A Mom's Heart

1 Kings 3:16-27

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These are all realistic elements from ancient society, and any blame that may be intended remains implicit in the story itself. The inescapable point of the whole story is its model of true motherhood: "Give her the baby, and by no means kill him; she is his mother!" In her speech to the king, the first woman expresses her grief at two of her profession's special sorrows. She has a child; it has no father, but she will love it dearly'.

I. Her Heart Beats

a. **Harlots**

i. **Harlots-** woman occasionally or professionally committing fornication, **prostitute, harlot**

1. because the common baseness of a life of prostitution forms the background for contrasting displays of self-sacrificing love and heartless cruelty
2. Although prostitution is disdained and condemned, some OT passages are unabashed in reporting a resort to prostitutes. Both secular and cultic prostitution were widespread in the ancient Near East. From a moral and sociological point of view, there was nothing that was worthy of praise in this institution. Ancient prostitutes were generally slaves, daughters who had been sold by their own parents. Otherwise they were poor women who had never had an opportunity to marry, or who had lost their husbands. The normal expectation for a woman was to be married and live in her husband's house, bearing his children. Women who had to support themselves by yielding to the lust of strangers, and whose children were destined to grow up as bastards and paupers, were wretched and altogether to be pitied.

ii. While no one else was there and sleeping

1. It is important that no “stranger,” i.e., client, had been there, for then he might have killed the baby.

b. Both had newborns
c. One Slept on the baby
    i. One woman quite carelessly smothers her child in the night, then switches babies while her colleague sleeps
d. One stole another’s baby
    i. She has to hear the taunts of the other woman, chiding her for sloth and carelessness in killing her child, when all the while it is that woman’s child that has been killed. It is bad enough to have to give up one’s little baby in death, but it is unthinkable that she should have to go on living in the same house with the evil woman who stole her baby, and now holds it fast in her bosom.

II. Her Heart Knows

a. When I looked at him **carefully**
    i. Carefully - examine closely (with to look out for)
    ii. Not her born son
        1. “He was not my son, the one whom I had borne”: a mother knows her own; since the second woman fully understood that the first woman would not be fooled, brazenness is added to knavery in her expectation that a judge will believe her denials and give that woman’s baby to her
b. King is Qualified
    i. Divide the Baby
        1. He decides to try the case based on the women’s maternal instincts and human compassion
        2. Solomon’s wisdom lay in his use of his God-given discerning mind. He saw that the threat of death to the child would reveal the true mother’s feelings in an urgent appeal against it

III. Her Heart’s Burns

a. Deeply **Stirred-** to **grow excited, hot burning**
    i. The real mother, who has already cared enough for her child to plead her case before the king, acts out of “compassion for her son.” She begs Solomon to give the baby to the other woman. In startling contrast the careless, dishonest woman is willing to take her “half.”

Her cruelty has been revealed, just as the other mother's kindness has emerged.

ii. *her bowels were fermented for her son* (*cf.* Gen. 43:30), translating the sequence with "yearned upon/after her

iii. "Her maternal instincts were stirred": the verb כמר, "grow hot," "get excited," occurs only in the niph and, except in Lam 5:10, where "skin" is the subject, it always has the subject רחמים (Gen 43:30, Hos 11:8, and here); the primary meaning of רחם is "womb" and the pl. means "maternal compassion."

b. Willing to put life of child over her desire

i. Faced with the ultimate horror of actually seeing her own child killed, she blurts out her plea that her wicked partner be given her way. The choice now is between the claim of motherhood and the claim of life itself! Thus the true mother finds herself willing to suffer even more in order to save her child's life, to lose her child in order to let it live

c. Unqualified chooses death over life of son

i. In her degradation and deprivation, the mother of the living child shows the lofty flight of the human spirit, the spirit of selfgiving sacrifice on behalf of one beloved. The other harlot typifies the meanness of which the human spirit is capable. She can do nothing but hate, hate, hate, and comes up empty in the end

Word Studies

Harlots - woman occasionally or professionally committing fornication, **prostitute, harlot**[1]

Carefully - examine closely

Stirred – Hot, grow excited

Commentary Studies

3:16–23 This story is one of the best known in the whole Bible. Having been promised wisdom, Solomon will now have this wisdom tested. Israel's kings were sometimes called upon to settle particularly hard cases (2 Sam 12:1–6; 14:1–11), and this situation is quite perplexing. Two prostitutes[12] have had babies. One woman quite carelessly smothers her child in the night, then switches babies while her colleague sleeps. Now both women claim the living child as their own. Without other witnesses or evidence, Solomon must devise some way to solve the case. Will God's promised sagacity materialize? Will Solomon wilt under this newly imposed pressure?

