

The Characterization of Solomon in Solomon's Prayer (1 Kings 8)¹

Michael Avioz

Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 is appropriately considered one of the most significant passages in the so-called Deuteronomistic History, since it articulates such central ideas as: the Davidic dynasty, the significance and status of the temple, the idea of sin, repentance, forgiveness and hope of redemption.² Scholars usually concentrate on its date of composition and subsequent redactional history.³

An aspect as yet ignored is how the prayer characterizes Solomon. I will argue that the prayer may be inviting the reader to take a critical stance towards Solomon in a similar fashion as other narratives in 1 Kings 1-11.⁴ Read in isolation, Solomon's prayer does seem to offer positive evaluation of Solomon's achievements. However, when the context of the Solomon narratives is involved, the picture might be casted in a more unfavorable light. My assumption is that the final editor of the book of Kings is responsible for the gathering all of the material on Solomon's reign, the selection, arrangement, and reshaping of it according to his agenda. The result of this editorial work is a new literary work.⁵

Synchronic analysis is best suited for this purpose since its subject is the final form of the narrative. Thus, it is able to expose the different viewpoints in the broad narrative context, which are not revealed by superficial reading. The synchronic reading facilitates uncovering literary allusion to other texts, as well as other literary tropes, such as irony. It deals with an existing work, actually lying before us, rather than with a hypothetical redactional layers.

In recent years scholars have claimed that the characterization of Solomon in the book of Kings includes more subtle criticism than those in 1 Kings

¹ All biblical references in this article are according to the NRSV.

² Noth, *History* 6-9, 93; McConville, *1 Kings* 8:46-53 67-79; Talstra, *Solomon's* 14-61.

³ See the literature cited in O'Brien, *History* 151-159.

⁴ This opinion is not accepted by all critics. There are those who assert that Solomon's description is for the most part ideal (1 Kings 1-10). See Parker, *Solomon* 75-91; Parker, *Wisdom*; Knoppers, *Nations*.

⁵ See Garsiel, *Revealing*.

11.⁶ In the following, I shall apply this approach to the story in 1 Kings 8, and uncover the implicit criticism by exposing the links between 1 Kings 8 and other narratives in the book of Kings and elsewhere. In order to identify the allusions to other texts within Solomon's prayer, we must recognize their markers. According to Ziva Ben-Porat, a literary allusion contains a 'built-in directional signal' or 'marker' that is 'identifiable as an element or pattern belonging to another independent text.'⁷ For identifying use of irony, I employ Booth's approach, according to which the reader follows four stages in uncovering irony:⁸ 1. the reader rejects the literal meaning; 2. alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out; 3. a decision is reached as to the author's knowledge or beliefs; and 4. a new, stable meaning of the text is reconstructed. I will attempt to demonstrate that only in the superficial reading of the story does the narrator appear to praise Solomon's achievements.

Israel as the People of Solomon

One of the *Leitwörter* in Solomon's prayer is אֱמֹ (‘people’) and its derivatives אֱמֹתָ (‘thy people’), אֱמֹר (‘his people’).⁹ Solomon's goal in his prayer was to point out that the building of the temple was not merely a royal project, but is rather central to the whole people. The reader recalls Solomon's dream at Gibeon in 1 Kings 3: Solomon guarantees to judge the people¹⁰ and look after them: to be attentive to their problems. However, using the verb דָּרַךְ to describe Solomon's dominion (1 Kgs 5,4 [Eng. 4,24]; cf. 9,23) hints at the people's difficulty in approaching the king to expound their problems. Solomon detached himself from the people. Thus, understandingly the people did the same and detached themselves from the house of David in 1 Kings 12. King Rehoboam continued in his father's path causing an emotional outburst: ‘What share have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse (V.16).’¹¹

⁶ See Frisch, Narrative 53-61; Sweeney, Critique; Walsh, Characterization; Hays, Narrator.

⁷ Ben-Porat, Poetics 108.

⁸ Booth, Rhetoric 10-12. On the various types of ironies, see Muecke, Compass 4. Muecke (Compass 67-86) discusses also the indicators for identifying irony. One of them is praising in order to blame, which is the most suitable for my thesis concerning Solomon's prayer.

⁹ See VV. 30, 33, 34, 36 (twice), 38, 41, 43, 44, 50, 51, 52, 56.

¹⁰ The word שֹׁפֵט has here a juridical meaning. See Kalugila, King 113-114.

¹¹ See Weinfeld, Counsel.

