

“Solomon the Scholar”

Introduction: What would you ask the Lord to do for you if you could ask Him for anything at all?

1 Kings 4: 29-32. 29.Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. **30.**Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. **31.**For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. **32.**He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. **33.**He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. **34.**Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

I. Solomon the Scholar's Wisdom, Discernment and Breadth of Mind/Heart were God-Given Gifts (1 Kings 4: 29)

- Wisdom
- Very great discernment
- Breadth of mind/heart
- Sand on the seashore

II. Solomon the Scholar's Superior Intellect and Wisdom (1 Kings 4: 30-31)

- Men of the East and Egypt
- Ethan, Heman, Calcol, Darda

III. Solomon the Scholar's Encyclopedic Knowledge and His Work as a Writer and Composer (1 Kings 4: 32-33)

- 3000 proverbs
- 1005 songs
- Trees to hyssop
- Animals, birds, creeping things, fish

IV. Solomon the Scholar's Fame and Appeal (1 Kings 4: 31b, 34)

- All peoples and Kings of the earth

V. Someone Greater Than Solomon the Scholar Has Come (Matthew 12: 42)

“The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; *and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*”

Conclusion: “What do you want Me to do for you?” How would you answer?

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DBU Scholars’ Luncheon

David Naugle

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Introduction:

What would you ask the Lord to do for you if you could ask Him for anything at all? Little did Solomon know that God would ask him this very significant, life-shaping question on a fateful night in Gideon after an intense day of worship during which he had offered some 1000 sacrifices to the Lord. According to 1 Kings 3, the Lord asked Solomon in a dream: “What do you want me to do for you?” “Ask what you wish me to give you.” Sounds similar, doesn’t it, to the Middle Eastern folktale about Aladdin’s Lamp in the book, *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Solomon thought about this question for a while, with, I would imagine, several options, some of them self-serving, dancing in his head. But eventually he came up with his final answer. Solomon knew he was but a little child who did not even know how to go out or come in. And since he had such great responsibilities as the ruler of God’s people, he said: “So give Your servant an understanding heart (a hearing heart) to judge Your people to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3: 9).

This answer pleased the Lord, and the Lord gave Solomon what he asked for – a wise and discerning heart. And the Lord also gave him what he didn’t ask for, namely, riches and honor as well, such that there would be none like Solomon all his days. This is the narrative background for a short passage of 6 verses in 1 Kings 4: 29-32 that I think can be well titled, “Solomon the Scholar.”

29Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. **30**Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. **31**For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. **32**He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. **33**He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. **34**Men came from *all peoples* to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from *all the kings of the earth* who had heard of his wisdom.

I would like to highlight several features of Solomon the Scholar from this passage that I think have relevance for our work as Christian scholars and professors today. The first is ...

I. Solomon the Scholar's Wisdom, Discernment and Breadth of Mind/Heart were God-Given Gifts (1 Kings 4: 29)

As we have seen in 1 Kings 3, as Solomon had asked and as God had promised, God gave Solomon wisdom, very great discernment, and breadth of mind and heart (that is, a very wide, large, hearing heart). How might we define these three divine gifts of acumen?

- ❖ Wisdom or *hokmah* is practical wisdom or the ability to decide what is the truthful, judicious and useful course to pursue; it enables a person to live skillfully in ethical conformity to laws of God worked into the very fabric of creation and present in all aspects of life.
- ❖ Very great discernment or *tebunah* is a keenness of understanding enabling one to discriminate between good and evil so as to make smart choices and pursue prudent courses of action in relation to life's complex issues and problems.
- ❖ Breadth of mind/heart or *rohab leb* is a special divine illumination coupled with an amazing mental capacity to understand God's truth

about all aspects of reality, how that truth about each thing fits together into a whole universal system of understanding (a gloss on J. H. Newman).

This grand wisdom, great discernment, and breadth of mind/heart is not just the accumulation of scientific data, facts and information, as we might think of it in the modern period. It is also the capacity to understand all aspects of life in its mysterious, depth dimension from God's point of view, not unlike what we might call a Christian worldview today. Solomon's comprehensive acumen and good judgment was, according to a well-established ancient proverb, unbelievably abundant and rich, even seemingly infinite, "like the sand that is on the seashore."