3:24–28 The king quickly produces his own evidence. He decides to try the case based on the women's maternal instincts and human compassion. Calling for a sword, he orders the child cut into halves, with each woman getting an equal share. The real mother, who has already cared enough for her child to plead her case before the king, acts out of "compassion for her son." She begs Solomon to give the baby to the other woman. In startling contrast the careless, dishonest woman is willing to take her "half." Her cruelty has been revealed, just as the other mother's kindness has emerged.

Solomon can now give a just verdict. The compassionate woman is given the child. He has the insight to see the difference between just and unjust persons even when he has no corroborating evidence. When this verdict becomes public knowledge, the nation was in awe of (lit., "feared") the king. This comment reinforces the statement in 2:46 that the "kingdom is now firmly established in Solomon's hands." Most importantly, this respect stems from the

knowledge that wisdom like Solomon's can come only from God. Israel now understands, as does the reader, that "the wisdom of God is in his heart to do justice."[13] If so, the nation will flourish under his leadership. So far Solomon has been faithful to the God who has kept the promises made to the new king.[4]

The 'harlot' Rahab belonged to the same class. The story is told in an effective way, with a genuine feminine strain to it; there is a certain amount of repetitiousness, which the Grr5*her bowels were fermented for her son* (*cf.* Gen. 43:30), and so correctly for the first noun A67translating the sequence with "yearned upon/after her son." The development of meaning of that noun appears in 'bowels of mercy,' Lk. 1:78, Col. 3:12, and finally it came to mean 'compassion.' See I. Eitan's study of the word in *JB8* 1934, 269 ff. A nice point of language appears in the same v., when the real mother varies the usual word for 'child,' *yèled*, by using another, *yālûd*, which may be translated with the etymologically equivalent 'bairn.' **18.** *The third day: i.e.*, 'the day after the morrow.' **21.** Stade would delete one or the other of the two cases of *in the morning*, but the language is that of feminine repetitiousness. **26, 27.** Omit, with OGrr9*the*) *living* (*baby*), *bis*; the addition was due to the erroneous notion that the dead baby also had been brought into court, leading to the absurd development in Josephus and Lucian that the king commanded the halving of both the living and the dead child, equal parts for each woman; this humorous expansion might be based on the law in Ex. 21:35. **28.** The story concludes with the impression made upon the people: *All Israel heard of the verdict that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, for they saw that divine wisdom was in him for executing justice*. As observed above, it is a judicial wisdom that is ascribed to Solomon in these early stories, not the philosophy of later legend. Indeed the corresponding word for Heb10*ḥokmāh*, in the Arabic *ḥukm* means a judicial judgment. For justice as the primary royal virtue see Ps. 72:1ff., and Gunkel's Comm11[12]

As related in our anecdote, the two harlots could have lived in any age and any country; it is only the ending that makes it Israelite. In spite of this ending, the king could be anyone. The situation is as common as human life itself. Nevertheless, and in spite of its striking generality, the anecdote is so touchingly realistic in its portrayal of human pathos that every reader has to identify with it. The harlots are not here to be ridiculed, but to be pitied and wept over. In her degradation and deprivation, the mother of the living child shows the lofty flight of the human spirit, the spirit of selfgiving sacrifice on behalf of one beloved. The other harlot typifies the meanness of which the human spirit is capable. She can do nothing but hate, hate, hate, and comes up empty in the end. I have called this "Judgment for an abused harlot." It is not really about two harlots, though there are two harlots in the story; it is about the harlot whose child was stolen from her, who ventures to appeal to the king, declaring herself willing to sacrifice her child to save him. If we read the text attentively we will discover how the structural outline illumines this intent. The basic structure is strikingly simple: (1) dispute; (2) resolution. The king does not do anything in part 1; on the other hand, the second harlot does nothing except contradict the first harlot in v 22a. Thus it is the first harlot who has the word from v 17 to v 21, and all that the reader needs to know about the case is stated here. The problem is, does this woman speak the truth, or has she stolen the other woman's baby and made up this story because that woman has snatched it back? This is the puzzle with which the reader (and the king) is left, as well as the central point of tension. In part 2 it is the king who holds center stage. He first announces his inability to find the truth in what the two women are telling him, then prepares to divide the living baby in two. One notes that the king does not tentatively propose this test to the two women, for they might think that he were teasing, or that he were offering a mere abstract possibility. No, they must be confronted with an emergency situation. They must be made to believe that he really will kill the baby in order to satisfy them both. Only in such a dire situation will the true mother plead to save the baby. So the sword is brought and the swordsman moves to do the king's command. It is then that the true mother cries out to give it to the other woman, while the second woman is saying, "Divide it!" Now the king has his answer; the true mother has been revealed.

