

THE ANCHOR BIBLE

1 KINGS



A New Translation
with Introduction and Commentary

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1 Kings 3:16-28
The Judgment of a Wise King



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IV. THE JUDGMENT OF A WISE KING

(3:16–28)

3 ¹⁶Then two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷One woman said: “If it please my lord, I and this woman live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. ¹⁸On the third day after my delivery, this woman also gave birth; we were alone, no outsider was with us in the house, just the two of us in the house. ¹⁹Now the son of this woman died during the night because she lay on him. ²⁰She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your maidservant was sleeping, and she laid him in her bosom and she laid her dead son in my bosom. ²¹When I got up in the morning to nurse my son, here he is, dead! But I looked carefully at him in the morning, and here he was not my son whom I had borne.” ²²The other woman said: “No! For my son is the live one; your son is the dead one!” And this one was saying: “No! Your son is the dead one; my son is the live one!” Thus they argued before the king. ²³The king said: “This one says: ‘This is my son, the live one; your son is the dead one.’ And the other says: ‘No! Your son is the dead one and my son the live one!’” ²⁴The king said: “Bring me a sword.” They brought a sword before the king. ²⁵The king said: “Cut the live son in two! And give half to one and half to the other.” ²⁶But the woman whose son was the live one said to the king, for she was overcome with compassion for her son: “Please, my lord, give her the live child, but by no means, don’t kill him. And the other one was saying: ‘Neither I nor you shall have him! Cut him!’” ²⁷The king replied: “Give her the live infant and by no means, don’t kill him. She is his mother.” ²⁸When all Israel heard of the judgment rendered by the king, they were in awe of the king, for they saw that God’s wisdom was in him to do justice.

NOTES

3 16. *Then two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him.* Having just related the account of YHWH’s grant of wisdom to Solomon, the editor presents an exemplary tale to illustrate how the wise king managed his realm.

Then. The introductory word “then” (Heb *’āz*) is a loose editorial phrase, frequent in Kings, used to tie together originally discrete literary units. Cf., e.g., 8:1, 12; 9:11b, 24b; 11:7; 16:21; 22:50; et al.; see further in the Note on 2 Kgs 16:5.

two prostitutes. Translating “inn-keepers” (so Wiseman; and as far back as Targum) is somewhat puritanical; the story line required that the two women not be living in their respective homes but together in some sort of shared residence. There is no expressed evaluation of the profession engaged in by these women, unless it is more implied than expressed; indeed, they are given their day in court the same as any other Israelite. After the initial introduction, the narrator proceeds to speak of “the woman,” dropping the career designation

altogether. Moreover, he describes the strong motherly feelings (v. 26) held by a woman of low social rank. On the biblical view of prostitution, see Goodfriend 1992.

two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. Public access to the king for judgment was also implied in Absalom's provocative words that, were he king, the people would receive proper hearings, which they were not receiving with his father, David (2 Sam 15:3–4). Compare this with the attention given by David to the woman from Tekoa in 2 Sam 14:1–20 and by Joram to the plea made by the Shunammite woman later, in 2 Kgs 8:4–6.

17. *One woman said: "If it please my lord. . ."* The form of Heb *bî*, here translated "please," has not been satisfactorily explained. Many adopt Honeyman's suggestion (1944) to relate it to **'by*, "need, want, desire," with the loss of the initial *'ālep*; it always appears at the beginning of a sentence followed by *'ādonî*, "sir," introducing a supplication; e.g., Gen 43:20; 44:18; Num 12:11; Judg 6:13; 1 Sam 1:26. KB, 120 views it as an elliptical expression: "upon me, my lord (shall come the harm our conversation could do)." It is also of interest that in the late Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, the particle *bî* is known, used only with the imperative of the verb *nadānu*, "to give" (CAD B, 216–17).

I and this woman live in the same house. Care should be taken not to introduce such modern terms as "house of ill repute" (*Dirnenhaus*; so Noth) into the ancient setting. The closest one might come to a permanent residence of sorts for these "professional" women was the tavern, which served as a place of refreshment and often a place to meet prostitutes. See provisionally, the remarks of Harris 1990, 222 n. 15; 224 n. 26.

while she was in the house. Without a conjunction in Hebrew; this resembles the late usage in Esth 7:8.

18. *On the third day after my delivery, this woman also gave birth.* An indefinite measure of time, an element common in storytelling, meaning "after a few days, shortly thereafter"; cf. Gen 22:4; 31:22; Josh 9:17; 1 Sam 30:1; 2 Sam 1:2; Esth 5:1.

we were alone, no outsider was with us in the house, just the two of us in the house. There were no witnesses, so it was her word against that of her housemate. Thus, the king would have to employ unconventional methods to determine the truth in this case. Some have found an allusion here to "clients" of the two women, recalling that the two spies who came to Jericho spent the night at the home of a prostitute (Josh 2:1).

19. *Now the son of this woman died during the night because she lay on him.* For this use of *'āšer*, cf. 8:33; 15:5; the fuller *'al 'āšer* in 2 Sam 12:6; and *mip-pēnē 'āšer* in Exod 19:18.

20. *She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your maidservant was sleeping, and she laid him in her bosom, and she laid her dead son in my bosom.* It is not clear how the sleeping woman learned that an exchange had been made.

21. *When I got up in the morning to nurse my son.* The twice-repeated notice in a single verse that morning had arrived is usually taken as a textual error

and the second one omitted; so already LXX; cf. Šanda, Noth, Gray, Würthwein. But perhaps the repetition refers to the difference between the ill-defined darkness of the early morning and the full morning light, when the recognition of the child's identity could be made. Note that, in vv. 19–20, "in the night" is also repeated. [DNF: "It could also reflect the agitation of the speaker."]

here he is, dead! See above, Note on v. 15.

