



SMYTH & HELWYS BIBLE COMMENTARY

1 & 2 KINGS

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1 Kings ch. 3

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BEGINNINGS AS A PIOUS, WISE KING

1 Kings 3:1-28

In this chapter we are offered the beginning point of Solomon's newly established regime. The unit divides into two unequal but perhaps cunningly related parts (3:1-15, 3:16-28).

COMMENTARY

An Initial Tale of Legitimacy and Piety, 3:1-15

Verses 1-2, presented as Solomon's very first royal act, report Solomon's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh. Taken alone, this might be considered as nothing more than a historical note. But given its placement in the text, we may appropriately suggest that its function is more than informative. The note about the marriage is surely designed as a marker to indicate the primary tendency of King Solomon. On two counts, Pharaoh must be considered a threat and a contrast to everything Israelite. First of all, Pharaoh embodies a concentration of imperial wealth and power, a center of commerce whereby security for the state consists in trade and military policy. As such, the Egyptian enterprise surely is a powerful contrast to the simple, covenantal horizon of Israelite faith that relied upon Yahweh and tended in the direction of neighborly equality.

[The Egyptian Connection]



The Egyptian Connection

No doubt Solomon deliberately imitated the great royal enterprises of the states around him. It is most plausible to conclude that one of the most attractive models in this regard was the "grandeur of Egypt." Thus scholars have noted that Solomonic replication of Egypt may have included (a) appropriation of Egyptian wisdom as an intellectual achievement of importance, (b) participation in commerce that in turn produced stratified society and eventually exploitation that sounds like an echo of the role of Pharaoh in the Exodus narrative (Exod 5:4-19), (c) imitation in the administrative structure of Solomon's government that seems to have the same titles and functions as Egyptian officials, and (d) implementation of building projects that are not unlike those

of Pharaoh. This may include the design and theology implied in the architecture of the temple and, more importantly, the more general state building projects that parallel the very state building projects in Egypt that required the slaves of the Exodus narrative (see Exod 1:11). The marriage to the daughter of pharaoh is a signal for engagement with Egypt, an engagement that led Solomon into the political "big time," but conversely, also led Solomon away from old Mosaic roots. The narrative before us is primarily attentive to this strange tension in the account of Solomon that so shaped the future of Israel in terms of both glory and disaster.



This image of King Solomon by Gustave Doré seems to capture something of the responsiveness to God at this time in his reign. As the caption in the text that Doré illustrated reads: *Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. 1 Kgs 10:23-24*

Gustave Doré. *Solomon* from the *Illustrated Bible*. 19th century. Engraving. (Credit: Dover Pictorial Archive Series)

Beyond that, “Egypt” is a term in Israelite memory and tradition that bespeaks brutality, exploitation, and bondage, the demeaning of the human spirit, and the suppression of covenantal relations. Indeed, Israelite memory concerning Yahweh is that the taproot of faith and life is emancipation from Pharaoh. Notably the Pharaoh is not identified. Historical calculations suggest that the Pharaoh of the moment is perhaps Siamun. [Candidates for Pharaoh] It is, however, crucial that he is not named, for in his anonymity he is emotionally connected to the ancient pharaoh of the Exodus narrative, also left unnamed (Exod 1:8). All Pharaohs are the same in Israelite imagination, and they are all a threat to Israel. But now, through the wedding, they have become “family.”

Solomon has allied himself with Pharaoh, the antithesis of everything Israelite. There is no doubt that it was a political marriage, designed to serve political interests. The marriage signals Solomon’s deliberate departure from what traditional Israel treasured the most. The remainder of vv. 1b-2 may be only a note to indicate that this marriage is situated in the pre-temple phase of Solomon’s administration. Because there was no temple, of course they worshiped elsewhere in shrines called “high places.” [The High Places] More than that, however, these verses likely contain a polemic that this worship was not loyally Yahwistic, but that Jerusalem was seduced by other gods (see 11:4). Thus the *marriage* and the *worship* together indicate a readiness to compromise or depart from Yahwism.

