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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 18: SOLOMON

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 11 “1 Kings” and 14 “2 Chronicles” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapter 21 “Solomon” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders* when indicated below.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles as they are cited in the following material.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The successor to David’s throne, Solomon (meaning “peaceful”) was also called Jedidiah (“friend of God”) and ruled in Jerusalem from around 970 to 931 BC. The first surviving child of David and his wife Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah the Hittite, Solomon had three full brothers (including Nathan who will enter the story later) as well as six known older half-brothers born of six of David’s other queens.

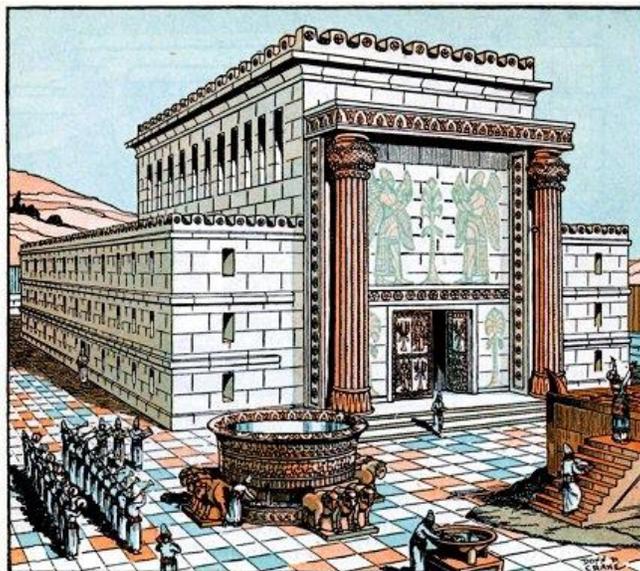
It is thought that Solomon ascended to the throne when he was only about fifteen years old, but he soon established himself as a king who would propel the nation of ancient Israel to a level of power and international political standing seldom, if ever, equaled again. The king’s accomplishments were many (see chapter 21 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*), but he is remembered above all for two things: his great wisdom and his construction of the temple for God in Jerusalem. Both these aspects of Solomon’s reign are better understood when seen in perspective.

Solomon’s wisdom is celebrated and documented in detail in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Chronicles, and the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and some of the Psalms are thought to have been composed by him. These works follow the pattern of “wisdom literature” that was widespread in the ancient Near East, and the book of Proverbs in particular – a collection of short, practical statements regarding right conduct and living – is very similar in structure and content to comparable wisdom literature from Egypt. For example, there are a number of aspects of the book of Proverbs that closely match the “Instruction of Amenemope,” an ancient Egyptian literary work composed c. 1300-1100 BC, well before the book of Proverbs. Like Amenemope, Proverbs is written to the writer’s son and offered advice that would help him in life. The authors of both works urge their sons to pay attention to this advice: “Give your ears, listen to the things which are spoken” (Amenemope iii, 9); “pay attention to my wisdom, turn your ear to my words” (Proverbs 5:1). Just as Amenemope tells his son “See for yourself these thirty chapters, they are pleasant, they educate” (Amenemope xxvii, 7–8), so the author of Proverbs writes: “I have written thirty sayings for you, filled with advice and knowledge” (Proverbs 22:20 NLT).

A number of specific statements in Amenemope are also found paralleled in Proverbs – as we see in this example: “They [riches] make themselves wings like geese, and fly to heaven” (Amenemope x, 5); “For wealth certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies toward the heavens” (Proverbs 23:5 NASB). Such examples demonstrate that Solomon not only utilized the form of literary genres of his time, but also that he collected many wise sayings from other sources – just as the Bible tells us (Ecclesiastes 12:9). But Solomon’s original contributions to wisdom literature were extensive, and we are told that he “spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five” as well as that he discussed plant and animal life in what were perhaps early examples of pre-scientific observation (1 Kings 4:32-33).

In addition to his great wisdom, Solomon was famous for his building projects – the greatest of which was the temple of God that the king built in Jerusalem. Sadly, excavation of the area of this temple is impossible because of modern political issues, but we are fortunate that another temple is known – that of Ain Dara in northern Syria – that was strikingly similar to Solomon’s structure. The Ain Dara temple, which functioned from around 1300 BC until 740 BC, was doubtless known to the Phoenician craftsmen who worked for Solomon and may well have served as one of a number of models for the construction of Israel’s temple around 964-957 BC.

Both the Jerusalem and Ain Dara temples were constructed on massive artificial platforms, and both followed the same tripartite plan with an entrance porch containing two massive columns, a main hall (divided in two halves in the Ain Dara temple), and an inner shrine or holy place. Both structures seem to have been flanked on three sides by multistory chambers (1 Kings 6:5), which were probably used for priestly and religious purposes. The decorative motifs of both temples were also very similar. At Ain Dara both the exterior and interior of the temple were decorated with the figures of lions and mythical animals such as sphinxes and cherubim as well as floral and geometric designs. Likewise, 1 Kings 6:29 tells us that on the walls all around the temple Solomon “carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers.” However, it seems that the temple at Ain Dara was likely built of mud-brick covered with wood paneling, while the temple of Solomon was constructed mainly of stone (see Note 1) with much of its cedar paneling and even the floor overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6:21,30,35) – making it far more impressive overall.



