

## 'Solomon in all his glory'

### COMFORT & CONTROL, COMPROMISE & CATASTROPHE



FREDERIC WILLIAM FARRAR  
(1831-1903)

– chaplain to Queen Victoria, preached at Darwin's funeral. Was his closeness to the heart of the British Empire motivation for his profound meditations upon Solomon?

BY DAVID ASPINALL [a sermon preached at Streetsville United Church, July 2006]

**S**OLOMON – much of the Old Testament is devoted or credited to him – 31 chapters of Proverbs, 20 more in Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, 20 in Kings & Chronicles. And one might easily make a case that much of the rest of the OT is written to trace the legacy of Solomon in the history of the divided kingdom. Yet, when we hear the name of Solomon, is it his political legacy we think of first? There are surprisingly few books about Solomon and his times, even from Christian sources. Could this reflect our discomfort with the lessons his life and legacy leave for our contemplation?

Solomon – no name has passed into the common tradition of our language which is bound so intimately with the words wealth, wisdom – and women. It is

interesting that later Jewish tradition relatively ignores David, but is fascinated with Solomon (Farrar 208) For what fascinates the worldly mind? - wealth, ostentation, sex & splash – “showy display of one’s means of life”, as John puts it (1 John 2:15-17).

But equally fascinating as the world’s attraction to the legend of Solomon is his comparative neglect in the New Testament. Christ mentioned Solomon only twice. Once in the sermon on the mount, in counseling the disciples “do not worry about your life”, quieting their anxieties regarding ‘normal’ needs, Christ pointed at the gorgeous lilies of Galilee. “Not even Solomon”, he said, “not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these”.

The second time the Lord mentioned Solomon, somewhat less famously, was in judgment upon his own generation. “The queen of the south came from the ends of the earth”, Christ solemnly warned, “to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but someone greater than Solomon is here.” The queen of Sheba, Christ insisted, would rise up in the judgment with that generation and would condemn it.

We see that Christ, unlike Jewish tradition, pays no homage to the wonders of Solomon’s wealth and harem. The Old Testament, by contrast, is far more concerned with the gifts and greatness of this king.

What were the gifts which this fabled king possessed to a unique degree? First, the wealth he was born to. We can hardly measure it in today’s dollars. We do know, though, that the temple which he built for the worship of YHWH cost by today’s measure billions. Compare our former Skydome, which in 1989 dollars cost less than half a billion. Yet the Temple itself was merely the size of the Streetsville United Church sanctuary. However, not even St Peter’s in Rome was goldplated, as Solomon’s temple was.

But obviously Christ’s reference to Solomon’s wisdom has more weight than his passing reference to Solomon’s fleeting glory. Kings tells us Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs (we have a few hundred of them to this day in the OT book). He composed over 1000 songs. Only a handful of them seem to have survived, in the psalms and the Song of Solomon, or Canticles. We are also told that Solomon spoke of the great cedars of Lebanon and the humble hyssop on the garden wall, of beasts both

significant and seemingly insignificant. God gave him, we are told, not only wisdom, that rarest of human attributes, but also 'largeness of heart, like the sand of the seashore'. And the beginning of this great wisdom, the intro to the book of Proverbs informs us, was the fear of YHWH.

Solomon's fear & wisdom shine most brightly in his prayer of dedication when the temple was complete (1 Kings 8). It is a prayer overflowing with thanksgiving, of recognition of human fragility & frailty, of the spirit of all true supplication, the recognition of our total dependence on God's mercy. *Hear us from heaven Your true home*, Solomon prays, and dwell with us forever, even as we dwell obediently in your presence. *Never leave us nor forsake us*. And here we have, in fulfillment of that request, the greatest of all gifts to Solomon. Despite all the splendour of that temple, all the manifest glory of Solomon's reign, there now arrived the supreme gift, the personal shekinah glory of YHWH, pleased to dwell among a people whose priority was manifestly the public worship of the true God. In those days God dwelt indeed on earth, as well as in heaven

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And what was the attribute of Solomon which brought God close by? Before the temple God had but once appeared to Solomon, in a dream. And Solomon, like Moses, Joshua and later Isaiah and Simon Peter, felt the littleness that we must all feel in the presence of Divinity. *I am a little child*, Solomon responded. *Who is able to judge your great people?* Indeed Solomon was probably less than 20 — but not all teenagers see themselves as little children, do they? Most at Solomon's age are already seeking fulfillment in ways the world did then, and does now. Careers, wealth, sex, the arts, higher education. In which way are we seeking our happiness? It's July and where are our teenagers on Sundays? The answer will likely tell you much about where they are seeking — and are being encouraged to seek — their happiness.