But I looked carefully at him in the morning. If there were any telltale signs, such as clothing, that would have made the identification positive, she does not say. Moreover, how could she be believed, when she had slept so soundly through the claimed switch of infants?! Was this inconsistency a clue to the true mother? The verb *byn/bnn in *Hithpolel* carries the iterative sense, i.e., of repeated or close scrutiny.

22. *The other woman said: "No! For my son is the live one; your son is the dead one!" And this one was saying: "No! Your son is the dead one; my son is the live one!" Thus they argued before the king.* The alternation between perfect and imperfect verbal forms conveys simultaneity; the scene had turned into a shouting match between the two women.

23. *The king said: "This one says: 'This is my son, the live one; your son is the dead one.' And the other says: 'No! Your son is the dead one and my son the live one!'"* The statements of the two women are given in chiasmic construction. Were this a modern courtroom, one might interpret this verse as the judge's repeating the facts of the case before sentencing (Šanda).

This one says . . . and the other says. For this locution, cf. similarly 1 Kgs 22:21.

25. *The king said: "Cut the live son in two! . . ."* Hebrew *gāzôr means "to cut, divide" and is here modified by *bišnayîm*, "in two," which is not repeated in v. 26. Its other uses are ambivalent and may simply mean "cut into parts," Ps 136:13 (of the Sea of Reeds) and 2 Kgs 6:4 (of wood).

And give half to one and half to the other. Literally, "half to one and half to one."

26. *But the woman whose son was the live one said to the king, for she was overcome with compassion for her son.* The storyteller reveals to the reader, for the first time, the identity of the true mother; it was "her son" who was alive. Yet we are not told whether she is the complainant or the respondent.

for she was overcome with compassion for her son. The *kî* has emphatic function, pointing to the "mental or sensory awareness of the character" (Van Wolde 1995, 635); see, too, Muilenburg 1961; Schoors 1981; Waltke and O'Connor 1990, 675.

overcome with compassion. Cf. Gen 43:30; Hos 11:8 (with *niḥûmāy*); Lam 5:10. Hebrew **kmr* is of questionable etymology; rather than a single root meaning "to become hot," Ibn-Janah and Qimḥi both suggest, in fact, two separate verbs: **kmr* in the present verse, meaning "arouse, bring about" (cf. Tg.: *itgôlalû*); with **kmr* in Lam 5:10, "dry up, shrivel," as it seems to mean in later MH and Aram.

the woman . . . said to the king. Hebrew repeats "said" after the long parenthetical description of the woman.

Please, my lord. See above on v. 17.

the live child. The pass. part. *yālûd* properly means “the born one.”

And the other one was saying: “Neither I nor she will have him! Cut him!” She interrupted the speech of the first woman; cf. similar syntax in v. 22.

27. *The king replied: “Give her the live infant and by no means, don’t kill him. She is his mother.”* The threat to the child’s life elicited compassionate motherly feelings and allowed the truth to be determined in what was otherwise an insoluble situation. The king’s words were likely accompanied by a gesture, pointing to the woman who had spoken first. For the listener, her identity is further clarified by the king’s quoting her words.

28. *When all Israel heard of the judgment rendered by the king, they were in awe of the king, for they saw that God’s wisdom was in him to do justice.* YHWH’s promise to the king at Gibeon had, indeed, been fulfilled (cf. vv. 11–12).

God’s wisdom. Or “divine wisdom.” The wisdom spoken of here is not the traditional lore of wise men, with which Solomon was also endowed (cf. 5:9–14), but the discernment necessary to render clever and difficult judgments. This quality was included in the list of judicial qualifications sought by Moses in Deut 1:15; cf. 16:19. The superlative use of *’ēlohîm* meaning “superior, extraordinary” (e.g., Gen 30:8) is inappropriate here.

COMMENT

Structure and Themes

There is much agreement among commentators that a folktale has been adopted by Dtr to show that YHWH’s promise in the preceding section (vv. 4–15) of a grant of wisdom to Solomon to judge his people has indeed been fulfilled. The original oral quality of the tale is much in evidence; the narrative moves forward mostly by means of speeches, which also serve as a means to characterize the two protagonists and the king. Only the concluding v. 28 is from Dtr.

In the original folktale, the wisdom displayed by the king was likely to have been little different from the shrewd cunning and astuteness that had helped him secure the throne in the first place (cf. 1 Kgs 2:6, 9). By cleverly creating a threat to the child’s life, the king forces one of the women to give up her claim, thus revealing her true identity. But Deuteronomistic wisdom, a godlike quality needed to judge between good and evil, was of another order; by inserting the tale after the dream episode at Gibeon, Dtr has led us to read the tale as the verification of YHWH’s grant to Solomon of judicial wisdom.

Würthwein’s adoption of the older Gressmann thesis (1907) that this tale made its way to Israel from distant India, where a large number of similar tales are attested, and was incorporated in a developed form into the Solomonic account in a post-Dtr stage (36–38) is not convincing; nor does taking 1 Kgs 4:1 as the original conclusion of the Gibeon dream episode support this view (see Note, ad loc.). Folkloristic parallels are not lacking, and one need not travel so

far afield; Thenius brings a quote from Grotius, who quotes Diodorus, with a classical parallel.

Though the role of the king is central to the narrative, the women's role in bringing about the solution to the crisis should not be dismissed. Had one of the women not acted upon her motherly feelings and saved the king from carrying out his threat, a wholly other conclusion might be imagined. Yet this "saving" of the king from an injudicious decision does not justify including the true mother of the child among the Bible's "wise women," e.g., the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1–20) or the one from Abel Beth-Maacah (20:16; as suggested by Beuken 1989).