The thesis sentence for what follows in vv. 3-15 is given in v. 3: “Solomon loved

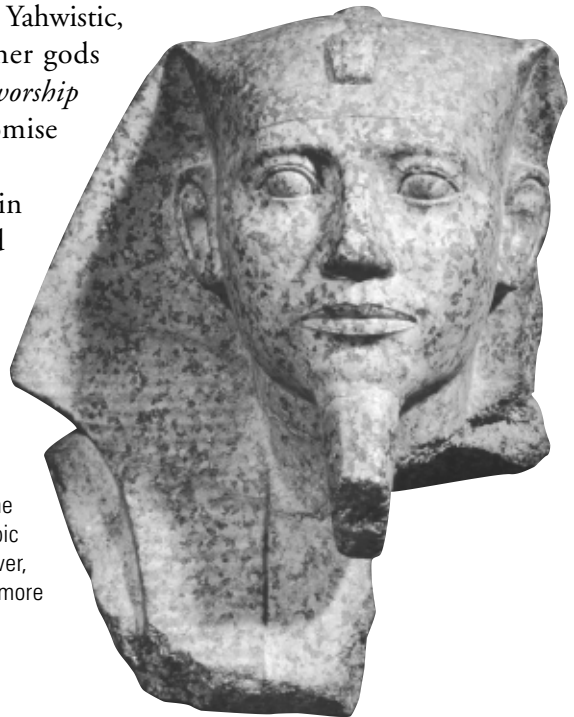


Candidates for Pharaoh

It is not at all clear which pharaoh may have been so connected to Solomon. The reconstructed sequence of pharaohs includes Siamun (978–959) and Psusennes II (959–945) from the XXI dynasty and Sheshonk I (945–924) from the XXII dynasty. It is likely, however, that in our text, the pharaoh is to be taken as paradigmatic, so that the precise identity of the pharaoh is not important for the point of the text.

In Egyptian art, there is also a tendency to minimize the aspects of portraiture and the specific identity of a particular pharaoh, and emphasize instead, the symbolic office of pharaoh, the unifier of upper and lower Egypt; the earthly equivalent to Horus, mythic son of the miraculous union of Isis and Osiris. The pharaoh was always larger than life and eternally perpetuated through the dynasties. In this example, the frontal stare and cubic rigidity negate a portrait reading of the statue. However, with lesser personages, the Egyptian sculptors were more predisposed to capture the details of the individual.

Chefren from Giza, c. 2500 BC. Rose Granite. Private Collection, France. (Credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY)



the Lord.” The term “love” does not refer to romantic sentimentality, but rather to the practice of singular and obedient loyalty. Solomon begins his reign as a determined adherent to Yahweh and to Yahweh’s Torah. Thus at the outset he practices the obedience urged by David in 2:1-4.

Solomon’s loyalty to Yahweh is expressed in highly visible acts of public piety. He offered many sacrifices at many high places, and an especially extravagant offering at Gibeon, a most prominent place of royal worship. Solomon’s behavior is not unusual. Because kings in that ancient world ruled at the behest of the gods and were taken to be the primary servants of the gods, it was important to be seen in devotion to one’s god, thus enhancing royal legitimacy.

The divine response to these acts of public devotion is a dream (3:5-14). In that ancient world, a dream is understood not as a random offer of the unconscious but as an intrusion of the deity into one’s affairs. [Dreaming beyond the Given] The dream reported is a powerful claim for legitimacy, because what God gives in a dream is

Ω The High Places

The phrase “high place” seems to refer generally to elevated locations that were claimed and dedicated as places as worship, perhaps as places where God or the gods were thought to be present. The statement in our verse simply recognizes that prior to the temple, other kinds of places were used for worship. The text on its own terms seems to regard this as normal and acceptable. In other strands of the Old Testament, reference to “high places” is polemical, regarded

as an aberration and departure from Yahwism of a most objectionable kind (2 Kgs 14:4; 15:4,35). Most likely no such polemic is intended or to be inferred here, except that given the negative judgment to be given on Solomon in chapter 11, it is not impossible that this “innocent” text is placed to prepare the way for the later polemic. This is one of many evidences to suggest that theological judgments about divine “presence” were in flux in Israel, in tension, and at times contradictory.

