

Views from the Pews: The wisdom of Solomon

In 1 Kings 3 we read the story of how God gave Solomon a uniquely wise and discerning mind. Soon, Solomon was faced with making a judgement between two women who came before him with a bitter dispute. They shared a house, and both had recently given birth. One of the babies died in the night, and both women claimed to be the mother of the remaining, living child. Solomon listened carefully to the two of them arguing in front of him. Eventually he called for a sword, and proposed to cut the living baby into two and give half each to the squabbling women. He predicted, correctly, that such a test would immediately cause the false mother to betray herself. How did he know that?

Solomon did not know anything about genes, but he lived in a culture fully aware of the inheritance of family characters. Why else would Moses have commanded that “ if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother” (Mark 12:19)? Biology can now explain what people of that time knew without understanding why: a man’s genes pass some of his identity onto his descendants after his death.

In Hebrew society, the primary function of a woman was to provide sons and grandsons for her husband, and a woman surrounded by many healthy children enjoyed high social esteem. Conversely, a woman who lost a child, especially if it was her only son, was rejected as a social disgrace. Solomon perceived that the false mother would know she had no family responsibility for the baby’s survival, and would rather see the baby denied to both of them than see her rival get the credit attached to motherhood.

Therefore, Solomon guessed that the real mother would choose an immediate protest to save her baby’s life, even at the cost of giving up her claim over it. Her instant response to the threat of Solomon’s sword was an unconscious demonstration of how inborn instinct strongly affects apparently conscious human decisions, especially in an emergency. It was as powerful a reaction as that of any cornered she-bear fiercely defending her cubs; she was ensuring that the baby carried part of her family’s genetic legacy into future generations.

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