

1ST KINGS

Week 6, chapter 3

The last words of 1st Kings Chapter 2 are that the kingdom was established in Solomon's hands. The elimination of potential rivals and rebels gave him a firm foundation from which to run his government.

The previous chapter tells us what Solomon did to gain national stability, and this next one will explain how he went about solidifying his reign and increasing Israel's status in the Middle and Near East.

READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 3 all

This is one of those "meaty" and "preachy" chapters, even if it might not seem to be so at first glance. There's enough historical and spiritual ammunition in here to keep us busy for awhile and I'm not one to waste ammunition. So we've got a lot to talk about today. But first let's talk about Solomon.

The first step of note that **Shlomo** took as undisputed king was to create alliances with surrounding nations, and this was invariably accomplished by marrying into the family of the hoped for ally. In the case of verse 1 the hoped for alliance was with Egypt so Solomon married the Pharaoh's daughter.

I would like you to notice how the writer of 1st Kings is (especially here) speaking like a historian and not as a person who was either involved with the events or even a witness to them. He explains in a brief summation and overview that Solomon married this Egyptian princess and had her live in the City of David until he finished his own palace and completed

the building of the Temple. So it is obvious that this writer/editor of 1st Kings lived at a considerably later date than the events he is telling us about (so that he was able to look back over a broad spectrum of time and see how the various events were pieced together).

I tell you this because Christians at times get flummoxed or even angry when they hear a Bible scholar say that a book was written a couple of hundred years or more later than the prime characters in the book lived or the events depicted occurred. Some think it a kind of heresy. In other words while David and Solomon lived in the 10th century B.C., it may have been the 8th or even 7th century B.C. before what we are now reading was actually written. And so sometimes a Believer thinks that such a scholar that explains this reality is disputing when David and Solomon lived, or that having the book written so much later reduces its credibility. The truth is that most of these books that form the Bible were written well after the events depicted in them happened, and the Scripture writers often worked from oral traditions that had been handed down and various written documents from earlier times. At the start of this book we talked about certain documents actually mentioned by name in the Scriptures themselves as being the source documents for much of Kings and Chronicles. The same is true for most of the Old Testament.

Let me give you an analogy. Some of the best books written about our American Civil War that was fought in the 1860's have been published in only the last 20 years. The authors use government documents from that time, and through thorough investigations of newspaper articles, private letters written by soldiers to their family members, memoirs of army commanders and other sources are able to see that terrible war in a panorama that folks living then couldn't. Battles and political decisions from various locations around America were all happening at once and they had unseen effects one upon the other; but most folks only knew what was happening directly in front of them. Only in retrospect, and when a person such as the writer of the book of Kings gathers documents and information from a number of sources, does a more complete picture emerge. And the picture that emerges from 1st Kings is that King **Shlomo** had a very definite strategy for his governance; it was that he would create peace and security for the Kingdom of Israel by means of forging personal and familial relationships with the leaders of neighboring countries. And he took this strategy to the extreme as eventually we get an estimate of the quantity of his wives and concubines that were the customary sign of these alliances and it numbered around 1000.

Now as concerns Pharaoh's daughter it was not at all against Torah Law for Solomon to have married her. For a Hebrew to marry an Egyptian was legal; it was marriage to Canaanite women that was forbidden.

Exo 34:15-16 CJB

¹⁵ ***Do not make a covenant with the people living in the land. It will cause you to go astray after their gods and sacrifice to their gods. Then they will invite you to join them in eating their sacrifices,***

¹⁶ ***and you will take their daughters as wives for your sons. Their daughters will prostitute themselves to their own gods and make your sons do the same!***

^{CJB} Deuteronomy 7:1 ***"ADONAI your God is going to bring you into the land you will enter in order to take possession of it, and he will expel many nations ahead of you- the Hitti, Girgashi, Emori, Kena'ani, P'rizi, Hivi and Y'vusi, seven nations bigger and stronger than you.***

² ***When he does this, when ADONAI your God hands them over ahead of you, and you defeat them, you are to destroy them completely! Do not make any covenant with them. Show them no mercy.***

³ ***Don't intermarry with them- don't give your daughter to his son, and don't take his daughter for your son.***

The only caveat was that a foreign wife had to give up her former pagan gods and worship only YHWH; and as we know that didn't happen very often.

