

Kohelet: A Map to Eden
An Intertextual Journey





David Curwin

KOHELET

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.....

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Aleph Beta Press
Maggid Books

Kohelet: A Map to Eden
An Intertextual Journey
First Edition, 2023

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

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Aleph Beta Press
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The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-611-1, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

In loving memory of my father,

Jack Ullmann z"l

*A man of uprightness and immense generosity,
who was thoughtful, with a deep love of Torah.
He appreciated the wisdom of the eternal truths contained
within the beautiful verses of the book of Kohelet.*

Yehi Zikhro Barukh



*In honor of Rabbi Fohrman
and the Aleph Beta team*

*Whose love for God and passion for the Torah
kindles the hearts of the faithful
and renews all of God's people in the fire of His love.*

וְהִלְכוּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לָבוֹ
וְנִעְלָה אֶל-הַר-ה' וְאֶל-בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב
וַיִּזְרְנוּ מִדְרָכָיו וְנִלְכָה בְּאֲרָחֹתָיו
כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וּדְבַר-ה' מִירוּשָׁלַם:

(Micah 4:2)



:

Author's Dedication

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of my father

Dr. Richard Curwin

(1944–2018)

*We didn't get to celebrate its publication together,
but your decades of support and wisdom
motivated me to take on the project and inspired me to finish.*



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Introduction

Ever since I was young, I loved following along with the yearly reading cycle of books of the Tanakh. However, the book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) was probably the least compelling. Longer than any other book ritually read, and with no story to follow, many repetitive phrases and a generally gloomy atmosphere, I typically tuned out when it was chanted on the festival of Sukkot.

However, I recently discovered the treasure of intertextual study, primarily through the teachings of Rabbi David Fohrman and his staff at Aleph Beta, a website and resource center for Jewish learning. In this method, two distinct biblical texts are compared, and the language and themes common to both help shed light on each. After another Sukkot – and another reading of *Kohelet* where I felt disconnected from the text – I came home and told myself there must be something more to be found here. Perhaps the book is connected to another biblical text. While rereading *Kohelet*, without the aid of a computerized search tool, or even a concordance, I sensed a strong connection to the first chapters of *Bereshit*. The more I looked, the more I found.

Introduction

This work is the fruit of that study. It took me all over the Tanakh, to places I never expected to reach. I hope you, the reader, will enjoy the journey as much as I have.

A couple of notes to help you along the way:

Intertextual study requires a sensitivity to the original Hebrew text. As is obvious by now, I have authored this book in English, despite the challenges involved. While most of the translated verses are based on *The Koren Tanakh – Magerman Edition*, I have frequently modified the translation, occasionally borrowing phrases from other published translations (see Bibliography). To better reflect the Hebrew allusions necessary to understand the connections between different texts, I have often chosen a translation that emphasizes literalness over clarity.

Although anglicized terms for books and names might be more familiar to some readers, due to the focus on linguistic messages found in the words of the text, I have used transliterations from the original Hebrew. For example, the words *Kohelet* and *Hevel* reflect the intent of the biblical text much more than do Ecclesiastes and Abel. For the convenience of those not familiar with the transliterated Hebrew terms used, I have provided a glossary at the end of the book.

Acknowledgments

Every book is the culmination of the author's education, experiences, and interactions with others. No work of writing is born in a vacuum. And yet, I feel that for this book, I am even more in need to acknowledge those who helped bring it to fruition. When the ideas presented here first came to me, I wasn't sure what to do with them. A class? An essay? Having never written a book, that seemed like a remote possibility. But with the help of those mentioned below, that dream became a reality.

First and foremost on this list is, without question, Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and lead scholar of Aleph Beta. I first encountered Rabbi Fohrman through his recorded classes and books. Later, I was privileged to attend his lectures in person. From his presentations, I developed an appreciation for biblical intertextuality (which formed the basis of this work). That in itself would have been sufficient to give thanks here. But I was so very fortunate to develop a personal relationship with him as well. This led to one of my first opportunities to present my theories about Kohelet, where Rabbi Fohrman gave me incredibly helpful feedback

Acknowledgments

and connected me with other scholars who provided additional insights. And yet, that still wasn't enough. He encouraged me to turn my thoughts into a book, and then made sure it happened by connecting me with the wonderful people at Koren Publishers, and working with them to see that the book would indeed be published. I really can't thank you enough. My wish for you, which would be a blessing for me and all lovers of Torah, is that you continue to "make many books" (Kohelet 12:12).

In addition to the scholars of Aleph Beta that Rabbi Fohrman introduced me to, I also presented my early ideas on Kohelet to the Friday night *ḥabura* on Pitum Haketoret in Efrat, led faithfully for years by Micah Gimpel. Participants in this *ḥabura* (myself included) don't go easy on any speaker, challenging their thesis from every direction. I knew that if my unconventional ideas about Kohelet passed their test of fire, I'd be in good shape with any future audience. I look forward to learning with all of them for many years to come.

