

First and Second Kings

Richard D. Nelson

INTERPRETATION

*A Bible Commentary
for Teaching and Preaching*



John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE

1987

1 Kings 3:16-28

**Note: the verse numbers do not appear
correctly in this electronic version.**

I Kings 3:165:18: Wisdom and Prosperity I

The promise given to Solomon in 3:1213 unfolds from verse 16 through chapter 5. The same themes and topics will be taken up again in 9:1010:29 (see "Wisdom and Prosperity II," below). Between these two sections, the story of Solomon's kingdom of shalom rises to its high point in the building and dedication of the temple (chaps. 68). This is then followed by a second, more ominous appearance of God (9:19).

This section is a characteristic example of paratactic structure. Units are laid out side by side until the whole story is told (see Introduction). First there is a folktale extolling Solomon's judicial wisdom (3:1628). Then come two lists of royal officials, enriched with additional comments, revealing Solomon's administrative wisdom (4:16, 728). Next follows a section bracketed by 4:29 and 5:12, developing the theme of Solomon's wisdom and the kings of the earth, particularly Hiram of Tyre (4:295:12). Finally the theme of preparations for the temple is completed by the miscellany of 5:1318.

Solomon's Judicial Wisdom (3:1628)

A traditional folktale (3:1628) provides an illustration of Solomon's "listening heart" (v. 9) and his "understanding to discern what is right" (v. 11). The first word ("then," v. 16) ties it closely to Solomon's dream at Gibeon, as does the concluding popular reaction: The wisdom of God is in (literally "inside") Solomon (v. 28). This story confirms that God's promised gift has indeed been given. It also provides an example of what even the commonest citizen could expect from Solomon's wise rule.

The story is told with artistry and wit. It moves by means of dialogue rather than through a direct portrayal of events. Three speeches are made by the women (vv. 1722*a*), followed by Solomon's speech (vv. 2325), two more by the women (v. 26), and then the king's judgment (v. 27). The plot moves from the normal situation of the two housemates (vv. 1718), complicated by death, deception, and the ensuing controversy (vv.

1922), to resolution (vv. 2327) and the popular reaction (v. 28).

The central dilemma for Solomon is repeated three times in verse 18. The women were completely alone, without even so much as a customer present (a meaning implied by the Hebrew), so the normal juridical practice of hearing witnesses is precluded. The usual procedure in such a difficulty would be to rely on God's judgment through the casting of sacred lots, an oath of purgation (Exod. 22:910), or an ordeal (Num. 5:1115). In this case, however, the "wisdom of God" is available directly from the king.

The repetitious dialogue has the effect of tiring and bemusing the reader. For example, the chiasm of verse 22 is repeated by Solomon in verse 23, as if to say that the argument was going around in circles. The Hebrew shows a repetitive word play in verses 18, 20, 25, obscured in the English. Solomon's final directive is an exact reproduction of the mother's urgent plea: "Give her the living child and by no means slay it" (vv. 26, 27; RSV modified).

The reader's sympathy is naturally directed at the woman who speaks first. She is polite and a bit chatty ("in the house . . . in the house;" "in the morning . . . behold . . . in the morning, behold"). In contrast, her opponent snaps back a brusque reply, and the argument is on (v. 22)! Even though the narrative does not say so, the reader assumes that this first speaker is telling the truth and thus is the compassionate woman, the real mother. The compassionate woman's "maternal feelings were stirred" (v. 26, literally "her wombs") out of compassion for her son. She uses an especially maternal word (*yalud*, "born one") for the infant in place of the more objective "son" or "child" employed earlier. Her opponent, on the other hand, is inhumanly cold. Even when she has won the baby by the compassionate woman's capitulation, she still insists on the fifty-fifty split which would be objectively "fair" (Exod. 21:35) but morally monstrous. The reader is glad things turn out the way they do and admires Solomon for pulling off this psychological *tour de force* in the best traditions of Hercule Poirot or Inspector Maigret.

But wait! Is the reader being fooled in the process? Think again. For one thing, we cannot be sure our favorite first speaker really is the woman of compassion. More seriously, Solomon has not really proved that the compassionate woman

is the biological mother, only that she is more fit to be a parent. His demonstration is psychologically reasonable but not logically watertight. Does her heart yearn (v. 26) for a son presently under the threat of a sword or for a son already dead? Moreover, the woman who loses the judgment is such a monster that she strains her credibility with the reader to the breaking point. She is inexplicable either as true mother or liar. Finally, perhaps a truly perverse reader might even wonder how wise Solomon would have looked if both women had urged him to preserve the child's life, which seems the most likely scenario! If the reader is being fooled, however, the story does such a good job of it that no one really minds. The reader is perfectly willing to agree with the populace that the wisdom of God and its resulting justice are present in Solomon.

One hallmark of God's justice is that it is fair to all, even to a pair of disreputable prostitutes. Human justice has always been available to the well heeled or the well connected. In contrast, God's justice "raises up the poor from the dust" (I Sam. 2:8; cf. Luke 1:52-53). It is justice for the outcast which transcends what may be objectively fair. It is justice for a woman in a man's world. One who has read the Bible's whole story, including John 8:31-11, recognizes that this tale about Solomon displays the genuine character of God's justice in a wisdom that goes beyond mere cleverness. Where such justice is done today, the wisdom of God may be perceived to be at work.

Solomon's Administrative Wisdom (4:128)

The structure of 4:128 is based on two registers of officials (vv. 16 and 728), the second of which has attracted various comments and extra details. The concept of "all Israel" (vv. 1, 7) focuses the beginning of each list. The second section (vv. 728) is held together by the repetition of the chief duty of these officers (better: "district governors," NIV) in verses 7 and 2728. The intention is to induce awe and wonder over the prosperity, extent, peacefulness, and stability of Solomon's kingdom. This "kingdom of shalom" was all anyone could ever wish for, a political and economic paradise.

The first list emphasizes Solomon's continuity with David's rule (cf. II Sam. 8:15-18; 20:23-25). Certain names reach back into the past (Zadok, Abiathar, Benaiah, Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud). One name and office, that of Adoniram, also points