As depicted in this rendering of the Ziggurat Temple at Ur (modern Muqaiyir, Iraq) from 2100 BC, it is common in the ancient Near East to locate temples and altars in prominent elevated locations. In fact, the ziggurat temples of the Sumerians were called mountains and actually simulated the gradual ascent of a mountain. A shrine or altar was located at the top and offerings would be made to the god of the city-state. It was believed that the god or goddess of a particular city-state would enter and exit the land through this prominent, “high place” on a daily basis.

(Credit: Jim Burt)



beyond human control or exploitation or manipulation or resistance. It is, so to speak, the real thing!

The dream consists in three parts, each of which is a speech. In the first brief speech, Yahweh asks what Solomon needs or wants (3:5). The implication is that Solomon can have from Yahweh whatever he asks (see Matt 7:7). This is an amazing offer of generosity in which Yahweh is immediately and generously available to the king.

The second part of the dream is Solomon's well-crafted prayer response (3:6-9). The prayer-speech is divided into two parts. In the first part, Solomon reviews Yahweh's past generous acts toward David (3:6). At the beginning and end of the verse, the king thanks Yahweh for "great and steadfast love," that is, Yahweh's utter reliability toward David. The sign of that enduring fidelity, moreover, is the gift of an heir, Solomon himself, thus keeping the royal, dynastic promise intact. That is, Solomon begins in gratitude for past gifts from God.

But the middle portion of the verse rather inverts matters. As expressed, the gift of Yahweh's enduring fidelity toward David is not free gift. It is given to David in response. It is given as a quid quo pro, because David has been obedient. We shall see later that David's obedience is more complicated than this, but here it is direct and complete. The inference to be drawn is that both David and Yahweh have been faithful; but it is David's fidelity that has evoked and required Yahweh's fidelity. There is a bit of a coercive hint here: You owed us this much!

The second part of Solomon's response, introduced by "and now," turns from past review to present circumstance. The "and now" regularly introduces a petition like the one forthcoming in v. 9. But prior to v. 9, in the proper protocol of piety, Solomon states his own modesty, vulnerability, and need. The prayer aims to convey the mismatch between the work of the king and the resources of this king. The petition is that Yahweh should overcome the mismatch by special endowments to the king.

In the petition itself, the king asks for an "understanding mind." This conventional translation is scarcely adequate; it would be better to render "a hearing heart," or even "an obedient heart." The principle work of a king in the ancient world is to serve as judicial officer, to sort things out, to render verdicts, to determine what is good and evil, just and unjust. The prayer for "a listening heart" is



Dreaming beyond the Given

It is important to recognize that in that ancient world, dreams are not to be understood in terms of psychological unrest, as they are in our post-Freudian world. Well before the emergence of such psychological categories of interpretation, dreams are understood as messages from the gods that are given in sleep, when conventional human controls are at rest and the hovering and haunting of God has a chance. It may well be that dreams are of special interest and importance when dreamed by royal persons. The two primary foci on dreams in the Old Testament concern the dream of Pharaoh interpreted by Joseph (Gen 41) and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar interpreted by Daniel (Dan 4). The dream is also a political statement that important decisions are made by God well beyond the control or even understanding of the royal person. That is, the dream subverts the certainty of royal control.



With great tumult, Giordano has opted for Baroque theatricality to convey the image of Solomon's dream. This interpretation demonstrates the Old Testament understanding of dreams as instructional access to God's presence.

Luca Giordano. *Solomon's Dream*. 17th century. Oil. Prado, Madrid. (Credit: Bridgeman Art Library)

not simply that he should be made clever or discerning, but that he be attuned to Yahweh's guidance and purpose for justice. Thus the new king wants to have the sensitivity and wisdom to order Israel's life by the will of Yahweh.

