

JUDGING THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON:  
THE TWO-WAY EFFECT OF INTERTEXTUALITY

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In his recent article in *JSOT* on 2 Kings 6.24-33 (Lasine 1991), Stuart Lasine raises the issue of the relationship between that story and the Judgment of Solomon in 1 Kings 3 and how our reading of 2 Kings 6 is illuminated by our knowledge of 1 Kings 3. This response to that article is a tribute to the stimulation Lasine's work has been to me in trying to understand the interaction of such stories and the effect of this on the reader. In this case, however, I want to draw attention to an aspect of the matter that I believe Lasine has not examined: the influence of 2 Kings 6 on our reading of 1 Kings 3.

Lasine's article follows a series in which he has explored the social function of judgment stories such as 1 Kings 3 (Lasine 1987; 1989a; 1989b: 63-65), seeking to understand what the ancient reader might have made of them. Essentially, he represents 1 Kings 3 as a comforting story that reassures the ancient audience by illustrating 'how a human being with "god-like" wisdom might be able to overcome human cognitive limitations' (1989a: 61). It serves a social function in allaying the anxieties of ordinary people over their inability to tell who is or is not deceiving them, an anxiety linked with the epistemological gap between the divine and human, which Lasine sees as a fundamental postulate of the Old Testament (1987: 252; 1989a: 73-74). Its readers are set in a world where they are not only open to deceit and betrayal by their inscrutable neighbours, but they are confronted by a God who has an insuperable advantage over them in an infallible knowledge of human nature. As Lasine reads it, what

gives reassurance to the audience of the story of Solomon's judgment is its demonstration of an inherent stability of human nature. Solomon's ruse can only work if he can depend on the compassionate self-sacrifice of a genuine mother's response as an unquestionable assumption in this otherwise baffling situation. Confronted by two women disputing the possession of a child, he threatens to kill the child, relying on the deep natural impulses of maternal feeling to impel the natural mother to renounce her claim if this will save the child's life. By telling such a story, the existence of these stable categories of relationship can be affirmed in times of social strain or transition.

If 1 Kings 3 is given this weight of epistemological and social significance, it is not surprising that 2 Kings 6 should have to be dealt with. Lasine quotes R.D. Nelson's view of it as a 'grim analogical contrast'<sup>1</sup> to 1 Kings 3 as he details the similarities between the two stories (1991: 41). In both, two mothers have each given birth. One of the children has died and the mothers are arguing over their claims to the living child.

In 1 Kings 3, however, the argument is between two women who both want possession of a living child. In 2 Kings 6, the argument is over the gruesome use of the child as an item of food. At first sight, this story appears to gainsay the comforting assumptions of 1 Kings 3. It turns upon the willingness of mothers to make a deal in which their children become mere meat. Not much compassion is shown here, and no compunction at all about the death of a child. Where is the natural response of the mothers now? The irony is compounded because this is not a situation where the social fabric has completely disintegrated. The woman still acknowledges the king as a figure to whom she can make an appeal to redress an injustice. She still has a sense of justice and of social cohesion; mothers may kill their children, but they should keep their promises, and the king, who can do nothing else, is still the figure to whom she can appeal to ensure that the words of her treacherous companion should be transformed into deeds.

Obviously, this presents problems for Lasine's reading of 1 Kings 3. As he himself puts it, 'even Solomon's god-like insight into human nature would be useless in the topsy-turvy world of this narrative' (1991: 29). The woman's behaviour 'turns upside down all expectations

1. Nelson 1987: 189. In the previous sentence, Nelson describes the case as 'a horrible parody [my emphasis] of the sort of dispute between neighbours that kings often heard'.

concerning maternal nature' (1991: 42). Does this not then undermine the assurance that Solomon's judgment was supposed to give? How much reliance can we place on a natural compassion that can be so completely overturned?

Lasine does not address this question directly. Instead, he sees the radical undermining of human nature as part of the *topos* of the 'world turned upside down' as God wreaks retribution on the people for their desertion of covenant promises. Deuteronomy 28 explicitly sees the resort to infant cannibalization as a consequence of such disobedience, especially in vv. 56-57. Lasine asks, however, whether the readers of 2 Kings 6 are being led to condemn the king and accept the justice of God's punishment or whether they are being induced to question the fairness of the divine response. Is there an implicit criticism of God's lack of maternal compassion towards his children whom he has abandoned to this perverse parody of an ordered world? As Lasine points out, such a reading seems to fly in the face of the generally accepted characterization of the Deuteronomistic History as interpreting the history of the Northern Kingdom as a tale of just retribution for acts of idolatry and betrayal. In turn, this may lead the reader to wonder just what ideological stance is being propounded by this material (Lasine 1991: 47-49).

