

This is a long passage to look at, so let’s just dive right in. The writer of 1 Kings has an agenda. This person is not immune to hinting at an opinion – intentional or otherwise – in their description of King Solomon. If you know about literary analysis, you know that there is always a tone to a piece of writing. There is always a way in which the writer conveys a particular feeling about a character or situation, without saying it explicitly. You have to dig a bit beneath the surface to see what’s really going on. And we don’t have to dig too deep here to catch some of the writer’s subtle jabs at Solomon.

Right before the passage we read today, the text tells us that Solomon married the Egyptian Pharaoh’s daughter. Now, if we read only that verse, we might hardly think anything of it. It’s just another fact in the historical narrative playing out here.

And it shows how powerful Solomon is, that he could just take a wife from a powerful king of a powerful nation. It shows how politically astute Solomon is, that he knows well how international alliances could be forged through marriage. It’s great PR to establish this kind of dominance at the beginning of one’s reign, is it not?

But remember: God commanded the Hebrew people not to marry outside their nation, especially Egyptian people. Remember who had enslaved the people? The Egyptians.

Now, to be sure and very clear: God’s commandment against Israelites marrying into other cultures was not about interracial or intercultural marriage in and of itself. Modern interracial and intercultural marriage has little, if not nothing, to do with this commandment.

But Solomon has extra problems. This is not the last foreign woman he marries or takes as a concubine. After Solomon asks for wisdom, this “taking of women” only gets worse and worse. Solomon also takes on the religious practices and worship of other gods that come with his wives’ and concubines’ cultures. For the ancient Hebrew people, God was guarding against the worship of other gods and the religious syncretism that naturally results from trying to mix one’s own religious commitments with those of a completely different faith.

So right off the bat, our narrator is telling us something important about who Solomon is.

And these subtle editorial comments don’t stop here.

The first thing we learn about Solomon in today’s reading is this: Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David...

Now, that sentence continues, but I’m going to stop mid-sentence because this comment here is significant. I’m particularly struck that the narrator chose here to say that Solomon walked

in the statutes of his *father* David, rather than in the statutes of the Lord. I'm also interested in the fact that the narrator chose to identify David as Solomon's *father*, rather than as the *King*, David. This phrase clearly takes on an ambiguous tone, which I'm sure much more qualified Biblical scholars could uncover, but knowing what we know about David, we as the readers could come to many different conclusions about what it means to walk in the statutes of David.

Did Solomon walk in the statutes of David, his father, who sang psalms and tended sheep? Of David, who answered God's call, stood up in courage, and defeated Goliath and the Philistines? Of David, who showed everyone what it meant to confess sin to God? Of David who began the lineage that eventually brought us Jesus Christ?

Now, that's a great PR campaign for the next king.

Or did he walk in the statutes of David, who took it upon himself to watch a woman bathing on her roof, the highest level in a home, reserved for bathing because no one could see the person bathing, except, perhaps, a king, who had rooms towering over the homes of ordinary people and could deliberately look down to spy. In the statutes of David, who took this married woman into his palace – who had no power to resist a king's advances and thus had no fault in the matter – from her husband. Of David, who sent this woman's

husband to the front lines of war and had him killed? Of David, who lied about who did what to whom in this thickly sinful web of deceit? Of David who told Solomon to kill everyone who wouldn't show enough loyalty to his reign? That's a huge chunk of the Ten Commandments broken there, isn't it? Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

It's great for a PR for a new king to worship alongside ordinary people, isn't it?

If it weren't for the "only" qualifier here, we wouldn't bat an eye at this phrase. Sacrificing and burning incense at the high places sounds like a great way to worship God, right? And he's alongside the ordinary people. Great!

But right before today's passage, we learn that already, the people were worshiping at the high places, local places of worship that were considered idolatrous, because there was no central place of worship. By deemphasizing the need for a central place of worship, Solomon prevented the people from worshiping rightly. And now today, here is Solomon, right alongside those folks, worshiping in the high places, possibly sanctioning idol worship, when he could have been working toward building the temple, the central meeting place for worship.

