

# **King Solomon: Wisdom for Modern Leaders**

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Our world is filled with leaders—in our homes, schools, work places, and the government. Williams and Denney (2010, 12) noted, “There are few issues more important to our daily lives than the issue of leadership,” so it is not surprising that there are thousands of books and journal articles about leadership. There are books that teach, among other things, how to become a leader, lead teams, be a visionary, promote creativity, and face challenges. Furthermore, authors focus on the strengths of great leaders, kinds of leadership, and principles of leadership. These resources are insightful.

Studies of past leadership are also beneficial. According to the Guinness Book of World Records (Guinness World Records, 2017, para. 1), the Bible is the world’s best-selling and most widely distributed non-fiction book. Not only have an estimated five billion Bibles been printed but at least one book of the Bible has been printed in 2,123 languages (Guinness World Records, 2017, para. 1). Therefore, an examination of an example of leadership in the Bible is instructive.

## **Introduction**

According to the Bible, the third king of Israel was Solomon. From Solomon’s birth, God loved him, as demonstrated by God’s command through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah (2 Samuel 12:25), meaning “loved by the Lord” (Hoerber, 1986, 439). This favor can be seen in God’s choice to have Solomon build the temple (1 Chronicles 22: 6–10), a task which his father, King David, was not allowed to do because of the many people he had killed as a warrior (1 Chronicles 28:3). God’s grace can also be seen in Solomon’s ascension to the throne.

A combination of Biblical texts and a “military topographic list” from Egypt (Levy, et al., 2008, 16460) are traditionally used to conclude Solomon lived during the tenth century BC. The discovery of clay bullae, which “were used to seal official correspondence in much the same way wax seals were used on official documents in later periods” (Mississippi State University, 2014, para. 3), supports Biblical accounts of a developed political organization during this time period. In addition, the results of Ben-Yosef, Langgut, and Sapir-Hen’s study (2017, 411) point to a “centralized [governmental] organization.” There is, therefore, evidence that the Biblical accounts of King Solomon may be true.

### **Solomon Becomes King**

God promised King David that one of his children would succeed him as king, but the passage does not say which son (2 Samuel 7:12). David had six sons while in Hebron. David had more sons after moving the capital of Israel to Jerusalem, including four sons with Bathsheba as well as nine other sons and sons with his concubines (1 Chronicles 3:1–9). Even though two of his oldest sons, Amnon and Absalom, had passed away (2 Samuel 13:23–33; 2 Samuel 18:14–17), there were still many left to vie for the throne as King David neared death.

Unknown to King David, Adonijah, Solomon’s older half-brother and the heir apparent, tried to take advantage of their father’s old age (1 Kings 1) and seize the throne (2 Samuel 3:1–5). It is evident from 1 Kings 1:17, however, that King David had told Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, that Solomon would take over the kingdom of Israel. As a result, at the urging of Nathan the prophet, Bathsheba informed David of Adonijah’s declaration that he was the new king. David intervened immediately, having Zadok the priest anoint Solomon as king with oil from the tent of meeting (1 Kings 1:39). This demonstrates Bathsheba’s status with King David and her importance for the nation (Berlin, 1982, 74-75). Some scholars suggest that King Solomon took the throne at about the age of twenty (Green, 2014, 151), and soon after becoming king, Solomon’s

reign was marred by more familial conflict as Adonijah tried to marry King David's last concubine, Abishag, in another play for power (1 Kings 2). Bathsheba once again proved "instrumental in removing his [Solomon's] major rival, Adonijah" (Nowell, 2008, 8).

### Meaning of Passage

Soon after Solomon took the throne, God appeared to Solomon and told him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5). As the son of King David, Solomon was well educated, but Solomon recognized his need for wisdom and leadership skills beyond his years. During the encounter with God, Solomon referred to himself as "a little child" (1 Kings 3:7). Consequently, in response to God's offer, King Solomon asked for wisdom, a discerning heart to lead, and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong (1 Kings 3:9). The text continues with God expressing His pleasure and promising,

Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings (1 Kings 3:10-13).

This is an intriguing passage as temporal and cultural contexts are quite distant from the twenty-first century. To fully comprehend and apply the text, a study of Hebrew, the original language, is necessary.

### Discernment

One of the key concepts in the passage is "a discerning heart" (1 Kings 3:9). In Hebrew, the word for "discerning" is *bīyn*, which Strong's Concordance defines as "to separate mentally (or distinguish), i.e. (generally) understand...have intelligence...perceive"

(H995 - *biyn* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). The same word is found in 1 Kings 3:11–12 when God acknowledged Solomon's desire for discernment and then said, "I will give you a wise and discerning heart."