Artist’s conception of the Temple of Solomon. Image: Archival.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In this section we will look at some of the key events in Solomon's reign and their broader significance.

The first chapter of 1 Kings records that when David became old, his son Adonijah attempted to make himself king. Nathan the prophet (who had accused David of his sin with Bathsheba, but who was a loyal supporter of the king) wisely guided Bathsheba to ask David to appoint her son Solomon as the new king. In effect, Nathan steered David into applying a co-regency – a model of kingship widely used in the ancient Near East – whereby an aging king declared a chosen son co-ruler with himself for the last period of his life, thus avoiding power struggles in the royal family after the king's death.

1 Kings 2:13-25 shows that Adonijah had not finished scheming, however. He asked to marry Abishag, the young woman who had helped King David at the end of his life. For this request, Solomon had Adonijah executed and while this may seem strange, it is because whoever took over a king's wives was presumed to be the new king. If Solomon allowed his half-brother to marry Abishag, Adonijah would doubtless have used that fact to strengthen his case to take over the throne. Solomon, as instructed by David, also had the unfaithful general Joab executed (vss. 28-34), and from that point his kingship was secure.

1 Kings 3:1 then tells us, "Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter." This is particularly significant as it shows Solomon's power and international standing. It was common in the ancient Near East for kings to establish political alliances through arranged marriages in which lesser kings gave their daughters in marriage to greater kings – but the pharaohs of Egypt very rarely did this, as they were usually among the most powerful kings. In this case it was probably the Twenty First Dynasty pharaoh, Siamun (986 - 967 BC) whose daughter married Solomon. Many scholars feel that there is good indication that the biblical "Song of Songs" was composed by Solomon regarding this Egyptian princess.

1 Kings 3:4-15 tells how God appeared to Solomon in a dream and granted the king's request for wisdom. This event is pivotal to understanding what follows in Solomon's story, as it explains why his level of wisdom was as great as it was (1 Kings 4:30). The following sections of 1 Kings give examples of that wisdom – such as 1 Kings 3:16-28, the story of how Solomon wisely discerned the true mother of a child claimed by two prostitutes. This story not only shows the king's wisdom but is included because it also shows his willingness to "rule for everyone," including hearing the cases of even those considered to be the lowest social groups.

1 Kings 4:7-19 explains how Solomon redrew the traditional borders of the tribes of Israel. It is easy to read over these verses without realizing that this is given as another example of the king's wisdom. In redistricting the land, Solomon broke the old tribal boundaries and mixed in some new areas and their populations, thus weakening the power of the individual tribes, permitting him to develop a taxation system (vss. 27-28) and to establish a much stronger centralized administration for his kingdom.

1 Kings 4:21 tells us "Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt." This is significant because it matches the boundaries of the promised land as given in Deuteronomy 1 and Joshua 1 and because it was the first and only time, historically, that those boundaries were achieved by ancient Israel.

1 Kings 5:1 - 6:38 and 2 Chronicles 2:1-18 record how Solomon corresponded with Hiram I (980-947 BC), king of the Phoenician coastal city of Tyre to the north of Israel, to build the temple for God that David had originally planned. The Phoenicians controlled the woodcutting and distribution from the great cedar

forests of the Lebanese mountains and were also known for their craftsmen skilled in many aspects of the construction and decoration of palaces and other monumental buildings. Hiram had built David's palace for him (2 Samuel 5:11), so relations were already established between the two areas. The Phoenicians were also skilled mariners, and Hiram and Solomon jointly developed a trade route through the Red Sea with a land called Ophir that seems to have been far to the east (see Note 2).

1 Kings 5-7 and 2 Chronicles 3-4 describe the construction of the temple, which was the greatest of Solomon's many building projects. It was a permanent replacement of the portable tabernacle used by Israel in its period of desert wanderings, and the massiveness of this structure is seen in that its foundation blocks were as much as fifteen feet in length, each weighing a great many tons. The two free-standing columns named "Jachin" and "Boaz" that flanked the temple entrance were cast from bronze and were over thirty feet high and almost five feet in diameter. Just as impressive as its scale, the decoration of the temple involved almost unimaginable quantities of gold – literally many tons – as well as silver and costly fabrics and furnishings. Not surprisingly, the temple's construction took seven full years.