Comment 16–22 "Two harlotrous women": this descriptive title, noun and adjective in the sing. or pl., occurs with some frequency in the OT; so also the adjective alone, taking the place of the full expression. Although prostitution is disdained and condemned, some OT passages are unabashed in reporting a resort to prostitutes. Both secular and cultic prostitution were widespread in the ancient Near East. From a moral and sociological point of view, there was

nothing that was worthy of praise in this institution. Ancient prostitutes were generally slaves, daughters who had been sold by their own parents. Otherwise they were poor women who had never had an opportunity to marry, or who had lost their husbands. The normal expectation for a woman was to be married and live in her husband's house, bearing his children. Women who had to support themselves by yielding to the lust of strangers, and whose children were destined to grow up as bastards and paupers, were wretched and altogether to be pitied. In our story, not only the one woman who had been aggrieved approached the king, but she and her adversary together. "They stood before him": they assumed an attitude of expectant waiting, subjecting themselves to his judgment; no mention is made of prostration (cf. 1:16), and we are to make no conclusion as to whether their social status prevented this, because the narrator may be omitting mention of it as an unimportant detail. "Please, my lord," בי אדני (cf. v 26): the simplest explanation of this striking idiom, which occurs fourteen times in the OT, is the one adopted by Gray (129) and Montgomery-Gehman (112) from A. M. Honeyman (JAOS [1944] 81–82) to the effect that בי is an elliptical imperative from the root אבה, "be willing." This would, however, be a feminine form, and in the Bible it is always a masculine "lord" or "Lord" (= God) who is addressed. Hence KB3, 117, follows L. Koehler and K. Marti (ZAW 36 [1916], 26–27, 246) and I. Lande, Formelhafte Wendungen der Umgangesprache im AT (1949) 16, in viewing it as an ellipsis for "Upon me, my lord, (come something too unpleasant to mention)." "We were together, without any stranger … only we two": this is offered as essential substantiation for the speaker's story. It is important that the two women were together in the house, for otherwise no one but the first woman could have killed the baby. It is important that no "stranger," i.e., client, had been there, for then he might have killed the baby. "This woman's son died one night when she lay upon him": no doubt by smothering, though it seems strange that the baby did not cry out; in any event, the first woman is telling this by logical deduction, for she had not been awake to witness it. "I got up in the morning … I took a good look at him in the morning": the Heb בקר "morning" is broad enough to refer to both the first crack of dawn and the somewhat later moment when it became light enough to look clearly at the dead baby. The story builds to a climax: first her baby was dead; next the baby was not her baby! "He was not my son, the one whom I had borne": a mother knows her own; since the second woman fully understood that the first woman would not be fooled, brazenness is added to knavery in her expectation that a judge will believe her denials and give that woman's baby to her. "No, but …," לא כי: because of the disjunctive accent over the second word, E. Nestle (ZAW 26 [1906] 163–64) proposes an unneeded emendation of the consonantal text. 23–28 "And the king said": to himself or to his advisors, but not to the two women, in spite of the LXX, which makes him address the women directly in v 23. "This one is saying … this one is saying": as if turning his head to look at each one separately. "They brought a sword before the king": this implies a swordsman to use the sword, for the king did not intend to wield it himself (cf. v 25). "Sever the live baby … and give …": address in the second person pl. implies that several men