One of the most widely quoted examples of King Solomon's discerning heart is when he pronounced a verdict in a legal challenge between two women who were arguing over who was the rightful mother of a newborn baby. King Solomon ordered the child be cut in half and one half given to each mother, but King Solomon knew that the real mother would give up her child so the baby would live (1 Kings 3:16–28). This scene demonstrates Solomon's ability to understand the reaction of a mother to preserve the life of her child (Walvoord & Zuck, 1985, 495). It also attests to Solomon's ability to perceive the truth in situations. In addition to discernment, however, God blessed Solomon with a wise heart.

## Wisdom

The Hebrew word for "wise" in God's response (1 Kings 3:12) is the adjective, *chakam*, which has been cataloged as Strong's H2450 (H2450 - *chakam* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). Strong's Concordance lists six Biblical uses of the word, but two are more directly related to the passage because they deal with the leadership role that King Solomon was commencing upon. The first usage is "wise (ethically and religiously)," and the second is "wise (in administration)" (H2450 - *chakam* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017).

During his reign, Solomon demonstrated both types of wisdom as king. Solomon's religious wisdom is demonstrated in his building of "a Temple for the deity who had endowed him with so much wisdom" (Porten, 1967, 98). The temple, with cedar paneling, gold overlay, and "outer doors of ivory," was over 30 meters long, 12 meters wide, and 18 meters high (Knox, 2017, Solomon's Temple, para. 2). To build the temple and then his palace, administrative wisdom was necessary, and as a wise administrator Solomon made a "treaty for timber and skilled artisans" (Porten, 1967,

98). The trees were cut in Lebanon, transported to the Mediterranean Sea, and sent to Israel (1 Kings 5:8-9). Thousands of years later, the results of Ben-Yosef, Langgut, and Sapir-Hen's study (2017, 411) point to a government involved in "inter-regional trade," providing evidence that the claims made in the Bible may be accurate.

### Servant

A lexical study of the word "servant" is essential for two reasons. First, Solomon used it four times while asking for wisdom (1 Kings 3:6-9). Second, in the current era, the term "servant" often has negative connotations, suggesting someone who is hired to do unskilled work or labor. This does not, however, mean that the Old Testament Biblical implications are the same.

The word "servant" in this passage comes from *'ebed* in Hebrew. This term is used not only for "slave" but also for "worshippers (of God)...[and] servant (as a form of address between equals)" (H5650 - *'ebed* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). It is a masculine noun, which is not surprising since Solomon was talking. Strong's Concordance notes that the root of *'ebed* is *ā·vad'*, a verb defined as "to work (in any sense); by implication, to serve" (H5647 - *ā·vad'* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). However, further examination of *ā·vad'* indicates that this term can also be used to "compel to labour or work...to cause to serve as subjects" (H5647 - *ā·vad'* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). Consequently, the lexicon can be used with positive, neutral, and negative nuances in the original Hebrew language, requiring reference to the passage to render a complete understanding.

Solomon's use suggests he was planning to work for the Israelite kingdom. For example, when Solomon referred to his duties for governing the Israelites, he called himself "a child." In Hebrew, this term, *nah'ar*, is used for "a boy, lad, servant, youth, retainer" (H5288 - *nah'ar* - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV), 2017). In his request, Solomon was admitting his lack of experience, and there is no suggestion that he felt he was being compelled to be king without choice. This is supported by the fact that he could have allowed Adonijah to become king. In addition, there is no indication that

Solomon felt he was a “slave.” Instead, Solomon appears to have the heart of a willing servant who expected to work for his Lord and country.

## **Results of Solomon’s Leadership**

### Wisdom

As king, Solomon became an extraordinary leader. Solomon is known for the wisdom expressed in his prose. Hoerber (1986, 942), for example, noted that the book of proverbs is “closely linked to him,” and Solomon “spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five” (Hoerber, 1986, 478).

He also became famous for his wisdom in administration and decision making. According to Biblical scriptures, his wisdom was greater than “the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:30). As a result, when the queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she said, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard” (1 Kings 10:6-7). Solomon effectively used his wisdom to make decisions that increased Israel’s peace and economic status.

