

1ST KINGS

Week 18, chapters 10 and 11

We concluded our last lesson by being introduced to the famous Queen of Sheba whose name, it turns out, is actually the Queen of the Saba. And more correctly, what we have is her title and not her name (and we never learn her formal name). Saba was the capital city of the Sabean culture that was located primarily on the Arabian Peninsula. It was a culture closely tied to the eventual birth of Islam some 5 centuries after Christ's lifetime. In fact the story of the Queen of Saba's visit with Solomon is extensively addressed in the Quran, Sura 27.

We got no farther than the 1st verse of 1st Kings 10 because there was so much in those few words; first a wordplay using a series of the Hebrew letter sheen 'ש' and then another wordplay based on the root word **shema**, and then we ended up with the revelation that the Queen did not come to ask Shlomo "hard questions" but rather to subject him to riddles as a test of his wisdom.

We think of riddles today in a different way than the ancients did. For us they either are children's games, or they are thought of as nearly unanswerable dilemmas (such as the riddle of establishing peace in the Middle East). But in ancient times they were more serious in nature. Indeed, as at Samson's wedding feast, a riddle could be a kind of "game" but it was really about a wager. In other words we could think of it as one today thinks of playing high-stakes poker: it's a game built around betting money, and the outcome can range from merely declaring a winner to building or losing fortunes. But riddles also were a measure of intelligence and cunning and often even had a mysterious if not superstitious aspect to them.

In some cases riddles were asked as means of determining life and death; if one answered correctly life was spared, if not death followed. In Greek times riddles actually became competitive games with champions and with the vanquished.

In later times the literature genre of parables became an offshoot of the concept of riddles, and thus a favorite of the Hebrew culture. Of course we see Yeshua Himself using parables as a means to communicate because they were an accepted, interesting and traditional means to present a profound thought by using a pointed saying that hints at a deeper truth. But only the initiated were equipped to sort through the parable to arrive at that deeper truth. In the case of Jesus' parables the initiated were those who trusted Him as Messiah and thus were given supernatural divine insight so that they could establish the meaning of the parable/riddle.

The riddles brought by the Queen of Saba to test Solomon no doubt were not about the King making an enlightened guess at a word puzzle for royal amusement, but rather it was about using deductive reasoning and logic and a wide range of academic disciplines to arrive at a brilliant conclusion. We saw Solomon deal with a riddle in chapter 3 when two women claimed the same infant, and there were no witnesses to testify as to the truth of the matter. So Solomon used intelligence and cunning to make the riddle solve itself by essentially using the importance of the life of the baby to lead him to the rightful mother. These riddles brought by the Queen no doubt were ones devised by her brain trust to test Solomon, and thought to be unsolvable except by the most extraordinary intellect. Needless to say King **Shlomo** did not disappoint.

What would be the purpose for the Queen venturing so far to test Solomon with riddles? Why not just send an emissary? It was a question of whether it would be profitable for her and her kingdom to make an alliance with Israel. And the other issue was whether it would be wise (and thus useful) for her to acknowledge Solomon's God, Yehoveh, and thus present the God of Israel with gifts in order to seek His favor (a standard means of dealing with gods in that era). That is the meaning of the words in verse 1 that say, "Sheva heard what was being said about **Shlomo** because of the name of Adonai....."

Let's re-read a few verses of 1st King chapter 10.

RE-READ 1ST KINGS 10:1 – 10

In verse 3 we read that the Queen of Saba peppered Solomon with all kinds of riddles and no doubt practical matters of state as well, and she didn't hold back personal concerns either. One can imagine that she and Solomon developed a rather close relationship as a result of the

time they spent together. The King satisfied her every inquiry and along with the visible grandeur of his palace and the Temple, the amazing variety and impressive amounts of imported foods she was served, the efficiency of his staff, and the loveliness and appropriateness of their garments, she became mesmerized. She had heard of nothing, knew of nothing, and had never seen anything that could approach such perfection of society and governance at every level.