It is in acknowledging Lasine's sensitivity to these issues that I want to draw attention to the aspect of the juxtaposition of these two judgment stories that Lasine does not treat. This story in 2 Kings 6 seems to me to entice the reader to go back and reappraise the story of Solomon's judgment, and in particular the figure of Solomon. Lasine sees that 'readers are indeed invited to compare the two monarchs' (1991: 41), but neither he nor the others who have looked at this story seem to have seen this as an invitation to do anything more than measure the king in 2 Kings 6 by the unimpeachable standards of Solomon, the all-wise judge of 1 Kings 3.<sup>2</sup>

As I have recently argued in the case of two other biblical stories that seem to stand in a similar sort of parodic relationship to one

2. See here for example La Barbera 1984, where the case is specifically argued that the king in 2 Kings 6 is being held up to ridicule in comparison to Solomon: 'Whereas Solomon in his wisdom brings justice and restores a child to its mother, the king of Israel here can do nothing but tear his garments, revealing underneath the sack-cloth of distress or repentance, conditions traceable to unwise behavior' (1984: 646). As we shall see, the question is: whose unwise behaviour?

another,<sup>3</sup> the existence of the parody inevitably throws doubt over the 'original' story. As John Miles (1990) puts it, parody shows up the conventions that underlie a text and, in the case of a satirical or ironic parody, the target is not so much the original text itself as the audience that takes its conventions at face value.

Lasine himself is well aware of the illumination that can come from the juxtaposition of analogous stories. In his own investigation of Judges 19 (Lasine 1984a), he argues that for the present reader of the text an awareness of the analogous aspects of Genesis 19 and Samuel 11 is very important in bringing the reader to recognize that the kingless world of Judges is itself 'inverted'. The callous actions of the old man in Judges 19 who thrusts out the Levite's concubine to be raped and murdered are, so to speak, a parody of the actions of Lot in Genesis 19 in response to the threats made against his guests by the men of Sodom. Where I would part company with him is in his view that this is an instance of what he calls 'one-sided literary dependence'. He explains this concept as follows:

By literary dependence I mean that Judges 19 presupposes the reader's awareness of Genesis 19 in its present form, and depends on that awareness to be properly understood. The dependence is one-sided because a reader can fully understand the story of Lot's hospitality in Sodom without knowing the story of the Levite's concubine, whereas the events described in Judges 19 must be viewed together with Genesis 19 for the intended contrast between the two situations to make the reader aware of the topsy-turvy nature of the 'hospitality' in Gibeah (Lasine 1984a: 38-39).

The question this prompts me to ask is how Lasine here can be so confident that the reader 'fully understands' the Genesis passage without reference to Judges. His whole case in his reading of Judges 19 rests on the contrast he makes between Lot's 'hospitality' in Genesis

3. 'Nathan and the Woman of Teqoa: Repetition as Parody' (Paper delivered at the SBL International meeting in Rome 1991). In this paper I sought to demonstrate the way in which the story of David's encounter with the woman of Teqoa in 2 Sam. 14 is a parodic counterpart to his encounter with Nathan in 2 Sam. 12, which throws doubt on the sincerity of David's repentance and on the status of the prophet himself. In addition, between the two stories, a hermeneutical model is at the same time proposed and undermined, leading to a questioning of the reader's own competence and status. I acknowledge in this the insightfulness of Lasine's paper on Nathan's parable (Lasine 1984b), but here again, the destabilization of a text by its parodic counterpart is an aspect that he does not comment upon.

19 in offering his virgin daughters to save his guests' honour, and the inhospitality of the old man of Judges 19 who includes the Levite's own concubine in the deal. Is there no sense in which this story in Judges serves to reinforce what one would hope was a fairly obvious message in the Genesis material itself: that there is something dishonourable—to say the least—in men sheltering behind women in this way, Lot included?<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that Lasine's claim that the dependence between the two stories is unidirectional is not based on the chronological order of the stories, or even the order of sequential reading. 1 Samuel 11 stands in a very different relation to Judges in this regard, and he argues that Judges 19.29 'presupposes the reader's awareness of the incident recorded in the given text of Samuel, and requires that awareness in order to be fully appreciated' (1984a: 41). So a story that would be read later can have a retroactive effect.<sup>5</sup> Though this time Lasine is not explicit in describing the dependence as one-sided, he again only refers to one direction of influence. Is there not a case here, too, for arguing that the increase in understanding operates in both directions? Surely the savagery of the dismemberment of the concubine throws a shadow over Saul's analogous action in summoning the people with the fragments of his oxen, especially in view of his association with Gibeah and Benjamin, the scene of the outrages of the last chapters of Judges?