Solomon's intellect and wisdom were clearly God's gifts, but they also constituted a task. God endowed Solomon with these abilities, and yet at the same time, he had to be a good steward of the gifts and talents given to him. Solomon had to work hard to develop what God had given to him. That Solomon's wisdom, discernment and breadth of mind and heart were, indeed, God given, suggests that all advances in human learning are due to God's gifts and His providence through common grace. This also implies that the people of God ought to embrace freely of any and all insights regardless of their source, as if they were "Egyptian gold," mined from ore of divine providence.

So there are three things for us to consider in light of these reflections: First, our intellectual gifts and their illumination are surely gifts of God's grace, leaving no room for pride. Second, we must be good stewards of our intellectual gifts, showing ourselves to be faithful, working hard as scholars to develop these gifts, just as Solomon did. And third, we must learn that all people, believers or not, possess remarkable talents and gifts and we can

learn much from them, realizing that all truth, goodness and beauty are, in the end, God's.

Apparently Solomon took his God-given gifts and his scholarly task seriously. He did the hard work, and it paid off. His knowledge and wisdom surpassed the greatest intellects of his day.

II. Solomon the Scholar's Superior Intellect and Wisdom (1 Kings 4: 30-31)

Solomon was smarter and his wisdom was greater than the leading lights of in his era. His intelligence and insight were better known than the highly regarded centers of learning. According to verse 30, Solomon's wisdom "surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt." And please note if you would that the leading scholar of the time was not a pagan, not a secularist (as we might say), not an unbeliever or a non-Christian. Rather, the leading scholar of the day was a religious man, a Jew, an Israelite, a man of God, of Yahweh – this kind of man was the kind most highly regarded for his intellect and wisdom. What about us? What about now?

Back to the text. The "Sons of the east" are generally understood to be the Arabian tribes (including the Sabaens, Idumaens and the Temanites) and also the Chaldeans or Babylonians, all dwelling east of the land of Canaan as far as Mesopotamia and the Euphrates River. These people groups were celebrated for the sciences and their great sagacity.

But not only was Solomon smarter and wiser than the "sons of the east," but also he had distinct edge on the Egyptians. This is probably the greatest compliment since the Egyptians were renown, proverbially so, for their knowledge and understanding of many branches of knowledge, including

medicine, geometry, mathematics, astronomy as well as their gnostic wisdom.

Indeed, as v. 31 points out, Solomon was wiser than all men, better than the best and brighter than the brightest, and this included such notables, in his day, as Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, both learned Levitical priests, and the more enigmatic Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol (a family with smart genes, evidently) who were famous for their learned contributions.

If these men were famous, Solomon was more so, since the last line of v. 31 states that his fame was known, not just in Jerusalem, not just in Judah, not just in Israel, but his fame born of wisdom was known in the surrounding nations (or as we might say today, globally).

How might we translate this for our times? Perhaps we might say that Solomon's notoriety would have outdone Cambridge and Oxford in Great Britain, as well as Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Columbia, here in the USA. He would have been known to be smarter than the French and the Germans, and the Japanese and the Chinese. Or, if we compare Solomon to individuals, we might say that he was smarter than

- ❖ -Homer
- ❖ -Socrates
- ❖ -Plato
- ❖ Aristotle
- ❖ -Isaac Newton
- ❖ -Leonardo Da Vinci
- ❖ -William Shakespeare
- ❖ -Samuel Johnson
- ❖ -Immanuel Kant
- ❖ -Benjamin Franklin
- ❖ -Thomas Jefferson
- ❖ -Albert Einstein
- ❖ -Thomas Edison
- ❖ -Winston Churchill
- ❖ Bill Gates/Steve Jobs
- ❖ Stephen Hawking
- ❖ Dali Lama
- ❖ J. K. Rowling
- ❖ Steven Spielberg
- ❖ Warren Buffet
- ❖ Sandra Day O'Connor
- ❖ Yo Yo Ma
- ❖ Pablo Picasso
- ❖ Oprah Winfrey
- ❖ Jane Goodall
- ❖ Richard Dawkins
- ❖ Toni Morrison
- ❖ Popes JP2 and Benedict XVI

Who among Christian scholars today could it be said that his or her wisdom surpasses all the others, that his or her reputation is known nationally or even internationally? Could this, shouldn't this be said of us?