The third element of speech is Yahweh's answer to Solomon's petition (3:10-14). Solomon's prayer commends him to Yahweh. We might have expected the son-in-law of Pharaoh to ask for long life, riches, and military success. These are the items Pharaoh characteristically champions and, indeed, they are the conventional goals of every royal claimant. But Solomon did not ask these. He did not ask what he may have been tempted to ask—because he is serious about being a good, Yahweh-oriented, Torah-informed king.

In response, Yahweh will give two gifts to Solomon. He will give what Solomon has asked. The king will be given the sensitivities of a good judge. But he will also be given what he might have asked and did not...riches and honor. He is given what he had not asked. We may infer that had he asked for these things now to be given, he would have brought trouble upon himself with Yahweh. As the

dream concludes, Solomon has the best of both: *gifts for rule* and *gifts for well-being*. No wonder the assurance is interrupted by a lyrical affirmation of Solomon's incomparability: None like him!

Before Yahweh's response is ended, however, the glorious promise is qualified with a condition, echoing 2:4 (3:14). It is not enough that Solomon makes a good choice at the outset. He must make a good choice all along the way, the choice of listening and obeying, for it is in choosing obediently that Israel and its king choose life.

The upshot of the dream in v. 15 is that Solomon is motivated to even greater public piety in Jerusalem than he had enacted in Gibeon. He is intensely Yahweh's king and now gives visible evidence of it.

We may consider the juxtaposition of vv. 1-2 and vv. 3-15. I suggest that vv. 1-2 are placed as a foil to help us understand and appreciate vv. 3-15. In the dream Solomon chooses against Pharaoh and rejects that way of kingship. One might expect Pharaoh (or his son-in-law) to choose riches, long life, and victory. In this faithful choice at least, Solomon rejects all of the "pharaoh-options." He remembers who he is as a subject of Yahweh.

Royal Wisdom Enacts Justice, 3:16-28

This well-known story is straightforward and not difficult to understand. While it may be the sort of story that was popular and reiterated in many cultures, here its function is to exemplify Solomon's wisdom, thus confirming the gift of Yahweh promised in the dream. The story intends to present the king as a shrewd judge whose cleverness makes the doing of good possible in difficult and unclear cases.

The narrative is arranged around a problem (3:16-22) and the royal solution (3:23-27), together with a reflective conclusion (3:28). *The problem* is not difficult to understand. Because both mothers passionately yearn for a live, healthy baby, they charge "baby snatching." Both mothers claim the live baby as their own.

The solution offered by the king is an act of shrewdness that falls outside any ordinary judicial procedure (3:23-27). Apparently there was no data upon which to base a decision, no testimony from any attendant, no markings on the babies that would identify their proper mothers. The king has nothing to work with, except the presence and attitude of the two mothers. Obviously the king must be an attentive observer of their conduct and aptitude, out of which he forces the issue. The response of the two mothers, once the issue is forced, permits an easy determination of the case.

In the context of the larger Solomon narrative, the editorial comment of v. 28 must be fully appreciated. Solomon's decision is recognized by his political constituency as dazzling. He has done something they would not have conceived. His wisdom is to reach outside perceived options, to engineer some fresh data that permits a knowing verdict. We are told that the popular response to the king is twofold: (a) they know that such wisdom was *from God*, a gift beyond human cleverness. Indeed, such awareness of God's gift of wisdom for the king evokes lyrical affirmation of David, the king's father:



Royal Justice

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.

May he judge your people with righteousness
and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the
people and the hills,
in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the
people, give deliverance to the needy, and
crush the oppressor.