Transforming the ideas in my head into a detailed book required inestimable hours of research, writing, and editing. By my nature, I constantly reach out to people, whether they know me or not, for advice and answers. I was fortunate to have such terrific people reading my requests, without whom no one would be reading this right now. For all their time and effort, I'd like to thank David Bar-Cohn, Avi Baumol, Yoel Bin-Nun, Erica Brown, Yuval Cherlow, Rafi Eis, Karyn Goldberger, Jonathan Grossman, Zvi Grumet, Malka Hubscher, Yoel Kortick, Seth Kosowsky, Steve Kowarsky, Nathan Laufer, Alex Maged, Simi Peters, Elhanan Samet, Ami Silver, Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, Avraham Stav, Rivky Stern, Yael Unterman, Elisheva Urbas, Barry Waldman, and Jonathan Wiesen. A special thanks goes to my friend and mentor, Jeffrey Saks, who always made sure I was heading in the right direction.

The document was first edited by Deena Nataf and fact-checked by David Mishkin. They transformed the writings of an

enthusiastic layman into a professional manuscript. Reading the book after they worked on it gave me the confidence that it should be published and shared with the world.

And when it finally came to publishing, Koren was my highest aspiration. I've been a huge fan ever since I first acquired their Tanakh and siddur decades ago. We Hebraicized our name to "Koren" in Hebrew when moving to Israel – while the primary factor was its similarity to Curwin, the prestige of Koren surely inspired me as well. Watching Koren, and its imprint Maggid Books, become the premier publishers of Torah content over the past few years has been incredibly satisfying, and having my book published by them was everything I could have asked for. Thank you so much to Matthew Miller, Reuven Ziegler, Caryn Meltz, Ita Olesker, Tani Bayer, Aryeh Grossman, Rachelle Emanuel, and Dvora Rhein for your fulfillment of my dream and your contributions to the Jewish people.

As I get to the end of these acknowledgments, I am drawn to the more personal. My interest in studying Torah began in the Hebrew Academy of San Francisco and blossomed in my years of study at Yeshivat HaKibbutz HaDati in Ein Tzurim. While sadly neither of those institutions remains open today, their legacy will remain for generations. In particular, I must thank the teachers who opened the doors of studying Torah to me: Mordechai Rindenow, Mitch Heifetz, and Shimon Heksher ז"ל, David Bigman and Avia Hacoen. Likewise, without my eternal *havruta*, Raffi Lev-Tzion, I couldn't have ever considered a project like this.

My family was a source of great support throughout the years of this endeavor. Both my mother, Geri Curwin, and my in-laws, Rob and Sue Kaplan, always provided encouragement and assistance whenever I needed it. A special thanks must go to my brother and sister-in-law, Aaron and Sarete Kaplan, who for years have hosted us in their home for Shabbat *Hol HaMoed Sukkot*, when *Kohelet* is read. It was in their home, in 2017, when I first became

Acknowledgments

determined to investigate the message behind Kohelet. And again the following year, when I related my discoveries in their sukka, Aaron asked me a question I hadn't considered, "Why is Kohelet read on Sukkot?" which became an appendix to this book. I look forward to sharing this book in your sukka in the years to come.

Lastly, I must thank my children: Yocheved and Zev Baker, Betzalel Curwin, and Noa Curwin. I know that my obsession with Kohelet must have seemed a bit much to you, but you never stopped encouraging me, and pushing me forward. The book of Kohelet is occupied with the question of legacy, and I couldn't ask for a better legacy than the one I know you do and will provide.

And of course, just like everything else in my life, I couldn't have taken a single step in this project without my hand being held by my darling wife, Toby. You gave me the time for this, you ignored my concerns of imposter syndrome and insisted that I march forth, you gave me happy emojis for every piece of news about the book, and of course you were always willing to read anything I wanted your insightful eyes to inspect. Even if I don't show it as I should, you are a ceaseless inspiration to me. Kohelet put it best: "Enjoy life with the woman you love" (Kohelet 9:9). I am blessed that you are that woman.

Section One

Kohelet and Shlomo



Chapter 1

The Kohelet Narrative

Of the five *megillot* in the Tanakh, three describe historical events (Rut, Eikha and Esther) and one uses a narrative format to express poetic themes (Shir HaShirim). Only one, Kohelet, appears as an outlier, with no story being told. Rather, its author reflects on his life experiences, passing lessons on to the reader. In this regard, it is classified as wisdom literature, and can be compared to other biblical books of that genre such as Mishlei. But unlike Mishlei, Kohelet remains one of the *megillot*, all of which tell a story.