The Temple as the Source of Justice

Various biblical texts illustrate the idea that law emanates from the temple and its precincts (see, for example, Isa 1,26-27; 2,1-4 // Mic 4,1-4; Ps 96,11-13).¹² Solomon hints at this in 1 Kings 8,32: 'then hear in heaven, and act, and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing their conduct on their own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding them according to their righteousness.'

The irony created in 1 Kings 8, is seen in the word 'law' relates primarily to God. In verses 45, 49 Solomon pleads that God *ועשית משפטם*, in other words – judge the people justly.¹³ In verse 58, Solomon promises to safeguard the law of God, a condition of the covenant between them. In all these cases, Solomon is not the subject of administrating justice but it is rather God. Linville rightfully contends that '[Solomon] ignores his own God-given wisdom in granting judgment.'¹⁴

Another irony is made concerning Solomon's throne of judgment. According to 1 Kgs 7,7, the hall of throne (*אולם הכסא*) was probably where the king sat in judgment.¹⁵ Solomon's throne is described in detail in 1 Kgs 10,10-18. In verse 9 the Queen of Sheba tells Solomon: 'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on *the throne of Israel!* Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness.' The ideal king was supposed to dispense justice and righteousness from his place upon the throne of Israel. The throne motif relates to the judgment and appears in several biblical passages.¹⁶ But, although Solomon built the 'throne', he did not hold 'court'.

The only scene among the Solomon narratives where the king appears to administer justice occurs in the tale of the two harlots (1 Kgs 3,16-27). The conclusion of the story (V.28) states that Solomon was endowed with divine wisdom. However, we do not find any juridical activity of Solomon after 1 Kings 3. Quite the contrary, it seems that the narrator aims to show that Solomon does not answer his people's demands or pleas. This may be viewed

¹² See Weinfeld, Instructions; Hurowitz, Temple 290-291 n. 2.

¹³ See Liedke, *שפט*, For a contrasting opinion, see Talstra, Solomon's 218. The RSV and NRSV translate here 'maintain their cause'. However, it seems that a more accurate translation would be 'act justly toward them'..See Cogan, 1 Kings 286. Cf. Gen 18,25; Deut 10,18; Jer 22,15.

¹⁴ Linville, Israel 289.

¹⁵ See Whitelam, King 235 n. 40.

¹⁶ E.g., Isa 9,6; 17,8; Ps 122,5; Prov 16,16. For further passages see Fabry, *כסא*, 245-251. On the role of the king as a judge, see Whitelam, King 29-37; Weinfeld, Justice 45-56.

in retrospect in the people's appeal to Rehoboam: 'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke upon us, and will serve you' (1 Kgs 12,4). The taxes imposed great hardship for the people as can be inferred from the details in 1 Kings 4-5, regarding Solomon's system of taxation and forced labor.¹⁷

The lack of descriptions of royal judicial activity in the Solomon narratives in the book of Kings¹⁸ is ironic when we consider the themes of Psalm 72, whose superscription attributes it 'to Solomon'. Regardless of the original purpose or intention of this superscription,¹⁹ the main theme of this psalm is the establishment of justice by the ideal king. Even the Queen of Sheba's words of praise to Solomon, that God has appointed him to do justice and righteousness (1 Kgs 10,9), are conceived as a hint of criticism towards Solomon who did not establish justice and righteousness.²⁰

Reference to Exodus from Egypt

In verses 16, 21, 51, 53 Solomon recalls the Exodus from Egypt. The repetition of this theme presumably validates the building the temple.²¹ The temple building signifies the end of the period of wandering and initiates a period of permanent settlement for the temple and the people of Israel (cf. 2 Sam 7,6-11). However, the Exodus is alluded to in the Solomon narratives in a completely different context. In fact, the author draws analogies between the age of Solomon and the enslavement of Israel in Egypt:

- a. Solomon marries Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kgs 3,1; Cf. 7,8; 9,16, 24; 11,1).
- b. The 'store-cities' (ערי המסכנורה) in 1 Kgs 9,19 allude to Exod 1,11.²²
- c. It is possible, that the reference to the 480 years from Exodus from Egypt to the establishment of the temple is not solely for chronological purposes, but also intended to hint that the bondage in Egypt is a prefiguration of the situation under Solomon's reign. A parallel between 1 Kings 9,21 ('taxation') and the enslavement in Egypt is even clearer.²³

¹⁷ See Walsh, Characterization 489-490.

¹⁸ Cf. Frisch, Narrative 113.

¹⁹ See, for example, Heim, King.

²⁰ See Hays, Narrative 172.

²¹ See Frisch, Exodus.

²² Frisch, Narrative 99.

²³ See Parker, Wisdom 90.

