

Dwelling and Indwelling: The House That God Built, Part 2:
“The Pillar of Wisdom”
Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Darkwood Brew Blog
October 26, 2014

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:4-28

If God offered to give you one thing, what would you ask for? No fair asking for “world peace.” Make it personal. There are plenty of excellent options – gratitude, faith, happiness, or hope, to name a few. Your engagement (and perhaps benefit) from this reflection will likely be deepened if you take a moment or two before moving on to find one thing you want or need so much that you would ask for that one thing if God came offering ...

“The one thing I would ask for is: _____”

Recently, I received something special that I’ve been wanting for years. It’s far from being the “one thing I would ask for,” and doesn’t have anything overtly to do with faith or the spiritual path, but there are aspects to it that did help me clarify the one thing I would ask for if God were to make the offer.

I. *Jammit* and the Bible

Years ago I was watching a music documentary in which an aging rock-n-roller – Pete Townshend of The Who – sat behind a giant recording desk as he was being interviewed about a song from their album *Quadrophenia*. Mr. Townshend hit a button on the recording desk and played a section of the song, just as it was released to the public in 1973. Then, as he discussed the making of the song, he pushed buttons and moved sliders up and down, isolating various instrumental and vocal tracks so you could hear them on their own, without all the other elements. It was a magical experience for me. When Mr. Townshend finally played the song again with all the musical elements added back, it was like hearing a song you’re intimately familiar with, as if for the first time.



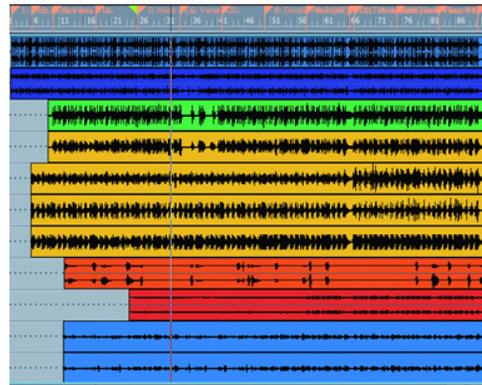
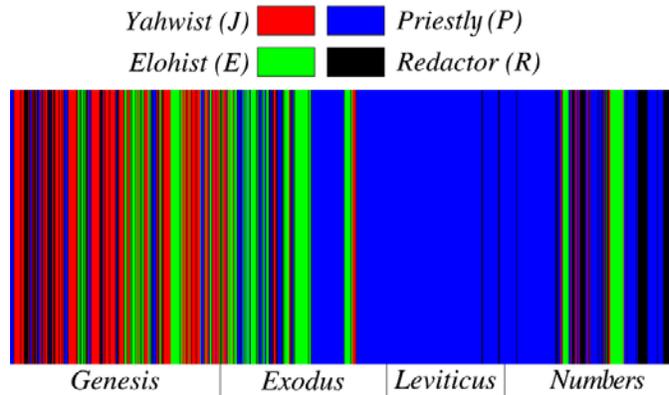
I thought to myself, “If the recording studios still have all those separate tracks sitting around someplace, why doesn’t someone create a piece of software that would allow the consumer to do what Pete Townshend just did? Wouldn’t it be fun to pick apart your favorite songs, hearing musicians from Carly Simon to Michael Jackson singing all by themselves, or isolating just the bass line or percussion tracks? What if you could remix the song with your own selection of tracks enabled or disabled, or set at different volumes?”



Now we can. Recently a company called Jammit released software that allows you to purchase your favorite songs track-by-track, and listen to them in ways that resemble sitting at a recording desk. The songs you buy are going to set you back a dollar or two per track, but you can interact with the music more creatively than ever. If you're a musician, Jammit scrolls the musical tablature for whatever instrument or vocal part you want so you can play or sing along. You can even take that part out and record your own track to play with the band.