On the surface Israel was prospering and living in well being that had never known. It seemed as though the God of Israel must have been pleased with them. However there was a serious and insidious problem going on in Israel and verse 2 says that it was that the Israelites were sacrificing at high places. And even more, so was Solomon! Yet the Scripture passages make it clear that **Shlomo** loved Yehoveh. This is a much different term than typically used for his father David's relationship with God; in his case it was that David was zealous for God or that he walked in Adonai's ways. We must understand that the term "love" (**ahav** in Hebrew) is not denoting warmth or a stirring of the emotions of this king towards God; in this context the idea is of a vassal in relationship with his king. In political terms of that era "love" was the usual term that described loyalty of the vassal to his master; of the lesser king to the greater king. So a better translation for our modern times would be that **Shlomo** was loyal to Yehoveh.

Rashi however says that the reason that this marriage with the Egyptian woman was mentioned (out of the countless other marriages) is that it marked the beginning of a regression in Solomon's devotion to the Lord. Saying that Shlomo loved God in the same breath as saying he married the Pharaoh's daughter is to give us a relative marker in time that this was the pinnacle of Solomon's faithfulness to Yehoveh. From here on, things deteriorated. And the deterioration had to do with manner and place of sacrifice and worship that was ongoing.

Let's take a short archeological detour because the issue in play is a very important one for the context of both books of Kings and also both books of Chronicles. The Hebrew word that is usually translated as high place is **bamah**. The reason the English phrase "high place" was chosen to translate the word **bamah** is not because it is a literal rendering (it is not) but because the word is describing a religious site and these ancient religious sites were more often than not built upon prominences, hilltops, or even a manmade earthen mound that was intentionally elevated above its surroundings. Whether Hebrew or Canaanite the belief was that gods lived on mountaintops so sacrificial altars were built on the highest places reasonably available. Yet we also know that, like with Elijah and his infamous battle with the worshippers of Ba'al, these **bamah** could be present in valleys.

Often the picture is painted by Bible scholars that these **bamah** were primarily located out in the countryside, but as recent archeology has discovered they appeared everywhere including in cities and villages. Sometimes the **bamah** were no more than a simple pile of stones for a crude altar. Often there was a fir tree planted next to it as an **Asherah**. More well-to-do folks hired stonecutters to make fancier altars, even ones that included horns on the 4 corners. Sometimes small houses were built next to the altars where worship and prayer and festive banquets took place, and the wealthiest folks used generous amounts of gold and silver implements in the rituals. And, as the coupe de gras, some aristocrats hired their own private priests (as a status symbol) to perform the sacrifices at their private altars.

What we need to understand is that God's commandment to sacrifice only at the place He designated was not being enforced. Thus the people fell back to ancient Middle Eastern customs and built their own altars at their homes. Recall that before Israel left Egypt and was given the Law at Mt. Sinai they too sacrificed at home altars and the typical officiator was the senior firstborn in the household. This firstborn acted as a kind of family priest and the custom was so enjoyed and ingrained among the ancients that they didn't ever want to give it up. There was even a special ceremony of transference of the family priest tradition to the Levitical priest requirement, and it was officiated by Moses out in the Wilderness to mark the end of the former ways of sacrificing.

One of the major tenets of the Law of Moses was not only WHO could officiate the sacrifice (Levitical priests) but that now sacrifice should ONLY occur at one place; and that one place was to be designated by God. The first designated place was the bronze altar in the courtyard of the Wilderness Tabernacle. Of course the sacred tent traveled with the people so the location of it changed regularly during their 40 year journey from Egypt to Canaan. Once they arrived in the Promised Land the Tabernacle was set up in a few different places, the longest running place probably being Shiloh. Later it was moved to Gibeon. So indeed there was in existence a single authorized place for sacrifice at all times even after Joshua took over leadership; but the people rarely used it.

There is a brief but quite illustrative story in the Book of Judges about this matter of private altars. It is worth the reading. Open your Bibles to Judges 17.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 17 all

This issue of a single authorized place of sacrifice as being important to Yehoveh cannot be overstated. Because the Hebrew people ignored this commandment, their sacrifices (no matter how expensive) were not acceptable to God. Every time that they killed an animal and burnt it up on their private altar, officiated by a family member or a hired Levite, they sincerely believed that their sins were being atoned for and they walked away from the ritual certain of it. But they were wrong. Think of what a dangerous delusion they were living! Imagine believing that you are safe and secure in harmony with God, but it turns out that you're not. The use of these private altars and private priests was also an indication of the moral decay of the people such that they preferred to do so critical an act as sacrificing using their own way, and all the time professing, defending, and believing that by doing so they were pleasing the God of Israel. Never mind that the Holy Torah tells them something else entirely.