Solomon loved the Lord; only, he married women from other nations, even an Egyptian, a powerful woman whose ancestors had enslaved his people.

Solomon loved the Lord; only, he took upon worship of other gods because it furthered his political power.

Solomon loved the Lord; only, he had his father's loyalists killed.

Next, we find the king at the principal high place, in Gibeon, sacrificing and offering incense, where he used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. So here we find Solomon in the high place again, when he falls asleep and spends the night there, dreaming about an encounter with the Lord.

The king went to Gibeon to "be with the people" and put on a religious show, a PR campaign to show his people that he was with them, alongside them. But the Lord came to Solomon, the man, in a dream. God approaches Solomon and asks what he wants.

After all those people he had killed, after making sacrifices in places associated with idol worship, after marrying an Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter, God asks him what he wants.

And in this moment, Solomon seems to dance around his problems more than he confesses them. He talks a lot about how great David was and how faithful David was and how God gave him the

authority God gave David. He displays a fleeting moment of humility, saying he doesn't know how to come out or go in, meaning in his historical context that he doesn't know how to go into or retreat from battle. And after all that groveling, he asks for wisdom, an understanding mind, to govern his people.

And so the man Solomon asks for a change. He asks for wisdom in his leadership as a king. He asks for what he apparently did not have up until this point.

And that pleases God. Finally, Solomon isn't asking for the demise of his enemies. He's not asking for riches or good PR or long life. He's asking for the wisdom to do what the Lord would have him do. And God gives him not only wisdom but riches and honor all his life. A bonus, God says, will come in the form of long life if Solomon walks in God's ways, keeping God's statutes and commandments. Notice that God is emphasizing walking with the Lord, not walking in the statutes of his father David. Here, the narrator places the emphasis on the commendable side of David, the one that was right with the Lord, the one who followed the Lord's commandments, in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward God. In case there were any question, *this* is the David God is asking Solomon to emulate.

And so Solomon immediately turns and does the right thing. He returns to Jerusalem, the central place of worship,

before the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, to worship rightly, and provides for his servants.

And then he has a great opportunity to show the wisdom God has granted him for his kingly leadership when two women prostitutes come before him with a problem. Now, prostitution in this age may not have been illegal, but it was certainly frowned upon, and prostitutes were seen in society much like they are in the contemporary United States. So for the King to welcome these women into his court, for him to hear their problem, and for him to provide an opportunity to solve the problem – that was groundbreaking.

But it's notable in this passage that the narrator exclusively calls Solomon "the king." Whereas before, at Gibeon, the writer calls him "Solomon", here, in front of the two women, he is exclusively "the king." What Solomon asked for from God was an understanding mind to govern God's people, ability to discern between good and evil. He asked for integration between Solomon, the regular guy, and Solomon, the King. He asked for integrity – the ability to be the same, faithful, upright person in private as he appeared to be in public. And yet here, in front of these two women, he is exclusively "the king." Solomon does not show up here as an ordinary man of God, called by God for extraordinary purposes. Instead, he shows up as a powerful king, the kind of king God warned the people about when they asked for one, the kind of king who

exercises power over others instead of power alongside others. And this is precisely how Solomon shows up in this ordeal with the two prostitutes.

After the whole ordeal is over, the people in the throne room might know who the real mother is, but we, the readers, can't be sure. Some English translations choose one or the other woman to be the real mother, but most Jewish scholars acknowledge that there is significant ambiguity here. So we, who read this story, in the end, don't know. But we can presume that Solomon figured it out, and that the women surely know.

Whether or not the story does indeed reveal to us the true mother, we can conclude that Solomon's wise response does solve the emergency problem at hand; because of his action, the mother of the child is revealed, at least to those present. Certainly, he exercised wisdom and justice, at least in some kind of way.

