

12. The Wisdom of Solomon – Part 1

This unit is designed to use a story from the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. This story is presented not only as a stand-alone illustration of justice dispensed fairly, passing on to children something of their biblical cultural heritage, but also as a springboard for starting to explore the differences between *knowledge*, *wisdom* and *emotional intelligence*. By 'emotional intelligence' we mean the development of self-awareness, empathy and social skills.

The story also relates to the broader Solarity themes of 'Learning from the wisdom and compassion of others' and 'Knowing what is of real value in the world.'

INTRODUCTION

Explain that today we're going to look at a story from the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament of the Christian Bible about a wise king of long ago who had to make a judgment in a very tricky situation (1 Kings 3:16-28). Before reading the story pose some questions:

- What do you think 'being wise' is all about?
- What other words might we use instead of 'wise' to describe someone?
- In the story we tell at Christmastime we hear of some Wise Men travelling to find the baby Jesus. In what way do you think they were wise?
- Do YOU know anyone whom you think of as being particularly 'wise'? How do they show their wisdom?

BACKGROUND

Note: You could make use of the following background information to inform the children's responses to the activities at appropriate points.

According to Jewish scriptural tradition, the women in the story of Solomon and the baby were actually *widows* (rather than 'prostitutes' as in most translations) without men to support them (i.e. marginalised by society). One tradition has it that they were 'zonots' (innkeepers) and another that they were mother and daughter-in-law (cf. Naomi and Ruth) in a society where women married very young and a mother-in-law and son's young wife might give birth contemporaneously, and a society in which, if a husband died, his widow would be expected to marry her brother-in-law *who might well be a baby at the time* (her mother-in-law's)!

In this case she would be expected to remain unmarried until her mother-in-law's baby came of age when she at least was given the option of marrying someone else!

At least 22 different versions of this story have circulated around India and the far east from pre-Old Testament times onwards, including a Buddhist version in which the Buddha in a previous incarnation takes the form of the sage Mahosadha, who arbitrates between a mother and a Yakshini (demon) who kidnaps the mother's baby boy and claims he is hers. The sage announces a tug-of-war in which one of the two contestants is to hold the arms and the other the feet of the baby. The one who manages to pull the whole baby over the line will get him. Here the genuine mother lets the Yakshini take him rather than risk the baby being torn apart and the latter is thus exposed for what she is and is banished by the sage.

ACTIVITY

Read the story of Solomon from a children's Bible such as *The Lion Storyteller Bible*. Ask the children for their responses to such questions as:

- What do you think about the story?
- Did the King do the right thing?
- How else might he have reacted to the dispute between the women?
- Was Solomon taking a big risk? What might have gone wrong?
- What made him suspicious of the woman who insisted that the baby was hers?
- Why was the real mother prepared to hand her baby over to the other woman?
- What do you think the bystanders watching the King make his judgment were feeling? Do you think that they expected Solomon to do what he did?
- Who else in the story shows wise judgment?
- If there were a similar case today, a DNA test would reveal who the real mother was, but what should happen to the woman who stole someone else's baby? What would be the *wisest* course of action?

Explain that Solomon was famed for more than settling this dispute:

1. He was so well known far and wide for his wisdom and goodness that the wealthy Queen of Sheba in Arabia (1 Kings, Cp. 10; 2 Chronicles Cp. 9) came up to visit him with a train of baggage-carrying camels bearing gifts - out of curiosity to meet him and

to see if he could answer all the questions she was unable to answer for herself. She stayed with him for some while and was very impressed by the exceptional wealth of his court and the apparent contentment of his people.

2. King Solomon has remained famous for centuries for having built a splendid and impressive temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem (started in 833 BCE) to serve as the main rallying centre for the Jewish nation to worship the Hebrews' God (see 1 Kings cps. 5-8; 2 Chr. cp2 – 7 vs. 10)

Background note: The temple which played an important part in the life of Jesus was not the original one built by Solomon as that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 422 BCE but was a second temple, often referred to as Herod's Temple, built on the same site (started in 349 BCE) and which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. This was a catastrophic event for the Jews, causing the collapse of Jewish civilization in Israel and the Diaspora (dispersal) of Jewish people around the then known world.

Today the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is not easy to visit and there is high security. Many centuries ago (in 705 CE) the Al Aqsa Mosque was built over the temple ruins by the Muslims, who revere it as one of their holiest sites. There have been regular ugly clashes over the possession of it by the two faith communities.

3. Solomon is credited with having made many wise sayings ('Proverbs') to be found in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. We don't know how many of these, if any, are actually his own, any more than whether the love poems in The Song of Songs (sometimes called The Song of Solomon) were actually written by him, but it is clear that during the mostly peaceful and prosperous period of his 40 year reign the Israelites / Hebrew or Jewish people in his kingdom were known in their region for living good and fulfilled lives.

ACTIVITY

Show children the following paintings of Solomon's Judgement:

- Giorgione:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Judgement_of_Solomon_\(Giorgione\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Judgement_of_Solomon_(Giorgione))

- Unknown artist in the Pilgrimage Church of Frauenberg in Styria (Austria):
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frauenberg_030.jpg
- William Blake:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Blake_-_The_Judgment_of_Solomon.jpg

Then encourage the children to choose one or more of the following activities:

- Comment on the paintings, for example, identifying the main characters by their facial expressions, clothing, gestures, positions, and saying what some of the main characters may be thinking or feeling.
- Construct their own dramatic version of the story, perhaps for use in an assembly on Wisdom. [Six children minimum per group: King, two women, soldier with sword, two onlookers.]
- Make their own illustration of the story.
- Illustrate and hand-copy a proverb of your choosing about wisdom from the Book of Proverbs for a poster collection that could be placed around the school. Here are some proverbs that might appeal:
 - Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open to knowledge (Proverbs 18:15).
 - If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the Wise (15:31).
 - Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do! And whatever you do, develop good judgment (4:7).
 - If you become wise, you will be the one to benefit. If you scorn wisdom, you will be the one to suffer (9:12).
 - Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise for the rest of your life (19:20).
 - Wise people think before they act; fools don't – and even brag about their foolishness. (13:16).