- d. In 1 Kings 12:4, the people of Israel tell Rehoboam that his father, Solomon, placed upon Israel 'hard service' (עבֹדָה קָשָׁה). These words allude to the enslavement under Pharaoh in Exod 1,14; 6,9; and Deut 16,6.²⁴

Who is in Possession of a 'Hearing Heart'?

In his dream at Gibeon, Solomon requests from God, 'a heart that hears' (1 Kgs 3,9). The root שמע is one of the key words in Solomon's prayer, where it nearly always occurs with God as a subject, asked to hear the prayers. However, Solomon does not mention any act of hearing on the part of the king, whether of the people, or of God.

Moreover, the word לב occurs in Solomon's prayer one time in relation with David's good will (V.18), three times in relation to each person in Israel (V.38-39) and twice in the first person plural (VV.58, 61), referring to the people as a whole. He is also asked in V.58 להטות לבבנו אליו. However, Solomon's heart turns from God in 1 Kings 11,3.²⁵

The Repose Motif

Solomon blesses God in his prayer: 'Blessed be the Lord who has given rest to his people' (1 Kgs 8,56). The motif of repose from enemies appears in several key passages: in the Deuteronomic law which conditions temple building upon God granting respite to Israel from her enemies (Deut. 12,9-11); completion of the conquest (Josh. 23,1); David's wish to build a temple since God allowed the people rest from their enemies (2 Sam 7,1); Solomon's prayer in which he states that God allowed him rest from his enemies (1 Kgs 8,18).²⁶ Here the repose applies not only to the Davidic kings, but also to the entire nation. This description is full of irony. The one who 'gave rest' was God and not Solomon. How is it possible to expect from the people a sense of repose, when they were occupied in building the temple for twenty years (1 Kgs 6,38; 7,1)?²⁷

²⁴ Frisch, Narrative 99.

²⁵ See Eslinger, Hands 175, n. 66; Hays, Narrative 163.

²⁶ See Preuss, נח; Talstra, Solomon's 247-248.

²⁷ In 1 Kgs 5,13-16, there is a description of the vast number of workers Solomon engaged in building.

The Davidic Covenant

The narrator also makes use of the dynastic promise to David to criticize Solomon (VV.14-21, 24-26). Solomon sees his ascension to the throne as fulfillment of the divine prophecy (V.20), but at the same time, he realizes that the fulfillment of the prophecy is conditional on keeping God's commandments (V.25).²⁸ The conditionality of the dynastic promise is mentioned already in David's testament (1 Kgs 2,3-4) and subsequently in the divine revelations prior to the building of the temple and after its completion (1 Kgs 6,11-12; 1 Kgs 9,1-9). This emphasis on the conditionality of the dynastic promise demonstrates Solomon's awareness of them, as they were conveyed to him both by his father and God. The accumulated weight of these passages serves as an indirect accusation of Solomon. Since Solomon violated the dynastic covenant and did not keep God's commandments, it is no wonder that God does the same, and limits the kingship of the house of David (1 Kgs 11,11-13).²⁹

In this connection, it is necessary to consider the root בחר in V.16, which is applied to David as the divine designate. If we accept the emendation of this verse, suggested by some scholars ('and I never chose any man to be ruler over my people Israel. But I chose Jerusalem for the presence of my name'), it appears also in relation to Jerusalem.³⁰ But nowhere in the book of Kings is this root applied to Solomon.³¹ The significance of this lack is reinforced by the Chronicler, who tied Solomon in with David's election in 1 Chron 28,4-6.

The Covenant between the People, King, and God

Trilateral covenants between king, people, and God are mentioned in conjunction with different kings. Such covenants are portrayed in 2 Kgs 23,3 and in Chron 15,12, dealing with Josiah and Asa. This type of covenant is not mentioned in Solomon's prayer, although it provides a suitable opportunity. In fact, the only mention of 'covenant' in conjunction with Solomon occurs in the epithet he applies to God as keeper of the covenant

²⁸ Eslinger, *Hands* 161, asserts that Solomon is depicted as one who attempts to alter the phrasing of the prophecy and in order to emphasize the divine promise to David.

²⁹ See Walsh, 1 Kings 116; Hays, *Narrative* 173. According to Parker (*Wisdom* 80) Solomon is presented in this prayer as upholding the Torah. However, I agree with Hays (*Narrative* 169 n. 46), that Solomon is criticized for not having read the Torah for the people, as did Josiah.

³⁰ See Knoppers, *Prayer* 243 n. 54; Cogan, 1 Kings 282.

³¹ See Hays, *Narrative* 158 n. 19.

