

## **A Holy Land: Tell Me No Lies**

### **1 Kings 3:5-12**

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One of my favorite things about the Bible is that, like any really good book, it doesn't change but my understanding of it does as I grow older and gain different experiences, different lenses through which to see this library of history, poetry, and storytelling. This scene of God and Solomon is a common addition to stories we think suitable to tell children; ask for wisdom, seems to be the moral of the story as neatly packaged as any of Aesop's fables, and don't ask for finite and selfish things like wealth or power. God will reward those who ask for the right thing.

But Scripture is always more than what we tell children; yes, Solomon asked for wisdom, but there is so much going on in *how* he asked, in the lies that are true and the truth that becomes a lie, in the bizarreness of God's offer in the first place. This dream tale teaches us so much more than how to get the right answer when chatting with God.

A bit of context as we finish up this miniseries on the trip I was able to take to Israel and Jordan this past February: we have switched from the adventures of the obvious scoundrel Jacob to the far less obvious scoundrel Solomon, son of the decided scoundrel who is rarely called such, David. The books of the Kings in what we call the Old Testament are part history and part theological warning; Solomon is the third generation of an office that was never supposed to exist. Israel, after having carved out a place for themselves in the Promised Land to which they were led after escaping Egypt, was meant to follow God; the Lord was their King, and all the books that people usually skip reading like Numbers and Deuteronomy are full of the infrastructure of how God-as-King-and-people-as-administrators would work. But the people wanted a human king, a person like them whom they could see and understand, and God said it was a terrible idea but it was their choice.

God, as usual, was correct; it was a terrible idea. Saul went first and utterly forgot God as he got trapped in his own search for power and prestige—the things Solomon is here lauded for not seeking—and then David took over and brought leadership alongside warfare, adultery, a family as messed up as Jacob's, and greed. Solomon was supposed to be the one who might get it right this time, and he didn't. He, too, was human; he, too, fails in his own way as king. He, too, wasn't God. And yet God reaches out, anyway, because God refuses to sever the relationship with God's people and with their leader.

When we come to this moment of God offering whatever Solomon wants, it is not simply because God felt generous on a certain Thursday. The people of Israel, having not yet built a permanent Temple, were making offerings at various “high places.” Solomon went to one of the most important such places, Gibeon, to offer his own sacrifices after a successful marriage-based alliance with the pharaoh of Egypt of all places, the nation's old oppressor. Both going to such a place and marrying outside the nation were against the Deuteronomic codes.<sup>1</sup> God's appearance in the dream is remarkable not least because God comes to a man who is already on theocratic

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<sup>1</sup> [Commentary on 1 Kings 3:5-12 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2008

thin ice, but also because God comes to the man; there's no sense that Solomon was expecting a one-on-one meeting at Gibeon at all.

And then God offers a blank check, a stringless wish: "Ask what I should give you," says God, and I can only imagine Charlie being given the keys to the chocolate factory in that moment. Whatever? Ask for anything? Because this is from God, there's no concern about this being a "gotcha" moment where the wrong choice will bring down singing Oompa Loompas, but because this is from God, there are wrong answers. Asking for something that did not contribute to love, or life, or wholeness, *shalom*, would certainly be a disappointment, and Solomon knows better than to be a disappointment on purpose.

But he doesn't know how to be fully genuine about it; in the three verses between God's offer and Solomon's actual answer, Solomon talks up his righteous and faithful father—which wasn't *completely* accurate—and talks himself down as "a child" who "does not know how to go out or come in," both of which are blatantly untrue. While certainly not equal to God, Solomon is no child, and the language he uses of "going out" was "typically used in a military context to denote the king's participation in war,"<sup>2</sup> so even his phrasing isn't altogether innocent. In his hedging, Solomon uses the word "servant" four times—once for his dad and three times for himself—in as many sentences. The word written is אֲבֶדְכָּה, *abdekha*, which is incidentally the same word Jacob uses when he meets his brother Esau again decades after taking blessing and birthright from him and is unsure whether Esau is going to forgive and forget or pummel him into the sand.<sup>3</sup>

When I was a child, they told me this was about how good and pious it was of Solomon to ask for wisdom. Now I am an adult, I am cynical enough to wonder if Solomon was as crafty and self-effacing as he sounds, whitewashing his family lineage and debasing himself just in case God needs the extra groveling. The lies Solomon tells grate, now, and I wonder how on earth God could respond that Solomon had asked well and then give him not only the discerning mind but all the other things as well. Surely, God understood that Solomon had an angle.

And the thing about the divine and the human finding each other is that yeah, quite likely, God did. But the gift was given, anyway.