Solomon wasn't famous for being famous. Rather, Solomon's great fame was due to his encyclopedic knowledge and for his work as a writer, composer and speaker.

III. Solomon the Scholar's Encyclopedic Knowledge and His Work as a Writer and Composer (1 Kings 4: 32-33)

Now Solomon committed his research, knowledge and wisdom to writing, in particular to the writing of proverbs and to song. Solomon was wise to write proverbs and songs, for a brief proverb is the soul of wit and wisdom, and songs can pleasantly work their way into the inner most parts of the human heart and shape and move its affections. Indeed, the world is much governed by proverbs and songs, and Solomon has given us some of the very best (Matthew Henry).

Solomon composed and spoke some 3000 proverbs which are wise sayings that are of great insight and practical use for the conduct of daily human life. Of these 3000, approximately 375 of the best of them are collected in the OT book of Proverbs, which clearly convey the blessings of the wise who fear the Lord, and the pitfalls of the foolish who do not. By the way, formulating one such saying is difficult enough (just try it!); to formulate some 3000 total is astounding (W. Brueggemann).

In addition to the 3000 proverbs, Solomon also composed some 1005 songs, three of which are preserved for us in the OT. These include Psalm 72 which deals with kingly politics, and Psalm 127 which concerns family life and children. The best of Solomon's songs is the Song of Songs which is both a

lovely lyrical meditation on romantic and married love between husband and also a reflection on the ardent nature of God's love for His people.

Solomon was also a natural philosopher, and he lectured on dendrology and botany, for the first part of v. 33 says that Solomon's wisdom included the study of trees, including the gigantic cedars of Lebanon, and also the miniature wall-moss called hyssop, and presumably, everything else in the tree and plant kingdoms in between.

And as the second part of v. 33 indicates, Solomon was also a student of the four principal families of the animal kingdom according to the Hebrew scheme of classification. Thus he possessed knowledge and spoke intelligently of animals, birds, creeping things, and fish in his respective studies and lectures on zoology, ornithology, entomology, and ichthyology. If there ever was one, Solomon was a "Renaissance man," the ancient world's polymath *par excellence*. (W. Brueggemann). Bear in mind that this reference to Solomon's vast knowledge of trees, plants and animals presupposes several things:

1. The original and ongoing importance of the cultural mandate that God gave to the human race as its original commission in Genesis 1-2 to rule and subdue the earth, to have dominion over all things, to cultivate and keep the creation garden, to be the creators and makers of human culture and civilization in order to bless people and glorify God.
2. The continuation of the original Adamic vocation of naming and explaining the animal kingdom, and by implication, everything else in all creation, a task that ascribes a great dignity and honor to human learning.
3. The communal nature and institutional character of Solomon's scholarship, for it is highly unlikely that he undertook this kind of vast research alone, but that it was the combined effort of the entire Solomonic

court that was involved with and contributed to this grandiose cultural, scholarly and educational enterprise.

4. Solomon's wisdom and the wisdom of his court had a goal: *shalom*: peace, prosperity, contentment. Verse 25 indicates that as a result, all Judah and Israel enjoyed an idyllic time of calm, peace, and contentment, for all "lived in safety, every man under his vine and fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon."

Hence, on the basis of God's original creation and through Christ's redemption, we would wish to affirm and be committed to these four things: (1) the ongoing importance of the cultural mandate and the creative process, (2) the value and significance of study and research, teaching and learning, (3) the communal and institutional character of scholarship and, by implication, the money, time and effort this endeavor takes, and (4) the ultimate goals of *shalom* or peace to which our work should contribute. Making academic culture in institutional community towards the fostering of shalom is our overall goal.

IV. Solomon the Scholar's Fame and Appeal (1 Kings 4: 31b, 34)

And Solomon's efforts, and those of his royal court, were not without reward. As v. 31 points out, Solomon was internationally famous for his knowledge and wisdom, and as v. 34 shows, he was a tourist attraction (W. Brueggemann) because his knowledge was so powerful, so appealing, so alluring. This is the loveliness and attraction of epistemology and education. As verse 34 states, "Men came from *all peoples* to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from *all the kings of the earth* who had heard of his wisdom.:"

This means that knowledge and wisdom of Solomon the Scholar brought many strangers to Jerusalem, where they undoubtedly learned from this

wisest of all men, and also heard about his God, Yahweh of Israel, who had given it to him. Solomon and his court were the world's centerpiece of learning, a place of rendezvous for thinkers, scholars, lovers of wisdom, all of whom came "to light their candle at his lamp and to borrow from him" (Matthew Henry). Shouldn't Christian colleges and universities be the same today, serving as beacons of truth and light, and leading searching minds to God?