The crucial issue seems to be how we are to make judgments as to

4. Lasine's disregard of the treatment of the women in this story is notable, though he is rightly concerned to understand it within what can be gleaned of the social mores of the times. That the biblical narrator is not quite so unconcerned may be seen in the subsequent behaviour of these daughters towards the father who offered them to the mob. Is Lot really any more a paragon of hospitality in these texts than of any other virtue?

5. It is, I hope, clear that by phrasing the matter in this way I am placing no weight on any putative order of composition of the texts. I write as a present-day reader of a canonized text in book form. Lasine also in the article in question is concerned with the 'reader of the Old Testament in its present form' (1984a: 37). This contrasts with his discussion of the judgment stories where he is concerned with the ancient reader. While I do not doubt the interest or the plausibility of his results, I find it challenge enough to read the texts from my own standpoint. The point is that if Lasine's ascription of dependence here is valid in his own terms, there is no *a priori* reason to exclude the possibility of such a retroactive dependence of 1 Kings 3 on 2 Kings 6 in the same terms.

what constitutes 'full appreciation' of a text. Part of the excitement of reading these texts, and the reason why three millennia after their composition they are still provoking the arguments of commentators, is that we can never be assured of having fully appreciated them. Indeed it is an illusion to suppose that any text can be fully appreciated, let alone one possessing the allusive complexity common among texts of the Old Testament. Any text that one could fully appreciate would be unlikely to be worth the effort. On that basis alone one would be justified in looking at 1 Kings 3 in the light of the analogue in 2 Kings 6. When in addition the suspicion of a parodic intent behind a text arises, we may feel that this is as clear an invitation as the text can give us to reappraise the text or genre that is being highlighted.

In the remainder of this paper I propose to read 1 Kings 3 in the light of 2 Kings 6 and at least make a case that the illumination is not all one way. My basic contention will be that in doing so, we are led to see that there is more consistency to the ideology of the final form of the books of Kings than Lasine seems to allow. I will argue that along with its depiction of the glory of the Solomonic empire, the text is always aware of the way in which it contains the seeds of its own destruction. Ultimately, the disasters that lead to the destruction of the monarchy are the product of its own internal dynamics as much as they are the result of God's vengeance or the activities of Israel's political enemies. The social and political disaster of 2 Kings 6 has its roots in the inevitable negative aspects of monarchic rule. The very assumptions underlying Solomon's judgment lead to the situation that reduces a king of Israel to tearing his garments in despair when confronted with the perversion of social values.

The Judgment of Solomon is presented to us by the narrator in 1 Kings 3.28 as the proof, in the eyes of Israel at any rate, of his wisdom and his fitness to judge. It follows on from the representation of God's gift of wisdom to him and the highest expressions of God's favour. In this context, it may seem perverse to argue that there is a negative side to this portrayal. It may, however, be significant that this high praise of Solomon is represented as a dream. Whatever the historical facts, the text presents this information in such a way that its only possible source is Solomon himself. We should at least bear in mind the strictures against taking a person's own testimony as the final word. All the reader actually knows is that Solomon has reported that the LORD has granted him wisdom and high favour. We might

observe also that the LORD appears to him at Gibeon, just after he has sacrificed a thousand burnt offerings at the chief high place in Israel (1 Kings 3.4-5). Is it not odd that the previous verse has explicitly stated that it was his propensity for sacrificing at high places that led to Solomon falling short of David's statutes? Just what is the status of this dream? In any case, there is a disquieting echo of the promise the serpent made to Eve in Genesis 3.5. That story certainly puts a question mark over the appropriateness of desiring wisdom, the very desire that led Eve to eat the fruit.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the word 'wise' has been applied to Solomon before this. His father refers to his wisdom twice in the charges he gives him as he prepares to 'rest with his fathers' (1 Kings 2.6, 9). This is the kind of wisdom that will let him know what to do to Joab and to Shimei. In this scene, of course, David is getting as near to contradicting his own previous oath to Shimei and to signing his right hand man's death warrant as he can without explicitly stating it. Solomon's wisdom is the kind of statecraft that allows a king to renege on promises without actually exposing himself to the charge of breaking his word; a useful gift, perhaps, but dangerous and not particularly admirable.<sup>7</sup>