(Ps 72:1-4)

The word of my lord the king will set me at rest; for
my lord the king is like the angel of God, discerning
good and evil. (2 Sam 14:17)

(b) They discern that such wisdom from God was
to implement justice, that is, to enhance the fairness
and trustworthiness of the community. Solomon
now is equipped for the most characteristic work
of the king, whose primal responsibility is public
justice. [Royal Justice]

CONNECTIONS

Verses 1-2 may only be an offer of information. If they are an intentional theological polemic, they raise questions about the purity and discipline of faith in a seductive situation. The seduction is not narrowly religious. Given Egypt's role in that ancient world, the seduction may be in terms of military and economic aggrandizement that depends upon and produces social relations alien to Israel's notion of covenant.

Such a polemic against compromise and seduction may raise important issues for a community of faith (synagogue or church) that must seek its way in an ocean of attractive economic offers. [Faith Seduced] There is enough evidence that the Western Church in broad sweep has easily colluded with economic practice and economic theory that in fact contradict its own faith claims. This negative practice of Solomon, however, is only a preface for the positive foundational narrative that follows next.

In these verses Solomon must choose. He must choose the fundamental direction of his reign. The choice is between self-aggrandizement and self-giving for his realm. The choice is between *usual forms of power* (riches, long life) and *power obedient*



Faith Seduced

There can be little doubt that Solomon “in all his glory” embodies the temptation of Israel to “be like the nations,” to imitate the power and splendor and grandeur of other great states. There can also be no doubt that such a temptation entails a sharp departure from the old faithfulness to Yahweh commanded in the simplicities of Sinai. And while that temptation in the Solomonic enterprise has theological rootage, it is articulated in economic categories of self-indulgence that inevitably ends in exploitation.

While the overlap of throne and religion makes the situation somewhat complex, it takes no great imagination to see

how such patterns of temptation are addressed to ecclesial communities, Jewish and Christian. That is, both the synagogue and the church face the endless temptation of accommodating the more attractive values of surrounding culture. And as with Solomon, such a seduction has theological rootage but shows up especially in economic categories. That is, the church can benefit economically by being allied with dominant cultural forces, and the leadership of the church can thereby live a more comfortable, albeit compromised life. Solomon is surely offered in the text as a paradigm for such a sellout in ancient Israel.

to *Yahweh* (wisdom to determine good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice). Because of vv. 1-2, perhaps the choice is to act like Pharaoh, his father-in-law, or against Pharaonic power. It is a choice that Solomon must make and must continue to make, as must every person who administers great power.

The choice before Solomon is a characteristic choice in Israel, made characteristic because of the character of Yahweh. This characteristic choice is made clear in Jeremiah 9:23-24 which sounds like a report on the options facing Solomon: [Control or Fidelity: Drastic Options]

Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their *wisdom*, do not let the mighty boast in their *might*, do not let the wealthy boast in their *wealth*; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with *steadfast love*, *justice*, and *righteousness* in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD (see 1 Cor 1:26-31).

On the one hand one may choose worldly *wisdom* (as in 2:6, 9), worldly *might*, and worldly *wealth*. On the other hand one may choose *steadfast love*, *justice*, and *righteousness*, the characteristic marks of Yahweh and the things Yahweh most delights in. The first choice is a decision to serve self at the expense of everyone else. The alternative choice is to serve the well-being of the community and to enhance it through fidelity and just dealings.

This is the choice that Israel must always make again. It is the choice commanded by Deuteronomy (Deut 30:15-20) and faced by Joshua (Josh 24:14-15). It is the choice required by the prophets (Amos 5:4-15; Isa 1:16-17) and the summons made in the exile (Isa 55:6-9). It is the choice to which Jesus calls his disciples (Matt 6:24).



