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### Political Rhetoric Behind the Solomon Story

Solomon is an interesting figure to study in the Bible; some praise him as a model Ancient Near Eastern King, while others condemn him for the same reasons. At first, Solomon's many wives, riches, chariots, horses, and trade networks are the hallmarks of his reign; they are how he is remembered. However, later in the text, they are turned on him and used to scorn all that he stands for and everything he has done. The story in the first eleven chapters of 1 Kings is written by a Shiloh priest who is resentful toward King Solomon for banishing their high priest at the time, Abiathar, and thus destroying the lives and livelihoods of those priests. This author used subtle irony to turn a critical eye on Solomon and his reign to show the reader that the king who had everything was not as glorious as he seemed.

Taken at face value, this turnaround can simply be the text showing the reader that this kingly behavior leads to the forced labor and taxation on the Israelite people. The author uses God and his condemnation of Solomon's rule to exemplify what the prophet Samuel warned against in his preaching. In 1 Samuel 8:11, Samuel says, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you..." Samuel explains all the things that the king will do, what he will take, and how he will force the people to work for him and become slaves. He intends to use this as a warning for the people. Then in 1 Samuel 8:18, Samuel makes it clear that "in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day." The people wanted a king that would rule them like the other Ancient

Near Eastern kings, and they got exactly what they wished for. But Israel was not supposed to be like the other empires in its time. They soon would regret what they asked God to give them; even Samuel was offended that the people would even think to ask him to ask God. Nevertheless, God knew that the people had “rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7), so he granted their wish in order to teach them a lesson.

One of the first things that needs to be acknowledged when studying 1 Kings is the varying interpretations of the reasoning behind the structure of the text. There are several different philosophies about the arrangement of the text. One theory is that the original writer wrote the praise and a redactor added a critique at the end. The way the writer arranged or framed the story is the key, and the writer may have intentionally written something that can be interpreted in different ways, leaving it up to the reader. These are only some of the theories in the academic world; however, there is another argument emerging in academia. In the article “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtly in 1 Kings 1-11,” J. Daniel Hays explains these arguments and then goes on to express his own opinion. The focus of Hays’ article is to give the way he would read and interpret 1 Kings by comparing it to the rest of the Deuteronomic history. Hays points out that when 1 Kings is examined through the lens of the book of Deuteronomy, it can be interpreted as using subtle irony to point out all the flaws in the reign of Solomon. A wonderful analogy that Hays uses to explain this is a “tour guide.” He equates the writer of 1 Kings to a tour guide giving a tour through a beautiful house and telling visitors all about its greatness, while at the same time using subtle irony: “without changing the inflection of his voice the tour guide points out places where the façade has cracked, revealing a very different structure” (154). This analogy is a good way of expressing what the writer had in

mind; it was not to directly criticize Solomon but to show the reader the truth behind the grandeur.

In order to understand the text fully, a basic understanding of who the writer might be is needed. The writer is a priest descended from the Levite tribe, who lived in the city of Shiloh. What the political climate was like in the time this book was written will help the reader understand where the writer of 1 Kings is coming from politically. The exact dating of the book is under much debate. However, it was written after the division of the nation into north and south and may have been written during the exile in Babylon. The writer may have blamed Solomon for the breakup of the empire, the punishment of his priestly class, and the suffering of the north.

In Friedman's book, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, he points out several ways the north was damaged because of Solomon's choices. When Solomon wanted to build the temple, he needed cedars from Hiram of Tyre. In order to gain access to them, he gave Hiram twenty cities in a tract of northern Israelite territory; he was just giving away parts of northern Israel to serve his own interests. Solomon was from the tribe of Judah and had interests that, as Friedman argues, centered on improving the welfare of his tribe that dominated the territory around Jerusalem.

Friedman also points out that Solomon decided to create new administrative districts. These districts were created in the north; they did not include the territory of Judah. These districts were given new administrative heads that were not chosen by the populace that lived there. The borders of the districts were not even drawn along the tribal lines; they were just drawn to fit Solomon's needs, much like gerrymandering today. One cannot forget the forced labor that the people were made to endure; this was the reason the north split from the south after

the death of Solomon. These offenses to the north would have made the writer of 1 Kings upset at Solomon and may have given him an “axe to grind,” so to speak.

The writer was from the Shiloh priests, so he would have supported Adonijah when it came to the fight for the throne. The succession is a large part of why Solomon chose to cast out the Shiloh priests and their leader. The deposing would have led to the diminished status of those priests that associated with Adonijah. These priests would have had to scramble for a living. Once they had been respected individuals, and now they were threatened just because of whom they associated with; it was a dangerous situation and Solomon was to blame for it. Even if the writer of 1 Kings was writing at a different time, he would have known about these events, and if he was in exile, that would have driven him to blame Solomon for the breakup and capture of the north. Some might argue that Solomon was a convenient scapegoat for the disillusioned people in exile. This might well be true; a people blaming someone else for their hardships is not completely out of the question.