(1 Kgs 8,23). But this context does not include a commitment of neither Solomon nor the people to keep the covenant.³² In V.66b the people are depicted as joyful for the 'goodness' God endowed on David and Israel, meaning the covenant.³³ The fact that Solomon is not mentioned as in this 'טובה' can hardly be coincidental. Moreover, Solomon does not appear in the prayer in the figure of God's servant, while David is.

Sin and Forgiveness

Commentators have justifiably emphasized the numerous repetitions of the root סלח ('forgive') in Solomon's prayer.³⁴ However, in my opinion, mention of forgiveness is not intended to supply hope to the exiles, but is rather ironically pointed towards Solomon. He does not express any remorse for his actions after God accuses him (1 Kgs 11,11-13), nor is there any evidence of forgiveness by God. Thus, in the prayer, the narrator articulates a request for forgiveness which excludes Solomon: 'If someone sins against a neighbor' (V.31), which is broadened in the following with reference to Israel's sins (VV.33, 34, 35, 36, 46, 50). Linville has rightly noted that Solomon's statement that 'there is no one who does not sin' in V.46 casts a shadow on Solomon himself.³⁵

Why is Solomon Criticized in His Prayer?

The reason for the critical assessment of Solomon in his prayer stems from the fact that the temple did not receive the recognition he had hoped for. One generation later, the people decide to rebel against Rehoboam, accept Jeroboam I as king and not to return to Jerusalem. At this juncture, the Bethel and Dan shrines become rivals of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 12,30).³⁶

The means the narrator of the book of Kings employed to bridge this gap was by making use of hints spread throughout the stories relating to the difficult life under Solomon's rule. Solomon drafted forced labor gangs from the people to build the temple, as opposed to the voluntary participation in the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 25), illustrated there by the use of the roots רום and נדב.³⁷ During the building of the temple numerous

³² See Walsh, 1 Kings 116.

³³ For this meaning, see Johag-Höver, טובה, 311-312.

³⁴ See Talstra, Solomon's 192-201.222-225.

³⁵ Linville, Israel 136.

³⁶ Many scholars claim that these shrines were Yahwistic. See Toews, Monarchy.

³⁷ See Gunn and Fewel, Narrative 168.

workers were obliged to leave their homes for extended periods, thus transforming Jerusalem into a religious and political center. When Solomon died, the people decided to rebel against Solomon's heir, and vocally objected to his reign. At this point, the author of the book of Kings perceives Solomon as one of the central characters responsible for the division of the united monarchy and the destruction of the temple. In this aspect, the book of Kings displays affinities with the criticism of the prophets who made little of the splendor of Jerusalem's royal buildings in Jerusalem, demanding instead to focus on the goings on within them.³⁸

Summary

Scholars have generally viewed Solomon's prayer on the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8) as a composition which promulgates various deuteronomistic ideologies. This approach is based upon the initial assumption that the prayer helps shape a positive characterization of Solomon as builder of the temple, who thus realizes the promise to David in the dynastic oracle (2 Samuel 7). Instead, I propose a different reading of Solomon's prayer which pays special attention to literary allusion and use of ironic trope. With the aid of these literary means, Solomon is being criticized, since he did not fulfill the expectations for an ideal king. The main themes of the prayer—kingship, the Davidic covenant, the exodus from Egypt and forgiveness—are employed in order to present Solomon's character in a critical light. The criticism directed against Solomon's rule stems from the gap between the prophetic vision of success and prosperity for the house of David, on the one side, and the dismal reality of the division of the united monarchy, on the other side.

Zusammenfassung

Bisher wurde das Gebet Salomos bei der Einweihung des Tempels (1 Kön 8) oft als eine Komposition betrachtet, die unterschiedliche deuteronomische Ideologien verkündet. Diese Auffassung basiert auf der Grundannahme, dass das Gebet eine positive Charakterisierung Salomos als Gründer des Tempels zu vermitteln vermag, der sich der Verheißung für David im dynastischen Orakel bewusst wird (2 Sam 7). Ich schlage dennoch eine andere Sichtweise zum Gebet Salomos vor, die sowohl die literarische Anspielung als auch den Gebrauch von ironischer Phrase unterstreicht. Mit Hilfe dieser literarischen Mittel wird Salomo kritisiert, kein idealer König gewesen zu sein und somit nicht alle Erwartungen erfüllt zu haben. Die leitenden Themen im Gebet – Königtum, der Bund mit David, der Auszug aus Ägypten und Vergebung – dienen hier lediglich dazu, Salomos Charakter in kritischem Licht zu präsentieren. Die an Salomos Herrschaft gerichtete Kritik beruht auf der Kluft zwischen der prophetischen Vorstellung von Erfolg und Wohlstand für das Haus Davids auf der einen Seite, und der trostlosen Wirklichkeit bezüglich der Spaltung der vereinigten Monarchie auf der anderen Seite.