You may wonder what all this has to do with the Bible. Actually, a lot more than you may think. The Bible is like an ancient version of a rock-n-roll song. Whether we read the book of Samuel, as we did last week, or the book of Kings this week, the stories we encounter are actually a composite work in which a number of people (or groups) have made contributions here and there, sometimes over the course of centuries. Until the last century, all we had access to was the final version – the “public release.” But over the course of the last 150 years, scholars have developed an increasingly sophisticated set of linguistic, literary, rhetorical and historical tools that allow us to identify distinct layers and literary strands within the Bible and listen to them in isolation. It's surprisingly similar to Jammit for the Bible.

Below to the left is noted scholar Richard Friedman's depiction of the major “tracks” of the first four books of the Bible, in which four different authors' or redactors' hands can be discerned. To the right is a photo of a multi-track recording. Notice how similar they look when you show them like this.



The story of Solomon, which extends over the first eleven chapters of the First Book of Kings, also has “tracks” or “layers” just as the opening books of the Bible do. The “main track” of the story was most likely recorded sometime during or shortly after Solomon’s reign, likely by someone associated with Solomon’s court. Our story 1 Kings 3 reflects the “melody line,” so-to-speak. It’s a “melody” that will be repeated in one way or another, not only in the book of Kings but throughout the Bible, even into the New Testament. And, why not? It’s a beautiful melody. Other “tracks” that were added to Solomon’s story are not necessarily so beautiful – and we’ll get to them later. For now, let’s simply sit back and consider the “A Track.”

II. Track A

[Read 1 Kings 3:4-28]

When storyteller Melvin Bray was asked at Darkwood Brew on Wednesday what he would choose if God offered to give him one thing, his response was: “I honestly have no idea what I’d ask for.” Melvin wasn’t ambivalent because he hadn’t had enough time to ponder what God could give him. Just the opposite. The more Melvin pondered the question, the more ambivalent he became. He said (paraphrased), “If I were standing in God’s presence, I would be so overwhelmed by a sense of my own inadequacy and inability to know anything that I would feel profoundly unqualified to make a decision as big as this.”



Dang. There’s such wisdom in Melvin’s answer! I had come up with three or four things I’d ask for, ranked in order of importance in case God nixed one or another of them! I felt like a pupil quietly erasing and changing his answer on the final exam after peeking at his tablemate’s answer.

In essence, Melvin answered the same way Solomon did in his dream where Yahweh appeared before him like a genie offering to grant one personal wish. Solomon asked – or rather begged – for wisdom, stating emphatically that he didn’t know his coming from his going or up from down. When any of us are struck by God’s glory and majesty, how could we respond otherwise?

Solomon’s “wise” choice is immediately rewarded – and demonstrated. Two prostitutes, each claiming to be the true mother of a certain baby set before him, present Solomon with a seemingly impossible challenge in an era before DNA tests. When Solomon asks that a sword be brought in to divide the child evenly between the two women, we as readers immediately wonder if Solomon hadn’t received the *opposite* of wisdom, causing the ultimate “miscarriage” of justice. His foolishness seems compounded by the fact that the real mother steps forward and offers to give her child to the other woman. Then, when Solomon offers the child to the woman who had offered to give him away out of compassion, we sense the deep well from which Solomon was drawing.

In Hebrew, the word that we translate as compassion is *rachamim*. *Rachamim* is the plural form of the noun *racham*, which literally means “womb.” Hebrew sometimes pluralizes words like this when it seeks to express an abstract concept that’s related to something concrete. To have *rachamim* is to have *wombishness*. It is to connect with another person on the most visceral level, as if they are a part of you. What the storyteller is trying to say about Solomon in this demonstration of his judgment is that Solomon’s wisdom arose from an ability to connect with people at the level where their deepest, most visceral feelings, hopes, and dreams were held. This is a place that can’t be discerned through the power of intelligence alone. It has to be felt. Felt on a level where your feelings and those of another person are nearly indistinguishable because you have found the other person’s voice within you.

Throughout human history, the greatest leaders among us seem to draw from deep stores of *rachamim* – wombishness. It’s like they know themselves and their inner struggles so well that our own struggles are not new to them. If they haven’t experienced our exact challenge, they can find an analogy of that challenge within them and use it to look out at the world through our own eyes (but using their wisdom and intelligence to discern a way forward).