Of course, the most notable of Solomon's guests was the Queen of Sheba and her retinue, the account of which is given in 1 Kings 10. At this visit, the Queen spoke with him about all that was in her heart, and Solomon himself in his wisdom answered all her questions. Upon hearing his wisdom and observing his prosperity, it says "there was no more spirit in her." She herself said to Solomon the scholar-king in 1 Kings 10: 6-9:

6"It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. **7**"Nevertheless I did not believe the reports, until I came and my eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. You exceed in wisdom and prosperity the report which I heard. **8**"How blessed are your men, how blessed are these your servants who stand before you continually and hear your wisdom." **9**"Blessed be the LORD your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel; because the LORD loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness."

Based on the Queen's testimony, we might ask who could be a better example of a life of learning and scholarship under God than Solomon?

V. Someone Greater Than Solomon the Scholar Has Come (Matthew 12: 42)

Solomon, as great as he was, is not our chief example in learning or scholarship. Nor is he the one whom we ultimately serve in our work as scholars and educators. Solomon in his great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of mind and heart, was merely a type, a foreshadowing, an

anticipation of Jesus Christ. And, indeed, Jesus was even greater, far greater in wisdom, discernment and knowledge than Solomon was.

After all, Jesus is God, the creator and redeemer of heaven and earth; he is the one who holds all things together by the word of His power, he is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge (Col. 1-2); he is the one who has become to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1).

You would think that the Jews of Jesus' own day would have recognized Him as such; you think we would too! But sadly, the Jews viewed Jesus as a nothing but a false messiah. We just view him as nice or good. In so far as the Queen of Sheba in her day and time was able to recognize the wisdom of Solomon the Scholar, one day Jesus will call upon her to testify on Judgment day against those Jews who knew Jesus and heard him speak in person, but were unable to recognize His wisdom and understanding which was so much greater than Solomon's. If the pagan Queen of Sheba could recognize Solomon's lesser wisdom, why couldn't the Jews of Jesus' day recognize Jesus' wisdom and understanding which superior to Solomon's? If Solomon was a wise scholar and teacher, then Jesus far more! As Matthew 12: 42 states,

“The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.”

On this basis, here is a battery of questions for Christian scholars to consider:

- ❖ Do we really recognize Jesus Christ whom we serve in our study, teaching, and learning is truly one greater than Solomon?

- ❖ Do we recognize in him wisdom, great discernment and breadth of mind and heart...like the sand on the seashore?
- ❖ Do we recognize that Jesus' wisdom surpasses the wisdom of all the sons of the east and of Egypt (great that Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia), that it is greater than the wisdom of the Ethans, Hemans, Calcols, and Dardas of today's world?
- ❖ Do we recognize the greatness of Jesus teachings? His proverbs, his songs, his parables, his discourses, his teachings?
- ❖ Do we recognize that Jesus, too, would have understood dendrology and botany and could have spoken eloquently of animals, birds, creeping things and fish, and in many ways, did?
- ❖ Do we recognize that people and kings from all over the earth have come and will come to hear the wisdom of Jesus and call him LORD, a great multitude which no one could count from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before his throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes and palm branches in their hands (Rev. 7: 9).

Many times I don't think I do. What about you?

Indeed, the One greater than Solomon has come. He is the One we serve as Christian scholars through our contributions to the broader arena of knowledge, through sharing our insights and research with a greater audience who can be strengthened through our efforts, through strengthening our disciplines by academic inquiry, through enhancing our teaching by scholarly investment and research and having new information to share with DBU students, and He is the one to whom we

seek to be faithful by using the gift of the mind faithfully to His pleasure and glory.

May the Queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba, not have to condemn us at the judgment for our own blindness of mind or hardness of heart in a failure to recognize who Jesus Christ really is in His wisdom, discernment, and breadth of mind and heart.

Conclusion: So, if God asked, "What do you want Me to do for you?" How would you answer?

Thank you.