³⁸ See, for example, Isa 1,10-17; Jer 7,1-15; 22,13-17.

Bibliographie

- Ben-Porat, Z., The Poetics of Literary Allusion, *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976) 105-128.
- Booth, W.C., *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago 1974.
- Cogan, M., *1 Kings (AncB 10)*, Garden City / New York 2001.
- Eslinger, L., *Into the Hands of the Living God (JSOT.S 84)*, Sheffield 1989.
- Fabry, H.-J., נָסַח, *kisse* 4, in: *TDOT* 7, Grand Rapids 1995, 232-259.
- Frisch, A., The Exodus Motif in *1 Kings* 1-14: *JSOT* 87 (2000) 3-21.
- Frisch, A., *The Narrative of Solomon's Reign in the Book of Kings*, (Ph.D. diss.), Bar-Ilan University, 1986 (heb.).
- Garsiel, M., Revealing and Concealing as a Narrative Strategy in Solomon's Judgment: *First Kings* 3:16-18: *CBQ* 64 (2002) 229-247.
- Gunn, D.M. / Fewel D., *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford 1993.
- Hays, J.D., Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in *1 Kings* 1-11: *JSOT* 28 (2003) 149-174.
- Heim, K.M., The Perfect King of Psalm 72: An 'Intertextual' inquiry, in: Satterthwaite, P.E. u.a. (Hg.), *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, Carlisle / Grand Rapids 1995, 223-248.
- Höver-Johag, I., טוֹב, *tób*, in: *TDOT* 5, Grand Rapids 1986, 311-312.
- Hurowitz, V., *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Buildings in Light of Mesopotamian and North-west Semitic Writings (JSOT.S 115)*, Sheffield 1992.
- Kalugila, L., *The Wise King: Studies in Royal Wisdom as Divine Revelation in the Old Testament and Its Environment*, Lund 1980.
- Knoppers, G.N., *Two Nations Under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies 1: The Reign of Solomon and the Rise of Jeroboam*, Atlanta 1993.
- Knoppers, Gerald Nile, *Prayer and Propaganda: The Dedication of Solomon's Temple and the Deuteronomist's Program*: *CBQ* 57 (1995) 229-254.
- Liedke, G., שָׁפַט, *špt*, to judge, in: *TLOT* 3, Peabody, Mass. 1997, 1392-1399.
- Linville, J.R., *Israel in the Book of Kings: The Past as a Project of Social Identity*, (*JSOT.S* 272), Sheffield 1998.
- McConville, J.G., *1 Kings* 8:46-53 and the Deuteronomic Hope: *VT* 42 (1992) 67-79.
- Muecke, D.C., *The Compass of Irony*, London 1969.
- Mulder M.J., *1 Kings* 1 (HCOT), Leuven 1998.
- Noth, M., *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans. J. Doull (*JSOT.S* 15), Sheffield 1981.
- O'Brien, M.A., *The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment*, Freiburg / Göttingen 1989.
- Parker, K.I., *Solomon as Philosopher King? The Nexus of Law and Wisdom in 1 Kings* 1-11: *JSOT* 53 (1992) 75-91.
- Parker, K.I., *Wisdom and Law in the Reign of Solomon*, Lewiston, New York 1992.
- Preuss, H. D., נָוַח, in: *TDOT* 9, Grand Rapids 1998, 277-286.
- Sweeney, M.A., The Critique of Solomon in the Josianic Edition of the Deuteronomistic History: *JBL* 114 (1995) 607-622.
- Talstra, E., *Solomon's Prayer: Synchrony and Diachrony in the Composition of 1 Kings* 8, 14-61, Kampen 1993.

- Toews, W.I., *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel under Jeroboam I*, Atlanta 1993.
- Walsh, J.T., *1 Kings (Berit Olam)*, Collegeville 1996.
- Walsh, J.T., *The Characterization of Solomon in First Kings 1-5: CBQ 57 (1995) 471-493.*
- Weinfeld, M., *Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt: Scripta Hierosolymitana 28 (1984) 224-250.*
- Weinfeld, M., *The Counsel of the "Elders" to Rehoboam and Its Implications: Maarav 3.1 (1982) 27-53.*
- Weinfeld, M., *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, Jerusalem / Minneapolis 1995.
- Whitelam, K.W., *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel*, Sheffield 1979.

Michael Avioz

Bar-Ilan University,
Ramat-Gan, Israel