



## More Lessons: Dangers of an Unguarded Heart (1 Kings 11:1-13)

*Notes: Week Nine*

### New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

#### 8. Solomon's Decline [11:1-43](#)

One final assessment of Solomon now appears. Unlike the earlier ones, this account lays bare the faults and frailties of this brilliant man. These failings affect the king himself, of course, but they affect the nation more. So far the people have certainly worked hard and have enjoyed the material success their leader's wisdom brings them. They seem to have remained faithful to the Lord, at least in part because of the presence of the temple. Like their king, Israel is riding a crest of power and influence previously unknown. To be sure, hints of problems appear in the text, yet such potential difficulties appear to be annoyances, not threats.

Unfortunately, the plot takes a tragic turn. Solomon and Israel have risen to great heights only to fall into idolatry, division, decay, and, ultimately, exile. The four episodes in [1 Kings 11](#) begin this sorry decline. Each stage of Israel's deterioration is made all the more regrettable because of its avoidability. Covenant faithfulness would have allowed the covenant people blessing and safety, but their disobedience leaves a just God no alternative except to punish. Solomon's sin may have begun small. It may have developed in stages over time. However it started, however it was fueled, it began a national disintegration that was at times slowed but never completely halted.

#### (1) Solomon's Idolatry [11:1-13](#)

[11:1-3](#) After the glowing report in [10:14-29](#), these verses are the literary equivalent of a blow to the face. Despite all his obvious strengths, the king has a very evident weakness for women, especially foreign women. Besides Pharaoh's daughter, he loves Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women. Altogether he accumulates "seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines." Like the marriage to the Egyptian princess, most of these unions probably were politically motivated. Such linking of nations was intended to foster peaceful relations between normally combative countries. In a straightforward secular kingdom this practice would be good politics.

There are several problems, however, with what Solomon has done. First, he has disobeyed Moses' law for marriage, which constitutes a breach of the agreement Solomon makes with God in [1 Kgs 3:1-14](#); [6:11-13](#); and [9:1-9](#). Moses says in [Deut 7:3-4](#) and [Exod 34:15-16](#) that Israelites must not intermarry with noncovenant nations. Why? Because God says "they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods" ([Deut 7:4](#)). Judgment will then result. Second, Solomon has broken Moses' commands for kings (cf. [Deut 17:14-20](#)). Moses explicitly says, "He must not take many wives or his heart will be led astray" ([Deut 17:17](#)). Indeed, all of Moses' dire predictions come true in Solomon's case. His wives do lure him into idolatry. Solomon, however, is responsible for his own actions. He knows better but does not act on this knowledge.

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1. Paul R. House, *New American Commentary – Volume 8: 1, 2 Kings*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 165-167.

Third, Solomon has evidently fallen into the emotional trap of wanting to be like pagan kings. Moses counsels kings to remain as close to the people as possible ([Deut 17:14–20](#)). Kings who become too wealthy desire possessions and women more than they desire to serve God and the people, Moses warns ([Deut 17:14–20](#)). Solomon has clearly forgotten this admonition. He has competed with other kings and queens in wisdom and splendor and has won (cf. [1 Kgs 4:29–34](#); [10:1–13](#), [23–25](#)). These victories are gifts from God ([1 Kgs 3:10–15](#)). Competing in wives is outside of God's will and promise to bless, though, so the process can have no positive result.

**[11:4–8](#)** What occurs in this passage must have sickened the author of 1, 2 Kings and any original readers committed to the Lord. In Solomon's old age his wives influence his devotion to God, and he worships "other gods." How did this outrage occur? "His heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been." In other words, his heart was no longer wholly God's. The Lord had ceased to be the major factor in his life. Once this shift occurred, the next steps into idolatry became more natural and easier to accept.

Other than their link to his wives, Solomon's choice of gods makes no sense. In the ancient world polytheists tended to worship the gods of nations who had conquered their armies or at least the gods of countries more powerful than their own. Ironically, Solomon worships the gods of people he has conquered and already controls. What could he possibly gain from such activity? The whole episode makes no sense, just as idolatry itself makes no sense.