Verse 5 in the CJB and most other translations speaks of Solomon offering a burnt offering at the house of **Adonai** (the Temple), which also impressed the Queen; there is another interpretation that to me is more likely considering the context and has nothing to do with making a sacrifice. While it is certainly possible that the self-important Solomon would think to offer the burnt offering at the Temple, the probability is quite low. Just because he did it at the inauguration of the Temple in no way indicates that it became his habit and would suppose to do it on a regular basis or even to show off when dignitaries visited.

Usually I wouldn't even address what is really a rather minor issue such as this but since many of you are studying Biblical Hebrew this gives us a good illustration of some of the difficulties in Scripture translation, so let's take a very brief detour. The Hebrew word usually translated to burnt offering is spelled Ayin, Lamed, Hey ??? and since Hebrew uses an alphabet that consists ONLY of consonants (no letters that are vowels) then one must inherently know what vowel sounds must be added in order to make a word that can be spoken out loud. For those not familiar with Hebrew, imagine if in English we only used our consonants to spell words. The word home would become only "hm". The word car would become only "cr". And depending on what vowels we added we could make different words from those consonants. "Hm" could be home, it could be him, it could be hum, and it could be ham. "Cr" could be car, it could be care, and it could be core and a couple more words. You just have to know what vowels to add by knowing the use of the word in its given context. This is the challenge of interpreting and then translating Hebrew because sometimes the context isn't perfectly clear because of aspects of Hebrew culture that have been lost to history.

Usually in the Bible this particular Hebrew word that we're dealing with has an "o" and an "a" vowel sound added to give us the spoken word **'olah**. And **'olah** is the chief of all sacrificial offerings that is burned up on the altar. However there is another Hebrew word that is spelled exactly the same but one must add different vowel sounds; that word is **alah** (and, no, this has no relation to the god of Islam, Allah). **Alah** means ascent, as in a stairway. In fact since the consonants form what is called in linguistics the root word, then by only adding different vowels you get a different, but related, meaning to the same sequence of letters. Thus one can correctly get **'olah** or **alah** and since Hebrew root words are related then that is why some scholars say that we ought to call the burnt offering the ascent offering.

Be that as it may, the point is that if we take the word in this case in 1st Kings 10:5 to be **alah** and not **'olah**, then what this is referring to is NOT to any kind of sacrificial offering but rather of the magnificent stairway that led from Solomon's palace up to the Temple. In fact in the parallel account of this same event in 2Chronicles 9:4 the word most translations use is ascent or stairway; that is, the Chronicler himself says that the idea is that the Queen was impressed with this amazing stairway between the Temple and the Palace. So I think it means the stairway, but others obviously think it means a burnt offering. You be the judge; but also now perhaps you can appreciate why sometimes there is such variance in Bible translations, particularly in the more minor points.

OK; let's resume after our mini-lesson in Hebrew grammar. In verse 6 the Queen of Saba expresses her admiration for Solomon's eloquence and knowledge and that it far surpassed anything she had imagined. The intent of her expression is that usually a person who has great philosophical wisdom or who deals in lofty theories will not be a good administrator; and that a person who is a pragmatic decision maker and deals in concrete facts cannot also contend with the deeper matters that come in shades of gray. Solomon seems equally capable of both. We might call that kind of person, today, a Renaissance Man.