Having raised some of these general questions, let us turn to the specific case of the two prostitutes. The first question might be: what are two prostitutes doing in the court of Israel's wisest king? Quite apart from the social stigma of prostitution, which is difficult to gauge in the biblical text, there is a standard connection between prostitution and the kind of dubiously orthodox setting in which the king has just been having his dream. There has been some disagreement among commentators about the significance of the status of these women. It can be seen as affirmation of the impartiality of Solomonic justice that was available to the lowest of the low (De Vries 1985: 61). It could also be seen as a narratological necessity (Deurloo 1989: 20). In what

6. I am aware that many modern commentators seek to show that this Genesis story is in itself not painting as negative a picture of Eve's actions as some traditional readings would have it. Be that as it may, the consequences of her actions are rather drastic, leading to the expulsion from Eden. We might then speculate on the relationship between Solomon's model of kingship and the eventual expulsion of the people from the land.

7. See here Rosenberg's description of this wisdom as the 'bad faith that sustains all statecraft of a "cumbersome people"' (1986: 186).

other setting than a brothel could such an unfortunate incident happen without witnesses? Where else would two mothers be sleeping together without a man around? Though both of these arguments have some force, the fact remains that the one act of justice recorded of the king involves these prostitutes. At the presumed peak of Israel's fortunes under the monarchy, such women are accorded some degree of royal indulgence. When we go on to consider the strictures found elsewhere in the text against Solomon's own interest in women, and foreign women at that,<sup>8</sup> a class that much biblical material seems to regard as practically synonymous with idolatry, the reader may begin to suspect that it is not purely accidental, nor entirely in Solomon's favour, that he is given such a setting in which to exercise his god-given wisdom.

If the picture of Solomon's god-given wisdom is not quite so straightforward, neither is the contrast between the women in 1 Kings 3 and the women of 2 Kings 6. Both stories contain a woman who shows compassionate instincts and a woman who seems shamelessly devoid of them. The woman who opts for the child to be divided in 1 Kings 3 may thereby show herself not to be its mother, but the case relies on her response as much as it does on the natural mother's. Why did both women not protest to the king about the killing of an innocent child by renouncing their claims? Of course, this would have scuppered Solomon's ploy. Solomon seemingly can depend just as reliably on the fact that a woman will be quite prepared to see someone else's child killed as he can on the fact that a mother will sacrifice her own desires to ensure her child's survival. What does this say about human nature and social values in Solomon's kingdom?

In 1 Kings 3, the polarization of attitudes is clear enough as we hear the two contradictory voices. The voice of maternal compassion is not heard explicitly in 2 Kings 6, but the problem at issue between the two cannibal mothers has arisen because one of them has refused to give up her son. The woman who complains to the king has not shown any compunction, but the second woman, though capable both of suggesting the deed to the other and of joining her in the meal, has, when it has

8. Is it a coincidence that 1 Kings 3 begins with the information that Solomon has concluded a political marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh, especially in view of the mileage made of that fact in 1 Kings 11? She is named first among the horde of foreign women who lead him astray into building new high places.



come to the point, hidden her own son. Strictly speaking, of course, we are not told whether she has hidden the living boy to protect him, or whether she has hidden the corpse so that she can have it all to herself. One possible clue may be the reciprocal use of the formula 'give up your son' by the two women, which would perhaps indicate that the children were either both alive or both dead when they were to be handed over. The former seems more likely—given the choice, a freshly killed child must have advantages over eating a child that has died of who knows what disease, in a land without refrigeration.

If this is so, maternal instincts are not completely abolished in 2 Kings 6 and there is little doubt that human nature has a pretty dark and uncaring aspect in 1 Kings 3. Perhaps there has not been such a revolutionary change as all that. Rather, circumstances have conspired to bring out the different aspects of a common but complex human nature.

The difference in the responses of the two kings when they are confronted with the respective complainants may also bear scrutiny. Solomon's willingness to arbitrate between the two prostitutes entails acceptance of the callousness of the woman who is not the mother as a natural fact on which he can depend. In this regard, the king of Israel in 2 Kings 6 may actually come out better than Solomon. He acknowledges his own impotence, and faced with the inhumanity of the woman who pleads with him he tears his garments, revealing the fact that he is wearing the clothing of a penitent. Though this may have a comic aspect, it is also something that it is hard to imagine Solomon ever doing, whatever the circumstances. It can scarcely be claimed that Solomon had nothing to repent over.