Control or Fidelity: Drastic Options

The matter is put as a stark choice in the text. In practice, the choices are no doubt more often complex and less than clear. But the literature is trying to trace the dominant storyline of Solomon and the monarchy, and so regards the fundamental options for kingship as clear and simple. One option that endlessly haunts Israel since Sinai is the practice of fidelity that relies completely upon the faithfulness and reliability of Yahweh. That choice, however, is a deeply difficult and demanding one, for it leaves everything open. And so Israel is tempted, as are we all, to exercise some control, to be able to predict and administer and manage. But as the text has it, such efforts at control are seen to be diminishment of trust that is too risky. The same contrast of control or trust permeates the entire life of faith, for trust of that sort means going where we cannot see. The dilemma of those entrusted with great power is that it often seems foolish and unnecessarily risky to trust where control can be exercised. But then, to be open for trust rather than control is indeed the mystery of faith, a mystery endlessly demanding and endlessly healing whenever we are able to trust.

The choice Solomon makes in his dream is a decision for *wisdom*, true discernment that can sort out the things that make for life. The choice of wisdom is an urging long made by Israel's wisest teachers:

My child, do not let these escape from
 your sight:
 keep sound wisdom and prudence,
 and they will be life for your soul
 and adornment for your neck.
 Then you will walk on your way securely
 and your foot will not stumble. (Prov 3:21-23)

Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget,
 nor turn away
 from the words of my mouth.
 Do not forsake her, and she will keep
 you;
 love her, and she will guard you.
 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get
 wisdom,
 and whatever else you get, get insight. (Prov 4:5-7)

While this wisdom clearly has a prudential aspect, it is oriented to Yahweh. To be wise is to understand what Yahweh wills and to practice it. And clearly Yahweh does not will the greedy pursuit of riches or preoccupation with one's own life. What God wills is the enhancement and well-being of community neighbors in faithful and just relations. The wisdom urged in Proverbs is practiced in the narrative of Joseph.¹ Joseph is seen to be a man "wise and discerning" (Gen 41:38-39), who is given authority for the good ordering of the household. In our text, Solomon chooses in his dream to

align himself with that practice of caring government for the enhancement of the realm, a readiness to look beyond himself for the good of others.

He had “all other things” (what he had not asked) added as well (3:13). The phrasing of this verse seems to anticipate the promise of Matthew 6:33:

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and *all these things* will be given to you as well.

Seek God’s rule, God’s righteousness! “All these things will be added,” that is, food, clothing, housing. Or in Solomon’s world, riches and honor and long life. But they are not more than by-products of a good choice of Yahweh’s wisdom.

Because Solomon is a large commercial, entrepreneurial success, we pause over his choice to notice that the choice he makes also faces us as his later readers. Those of us who live in a postindustrial, consumer society that is endlessly greedy for more can of course choose to pursue riches and self-security. We can do that at the expense of others. Indeed, the market policies of the U.S. increasingly concentrate wealth in the U.S. while the world around grows more poor and more desperate and therefore more violent. The dominant choice is to choose for self at the expense of all the others.

But we in the community of faith are like Solomon. [\[The Choice Continues\]](#) We can make another choice, a choice of wisdom that is both practical and neighborly. To make such a choice is not popular, but it is urgent. The hard choice we now face about our economy and what it does to our neighbors may help us to



The Choice Continues

The kinds of choices lined out in this text are precisely the kinds of choices facing the church in our season of disestablishment in the West. It is now clear that the church in the U.S. has been allied with dominant economic interests for a very long time. Thus the gospel has been largely privatized, and the assumptions of the market economy have been assumed by the Church and largely left uncriticized. But now we are able to see in fresh ways that there is an immense gap between what passes now for “The American Dream” and the claims of the gospel. While the gospel celebrates a neighborly ethic, the ideology of the American Dream is in large part a way of rugged individualism that regards the neighbor as a competitor. The choice is grounded in adherence to the God of the covenant. But the choice is effected in

neighborly zones of life, specifically in economic values and transactions. It would be extravagant to say that Solomon embraced a “global economy,” but that is more or less the case in that ancient world of limited horizon. The analogue now seems to me to be the values of “The Global Economy” that is capable of producing enormous wealth while it also displaces and exploits in harsh ways. An alternative to that economic practice is not obvious, just as it was not obvious that Solomon could choose otherwise. It is my estimate that the choices now facing the community of faith are as difficult and complex and obscure as those Solomon refused to make. Now, as then, the community of faith faces temptations of social power that obscure and contradict its true identity.

understand the choice that Solomon dreamed of making. The text is an invitation to choose against the choices of Pharaoh, the model exploiter.

