

NOTES ON 1 KINGS 3:5-12

Richard D. Weis

The dialogue between God and Solomon that makes up this passage occurs in the context of Solomon offering his usual worship of God at the altar in Gibeon. The prayer is well-known for presenting an ideal for kingship in that when God offers Solomon anything he wants, Solomon eschews a request for power and wealth in favor of asking for the wisdom, the discernment, to govern the people well.

1 Kings belongs to the Deuteronomistic History, a work of theology in narrative form including Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. It was first composed in the late 7th century B.C.E. after the northern kingdom of Israel had been wiped out, and the southern kingdom of Judah was nearly overcome. It was then revised during the period of the exile after Judah had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Obviously, the respective monarchies of north and south had failed in their governance of the kingdoms in their care. As part of its theological critique of the practice of monarchy – the practice of national governance really, the Deuteronomistic History offers this ideal of the essential capacity for governing in v 9: “an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”

The indispensable expression at the heart of this ideal is “to discern between good and evil.” It’s easy to assume we know what this means, but the meaning of the underlying Hebrew is probably not what we mean in American English by “good and evil,” and that makes a huge difference. When we say “good and evil,” we immediately think in terms of morality. In our language “good” means morally good, and “evil” means morally bad. But the Old Testament was not written in English, but in Hebrew.

In Hebrew the word translated here as “good” is tov, and while it sometimes can refer to moral goodness, that’s not its fundamental idea. Tov is what the potter says when the pot comes off the wheel and it is fit for the purpose for which it is intended. It is well-formed and sound, beautiful even. Tov is first of all what works, what serves the purpose for which it is intended, but in addition to being functional something that is tov is also lovely, inspiring admiration. When God looks at creation and pronounces it tov, God is not commenting on the moral correctness of creation, but its usefulness, its functionality, and its beauty. Ra, here translated “evil,” is thus also not primarily a moral category, but also a functional category. What is ra is broken, does not serve the purpose for which it was intended, and is neither sound nor well-formed. It inspires no admiration for its usefulness and beauty.

In Genesis 1 tov especially is that which corresponds with God’s mishpat, justice, i.e., not fairness, but the ordering of the world that enables all of God’s creatures, including us, to thrive, to be whole, to be shalom. In the Hebrew Bible as a whole the king’s mishpat, the king’s ordering of the life of the nation, is to correspond to God’s mishpat so that all those under the king’s rule may thrive, may be shalom.

Thus when Solomon asks for the ability to distinguish between tov and ra, he is asking for the knowledge of the ways God has ordered the world so that all its inhabitants thrive in order that Solomon may pattern his governance of the kingdom after God’s governance of the universe. Only if he knows this, can he order the society for which he is responsible in the ways necessary to promote the thriving of all the members of that society. The subsequent history of his reign and what happened afterward suggests that Solomon did not actually govern in this way, but governed more for the greater glory and benefit of Solomon than of his kingdom. Nevertheless, the prayer’s ideal of good governance, contained in his request for the capacity to see the ways to order society that promote the well-being and thriving of all, remains as a basis for reflection on and critique of contemporary governance even today.