### Peace for the Nation

Soon after Solomon took power, he married the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt (1 Kings 3:1). Davidovich (2010, 80) asserts that the marriage was a political move for both sides since this type of marriage was considered a contract for mutual security. The Pharaoh’s name is not mentioned in any documents. “The custom was that the more powerful king received the daughter of the other king” (Davidovich, 2010, 77), suggesting that at this point in history, Egypt was weaker than Israel and may have

been trying to continue the political relationship originally developed with King David (Millard, 2002, 75).

This marriage contract was prudent for Israel since throughout the ages Palestine was often embattled in military campaigns and in the direct route of the commerce flow going north and south (Merrill, Rooker, & Grisanti, 2011, 42). These human maneuvers helped secure temporary international tranquility. When combined with the fulfillment of God's promises after Solomon's request for wisdom, the marriage contract was instrumental in creating an unprecedented period of peace for Israel (Knoppers, 1992, 416).

## Wealth

Solomon started his reign in the Middle Iron Age, which came after the Bronze Age. The Bible claims that King Solomon received over 25 tons of gold, plus taxes, every year during his reign (2 Chronicles 9:13), making him "greater in riches...than all the other kings of the earth" (Hoerber, 1986, 490). Solomon used this wealth to build a temple (1 Kings 6) and a palace as well as terraces, ships, store cities, and towns (1 Kings 9), and artifacts provide evidence supporting Biblical claims. For example, archeologists have found evidence of the ancient defensive walls thought to have been built by King Solomon in the second half of the tenth century B.C. (Milstein, 2010). Archaeological findings also provide evidence of the fortune and technological advancement that Israel received as a result of Solomon's leadership.

Dr. Allan Millard, an Old Testament scholar, expounded on the proliferation of the use of gold and bronze in extravagant ornamentation of the interiors of temples and palaces of the kingdoms surrounding Israel (Merrill, Rooker, & Grisanti, 2011, xvii). These kingdoms included Egypt and Mesopotamia, which included Assyria. This use of valuable metals was also replicated in Israel. Solomon overlaid the inside of the temple, the altar, and the front of the inner sanctuary with gold (1 Kings 6:20–22). The Hebrews did not, however, have the necessary skills to build the 200 large hammered

gold shields (1 Kings 10:16–17), so Solomon utilized craftsmen from Phoenicia, thereby advancing Israel’s metalworking abilities (Chaney & Basbous, 1978, 120). High-precision radiocarbon dating of 3,000-year-old animal waste as well as over 1,000 tons of smelting debris support the fact that there was an “industrial-scale production worthy of an ancient state or kingdom” (Donahue, 2017, para. 21). Furthermore, archaeological excavations have yielded “secondary metallurgical activities...and production of fine metal ingots” (Ben-Yosef, Langgut, & Sapir-Hen, 2017, 425), providing evidence the Biblical story is accurate.

### **Implications for Modern Leaders**

The passage provides guidelines for those in leadership positions, particularly those who are new leaders. First, in spite of Solomon’s upbringing in the house of King David and the education he obtained in that environment, Solomon did not rely on his intelligence or previous experiences. Instead, he recognized his need for wisdom and discernment. Leaders are reminded that they need to be humble enough to ask for help and guidance from those with more and different experiences, and this is increasingly becoming a mantra of corporate culture. LinkedIn, for instance, noted that everyone needs mentors who can, among other things, “help you...discover the path you may need to take [and] provide you with a wealth of knowledge and resources” (Adenle, 2014, 10 Concrete Reasons). Similarly, the creator of *Dilbert*, a comic distributed around the world, noted that when he was first starting off on the speech circuit, he needed advice about how much to charge for a presentation (Adams, 2013). With the help of a senior vice president, his speaking career was launched, leading him to conclude, “Sometimes you just need a friend who knows different things than you do” (Adams, 2013, Kindle page 81).

Second, Solomon’s request informs leaders about the source of wisdom. The original Hebrew, *bīyn*, emphasizes that true wisdom combines intelligence and the ability to perceive. Three thousand years after King Solomon, today’s leaders are starting to realize the importance of perception as well as traditional intelligence. For example,



Ray Dalio, founder and former co-chief executive of the biggest hedge fund in the world (Gajana, 2017), noted intelligence alone is not enough for leadership when he observed, “There’s an emotional you and there’s an intellectual you, and often they’re at odds, and often they work against you.” He gave the example of constructive criticism. On the one hand, he noted, leaders want feedback that will help them improve, while on the other hand, part of the brain signals they are being attacked (Dalio, 2017). To overcome this, the ability to perceive is essential.