Verse 9 actually continues a theme that we've seen for a couple of chapters; the Queen states that people of Israel are indeed fortunate to have **Shlomo** as king because of his **mishpat and tzedekah** (justice and righteousness). The theme is that a nation's spiritual standing before God as a group, as a congregation, as an identifiable population, is reflected in the character and actions of that nation's leader. This is not a symbolic matter; that is, it is not that we take look at the leader and assume that he or she is generally representative of everyone else in that society. Rather it is that God deals with mankind on a personal, individual level in one aspect; and on a national, group level in another aspect. God created nations just as surely as He created individuals and so we will all be judged on account of both. That is, our eternal salvation will be judged according to our trust in Messiah on a one-by-one basis. Our earthly, physical condition and existence as part of a nation will be judged according to the leader of the nation to which we belong. Thus Israel will in time be dissolved as a sovereign nation and even sent away to exile, and this affected both the wicked and the righteous Israelites equally; that is the consequence of bad national leadership. However that has nothing to do with each Israelite's spiritual standing or personal righteousness before the Lord. They are two different issues. Nothing has changed or will change in that regard even after Christ returns.

Notice also (although most Bible translations obscure it) that the Queen of Saba says, "Blessed be Yehoveh your elohim". She acknowledges God by name, and exalts Him. The Queen, without reservation, believes in the God of Israel. But this is not a saving or even a

righteous belief because belief is not the same thing as love and trust and thus altering your life and behavior accordingly.

James 2:17-19 CJB

17 Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.

18 But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!

19 You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too- the thought makes them shudder with fear!

The Queen of Saba is nearing departure but does not leave before giving an enormous gift of 4 tons of gold plus a small fortune in spices and gemstones.

Let's read a few more verses.

RE-READ 1ST KINGS 10:11 – 22

The mention of Hiram's fleet suggests that one way or another Hiram owned a fleet of ships that operated on the Red Sea. I can only offer the conjecture that would seem to follow a familiar pattern in Solomon's dealing with Hiram: in exchange for Hiram supplying workers and materials to build Solomon's fleet at Eilat, Hiram also received some of the ships as payment and this formed a personal fleet of ships for him. Some have suggested that Hiram may have sent disassembled ships over land, from the Mediterranean Sea, to Eilat and there they were re-assembled. That seems a bit over the top. In any case Hiram's fleet would have been operated by Hiram's sailors, and so the gold, precious gems and special wood that arrived in Israel was in no way a gift. It was merely designated for Solomon, and he would have purchased it from Hiram.

Then we're told that Solomon showered expensive gifts upon the Queen of Saba; she loads up these gifts of friendship and departs. Understand: in the oriental custom Solomon had to give her gifts in return for the ones she brought to him, in approximately the same value, or it would have been dishonoring and brought shame upon the Queen. This was NOT an alliance, yet. Marriages, not gifts, created alliances.

The Rabbis point out something that dovetails well with those passages we read in the New Testament book of James. The Queen came to **Shlomo** to satisfy her desire for wisdom. But once attained, she turned and went back home, she and her entire entourage. Part of that new wisdom she attained was that the God of Israel was an awesome and existent God. Yet, there is no mention of any of them converting or even remaining in the land. Her new and firm belief that the God of Israel existed, that He was active and powerful, changed nothing in her life. She returned home to her pagan ways, and stayed devoted to her idol worship. How many folks, today, feel an emptiness inside their souls, go as a seeker to a church, have some kind of experience and go home saying that now they "believe in God", certain that if there is a heaven they'll someday be there. And most will do just as the Queen of Saba did; when the experience is over, they'll quickly return home and to their old ways, utterly unchanged in their daily life but perhaps dangerously believing that they have gained harmony and peace with God.

Verse 14 says something quite remarkable, and it concerns the amount of gold that Solomon received annually. If like the CJB your Bible converts the amount stated in the Bible to a more modern measure (tons), then it obscures an important fact. Our CJB says 22 tons, but in the Hebrew it says 666 talents of gold. Yes, there's that number 666 and its symbolism cannot be ignored. In Judaism, 666 is a mystery number. Vilna Gaon's commentary in the Zohar states that while no one knows the secret of the mystery number 666, that it does have something to do with the Messianic Age that is to come. In Biblical numerology 6 equals the physical world and is also known as the symbolic number of Mankind. Thus the Sages say that 666 represents the peak of the strength and perfection of the physical world. That is, the physical world has reached its zenith or its ultimate of what it can ever be.