According to the book of Kings, Solomon’s ability to connect with others in this way paid off in numerous ways, for himself and Israel. For example, Solomon was able to connect in a very basic, human way with his enemies. It is almost like Solomon decided to be the exact opposite kind of person his father was (like so many sons ...). Where David was a man of war, Solomon was going to use his wisdom to be a man of peace.

I’m reminded of a quote on the wall of a museum in Rwanda that is dedicated to remembering the vast genocide that swept the country in 1994. It says simply, “If you knew me, and you really knew yourself, you wouldn’t have killed me.” Somehow Solomon in his wisdom – his wombishness – seems to have broken through the barriers that separated Israelites from their enemies. Not only did Solomon break down barriers with these people, he turned them into allies, sealing their alliances with multiple marriages. In total, Solomon is said to have married 700 different women, in addition to keeping 300 concubines on the side. Talk about “make love, not war!” And talk about “biblical marriage”! No wonder Solomon was so wise – he had so many wives to tell him what to do ...

Solomon’s wisdom evidenced itself in equally extravagant ways. Because of his extraordinary peacemaking, Israel reaped an enormous “peace dividend” financially – something we haven’t experienced in our country for an entire generation. Israel was not only able to save the money it would have had to spend in war but it took in huge sums of money from its neighbors besides. Because the land of Israel acted like a narrow land bridge between the two superpowers of the ancient Near East – Egypt to the south and the land of Mesopotamia to the north (ruled by the Assyrians in Solomon’s day) – whenever there was peace in Israel, there was also an enormous amount of trade. With trade came both exports and taxation in the form of tolls.

So much wealth flowed into Israel during Solomon’s reign that you almost get the impression Solomon had to try as hard as he could to figure out what to do with it all much of the time. He built the First Temple to Yahweh – a gigantic complex involving imported cedar *forests* to construct, along with millions of tons of hand-cut stone, as well

as countless tons of bronze, iron, silver, and gold – and all the artisans, wood- and metal-workers and craftspeople to go along with it. As large as the House of Yahweh was, Solomon built a larger house for himself! He also fortified cities throughout Israel, and expanded Israel's borders to the farthest extent they would ever be – so far that scholars continually scratch their heads wondering if Israel's landholdings were even possible or if they may have been exaggerated by an over-eager scribe.

If peace, prosperity, and cultural advancement were all that marked Solomon's forty-year reign, then any impartial observer could logically conclude that he had surpassed his father David's achievements. From the standpoint of our personal spiritual path, we might also conclude that if God ever comes around offering to give us one thing, we'd be fools not to choose wisdom. Only, the Bible remembers David, not Solomon, as being the greatest king who ever lived. Perhaps wisdom alone isn't all it's cracked up to be.

III. Track B

Not everyone thought Solomon's story was complete with only the happy melody of "Track A." They knew a darker side to Solomon and felt his story was incomplete without adding a few discordant notes here and there. So, for instance, they added a couple of verses at the beginning of Chapter 3. Just before "Track A" sounds its opening note which says, "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David ...," "Track B" says, "Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh, king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her to the city of David ..." Any good Hebrew would have done a double-take over that line. Make an alliance with Pharaoh? Marry Pharaoh's daughter?! The Pharaohs of Egypt had enslaved Israel! Israel's central identity was found in its affirmation that "we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." (Deut 6:21) A discordant note is sounded in "Track B" of Solomon's story that colors the cheery sound of "Track A."

Just when "Track B" gets us wondering if there might be an overly cozy connection between Solomon and Pharaoh, we also learn that in order to carry out Solomon's enormous building projects, Solomon "conscripted forced labor out of all Israel." (1 Kings 5:13) What's the difference between "conscripting forced labor" and enslaving people? Perhaps they were paid the Minimum Wage. We also learn that Solomon outright enslaved other, non-Israelite peoples. (1 Kings 9:21) One begins to wonder who Solomon thinks he is.

On "Track B" we also learn that Solomon bought horses and chariots from Egypt and sold them to the kings of the surrounding nations. (1 Kings 10:28-29) This is like saying, Solomon became an arms dealer, purchasing weapons from the country that had enslaved Israel and selling them to Israel's neighbors, at least one of whom would one day use these very weapons against Israel. What nation is crazy enough to do that ... besides us? (Okay, there are several ...)