Solomon’s request for wisdom implies that leaders must also be constant learners. This is as true now as it was in the tenth century BC. Mikkelsen and Jarcho (2015), for example, noted that to succeed in the twenty-first century, leaders must continually change and adapt, which requires autonomous learning.

Third, Solomon’s request for wisdom demonstrates a standard by which to make decisions. As the lexical study for *chakam* demonstrated, Solomon needed not only administrative wisdom but also ethical (and religious) wisdom. In the secular world, the two are sometimes mutually exclusive. For instance, a leader may be good at administering an organization’s finances while illegally skimming money. This type of leader would have administrative proficiency without ethical wisdom. Solomon’s request, however, calls leaders to not only follow the country’s laws but also to make ethically sound decisions, and businesses and leaders have been having similar revelations.

Howard Gardner, named one of the top 100 public intellectuals who are shaping the world (Foreign Policy, 2008), asserted that the “ethical mind” must be cultivated to fulfill one’s responsibilities as both an employee and a citizen (Gardner, 2008, 21). Similarly, research has demonstrated that “trust-based culture [in the workplace is a] strong driver of successful business” and noted that future workplaces will be defined by “a fairer workplace for all employees, increased focus on developing all employees, and a deeper sense of purpose for all employees” (Great Place to Work, 2017, 4-5). These values suggest that rather than exclusively focusing on the bottom line (i.e., profit or loss), ethical wisdom will be increasingly pertinent for successful companies.

Fourth, although Solomon boldly asked for help to meet his needs so he could be a good leader, he did not seek personal gain. Instead, he referred to himself as a servant. Although there are many examples of leaders who have profited at the expense of those under them, many are realizing the fallacy of this viewpoint. Simon Sinek (2009b) noted that leaders influence others by either manipulation or inspiration and those who are inspired are less often motivated by money and more often excited by their personal involvement. He demonstrated his point by comparing Samuel Pierpont Langley to the Wright brothers. Although the Wright brothers had less money, were not well connected, and did not have the following of the mass media, they made history. Langley's lack of success, Sinek claimed, was because of his selfish motivation and hunger for money and fame (Sinek, 2009a).

Finally, in the passage, the use of *'ebed* (*ā·vad'*) suggests leading by example and balance in life. To begin with, for Christians, God does not call leaders to rest while others do the work, and in the same way, leaders in all fields should be actively involved in their work, not separated by their positions. This implies that leaders will have many demands on their time as they lead by example. Busy leaders must remember that, as *'ebed* demonstrates, Solomon's prayer commands servants of the Lord to worship God. Christian leaders cannot become so engrossed in doing things for God that they forget to have a relationship with Him.

Leaders in every field can apply this message. They cannot become so involved in their work that they forget what is most important. They must fight to maintain the proper perspective about work. Increasingly, companies are encouraging employees to balance their work and personal life (Great Place to Work, 2017). To promote this, some companies allow their employees to volunteer during working hours. Companies are also doing more to take care of the entire person. For example, Marriot's TakeCare program "includes wellness programs, formal training and traditional benefits, along with fun programs like photo contests that let employees show co-workers what makes them smile" (Great Place to Work, 2017, 11). Providing a better work-life balance is not only altruistic; it can prove beneficial to the companies because the employees feel

pride and have high levels of commitment to their work and the company (Frauenheim & Lewis-Kulin, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Solomon rose to power during a period of conflict within his family and during a time when Israel was no stranger to war. Many of David's sons could have competed to be the new king, but King Solomon took the throne. Like Solomon, leaders will face some type of conflict, so a study of Solomon's wisdom in leadership is instructive.

Solomon wanted a discerning heart to lead the nation of Israel, and this provides leaders with insight. To begin with, they must begin new roles humbly, seeking help from others. Solomon also shows leaders that they are called to not only do their tasks well by utilizing traditional intelligence but also use their perceptive ability to develop their administrative and ethical wisdom. Furthermore, in contrast to secular society, which often emphasizes getting ahead at the expense of others, Solomon used "servant" four times in this short passage. Following his example, leaders must not use their position to seek personal gain but instead lead by example. Finally, the text instructs leaders to have a good balance in their lives, no matter how busy they become.

In response to Solomon's request, he received wisdom and discernment. Moreover, the nation was granted peace and wealth. Increasingly, leaders are mimicking the wisdom demonstrated in Solomon's request, and there are many indications this trend will continue, with benefits accruing to the leaders as well as those around them.

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