Who were these gods Solomon worshiped? The fertility goddess Ashtoreth had been a stumbling block to the Israelites since they arrived in Canaan ([Judg 2:13](#)). Perhaps it is fitting for Solomon to worship a sex goddess. Molech was an astral deity ([Zeph 1:5](#)) to whom human sacrifices were offered ([Lev 20:2–5](#); [2 Kgs 23:10](#); [Lev 18:21](#); [Jer 32:35](#)). Chemosh, like Molech, probably was also an astral god. Besides these deities, Solomon probably worshiped other gods as well ([1 Kgs 11:8](#)). Thus, the miraculously blessed heir of David, leader of the covenant people, has broken the most fundamental command of all: "You shall have no other gods before me" ([Exod 20:3](#)).

**[11:9–13](#)** Of all the sins recorded in Scripture, God takes idolatry the most seriously, for no other sin has the capability of wrecking the entire covenant by itself. When this sin is committed, God acts swiftly, justly, and redemptively, as Israel discovers in [Exodus 32–34](#); [Numbers 20](#); and the entire Book of Judges. It is natural, then, to read that God "became angry with Solomon." The Lord has revealed himself to Solomon, blessed him, and honored him. In return Solomon has turned his back on the Lord.

Therefore, God speaks to Solomon again. Unlike [1 Kgs 3:1–15](#); [6:11–13](#); and [9:1–19](#), however, the Lord now censures Solomon. God says, "Since this is your attitude ... I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates." This declaration reminds readers of [1 Sam 13:13–14](#), where Saul's sin leads Samuel to tell Saul his kingdom will not endure, for "the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command" ([13:14](#)). Whereas David ascended to power because of Saul's power, now David's son has sinned in a way that causes God to limit the kingdom of David's descendants.

Only one thing keeps Solomon on the throne at all, and that is the promise the Lord made to David in [2 Sam 7:1–17](#). For David's sake the Lord allows Solomon to remain in power. Further, for David's sake his descendants will continue to rule a fragment of the covenant nation. Despite these concessions to David's memory, however, the punishment is clear, irrevocable, and stunning. Solomon's sin will soon cause the nation to crash from the heights it has achieved. His idolatry will lead to idolatry among the people. Israel has begun the long road to exile, though they do not know yet that their actions entail such consequences.

## Understanding the Bible Commentary Series<sup>2</sup>

### 16. Solomon's Apostasy ([1 Kgs. 11:1-13](#))

While stopping short of questioning his basic commitment, and certainly allowing that he was blessed by God in a tremendous way, our authors have hinted throughout [1 Kings 1-10](#) that all is not well with Solomon's heart (e.g., [3:1-3](#); [4:26, 28](#); [5:14](#); [6:38-7:1](#)). The prayer of [8:22-53](#) and God's response in [9:1-9](#) have, however, made clear both the importance of keeping the law and the consequences of disobedience; read in this context, [9:10-10:29](#) have sounded ominously like the climbing of the mountain just before the fall. That fall is now reported as the authors, returning to the marriage/worship theme of [3:1-3](#), come out in open critique of Solomon and describe the inevitable consequences of all that has gone before. His sins have found him out, and they have led him to apostasy.

[11:1-8](#) / Solomon loved the LORD ([3:3](#)). In spite of the LORD's own warning about the dangers of intermarriage with foreigners ([Deut. 7:3-4](#)), however, he also **loved ... Pharaoh's daughter** (Hb. *'hb*, [v. 1-2](#)) and many other women besides: he **held fast to them** (*dbq*, [v. 2](#)). The use of both verbs is to be understood in terms of their appearance in Deuteronomy ([6:5](#); [10:12, 20](#); [11:1, 22](#); [13:4](#); [30:20](#)), where they speak of unswerving human loyalty to God. The Israelite was to love the LORD wholeheartedly ([Deut. 6:5](#)). But Solomon's **heart** was divided ([v. 4](#)); he was a man unable to practice his own advice to his subjects ([8:61](#)). And in spite of his pious hope that God would always turn Israelite hearts towards God ([1 Kgs. 8:58](#)), we read that in his old age, the king's wives **turned his heart** in the opposite direction—**after other gods** ([v. 4](#)). The threat implied in much of Solomon's life story to this point now becomes a full-blown reality, and hints of impropriety become direct accusation: **Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD** ([v. 6](#)). He has ceased to be like **David his father** ([vv. 11:4, 6](#)) who, whatever his other faults may have been, certainly never worshiped other gods. Solomon not only worships them, he builds sanctuaries for them on the Mount of Olives (the **hill east of Jerusalem**, [v. 7](#)) and elsewhere that rival the temple (**He did the same for all**, [v. 8](#)). His "turning away" is truly spectacular.

