



SHABBAT SERMON

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According to the official record, Solomon composed one thousand and five songs (I Kings 5:12). Presumably they were published in his day, read, sung or performed, and counted among his achievements, alongside his three thousand proverbs, and his discourses about trees and animals. But let us consider a Solomon nearing the end of his life. Despite the great beginning to his reign and the relationship he had established with God, his power and wealth have led him astray. That same official record will list his great achievements, his monumental building works, his enormous standing army, his fame amongst the nations, his many wives and political alliances. But how much of this would have been of interest to him any more. For after all, what does one wish to have preserved of one's life, what does one want to hand on to posterity? Perhaps his thoughts turned to his father David and his legacy of one hundred and fifty psalms – either composed by David, or edited by him or written in honour of him. What comparable creative expression could Solomon leave behind?

So let us imagine that he summoned his scribes and asked them to recite for him his one thousand and five songs, with a view to making a final edition of his collected works. The process took many weeks, with the gradual weeding out of materials that had become dated, were too much bound to specific events, or were simply disowned by the king as immature or of a lesser standard, or derivative (too much Egyptian influence perhaps) or simply no longer to his taste. Thus the numbers were reduced to a few hundred. But the king was not satisfied. True they were often clever or witty, well crafted with a fine feel for the Hebrew language. Some even contained newly invented words as part of his long-term aim to expand and refine its intellectual and philosophical vocabulary.

But somehow none of this satisfied him and he wondered what it was that he had missed in the selection? To his annoyance he found himself asking, what might David have done in his place? And the answer came very quickly. David would have wanted to expose himself, confess his sins, vent his anger against real and imagined foes, but above all, sing to his God. But Solomon was of a different temperament, more subtle, used to hiding behind his mantle of wisdom, cautious in his pronouncements, diplomatic in the complexity of his dealings. Not for him raw emotions. And yet, somehow he understood that beyond cleverness and subtlety of expression, beyond brilliant ideas and poetic craftsmanship, the only thing that might survive him would be, quite simply, the truth: the truth of his life, of his experience, and, like his father David, of his relationship with his God.

But here was his dilemma. For Solomon could no more expose himself in his writing than he could in his relationships. His was the art of indirection, of hints, of nuances, and so the truth, too, had to be expressed in this form if he was to be true to himself. So he returned to the reams of parchment and set about making a different selection, this time reducing it and reducing it to some quintessential collection, just a few chapters that somehow said it all for those who would take the trouble to try to understand it and its author.

For some reason he could not understand at first, he found himself turning to some materials he had written many years before, during the early expansion of courtly life, a development that was later condemned as the first step in its descent into decadence. He had written a masque, a kind of theatrical performance with words, movement, costumes and music. (Readers of Solomon's brief philosophical memoir, first published anonymously in Jerusalem under its original title 'I Kohelet', will recall his reference to his many male and female singers.) The masque was an ambitious piece that involved a large number of the ladies of the court who served as a chorus. The hero and heroine, dressed as a shepherd and shepherdess, were given comic lines as they tried to describe one another in the inflated language they thought might have been used in the court. Solomon himself made a grand entrance at the head of a great parade, seated in a beautifully decorated palanquin playing himself as some legendary king, escorted by magnificently arrayed soldiers. As a delicate contrast he composed and personally choreographed a dream sequence ballet conducted in front of a painted backdrop of a townscape. Some of the performance took place in the open air, against the background of the Judean hills, dressed for the occasion with artfully located flocks of selected white sheep. When performed at the right season, the scents of spring flowers added to the overall effect.

Even three thousand years ago, there were only so many basic plots. Solomon picked the classical: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl again, and developed it into an elaborate game of hide and seek. Since it fitted some stylistic experiments he was engaged in at the time, the story was told from the perspective of the girl.

No author ever realises the true extent and significance of his or her writings. For some reason, what Solomon had considered at the time as no more than a frivolous youthful concoction to entertain visiting potentates, suddenly spoke to him in a different way.

At first he laughed at the naivety of the girl he had created: her adolescent exuberance, her romantic longing for her handsome shepherd, her readiness to defy tradition and convention in her foolish dream of love. So why did he find himself reading and re-reading the two dream sequences? 'I sought him whom my soul loves, I sought him but I found him not.' Solomon was personally moved by her search through the streets, her brush with the watchmen, and her joy when she found her lover. But then he read the second dream, annoyed at the silly girl for denying her lover, then letting him get away. He joined her as she searched again through the streets: 'I sought him but did not find him, I called him, but he gave no answer.' He was shocked when she met the watchmen, the guardians of the city, who beat her, wounded her, stripped her, and he found his anger mounting till he realised with a start that it was only a story, a fiction of his own composition. Why had it moved him, what message was he hearing from that earlier Solomon, at the peak of his power?

'I sought him whom my soul loves, I sought him but I found him not.' Was that it? Was all of his life just a search for the one whom his soul loves, whether human or divine? Was everything else of no account? He knew that certainly as a philosopher, had he not written 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity?' But that was the truth of the mind, not of the heart. The mind sought reasons and meaning, the heart sought meeting and love. Was that to be his epitaph: 'I sought him but I found him not?'

Such speculations made Solomon uneasy. So much so that he abandoned the project entirely, and never completed editing the text. It was this rather disorganised version that his scribes entered formally into the royal archive, and this version survived, while all the rest of the one thousand and five songs, not to mention the three thousand proverbs, disappeared when the kingdom fell apart. Perhaps Solomon would be amused that so much has been invested in trying to understand a work he never managed to complete. But perhaps he would be grateful that something that inexplicably moved him, may still move us today.