This may be jingling some bells in your mind about now (at least I hope so) because this mindset of "my way" when it comes to our obedience before God is not exclusive to the ancient Hebrews. In modern times Believers go through all sorts of manmade religious gyrations certain that we are pleasing to God, when in truth these gyrations are as nothing (or worse). In other cases people who identify themselves as Christians can't tell you exactly why they are Christians. Some will say it's because they live a good life. Some will say it's because their parents are. Others it's because they go to church. Some adorn themselves with religious icons head to foot, and put stickers on their cars, and assume such a display is like a spiritual flu vaccination. Some who don't go to church at all do attend on Christmas and

Easter and they rely on that to show God that they are pious. Others may attend a Passover Seder or Feast of Tabernacles celebration and think that's the key. Many have no idea what Salvation or redemption means, and don't think they need to be delivered; but they still insist that they are Christians. In other words, many who think they are Believers and therefore right with God do so based on nothing more than some long-standing cultural norm, or some small personal action or feeling or national celebration, even if many of those things are actually forbidden by the Lord. We tend to fill our lives with our own 21st century high places and then expect God to honor them as sanctified and proper worship, and to be pleased with our sincerity. If everyone is doing it, how can it be wrong? I can't think of a more dangerous position for anyone to be in; today or 3000 years ago.

In verse 4 Solomon (at this time still spiritually close to the Lord) goes to Gibeon to worship and sacrifice. Note that he did so because Gibeon was still seen as Israel's main high place (or as it says in the Hebrew original, *ha'gadol bamah*, the great high place). And indeed Gibeon was where the remnant of the Wilderness Tabernacle tent stood and where the original bronze altar fashioned below Mt. Sinai still operated. It's important for us to see that since the word *bamah* is not used as a negative term here, we don't need to assume that all the private *bamot* scattered around Israel and used by Hebrews were inherently pagan or even that the word *bamah* is meant to speak of something that is necessarily bad. Very likely many of these high places were new and not converted Canaanite Ba'al worship centers, nor were other gods automatically worshipped there. Rather a large portion of them seem to have been dedicated only to Yehoveh, the God of Israel. But that doesn't make the existence of them right or in any way effective for their intended use.

The reality is that the tattered remains of the Wilderness Tabernacle at Gibeon was not as it should have been. Just as it would be for those joyous Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon many years later and rebuilt their precious Temple, the Holy of Holies would remain empty. The single furnishing that made the Temple the holy place that it was meant to be was the Ark of the Covenant. And David had moved the Ark of the Covenant to a tent shrine he built for it in the City of David, and it was still there. The Wilderness Tabernacle with its altar was separated by several miles from the Ark of the Covenant.

In the City of David was an altar. At the hilltop above the City of David called Mt. Moriah was another altar (the one built on Araunah's threshing floor). And of course the original bronze altar was located at Gibeon. Were any of these places acceptable to God as authorized places of sacrifice to Him? The reality is that conditions were such that the perfection required by the Torah was not being met. But as I have grown fond of saying: this is not Heaven, it's the world. And in the world there are troubles. Was Yehoveh supposed to not accept any attempts at sacrificial atonement because not one place existed that met all the requirements He had set down at Mt. Sinai? Would the God of Israel refuse to have a relationship with His people

because there didn't seem to be a single channel of worship or ritual remaining, which they had not polluted or spoiled in some way or another? Conditions in this world will never be perfect to allow us an easy or straight path to a right relationship with God. And God doesn't demand perfection from us to love us or to save us. That is the practical definition of grace. It is so now and it was so in all past eras.

So the answer to that question of would God have a relationship with His people in spite of their imperfect worship appears in the narrative of King Shlomo at Gibeon. Verse 4 says that at Gibeon Solomon presented 1000 burnt offerings to God. Here I must remind you that the number 1000 is a representative number and not a precise number. 1000 is the largest number unit in the Hebrew language (**eleph**). So the idea is that an inordinately large number of sacrifices were offered up. But something far better than the dense smoke of all those burnt-up animals was produced here; the God of Israel who led Israel out of bondage in Egypt, who hovered protectively over them for 40 years in the Wilderness, appeared to Solomon in a dream in assurance that He still watched over His people.