If you have teenagers in the family, get them to read Ecclesiastes. They may know some of it already. *To everything there is a season, a season for everything under heaven*. One of the biggest songs of the 60s, *Turn Turn Turn*. That's chapter 3, but get them to read chapter 2. Solomon had

it all. Parties and pleasure, wealth untold, architecture, horticulture, music, the fine arts — Solomon did it 3000 years ago. In Ecclesiastes he recounts his attempt to find fulfillment in all these things. His conclusion? *Vanity, vanity, trying to catch the wind ...* — (isn't that another famous 60's song? It seems we were not far from the kingdom of God — for a little while anyway!)

And we shall not forget one more way Solomon sought happiness. We noted Solomon's interest in creation in all its wondrous diversity. Well, as possessor of 700 wives, 300 concubines, he found out something men of this world spend a lifetime learning. Diversity may be stimulating, but it's exhausting. To both body and spirit. Covetous appetite knows no ceiling — or better, no basement. And guess what's in the basement of Satan's sensual supermarkets.

And what can we do in the wake of Solomon? He asks us to reflect on what we can do that he did not do more — and better. *So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done?* (Eccl.2:12)

To be sure, not all of Solomon's interest in the opposite sex was selfish. Perhaps not even most of it. His marriage to Pharaoh's daughter brought many benefits to Israel. For a time Egypt treated Israel almost as an equal on the world stage. (Pharaoh's daughter was normally NOT available to foreigners, even kings. - Aling 121)

So the foreign wives were, in effect, insurance policies, fancy wrapped & scented. Remember Lot — & Lot's wife. Like Lot, but unlike Abraham, Israel was now a settled people - peace was the necessary condition of that prosperity. We recall that Solomon's very name means peace (shalom). But also as with Lot, the cost of that 'peace' was heavy. Compromise was the inevitable price. We recall that YHWH had never commissioned an earthly king, He had but tolerated the people's passion to be like their neighbours, to have a visible ruler. He warned them through Samuel that the cost of an earthly king would be enormous.

The OT makes much of Solomon's expenditures on military preparation. Here Solomon and Israel were in direct violation of the spirit of the law of Moses. There is a brief passage in Deut 17 (vv 14-20)

which contains principles applicable to Israel's future king. There are 3 absolute prohibitions. *He shall not multiply horses for himself ... Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.* (Payne 392) War preparations, sexual license, wealth. Yet these are the very things Solomon did, the book of Kings tells us, usually without even editorial comment. We may try to rationalize his comforts, his extravagant court, his compromises. After all, are not all these the cost of international responsibilities and ambitions? How we love our comfort zones – our proof that life is under control. But what is the inevitable cost to faith when we make control & comfort our priorities?

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So it was that Israel became a mercantile people (Farrar 114). Its cash economy dates from Solomon's reign: Israel became a race of middlemen, capitalists, in contrast to its prior rustic, agrarian culture (Martin 395,407). And so Jewish nostalgia for the 'golden age' of Solomon is ironic – it has about it an ambivalence which we in this dangerous age need to consider extra carefully. In the name of material progress & prosperity, what heavy burdens are we hoisting upon our own backs – or worse, leaving our children to struggle under after we are dust?

And with all Solomon had, including TWO personal visits from YHWH (not even David enjoyed that privilege), one thing he DID NOT have – he had no Nathan to call him to account. No prophet, no accountability (Martin 400). He even took to appointing priests, which tipped the balance of power in Israel's theocracy precipitously toward tyranny (Martin 398). Here we should look at OUR prosperity, our politics. What accountability do our button pushers have? Whose interests are they REALLY interested in?

Amazingly, in all this compromise, even flagrant disobedience, Solomon remained a formal worshipper of the true God. Yet his extravagant public worship of Yahweh, his 1000s of bloody sacrifices, did not lessen his guilt before God. His sin was made worse by syncretism - PUBLIC ritual in both the temple of YHWH and the sanctuary of Chemosh etc (Farrar 144). Yahweh, Chemosh AND Mammon an unholy trinity make.

But let US ask ourselves: *Is Christ on our lips while Mammon is in our heart? How long will we straddle the theological fence – if Chemosh be the true god, let us worship him, and not name the name of Christ ever again.*

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After you read the account in 1 Kings, read Chronicles' account of Solomon's reign and note something very interesting. Almost all these embarrassing aspects of Solomon's reign are omitted. In the opinion of some commentators, they were just 'less edifying' than the double account of Solomon's greatness we get in Kings AND Chronicles (Payne 397). Here too we might seek light on our generation's media practices. To whom are our leaders & media accountable? Are we being told the WHOLE truth? When your 'truth' has a spin on it, you can bet it will topple. What do you know about the dark side of our institutions & organizations? Who profits from the 'truth' they let us know?

