

1 KINGS 3

3:1

This pharaoh was probably Psusennes II (who ruled around 964 to 950 BC), but other scholars have proposed different candidates. Solomon married many wives to solidify his alliances with various kingdoms, but this unnamed Egyptian princess is noted because of Egypt's significance as a regional power. Egyptian royalty did not usually wed outside of Egypt, and Egyptians generally did not like to leave Egypt at all because part of their belief system was based on their direct connection with the land.

3:2–4

“High places” were outdoor spaces sacred to the Canaanites. Depending on the location, high places might have included a grove of trees dedicated to the goddess Ashtoreth, but they seem to be mostly associated with the Canaanite god Baal. High places may also have included threshing floors for separating wheat from chaff. This would allow the wind to help in the separation process (since the floor would be high up, where there was likely more wind), but the wheat sheaves would have needed to be carried to the high place. For some time, the ark of the covenant was kept in Gibeon, and when David brought the ark to Jerusalem, he left Moses's tabernacle in Gibeon. Second Samuel 6:17 says that David pitched a new tent for the ark until the temple could be built. Gibeon might also have been the capital of Israel under King Saul, but not under David.

The text is a little ambiguous about whether it was right for Solomon and the other Israelites to sacrifice on high places. The word “only” implies that Solomon was righteous except for his mistakes. “Only” gives enough leeway in the description for Solomon's actions at high places to be justified, especially since God appears to Solomon in the next verse. After the temple was built, high places were no longer acceptable, according to the author of Kings.

3:5–7

We assume that Solomon called himself a little child to express humility. Talmudic rabbis calculate Solomon to have been twelve years old at the beginning of his reign, and Josephus thought he was fourteen.¹ First Kings 11:42 says that Solomon reigned for forty years, and 1 Kings 14:21 says that Rehoboam, Solomon's heir, became king of Israel at age forty-one. So either this passage is chronologically out of order, or Solomon was old enough to have an infant Rehoboam at this point in the narrative.

3:8–9

The ancient Israelites believed the heart was where thoughts came from. And we think of the heart as the origin of feelings when, in fact, both feelings and thoughts come from the brain. It is a mistake to imply that Solomon was seeking greater empathy in his request for an “understanding heart.” The phrase would be better translated as “discerning mind.”

3:10–15

This verse echoes Genesis 41:7: “And Pharaoh awoke, and, behold, it was a dream.” The mention of another pharaoh in verse 1 may be a connection between Solomon and Joseph.

King Solomon returned to Jerusalem and offered sacrifices there, which brings up the question of why he was in Gibeon at all. Later in life Solomon allowed his foreign wives to worship their own gods in what seems to have been a mostly political gesture. It's possible he was traveling around his kingdom offering sacrifices and burning incense at the local holy places as a political gesture to his subjects.

3:16

The narrator tells us right away that both women were harlots but then never mentions that again, only referring to them as women. One of the most unique aspects of biblical law that became a foundational point for later law is its equitable nature. It didn't matter to Solomon that these women were far below his social status. This is the same principle behind “eye for an eye” in Exodus 21:23–27. If a slave took the eye of a nobleman, most other cultures would kill the slave, but in Jewish law, “eye for an eye” is a statement that the punishment should be equal to the crime.

3:17–19

In modern times this type of death falls under the category of sudden infant death syndrome, or SIDS. According to the CDC, about 3,400 babies in the United States die per year in sleep-related incidents.²

¹ Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4 of 7 (New York, 1913; Project Gutenberg, 2001), chap. 5, <https://gutenberg.org/files/2882/2882-h/2882-h.htm#book05>. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, bk. 8, chap. 7, line 211.

² “Data and Statistics,” Sudden Unexpected Infant Death and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, Centers for Disease Control

Infant mortality was higher in biblical times, when as many as one-third of children died in their first year. Solomon’s older brother died as an infant (see 2 Samuel 12:19).

3:20–26

The cruel nature of the woman who had already lost a child seems unbelievably extreme; however, since this case had been brought all the way to the king, she probably feared the outcome if her culpability was discovered. Kidnapping was a capital offense in ancient Israel (see Exodus 21:16), and she may have assumed that Solomon was not bluffing but just wanted the women’s case swiftly dealt with. If she allowed the child to be killed, she may not have been subject to the death penalty.

3:27

This passage records probably the most famous judgment and the most famous event from Solomon’s life. We are not told the fate of the guilty woman. Since she did not gain from the brief kidnapping, it seems likely she was not punished for kidnapping the woman’s son.

3:28

The use of the word “feared” here illustrates perhaps the best way to understand the common Hebrew Bible use for fearing God—“to hold in awe.” It’s easier to understand the use of “fear” when the reason is something amazing like Solomon’s wisdom. God impressed the Israelites in the same way: not by striking fear the way we use the word but by inspiring awe and recognizing greatness.

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