The 666 talents of gold that Solomon would receive each year then represents that everything that could be extracted from the world in wealth and power was extracted by Solomon. And of course the source of this gold was from everywhere in the world except from God's Kingdom. This blessing of abundance came from the hands of men, not the hand of God. For Solomon, and for God's people, it is the wrong kind of abundance to seek or to accumulate. And Solomon desired and received more of it than any man in history up to his time.

Even with all this gold he still wasn't satisfied; so he taxed the sales of businesses and merchants, he taxed goods that merely crossed through his territory but were destined for somewhere else, and he assessed all the petty kings and governors of the various mixed people groups that he allowed to live in peace on Israeli land. The luxury of Solomon's kingdom turned to opulence, and opulence to decadence. He made hundreds of golden shields (military looking armaments that would certainly never see a battlefield but were only for a display of wealth) and put them in his palace to impress his visitors.

He made a throne for his royal self that was inlaid with ivory and gold. The approach to the throne had 6 steps and each step had a pair a lions at the edges. He drank from goblets of pure gold; his personal eating utensils were made of gold. In fact he used so much gold that silver was looked down upon and no more valuable than paving stones for the streets.

He created a fleet of so-called Tarshish ships. Depending on your translation, the word Tarshish can imply that the ships were meant to sail to and from Tarshish, but that isn't correct. Tarshish is on the coast of modern day Spain, in the Mediterranean. Rather, the sense of it is that a Tarshish was a specific design of ship; it was large and especially sturdy vessel designed for the open seas and it needed to be large as it was made for long voyages that would return with much cargo. Solomon's fleet and Hiram's fleet sailed together, no doubt into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and probably to the Persian Gulf. Apes, peacocks and ivory (which are listed among the cargo) were not to be found in the Mediterranean; these were native to Africa. So this for certain was a Red Sea fleet of ships.

RE-READ 1ST KINGS 10:23 – end

As Solomon's fame spread, leaders of nations and wealthy aristocrats naturally wanted to be seen with Solomon. So they ventured from all over the known world just to come and view the spectacular buildings and vast wealth and such a well ordered society. They all wanted to be just like Solomon. But if one wants to see the most sought-after monarch in the world, one must bring stunning gifts that purchase an audience. This was yet another source of wealth.

Naturally as Israel gained wealth, they had to protect it. So King **Shlomo** built fortresses and

military bases at strategic locations. The most fearsome weapon of the day was chariots and Solomon amassed a huge arsenal of them. Egypt was the primary source of horses in that region and so naturally with his special relationship with Pharaoh Siamun, his father in law, Solomon obtained the best horses at wholesale prices. He cornered the market. And thus when other kings and potentates around the Middle East wanted to emulate King Solomon, they had to come to him to buy their horses and chariots. Solomon not only built up a huge chariot force for Israel, he became an arms broker and controlled the supply of chariots and trained chariot horses throughout the region.

Solomon was very possibly the most powerful leader in the known world in his era. And as we'll soon see, it was only for a very short time before it all came to ruin.

Let's move on to chapter 11.

READ 1ST KINGS CHAPTER 11 all

This is one of those chapters that Judaism has gone a long way to try to find ways around. They prefer to label God's judgments and pronouncements against Solomon as "criticisms", and to ignore statements that Solomon descended into deep idolatry and did what was evil in God's eyes and instead say that Solomon remained righteous but he was a bad boy at times. What we read, however, says something very different.

The Lord had kept His promise to Solomon of giving him what he had asked for in God's first appearance to Solomon at Gibeon at the beginning of his reign. The new King asked the Lord for wisdom and the Lord gave it to him in abundance. But Yehoveh told Solomon that He would also give him great wealth because he didn't ask for it.