It's a beautiful and awesome scene, really. There on the hills of Gibeon a huge festive crowd had celebrated and worshipped along with their king and they were ready to return home. One can imagine after such an inspiring day that **Shlomo** looked over the dispersing multitudes and wondered at what an amazing work God had done, but also wondered what chance did he ever have to properly govern and shepherd such a diverse and set-apart people; a people that did not belong to him but rather to Yehoveh. That very night the Lord came to him in a dream. "Tell me what I should give to you", said the Father. This was not the grateful genie of the bottle offering a generous reward to his master for freeing him; this was the Lord inquiring of Solomon to see what sort of man he was.

Despite how it might seem as we ponder Holy Scripture, dreams and visions that were of a divine nature didn't happen all that often in the Biblical era. But people who claimed such things were many, and those who wanted it to happen were even more. Everyone it seems had their story of a dream and people spent substantial sums of money for seers to interpret them. Most of the time these seers were charlatans merely taking advantage of folks who were caught up in superstition, but who also were convinced that their experience was quite real and had meaning beyond the fantasies that our unconscious minds seem to spin as we sleep. The issue of dreams and visions eventually became problematic enough that the prophets began to warn people about them, and the wise Solomon wrote cautions as well.

Ecc 5:3-6 CJB

³ If you make a vow to God, don't delay in discharging it. For God takes no pleasure in fools, so discharge your vow!

⁴ Better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not discharge it.

⁵ Don't let your words make you guilty, and don't tell the temple official that you made the vow by mistake. Why give God reason to be angry at what you say and destroy what you have accomplished?

⁶ For [this is what happens when there are too] many dreams, aimless activities and words. Instead, just fear God!

READ ISAIAH 29:6 – 14

People who get all caught up in dreams and visions, certain that God has visited them and given them special wisdom beyond others; the kind of wisdom that says that even though the Holy Scriptures says thus, God has told me to do differently; these people are not God's friends they are just people who go their own way, enjoy a sense of self-importance, and co-opt God's name to try and legitimize what it is that their evil inclinations are leading them to do. But here on the hills of Gibeon with Solomon, the dream was quite real and Solomon was being asked to examine and search his inmost soul and mind for the answer to a question that would challenge any of us: what would you ask God for if you could have anything? The answer has much to do with how much our desire is to please the Lord.

Some years later, Messiah would be sitting and talking with his most impulsive disciple Peter, and He asked Peter a question that on the surface seems so straightforward but in reality penetrates directly to the core of who we are. In John 21 Yeshua asks this:

John 21:15-17 CJB

¹⁵ After breakfast, Yeshua said to Shim'on Kefa, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, do you love me more than these?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I'm your friend." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ *A second time he said to him, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I'm your friend." He said to him, "Shepherd my sheep."*

¹⁷ *The third time he said to him, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, are you my friend?" Shim'on was hurt that he questioned him a third time: "Are you my friend?" So he replied, "Lord, you know everything! You know I'm your friend!" Yeshua said to him, "Feed my sheep!"*

Peter was not supposed to answer quickly or in a knee-jerk reaction but rather to think deeply. Yeshua's hope was that **Shim'on Kefa** would say something like: "I do love you and so I understand that the greatest love that I can ever give back to you is to spend my life taking care of your flock in the same sacrificial way as you would, until you return."

Peter, unfortunately, didn't do that. In fact not much earlier he denied even knowing Yeshua.

Solomon on the other hand answered most wonderfully, in 3 parts: in thanksgiving, in confession, and in a petition for God's help. And this is a very good pattern for us to follow each time we approach the Lord in prayer. **Shlomo thanked** the Lord that the greatness of his own father David was only possible for the same reason that he now sat on the throne of Israel as the designated son to carry on David's dynasty, which itself was promised and assured by Yehoveh: and that reason is God's grace towards David and towards himself.

Then **Shlomo confesses** that of himself he has no ability or knowledge of how to lead these chosen people. He says that he is a mere child, which is a Middle Eastern expression of humility not so much a statement of chronological age.

And finally he **petitions** God as what amounts to his response to God's initial question: "Tell me what I should give to you." He asks that the Lord would give him an understanding heart that was able to properly administer justice, and so that he could discern between good and bad. That is the answer of a shepherd king, not of a typical human king. It is the kind of answer that a true worshipper of the God of Israel, who understands his position in relation to God, would give. And Yehoveh told Shlomo how pleased He was with such an attitude.

We'll discuss the Lord's response to Shlomo's petition next time.