

‘Happy Are Your People’: Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, and the Cost of Glory

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1 Kings 10.1-13

If you were with us for Evensong last Sunday, you might remember that I preached on a passage from the First Book of Kings describing the building of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. The passage contained much detail about the materials used to enhance the Temple’s splendour: gold, in particular, which richly overlaid not only the altar and the cherubim, but also the doors, the walls, and even the floor of the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6.20–22, 28, 30, 32).

After the service, Canon Neil told me that reading the passage had made him think of President Trump’s Oval Office. Indeed, the Oval Office has undergone a lavish redecoration during Trump’s presidency, with extensive use of golden ornamentation, reflecting the taste for all things gilded that is also on display in the president’s private residence, the famous penthouse at Trump Tower. And recently, four equestrian statue groups standing at Lincoln Memorial Circle in Washington, D.C., were, at the president’s orders, re-gilded with gold leaf at a cost of around \$5 million, paid for from the public purse.

Surely, you might be thinking now, that is a preposterous comparison. The abundance of gold in the Temple, after all, was meant to reflect the beauty of holiness and the glory of God, not the self-glorification of any nation, let alone one person’s delusion of grandeur.

Moreover, Solomon, who built the Temple, was known for his wisdom, which is rather more than can be said of some of the statesmen occupying seats of power

today. The Bible tells us that, when God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked him what he desired, Solomon did not ask for long life, riches, or honour. Instead, he asked for an understanding mind, so that he might discern what is right and govern God's people justly (1 Kings 3.5–13).

However, before you go to Canon Neil to berate him for inciting his curate to dwell on such an inappropriate comparison, I want to invite you to think again. Because the comparison may not be quite as preposterous as it appears at first sight. Scripture tells us that the building of the Temple was part of a much larger building programme. Solomon also built a magnificent royal palace, which took nearly twice as long to construct as the Temple itself (1 Kings 6.38; 7.1). The biblical writers are at pains to convey to the reader just how vast the wealth and resources the king had accumulated were. Again and again, the text returns to the sheer abundance of Solomon's gold, silver, horses and chariots, repeating the numbers and piling up the figures until the scale of his wealth appears almost beyond imagining (1 Kings 9.15–28; 10.14–29).

And, indeed, the biblical account bears little resemblance to what historians, drawing on archaeological and other available evidence, can tell us about the kingdoms of the region of present-day Israel-Palestine during the period in which Solomon is thought to have lived.

The biblical description of Solomon's riches, however, does not end with material goods. The king's possessions, we are told, also included no fewer than a thousand women: seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11.3). Again, a historical impossibility, but nonetheless crucial to what the writers of the Book of Kings want us to understand about Solomon's rule, and why it ultimately fails. Because if, after what you have just heard about Solomon's excessive wealth and the thousand women he owned, you are beginning to doubt his wisdom, that is probably exactly what the biblical writer wants you to do.

And if the reading also made you think of certain powerful men in our own time, whose wealth and influence have seemed to entitle them to the bodies and lives of nameless women, you may find that the Bible has something to say about that question, too. You may, after all, not be guilty of the sin of anachronism, of simply applying the moral and social norms of our own time to a very different age.

You see, I do not think it is insignificant that, right next to that catalogue of silent wives, the scriptural writers place an episode about a woman who comes to Solomon uninvited, whom the king does not possess and cannot command. This afternoon's reading tells of the legendary visit to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. She had heard about the king's unmatched wisdom and his prosperity, and she came to see for herself whether the reports were true.

Having had Solomon undergo what one presumes was an ancient version of a cognitive function test — which he appears to have passed with flying colours — and having witnessed the splendour of both his private residence and the sacrificial worship at the Temple, the Queen of Sheba sings praises to Solomon and to Solomon's God:

'Blessed be the LORD your God,
who has delighted in you
and set you on the throne of Israel!
Because the LORD loved Israel for ever,
he has made you king
to execute justice and righteousness'
(1 Kings 10.9).

You might also recall that, before she offers these words of praise, the Queen of Sheba says:

'Happy are your wives!
Happy are these your servants,

who continually attend you
and hear your wisdom!' (v. 8).

In the Hebrew text, however, there is no mention of 'wives'. The Hebrew reads: 'Happy are your *men*', or, more broadly, 'your *people*'. The word 'wives', found in the Greek and Syriac versions of the Hebrew Bible, might be the result of an ancient scribal error. The Hebrew words for 'men' and 'wives' differ by a single consonant, which might account for the difference.

There are, in any case, no other indications in the text that Solomon's wives belonged among the things a visitor should envy. Especially not a woman visitor, who comes to Jerusalem entirely on her own terms: a ruler in her own right, testing Solomon, forming her own judgment, and free, when she is done, to return home.

The episode recounting the visit of the Queen of Sheba marks a turning point in the story of Solomon and of the monarchy: a moment when the king's glory seems to have reached its height, just before we learn of the fall that is to come. The chapter in which the Queen of Sheba praises Solomon's God, who made him king over Israel so that he would exercise justice and righteousness, is followed by the chapter in which we learn of Solomon's turn to idolatry under the influence of his many wives, and of the division of his kingdom in two, brought about, at least in part, by the exploitative labour practices he employed to enable his ambitious building projects, which I spoke about in last week's sermon.

Solomon, the king renowned for his wisdom, is ultimately found guilty of two of the greatest sins: against God, through idolatry, and against his neighbour, through injustice. Take idolatry first. Israel's covenant begins with a demand: 'you shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20.3). Solomon breaks it literally, building altars to foreign gods in the very city where he had built the Temple of the true God (1 Kings 11.7–8).

Few of us burn incense to pagan deities on mountain tops. But the biblical writers, I believe, are naming something wider: what happens when something other than God commands a people's ultimate loyalty: wealth, perhaps, or a nation's greatness, or a leader who promises to secure it.

And then there is the second of Solomon's sins: injustice. Solomon's downfall is never simply a matter of private error. It follows hard on gold beyond counting and a household built on exploitation. Splendour bought at another's cost does not hold a kingdom together. Shortly after Solomon's death, his kingdom is divided (1 Kings 12.1–19).

The story of Solomon leaves us with two questions to sit with.

The first is this: What commands our ultimate loyalty? God, or something we have quietly put in God's place?

The second is this: Whatever comfort or splendour we enjoy, personally or as a nation, what has it cost someone else?

These questions do not set love of God against love of country, or against ordinary human flourishing or simple creaturely pleasures. They ask only this: that neither wealth, nor nation, nor leader take the place that belongs to God alone; and that whatever we build, we build without laying too heavy a yoke on our neighbour's shoulders, whether that neighbour is a foreign labourer, a woman without a name in someone else's story, or a nation with less power than our own.

That is not an ancient question. It is today's news.

Amen.