would be involved in actually cutting the baby in two and handing the parts to the two women. “Her maternal instincts were stirred”: the verb כמר, “grow hot,” “get excited,” occurs only in the niph and, except in Lam 5:10, where “skin” is the subject, it always has the subject רחמים (Gen 43:30, Hos 11:8, and here); the primary meaning of רחם is “womb” and the pl. means “maternal compassion.” “While the other was saying …”: translating a participle by which the narrator intends to subordinate the role of the second woman. “Neither mine nor yours”: thus MT depicting the second woman as speaking to the first woman, but G “nor hers” implies that she is addressing the king. “And the king made response and said”: finding difficulty with ויען המלך ויאמר, E. Rupprecht (ZAW 88 [1976] 415–18) proposes an unnecessary emendation in the text; the root ענה does not necessarily imply a verbal utterance, such as would preclude “and said,” but has the basic meaning, “respond.” The two verbs are useful together because they tell us (1) that the king reacted and (2) that he spoke out to effectuate his reaction. “Give her the baby … she is his mother”: the king’s first utterance is a command; his second is a formal declaration, identifying which of the two women is actually telling the truth. “And all Israel heard …”: for the political well-being of the realm, it is necessary that the whole populace hear about what its king has done; if he will do this for two of his most despised subjects, he will surely do it for “all Israel.” “They revered the king”: ויראו, misspelled as if from the root ראה, under the influence of ראו, means to hold in dread, hence to honor, respect, and revere. “Divine wisdom,” חכמת אלהים: lit., “the wisdom of/ from God.” This expression does not occur elsewhere in the OT, but the Bible does have the idea that wisdom proceeds from God (cf. Prov 8:22–31). In our anecdote the king is said to be like God because he has a godlike wisdom and tearfulness. “For performing justice”: משפט is a judicial decree, a case to be judged, the act of judging, or a case that has received judicial attention. This concluding phrase is precisely what our redactor, Dtr, would be looking for in illustrating the operation of God’s gift at Gibeon, “a receptive heart for judging thy people, discriminating between good and evil” (v 9).

Explanation The fact that the two mothers were prostitutes is important in this story (1) because it shows how the wise king would act on behalf of the very lowest of his subjects, (2) because a house of prostitution, with no man present to adjudicate a dispute, is a central premise to the narrative, and (3) because the common baseness of a life of prostitution forms the background for contrasting displays of self-sacrificing love and heartless cruelty. Otherwise the story does not moralize about prostitution. Nor does it moralize about the wretched behavior of the woman who stole the other woman’s baby, lied about it to the king, and was glad to see the live baby’s blood gush out rather than allow its true mother to have it. Nor, once again, does this story moralize about the summary execution of a helpless innocent (we are not to guess whether the king would have gone ahead with the execution if the true mother had not made her offer!). These are all realistic elements from ancient society, and any blame that may be intended remains implicit in the story itself. The inescapable point of the whole story is

its model of true motherhood: “Give her the baby, and by no means kill him; she is his mother!” In her speech to the king, the first woman expresses her grief at two of her profession’s special sorrows. She has a child; it has no father, but she will love it dearly’. The child is taken from her, she thinks, by death, God’s mysterious and awful act. As she weeps in submission to God’s will, she discovers a more dreadful terror: this is not her baby! Where is her baby then? The other woman has it, and now claims that it is hers. First the true mother was bereaved (so she thought), but now she had been robbed! She has to hear the taunts of the other woman, chiding her for sloth and carelessness in killing her child, when all the while it is that woman’s child that has been killed. It is bad enough to have to give up one’s little baby in death, but it is unthinkable that she should have to go on living in the same house with the evil woman who stole her baby, and now holds it fast in her bosom. Better to be bereaved by God than to be robbed by such a companion! This true mother makes her appeal to the king, and naturally everything she says is contradicted. The king does not seem to be able to decide who is telling the truth. How shocked the mother is when she hears him call for a sword and order the baby—her precious child—hewn in two! Faced with the ultimate horror of actually seeing her own child killed, she blurts out her plea that her wicked partner be given her way. The choice now is between the claim of motherhood and the claim of life itself! Thus the true mother finds herself willing to suffer even more in order to save her child’s life, to lose her child in order to let it live. Here is substance, no doubt, for many a Mother’s Day service, but we would impoverish ourselves if we did not recognize that it offers also a model for all kinds of human interrelations. Parents to children, husbands and wives to each other, brothers and sisters to each other, any person in close relationship to another, need to learn the danger of stifling another’s life and spiritual growth by holding it too close to oneself. Important as the various human relationships may be, the survival and the integrity of the person being held in these relationships must always come first. Unmistakably, the anecdote’s central concern is about the wise king. After all, it is his cryptic order for execution that drives the true mother to disclose herself, and this is held up in the conclusion (v 28) as evidence for his “godlike” wisdom. This is, however, of little spiritual value for modern readers. We do not, after all, know this king, and we are not his subjects. The king’s role is important to us only if we take it as an example for all who are called upon to render judgment on human motivations. These may be ministers, teachers, policemen, judges, psychologists; or they may be just anyone, professional or nonprofessional, on whom this responsibility comes to be placed. There are times when each may be called upon to judge, perhaps in drastic confrontation, who is “the true mother.”

Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, 2nd ed, vol. 12, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Inc, 2003), 58–62.