Early on Solomon indeed attained a large measure of wealth; but it only seemed to whet his appetite for more. It became obvious that what the Lord had offered **Shlomo** as heavenly blessing turned into an uncontrollable lust and greed for what **Shlomo** could glean for himself from anyone and everyone. But the Lord's blessings had come with a condition: Solomon was to be obedient to the Lord and maintain himself operating on a high spiritual plane. Because he

was made King of Israel at time when David had conquered most of his enemies, and so handed over to Solomon a peaceful and substantial kingdom, young **Shlomo** began his reign at the highest spiritual level. He was determined to build and complete a Temple to Yehoveh as his first major endeavor; and he devoted himself to that effort. But from there forward it became a race to the bottom.

The first verses speak of Solomon's infamy that turned to amassing an enormous harem. He is said to have "loved" many foreign wives; one could argue if "loving" that many women simultaneously is even humanly possible, but the word used is **ahav**, and **ahav** indeed is properly translated as love. We are plainly told that he married Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, and Hittite women, as well as women from Sidon (King Hiram's nation). This was firmly against Torah Law and the main concern the Lord had that caused Him to outlaw such marriages was that these foreign women would turn the Israelites' hearts towards false gods and away from Yehoveh. But as verse 2 ends, we are told "but **Shlomo** was deeply attached to them by his love".

Let's be clear about what is being said: Solomon let his own feelings and definition of "love" override God's laws. Solomon was a brilliant man, and he had a stellar royal court of the finest minds who knew the Torah well. The king knew that marrying these women was indefensible, legally speaking. But it didn't matter; he felt that he loved them all and he wasn't about to give even one of them up. And as we find out in the Song of Solomon, King **Shlomo** was in incurable romantic; he was in love with love. Where love was involved, little else mattered. After all, God is a God of love, right? So if we love something or especially someone, then that love rises above everything else; God's laws and commands become secondary to our decisions. Solomon is the perfect Old Testament example of a modern New Testament Believer who thinks (incorrectly) that salvation means that whatever love we feel replaces obedience and renders it not only obsolete but undesirable.

Verse 3 tells us he married 700 wives and also maintained 300 concubines. A wife is fully married according to the laws of Torah, and as such a marriage can only be ended with a **get** (a divorce document). A concubine did not receive a marriage document, did not qualify for a **get** if he was through with her and yet her husband was obligated to care for her and she may not live with or consort with another man.

Solomon's polygamy was not the only Torah commandment concerning Israel's kings that he broke.

Deuteronomy 17:16-17 CJB

¹⁶ However, he is not to acquire many horses for himself or have the people return to Egypt to obtain more horses, inasmuch as *ADONAI* told you never to go back that way again.

¹⁷ Likewise, he is not to acquire many wives for himself, so that his heart will not turn away; and he is not to acquire excessive quantities of silver and gold.

The previous chapter spent a goodly amount of time itemizing the vast amounts of gold and silver that Solomon had obtained (much of it purchased upon the backs of forced laborers whose work was taxes), and of the extensive army of chariots and horses he had built up. Further, that he led his people back to Egypt in every imaginable way including having an Egyptian wife that appears to have been his favorite and the one above all his other wives, creating an almost sister-state alliance with Egypt, and buying all of his horses from Egypt. And now in chapter 11 he acquired so many wives and concubines that modern scholars question whether such an amount was even feasible.

Interestingly, however, it is always idolatry that is the worst of the worst offenses that we can commit against God. The slippery slope to idolatry is NOT the amassing of too many horses nor is it a treasury full of gold and silver (as bad as the king doing those things might be). Rather it is the marriage to non-Hebrew women (women who maintain allegiance to false gods) that leads inevitably to idolatry. Polygamy in and of itself was wrong at all times; but just as divorce is wrong but due to the hardness of men's hearts the prevalence of divorce in Hebrew society forced St. Paul to define rules of decency and justice towards divorced women, so it was that God through Moses was forced to define rules for men who married more than one wife and/or maintained concubines because polygamy was so prevalent in Hebrew society.

We'll continue with this chapter next time.