[11:9-13](#) / It comes as no surprise to readers of Kings to find God becoming **angry** with Solomon because of his apostasy ([v. 9](#)) or announcing that **the kingdom** is going to be torn **away** from him ([v. 11](#)). That is what [2:4](#), [8:25](#), and [9:4-5](#) have led us to expect. Those who have read Samuel before Kings, on the other hand, have long been living with something of a tension in regard to these descriptions of the divine promise to David. Is the continuance of the Davidic dynasty really conditional upon obedience? Or rather, will the wrongs of David's successors in the end be punished with measures other than the deprivation of dominion suffered by Saul (cf. [2 Sam. 7:11-16](#))? [First Kings 11:11](#) only adds to this second reader's sense of puzzlement, because it so obviously recalls Samuel's words to Saul in [1 Samuel 15:28](#), thus correlating Saul with Solomon. [First Kings 11:12](#) does little to help, except for the solace it offers in drawing the first reader now into the sense of confusion. The implicit threat of [2:4](#), etc., is unexpectedly mitigated: **I will not do it during your lifetime**. And what of [verse 13](#)? Here it is no longer the **whole kingdom** that is jeopardized by disobedience but only eleven of its tribes. **One tribe** remains out of grace, **for the sake of David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen**. This is more than readers of Kings (or indeed Solomon), with their knowledge only of law, had any right to expect; but it is certainly less than the readers of [2 Samuel 7](#), with their deeper convictions about grace, might have anticipated. Everyone ends up surprised, standing unexpectedly on middle ground somewhere between rigid law and boundless grace. This is, indeed, where we shall be standing for much of the remainder of the book: one tribe (Judah) will remain due to God's grace, "for the sake of David," for a very long time (cf. [1 Kgs. 15:4](#); [2 Kgs. 8:19](#)). Eventually, law will appear to prevail ([2 Kgs. 24-25](#)); but we shall return to this topic in a moment.

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2. Iain W. Provan, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series – 1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "16. Solomon's Apostasy (1 Kgs. 11:1-13)".

## Additional Notes

**11:3 / Seven hundred wives ... three hundred concubines:** Not for the first time in the Solomon story (cf., e.g., [4:26](#)), we may suspect that the number (a round 1000) is not meant to be taken literally. The point is that everything Solomon did, he did in a big way! Song [Sol. 6:8-9](#) contrasts the one true love of the king (Pharaoh's daughter? cf. V Sasson, "King Solomon and the Dark Lady in the Song of Songs," *VT* 39 [1989], pp. 407-14) with his 60 queens and 80 concubines—a more modest number, though not in itself unimpressive, particularly when combined with "virgins beyond number."

**11:5 / Molech:** The *NIV* changes the *MT*'s *milkôm* here and in [11:33](#) and [2 Kgs. 23:13](#) so as to make the text refer instead to the **Molech** of [11:7](#) and [2 Kgs. 23:10](#). This is an unusual and implausible variation on a popular scholarly theme, which is that **Molech** is a corrupt form of Milcom—itsself an argument with little to commend it (how is it that both forms are found in the text of Kings on two separate occasions?). We certainly cannot assume that the same god is meant just because the same people worship him. Two different gods are, in fact, described; or, as the text puts it, two "detested things" (Hb. *šiqquš*), avoiding even the word "god" lest they be thought to have anything in common with Israel's God. See further J. Day, *Molech: A God of Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, *UCOP* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 31-33.

**11:6 / Solomon did evil:** Solomon's apostasy is only the first of many in Kings, and we find in this text many themes that recur throughout the book. Individual kings are characteristically assessed in the story that follows in terms of whether they "did what was right" or **did evil** in the eyes of the LORD (e.g., [1 Kgs. 15:11](#), [26](#), [34](#)); and Judean kings are said to be like **David** or not (e.g., [1 Kgs. 15:3](#), [11](#)). The worship of other gods and the existence of high places lie at the very heart of the authors' concern (e.g., [1 Kgs. 14:23](#); [15:14](#); [16:31-33](#); [22:43](#)).