Another discordant note is signaled when we learn that despite the enormous wealth flowing into Israel, Solomon's building projects are so enormous that they have nearly bankrupted the country. At least, this seems to be the import of Solomon deciding to "give" twenty Israelite cities in Galilee to King Hiram who was Solomon's major lumber supplier.

IV. Track C

One more track seems to have been added to Solomon's story. Whether this is, in fact, a separate track or simply the culmination of "Track B" is unclear. What makes it different from the rest is its thinly veiled rage expressed at Solomon, and the reason for that rage. This track reflects the hand of an author who writes not during the height of Solomon's glory (like "Track A") but a number of generations later, as if sitting upon an ash heap. Perhaps this is a person from the generation of Solomon's great, great, great grandchildren, writing a story to explain why they are in the mess they're in. 1 Kings 11 is essentially one continuous rant that starts like this:

1 Kings 11:1 King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, 2 from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love. 3 Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. 4 For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. 5 For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6 So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done. 7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. 8 He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods. 9 Then the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, 10 and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord commanded. 11 Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. 12 Yet for the sake of your father David I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son. 13 I will not, however, tear away the entire kingdom; I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."

Basically, from this point on, all hell breaks loose in Israel. The "man of peace" is attacked from a number of enemies, including the Arameans, to whom Solomon had sold weapons. Once Solomon dies, Israel collapses like a house of cards. Civil war erupts, and ten of Israel's tribes split off, never to reunite with their sisters and brothers from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin again. Those ten will eventually be conquered by the Assyrians and will become the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The other two tribes will be conquered and exiled by the Babylonians 150 years later.

V. The Final Release

So there we have it. The "Jammit" story of Solomon in two – probably three – tracks. "Track A" is the happy melody, singing the glories of Solomon and his wisdom, leading us to wonder if perhaps Solomon is the greatest king who ever lived. "Track B" salts in some staccato notes of skepticism, linking Solomon to Pharaoh, slavery, and a budget that is out of control and perhaps an ego along with it. Then "Track C" has the effect of taking Solomon's story over a cliff at the end, accusing him of creating a House of Cards rather than a House of God by failing to attend to the very foundation of the House: "I am Yahweh your God. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3; Deut 5:6-7) In light of the kingdom's collapse, "Track C" makes us wonder if Solomon was perhaps the worst king who ever lived.

So now that we've isolated the different tracks, when we put them back together and hit "play," we hear more clearly what the "final release" is trying to tell us about Solomon – and the House that God seeks to build with us.

In essence, what I hear is this: A central pillar in God's House (our relationship with God) is Wisdom. "Ask for Wisdom," the story seems to say, "and all of God's blessings will be yours." "Track A" invites us to imagine the glories of what life looks like, and could further develop into, when we accept the gifts God gives us and use them for God's purposes. But tracks "B" and "C" remind us what happens when we don't. These tracks remind us that Wisdom is not the most important part of God's House. Without the most important part, you can be the wisest person who ever lived and still build a House that will come crashing down on your head.

What should you ask for if God comes offering you anything you want? The story seems to say, don't ask for any gift unless you're prepared to love and respect the Giver. It's not that God punishes you for failing to love and respect God. You simply won't be able to manage the power God puts in your hands. Without that power being focused through the lens of a living relationship with God, it spins out of control, often harming the very person wielding the power. And their descendants.

We may have iPhones, wireless internet, and large houses; we may have superhighways, fast cars, and important jobs; we may have enormous armies, powerful allies, and corporations that span the globe. But if we have failed to "keep the Main Thing the Main Thing – that is, our walk with God – we cannot expect to focus all these powerful energies for very long. We will eventually lose control of them, and we who thought we were their masters will become their slaves. If, like Solomon, we should be so lucky as to keep the power that has been given to us from slipping completely out of our hands, then we can cry not for ourselves but for our children. We can cry and hope our children are more faithful than we have been.