Thus Solomon's glory became Solomon's disgrace. The mess was avoidable. The law of God did not prohibit money, but prohibited excess. The law of God did not even prohibit multiple marriage (if you had sufficient shekels) – but did prohibit alliances with worshippers of other gods. Solomon's greatness diminished in direct proportion to the growth of his glory, for the glory which Christ conceded to Solomon was, in the context of the Lord's comment, NOT related to simplicity & singleness of vision. His eye did not remain simple, life became more complex, nay totally, inextricably tangled, and the knot he created finally strangled not just himself but ALL Israel. Today's mess in the middle east is DIRECTLY traceable to Solomon's compromise. The catastrophe of his reign is still with us. His reliance on political alliances, military might and his love of ostentatious wealth finally undermined what wisdom he attained. What was the immense cost of the temple, the military and the lavish lifestyle? Virtual enslavement of tens of 1000s of Israelites & gentile neighbours as well. The yoke was too heavy to bear. It would be thrown off – in revolt, in violence. In civil war, in the permanent tearing asunder of Israel (read 1 Kings 11-12).

His people today have not learned from Solomon's folly. Israel, and for that matter the 'Christian' west as well, still have more faith in carnal weapons, carnal covenants than in YHWH, whose very name proclaims

Him the ONLY God of covenant faithfulness. Let me say that again, even more simply – YHWH is the only God who KEEPS covenants. All human alliances, therefore – at least those where God's express will is ignored – are ultimately deals with the Devil.

### **Are we seeking wealth, fame and glory – or wisdom?**

But someone greater than Solomon is here. Contrast the greater Solomon with His ancestor. Solomon built a temple which took 7 years to build – but spent 13 years on his own palace. Christ had no place to lay his head. Solomon built an empire which even Egypt envied. Christ was offered ALL the kingdoms of the world and their glory -- but would not bend the knee ONCE to Satan. Solomon's wisdom brought a queen from the ends of the earth. But Christ IS Wisdom. We may not have Solomon's wisdom – but we can have the MIND of Christ. Let the pagan queen teach us. Would we travel as far as she in search of divine wisdom? Would we even cross a road for a Bible study? Or would we more likely cross the road to sit at Solomon's elegantly appointed table? Are we weekly turning down the Lord's invitation to an even richer banquet, while our eyes, hearts and even bodies travel the ends of the earth, seeking the treasures of Solomon? (Maclaren 199-201) These are questions we should daily ask ourselves – and ask those we love who set less store in worship of God than service of Mammon.

Related concluding questions: – Are we, like Solomon, entangling ourselves in ever more complexities, with the inevitable compromises of godly living – or are we living with a single thought, as Christ did? Are we, as individuals and as nations, seeking peace the way Solomon sought peace, by bigger & better chariots, making deals – 'covenants with death' (Isaiah 28:14-16)– with both men and God? Are we seeking the glory of this world, its wealth, its sensual and sexual pleasures, even its wisdom, or do we rise each day with a single goal – to better love God and our neighbours?

*'All flesh is like grass, and all its glory is like the flowers of the field. ... The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.'* – ISAIAH 40:6,8

Lord, preserve us from Solomon's folly. We are not told the end of

Solomon – where he will spend eternity. We ARE told, though, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the childlike. Our heavenly Father, give us the heart of the little child, a constant dependence on You, a thirst for the pure milk of the Word, a hunger for righteousness, rather than the things of the flesh. Let our eyes remain simple, our hearts undivided. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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### **Farrar on Solomon's legacy to the Jewish people**

It would have been in Solomon's power to choose for his people the ideal of military glory which had prevailed in the days of his father; but he chose instead the ideal of peaceful wealth and material aggrandisement. ... Nothing is more remarkable in his reign than the immense and sudden development of a widely extended commerce which kindled the imagination of the Chosen People., but which brought them few real advantages, and vanished almost as soon as it had been established. Yet though the special traffic vanished, being almost exclusively connected with luxuries and the Court, it gave the earliest strong impulse to those commercial tendencies which totally altered the characteristics of the Jews, and changed them in time from an agricultural into a mercantile race – a race whose famous Rabbis spoke of agriculture in tones of scorn. – F. W. Farrar, *Solomon and his times* p 114

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