On one of the nights I stayed in Jerusalem, I went with a part of my group to a show at King David's Castle, a structure also known as the Tower of David or the Citadel near the Jaffa Gate into Old Jerusalem. It's a beautiful and impressive structure looming over the street below, a conglomeration of Byzantine and Roman and crusader and Ottoman architecture layered over and around each other. It's a museum now, and in the evenings, there's a light show of projections on the walls of the castle itself that tells the history of Jerusalem. There's a narration track and music as the images spill over the stone for the audience gathered in the courtyard; as a theatrical experience, it's breathtaking. It was also deeply cold in February, so that shapes my memory of it.

The show, though, is 112% propaganda. Of course it is; it's a museum in the heart of Jerusalem celebrating the city that has been through so much, and the images and narration tell a

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<sup>2</sup> [Commentary on 1 Kings 3:5-12 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2008

<sup>3</sup> [1 Kings 3 Interlinear Bible \(biblehub.com\)](#); [Hebrew Concordance: 'ab-de-kā -- 141 Occurrences \(biblehub.com\)](#)

tale of perseverance and strength through wars and crusades and earthquakes and fire. It was an amazing experience, and it swept entirely over any of the times the city was a place of danger, or exclusion, or internal battles; it ignored the way that Israel itself is a mess and has been since it was carved out by the well-meaning Allied forces after the devastation of World War II. There was no naming of Jerusalem as the bloodied heart of three religions that rarely get along, or of the soldiers patrolling the streets. It was beautiful, and it was true, and it was deeply untrue at the same time.

“Your servant my father David...walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you”.

The day after that light show, I went with a different group of people to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum at the edge of the forests on the west side of the city. It's on top of a small hill with greenery and life all around, but the building of the museum is a stark grey concrete blade. The architect wanted it to be ugly, wanted it to be a “saw blade” that permanently scarred the earth itself.

The museum's layout is designed to force you forward; there are exhibits built in the floor of the central hallway so that you can't walk in a straight line but instead are pushed to and fro and crowded together in each exhibit just as the those sent to the camps were. The very first thing you see in the museum is a video montage of Jewish life around Europe in the 1920s—dancing, school pageants, families hanging out laundry, *shabbat* dinners, old men and women talking through the stories of the day. It's a video of life, and the rest of the museum teaches you about how that life was methodically snuffed out over and over and over again. The end of the museum is a circular room with name plaques for the dead, and many of the plaques are blank, because many of those who were killed will never be identified, never brought home to their families, their lives.

“And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?”

Yad Vashem is also a mix of bent truths and deeply true things; the very specific story it tells is an important and horrifying story that must be told, that must be remembered in every generation lest we forget who we become when we lose our souls of compassion, our connection to the love that has nothing to do with romance and everything to do with our neighbor. At Yad Vashem where the garden does not cover the desolate stone, there is the fierce hope that if we tell this truth, perhaps we can discern between good and evil; perhaps God's people can be so numerous. It was an extra layer of meaning to go to that museum in 2023 when fascism is taking root in leadership around the world again and the reality of legal discrimination that leads to dehumanization gains ground by the day.

Solomon's presentation of his answer is not completely true, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. The light show at the castle was telling a story that encourages children to be proud of the city that houses them, and telling tourists that there is steel in the spine of this place. And Solomon is telling a story to God, one of honor and faithfulness and humility, because sometimes a lie is not a lie if it is told in service of a hopeful truth.

“Solomon knows that a listening heart and an understanding mind are more valuable than traditional signs of kingship,” writes Professor Roger Nam. “The Hebrew words help unpack the richness in Solomon’s response. In Hebrew, the word ‘to listen’ is the same word for ‘to obey.’

“Also, the concept of ‘understanding’ is not mere cognition, but integrates morality as seen with the clarification ‘able to discern between good and evil.’”

God’s open offer of everything is answered with Solomon’s Mad-Ave-slick politicking and the very real request for a mind and heart with which to lead. I have no idea if Solomon believed himself, but I know that God believed that it was a good enough response to merit granting it. I know that the writers of the books of kings needed their people to know that Solomon, broken and foolish and proud as he was, had this one moment of being the leader they’d hoped he would be.

We weave our own narratives all the time; even this morning, the public act of a baptism is part of the story we are telling about ourselves. It is true, and real, and honest that now we have this littlest sibling who joins us in the family of Christ and whom it is our job to nurture. Will we adhere to the vows we said, beautiful as they are? Perhaps. Perhaps they were lies, reshaped truths like Solomon’s presentation of a faithful father and he, the dutiful son. Perhaps we, too, will fail in our bringing her up as someone who knows not only that she has a whole family of people to teach her about the surface and the sublevels of Solomon’s wisdom but also that she is never any less than God’s beloved. Of course we will fail that—but we promise it, anyway. Solomon asks for a discerning mind, anyway. And God grants it in the love of who Solomon could become, anyway. Grace is ever hopeful, ever trusting, ever honest, after all.

May we seek that grace earnestly and give it honorably as we listen to each other tell our stories, hearing the things we mean to say even as we hear what is fully said, and may we, too, ask for and live through wise and discerning minds. Amen.