One of the most interesting things about the writer of 1 Kings is that he was very staunch on his views; he was anti-monarchical, seeing as he criticizes Solomon at every turn. He was most certainly pro-Moses, as he was from the Shiloh priest lineage and a Levite, so he would have descended from the teachings of Moses. Therefore, he would have been anti-Aaron. Aaron is seen as being the one who created the model for Golden Calf sanctuaries at Beth-El and Dan. The priests were excluded from Jerusalem and would be excluded again under the reign of Jeroboam when he did not give them the positions in the priesthood in either of the Golden Calf shrines. This might account for the hatred the writer felt towards the sanctuaries. This writer is very much against the Golden Calf worship that was going on in northern Israel; he was someone who wanted to follow the traditional law of God. This is evident again by the condemning of

Solomon when he points out his many horses, wives, and gold and silver that are specifically given as examples of a bad king in Deuteronomy 17. The kings were to be evaluated based on the laws that everyone had to follow in Deuteronomy; Solomon did not follow the laws and keep the covenant with God.

The literary style of the writer is what really clues readers in on the critique of Solomon. The simple fact that he mentions the wealth, wisdom, and wives Solomon has are his way of bringing to the forefront what the reader would already know. The readers would have been familiar with the laws and prohibitions put on a figure of power, even kings. They would have read all about the ways to break God's laws, so when reading this they would have begun to realize that these great characteristics everyone loved Solomon for were not what a good Israelite king would possess. As said before, Israelites were not supposed to have a nation that was like all the others; their nation was supposed to follow the rules of their God. To have a king that would be like other Ancient Near Eastern kings would defeat the purpose of following God and allowing him to lead the way.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that God never chose Solomon as king; it was Nathan's manipulation of Bathsheba that allowed Solomon to come to power. The succession of the throne after David's death was in question; Adonijah had proclaimed himself king, but it was a tricky situation at best. Solomon, in the eyes of the prophets of God, never even really had a claim to the throne to begin with, since a prophet of God never appointed him king. In the eyes of the writer, the faults in Solomon's reign were not towards the end but were right there from the start. The major fault was marrying an Egyptian princess. Egypt was the enemy of Israel; the Egyptians had held them captive and forced them to do labor in the name of the Pharaoh. This marriage would have been expected of any Ancient Near Eastern king, but certainly not of an

Israelite one. The structure of Deuteronomic history is to show the decline of the period of the judges and the fall of the monarchy. Naturally, the historian/writer of these texts would not reserve the criticism for the end of Solomon's story; it would be set up all along the way and end with a crescendo of the most obvious of his failures.

In the time of Solomon, the judgment of what was best for Israel might have been influenced by the surrounding political climate. The writer of 1 Kings was condemning Solomon for his crimes but wanted to make his argument better by using literary devices to mask his intent. The subtle critiques, back-handed praise, and ending that was just outright scathing all show the reader that there is more to the simple reading. One must really analyze the text and compare it to the rest of the Deuteronomic history to get a full understanding of what the writer wanted readers to see.

Taking this knowledge into the modern world is not that hard. Throughout most of history, if people do not like something—a ruler, a king, even a politician—they will write about it. People are inclined to want to voice their opinions about the rulers of their worlds. A good example of this in history would be Virgil's *Aeneid*. It tells the history from the founding of Rome by Aeneas to the rise of Julius Caesar and his successor, Augustus. The *Aeneid* was also a critique and had some satire to it when Virgil wrote it. In modern society, this might be equated to something like written political rhetoric or even political satire. The political comics in newspapers could have their roots in something like 1 Kings. Because of the subtle irony found through analysis of 1 Kings, anything written today with irony directed at world leaders could qualify. In the time of the Old Testament writers, this would have been the main outlet for expressing their political views. Today this outlet might be political cartoons, blogging, or other political websites.

The idea of 1 Kings and what it represents is something that is and has been carried over into our society today. There is a lot more that can be learned from 1 Kings, as well as the rest of the Bible. The Old Testament is especially rich with information that cannot be understood or gleaned through a simple straightforward reading. The reader must go into greater depth and compare the information found in 1 Kings with the rest of the Deuteronomic history. The writer of this history was clever in the way he delivered the reign of Solomon and Solomon's fall. The literary technique, subtle irony, and style of 1 Kings are what need to be taken into account when examining the text. A scorned and resentful priest wrote one of the most scathing and brilliant works in the Old Testament.

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