In addition, amid all the cares and worries of his situation, he stops to listen to the pleas of an importunate woman, and seems prepared to take his time in reaching what conclusion he can until he hears the abhorrent tale she has to tell. In contrast to this, Solomon's encounter with the prostitutes looks like a rather stage-managed virtuoso exercise, in which the feelings of the mother and the life of the child become legitimate material for the king to use in the demonstration of his superiority. He is capable of using a ruse to differentiate between the women, but the cleverness of this, rather than the establishment of justice, is the focus of the story. We look in vain for the ruling on what the due punishment of the callousness of the false claimant

should be. It is at least arguable that the criticism is not all one-sided as we look at these two stories.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than seeing the contrast between the situations of these two kings as the picture of a world turned upside down, I see it more in line with the kind of picture that García-Treto paints in his recent article (1990) on 2 Kings 9 and 10, which he treats in terms of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization. He prefaces this paper with this epigraph:

'I saw a topsy-turvy world', he replied, 'the upper [*class*] underneath and the lower on top'.

'My son', he observed, 'you saw a clear world' [*Pes.* 50a] (1990: 47).

Bakhtin writes of the fall of the house of Ahab as a critique, not just of Israel and the Samaritan establishment, but of all religious and political institutions. Out of the chaos of their collapse, however, there are seeds of new hope and revived fortunes.

In the same way, the world of 2 Kings 6 may actually be Solomon's world with the skin off, so to speak, a world where the assumptions and pretensions of kings are shown up for what they are—a world where Solomon's unbending harshness, epitomized in his willingness to divide the child, has led to the division of his kingdom under his son Rehoboam, whose weak attempts at bullying tactics are a parody in themselves of his father's strength. It is a world, moreover, where the dalliance with foreign women and with alien gods, which Solomon also initiated, has led both to the political weakness and the religious crisis that issue in the destruction of the kingdom. Far from being a crazy reversal of the normality of Solomon's world, it is the 'clear world', the one where the real impulses of human conduct are

9. Another line of argument, for which there is not enough space to pursue here fully, is also opened up by Lasine himself when he looks at the story of David's three contradictory judgments between Mephibosheth and Ziba (Lasine 1989b). David's ultimate solution of dividing the property is often compared to Solomon's, especially since Mephibosheth then renounces his claim to a share in a way not totally dissimilar to the response of the genuine mother. Lasine makes the point that this so-called 'Solomonic' judgment of David is in the end a demonstration of his inability to judge fairly or consistently on this matter, which Lasine contrasts with the brilliance of Solomon's verdict (1989b: 63). Once again, however, the comparison is one-sided. When we see Solomon adopt the same strategy in 1 Kgs 3, might this not give us pause and lead us to wonder whether he may not be following his father's example all too closely?

revealed. In that revelation, it indicts the world of Solomon—that depends on ‘wisdom’ for its continuance—as unreal and inadequate.

Yet it is also a world where some order, some decency survive, though hopelessly beleaguered. It is a world where a mother *in extremis* may still hide her son rather than eat him, and where a king *in extremis* can be horrified and wear garments of repentance, while railing against the agent of a God who has allowed such chaos to come about.

On faithfulness in such decency will depend in the end the survival of those in exile. Just as the mother who is prepared to give up her son in the end has him restored to her, so God is prepared to give up his people and let them be taken into exile, rather than subject them to the destruction they have brought on themselves. The people must indeed also be willing to give up their land and their temple, together with their political and religious institutions, and observe instead the remnants of human decency that lead to compassion for all God’s children, not just one’s own family, and this will preserve them as a community in exile, with the hope of a return to a renewed kingdom.

By allowing 2 Kings 6 to inform our reading of 1 Kings 3, then, we may be able to understand more fully the subtlety of the portrayal of the monarchy in these texts, not as something either bad or good, but as something that failed as all human enterprise must fail. In that failure, the writers of Kings see revealed both the glory and the shame of human nature, and they seek to indicate the way in which God may use such failure to deepen Israel’s understanding of the conditions for its continued existence as a community.

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#### ABSTRACT

Stuart Lasine has drawn attention to the parallels between the stories of the judgment of Solomon in 1 Kgs 3 and the story of the cannibal mothers in 2 Kgs 6 (see *JSOT* 50 [1991]: 27-53). He finds that the contrast between the two situations reveals the reversal of Israel's social values. This paper argues that rather than showing a contrast, the two chapters show the same ambiguous attitude to the institution of the monarchy. The seeds of the breakdown of social morality are to be found in the former story, which the reader is induced to re-read in the light of the latter.