1 Kings 7:1-12 tells of the building of Solomon's massive palace complex, which was larger than the temple in ground area as it included administrative offices, throne rooms, audience halls, and other areas in addition to the king's own home. The "Palace of the Forest of Lebanon" with its virtual "forest" of forty-five cedar pillars was only one such part at approximately 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. The building of the temple and Solomon's palace together took twenty years (1 Kings 9:10).

1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1-12 recount the visit of the Queen of Sheba (probably an area in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula), one of the most well-known episodes in Solomon's story, although it is given as a side-note to show Solomon's international reputation for wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 10:14-29). It is helpful to remember that "wisdom" in the ancient world was a far more practical concept than it tends to be today. Solomon's works of building and development would all have been seen as expressions of wisdom. The queen's gift of 120 talents of gold is a staggering amount of several tons and is the same as the amount Hiram of Tyre had given to Solomon – so it was probably to seal a trade or political partnership rather than strictly a "gift."

1 Kings 11:1-13 tells how Solomon was led astray by his many foreign wives. We have already looked at Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess, but as time progressed the king married a great number of foreign wives who began to influence Solomon through their worship of false gods, as we will see. Sadly, this was the turning point in Solomon's life, and the rest of his story centers on the decline of his relationship with God and on the enemies that God allowed to rise against him.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When Solomon was born, God sent a message to David and Bathsheba through the prophet Nathan – the same prophet he had used to reprimand David for his adultery with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband Uriah. Although God had allowed the child conceived of that sin to die, he showed his acceptance of David's repentance in acknowledging his marriage with Bathsheba and by telling them to name Solomon, their second child, Jedidiah – meaning "beloved of the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:25). In that way Solomon was a living image of God's grace – proof that God does fully accept true repentance – and the name God gave Solomon was also a word picture of God's love for him despite the circumstances of his background.

At first, Solomon's attitude toward God was also one of love – 1 Kings 3:3 tells us: "Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father." Yet this verse continues, "only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places." These "high places" were the unofficial locations for worship in ancient Israel, often associated with the local gods or elements of right and wrong worship, and we can only wonder what their attraction was to Solomon. Given his later history, it is more than likely that Solomon wanted to please the people by joining them in their worship although it was not true to God. Even when Solomon had built the temple for God and had dedicated it with great devotion (see 1 Kings 8), we read:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. (1 Kings 11:1-3)

Although God had warned Solomon explicitly not to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command; as a result, 1 Kings 11 continues:

The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates." (1 Kings 11:9-11)

We might well wonder what the reason was for this failure on Solomon's part, but the Bible gives us a clear clue. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon himself told the people: "may your hearts *be fully committed* to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands" (1 Kings 8:61, emphasis added). Ironically, that was exactly the way in which Solomon failed – he was committed to God, but not *fully*. The Bible confirms this in recording "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and *his heart was not fully devoted* to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been." (1 Kings 11:4, emphasis added)

This is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from Solomon, and it is as important a lesson as any we learn from his father, David. No matter how dedicated to God we may feel or seem to be, if we are not *fully* dedicated – if there is any area in which we routinely hold back from full commitment – that problem or area will eventually separate us from God whether we have spent years building him a temple or in worshipping and serving him in any other way. It is a sobering lesson, but a vital one. Whatever our level of dedication, it will eventually fail if it is not complete.

No matter how strong Solomon's love of God had been, over time he was pulled away from his original devotion and gradually lost his spiritual bearings. We see this quite graphically in the book of Ecclesiastes that was doubtless composed by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:1; etc.) – in the way that he began to search for meaning and satisfaction in transient physical things. It is possible that late in his life, when Ecclesiastes was probably written, that Solomon realized the futility of such a way of life and that he returned to God. But the Bible does not clearly show that, and we can only be certain that Solomon is remembered for his wisdom and accomplishments, but not for wise living.

Solomon's lesson for all of us is that wisdom of itself is not as important as wholehearted commitment to God, and that deeds are never as important as dedication.

* Note 1: 1 Kings 6:36 tells us “Solomon built the inner courtyard with three rows of dressed stone and one row of trimmed cedar beams.” Interspersing stone with wood in this manner was frequently used in constructing monumental architecture in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, as this provided better protection from the earthquakes that were common in these areas. Wood-layered stone shifts more easily without completely falling.

*Note 2: 1 Kings 10:22 shows that Solomon received apes, ivory, and peacocks from Ophir, which must have been far to the east and very possibly India, as the journey there and back took three years.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Why did Solomon have his half-brother Adonijah executed?

Why was it significant that the Egyptian pharaoh allowed his daughter to marry Solomon?

In what ways was the temple of Solomon more magnificent than the great temple of Ain Dara?

Looking Below the Surface:

How did Solomon’s sins affect more than his own life, but also the lives of many others – and how does that principle apply to us?

Everyday Applications:

Those with whom we spend time can eventually change our attitude toward God and cause us to drift away from him. What measures can we apply in our own lives to make sure that what happened to Solomon does not happen to us?

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