This narrative account evokes a major accent and a suspicious footnote. It may suggest to us the cruciality of a reliable, discerning, imaginative judiciary. Finally, the ordering of society in a workable way depends upon a judiciary that is not only reliable and credible, but that has the freedom to move outside conventions to offer new dimensions of the rule of law never before perceived.

[Beyond Strict Constructionism]



Beyond Strict Constructionism

Recent history of the judiciary in the U.S., and in the Supreme Court in particular, has evoked dispute about interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. Specifically, those who want a minimalist government (generally those who are privileged by the status quo) insist on “strict constructionism,” that is, no judicial decision except those warranted by the “initial framers of the Constitution.” But of course such a notion is an illusion, because almost none of the great issues before the court at the end of the twentieth century could have been on the horizon of the “initial framers.” Good judges and jurists must always interpret, imagine, and construe from tradition in the face of new issues. Solomon is no “strict constructionist,” but must decide afresh.

In the U.S., we have recently witnessed the retirement of Justices Harry Blackmun and William Brennan. While their work has been disputed (and thought too “liberal” by some), none can doubt that they managed the trust of law with great *imagination* and courage, and thereby produced fresh dimensions of justice in our society. Great jurists must not only have a grasp of law and legal precedent, but an uncommon human passion that makes decisions that are rooted in something like God’s purposes that serve the well-being of community.

Clearly great judicial actions are not done by rote and reiteration. Martha Nussbaum has carefully argued that great jurists characteristically live by emancipated imagination that dares to rearticulate social reality in new categories. [Nussbaum on Imagination] This is what Solomon does in this narrative, an act perceived by his contemporaries as more than human cleverness.

Having said such positive things about Solomon, I add one important dissent. His way to a solution was by way of *a sword*:

So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king. The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.” (3:24-25)

Solomon seems to have the sword excessively on his brain, the sword as a tool of control, coercion, and intimidation. In chapter two, his father David twice urges him to act wisely, to kill (3:6, 9). Solomon’s regime, in that chapter, is three times to *enact the sword* (2:25, 34, 36). This is a strange *wisdom* that governs by *violence*.

To be sure, the sword in this narrative is only a ploy. But it is a severe ploy, one that was perfectly credible to the real mother. That is, the real mother could imagine that the king would proceed in that way, a notion that must have deeply terrorized her. One may wonder about what the king would have done with his threat of violence had the real mother not flinched. Would he have escalated the threat? Would he have “divided” the child? We of course will



Nussbaum on Imagination

In a formidable and suggestive book, Martha Nussbaum has argued persuasively that sound administration of justice in the courts requires a disciplined, emancipated imagination, whereby judges make connections and interpretive maneuvers not evident to a less generative perspective. It is evident in our text that Solomon commits an overt act of imagination. In the same way, Nussbaum cites cases where the same “leaps of interpretation” are made. It is instructive that the judges she quotes from time to time explicitly acknowledge appeal to imagination. Solomon is a case study of shrewdness that permits his ruling to be *generative* and *constructive* in a way that is not “strict.”

Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

never know. We do not know that about the king in this act, but we now know a great deal about this king.

It is sufficient to notice that Solomon’s “wisdom” from God is not “nice.” It is marked by prudence; but it is also, it seems, marked by a kind of crudeness that can damage. Perhaps wisdom that governs must always be a compromised wisdom with coerciveness behind it. As we shall see, Solomon’s wisdom, here narrated, becomes increasingly compromised and finally dubious in the narrative that follows. Indeed, in the end this wisdom turns out to be self-destructive foolishness in masquerade. That, however, is not yet evident in our text.

NOTE

¹Gerhard von Rad, “The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom,” *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 292-300.