But Solomon's action doesn't solve the longer-term, deeper issues: the deceit of the woman who tried stealing the baby. The unresolved grief of the mother who lost her child. The poverty that led to these nameless women needing to engage in the profession of selling their bodies. The men who are strikingly absent from the scene, who fathered these nameless children.

On top of all of that, we don't know if the women ever resolved between the two of

them how they would handle the situation. Presumably they would follow the king's orders to avoid severe punishment, but would the king take the time to hear their case again, should the woman who took the baby not return him to the mother?

And yet we learn that the people perceived that Solomon was wise and just. They saw only the heroic nature of this encounter, the good PR, learning about the skill he used to reveal the real mother of the child in question. They chose to grasp at the tiny moments of clarity, of compassion, of wisdom, rather than to see this ruthless ruler for who he was.

Solomon loved the Lord; only, he turned what could have been a moment of using his great wisdom to further establish authority by the sword. He loved the Lord; only, he threatened to break God's commandment to not put children to death for the crimes of their parents.

Solomon loved the Lord; only, he only allowed God to take his wisdom so far. He loved the Lord; only, he wasn't about to use his wisdom and power to clear the way for following God's commands.

Later in 1 Kings, we learn that Solomon loved the Lord; only, when he finally got around to work on building the temple, he used enslaved people to build it.

We learn that Solomon loved the Lord; only, he accumulated wealth at the expense of others.

God promised that there would be no more poor and needy in the Promised Land if the community cared for those among them according to God's law. So these women would not even have been in their profession to begin with if the king had followed God's law: to care for the orphan and fatherless, to remit debts every seven years, to save the tithe – the gleanings of the fields – for the poor, to set servants free in the seventh year, to ensure that laborers were paid their proper wages before sundown each day...

The good news is that God brought us the kind of ruler we didn't ask for, the kind of ruler who follows God's law perfectly, the kind of ruler who established his reign by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the prisoner go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The kind of ruler who ate with sinners and outcasts. The kind of ruler who let a man wander out of the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey baptize him and receive the Holy Spirit. The kind of ruler who followed God's law even though it led to his death. The kind of ruler who called two women to be the first to share the good news of resurrection. The kind of ruler who prayed for God's wisdom and who even now prays for us.

The kind of ruler who taught us to pray in praise of the ruler of heaven and earth, to pray for *that* ruler's kingdom to come, for *that* ruler's will to be done,

here on earth, here and now, even while we are waiting on the kingdom of heaven to come.

And so we don't pray in hesitation as Solomon did. We don't pray:

Hallowed be your name, Lord; only, I'd like to hallow your name in the high places, in the places closer to comfort, where I can be seen by others as pious, faithful, and wise. I'd rather designate my own place for worship, with my own incense, my own songs, my own sacrifice of praise.

We don't pray: Your kingdom come, Lord; only, I'd like to create a bit of a kingdom here for myself, first. I'd like to accumulate some earthly treasures rather than focusing on storing up heavenly treasures. I'd rather not give up what I have for the sake of gaining what you offer.

We don't pray: Your will be done, Lord; only, I'm not ready to do it here on earth as you would in heaven. I'm not ready to take up the suffering that comes with doing your will. I'm not ready to give up the power and prestige and comfort I have.

Instead, we pray:

Praise be to *you*, O God. Hallowed be *your* name.

*Your*, kingdom come, God, here on earth as it exists already in the kingdom of

heaven. And may I be part of bringing your kingdom here to earth.

*Your* will be done, God, here on earth as it exists already in the kingdom of heaven. And may I be ever seeking ways to do your will.

Your kingdom come, God, not as the rulers of this world, but as the kingdom Jesus Christ ushered in as the ruler of all creation.

*Your* kingdom come, God, where no one has to sell their body for food. *Your* kingdom come, God, where all worship and serve you together, freely. *Your* kingdom come, God, where no one is enslaved. *Your* kingdom come, God, where we engage in both immediate acts of mercy and ultimate acts of justice. *Your* will be done, God, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.