After a closer examination of Kohelet, I discovered that its lessons do indicate a story. The prose comprising the four main themes of the book – much of what we do in life is futile, searching for knowledge does not lead to a positive end, death is inevitable, and the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper – contains one recurring word: *hevel*.

Section One: Kohelet and Shlomo

Kohelet's themes and one-word motif seem to have been inspired by a much earlier story: that of Adam, the first man. Adam's story is the inspiration for this project.

In this book, we will examine the parallels between the lives of Shlomo and Adam. We will also see strong textual connections between those opening chapters of Bereshit that are germane to Adam and the verses in Kohelet. But our journey will not end there. A third story, the episode of the spies in the book of Bemidbar, also has thematic and literary parallels to the stories of Adam and Shlomo. Moreover, each narrative is immediately followed by stories of rebellion and disputes over the way to sacrifice to God: Kayin and Hevel, Korah, and Yarovam.

By comparing all three stories, a picture will begin to emerge of what led to the downfalls and subsequent rebellions described in each episode, and how they can be avoided in the future. The answers can be found in the laws of the Torah, which was given to help put us on the correct path. We will show how laws as disparate as tzitzit, the Yom Kippur service, and the *hak'hel* ceremony¹ play a role in preventing the pitfalls we will see repeated again and again. At times we will depart from the text of Kohelet for other biblical texts. But the messages of Kohelet – what leads to downfalls, how to avoid them, and how to return to a successful path – will remain the focus of this book throughout.

We will begin our exploration with Shlomo, the author of Kohelet.

1. A national assembly held every seven years, where the king reads from the Torah to the people. For more on *hak'hel*, see ch. 23.

WHO WAS KOHELET?

Kohelet² is traditionally ascribed to Shlomo son of David – the second king in the Davidic dynasty.³ An opinion in the Midrash⁴ claims that Shlomo wrote Shir HaShirim in his youth, Mishlei in middle age, and Kohelet at the end of his life.

Shlomo's name does not appear in Kohelet, but there are solid reasons to accept his identification with the narrator. First, the text opens with the statement, "The sayings of Kohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Kohelet 1:1). Several verses later, the narrative continues, "I, Kohelet, was king of Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12). Shlomo was David's son who was king in Jerusalem. He was also the only descendant of David to rule over all of Israel, for after his death the kingdom split in two, and the Davidic dynasty ruled only the southern kingdom of Yehuda.⁵

-
2. Kohelet is both the name of the book and the author's pseudonym. It appears to derive from the Hebrew root ק-ח-ל, "to gather" or "to assemble." Many theories have been proposed as to why the name Kohelet was chosen. We will present our theory in chapter 23.
 3. For the purposes of this work, I am not going to tackle the question of when the book of Kohelet was composed. Even the Sages, who universally agree that Shlomo was the author of Kohelet (along with Shir HaShirim and Mishlei, where Shlomo's name appears explicitly), write in Bava Batra 15a that generations later, "[King] Hizkiya and his colleagues composed" those books. (And even later, according to *Avot DeRabbi Natan* 1:4, the Men of the Great Assembly returned Kohelet to the biblical canon after properly explaining it.) Bin-Nun and Medan quote Prof. Moshe Ben Asher and Prof. Yehezkel Kaufmann as saying the late "sealing" of Kohelet can explain the frequent use of post-biblical Hebrew and the influence of Aramaic and Persian on the language of the book (Yoel Bin-Nun and Yaakov Medan, *Ani Kohelet* [Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017], 66). However, as we will continue to demonstrate, whoever edited the final work firmly linked the themes in Kohelet with the life of Shlomo. I follow the approach put forward by Micha Goodman, who writes that his method of interpretation is literary and synchronic, and he reads the way a book asks to be read. Kohelet asks to be read as the reflections of Shlomo (Micha Goodman, *HaNe'um HaAḥaron shel Moshe* [Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2014], 272).
 4. *Shir HaShirim Rabba* 1:10.
 5. Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp. ix–x.

Section One: Kohelet and Shlomo

While it is possible to claim that the above verses refer only to a descendant of David and not to Shlomo himself,⁶ the content of Kohelet portrays a king whose life matches only that of Shlomo. Kohelet describes a wise king, who built extensively. It recounts his wealth and his many wives. No king fits this better than Shlomo.

A BIOGRAPHY OF SHLOMO

A review of Shlomo's life will enable us to better understand the connection between Shlomo and Kohelet, particularly his relationship with God. Moreover, it will be invaluable for our exploration of both the book of Kohelet itself and the parallels to the other stories we will be examining further on.

Shlomo first appears in the book of Shmuel. He is the child of King David and Batsheva. From his very birth, he had a special relationship with God, even meriting having a special name bestowed on him by the Almighty: "The Lord loved him, and He sent a message through the prophet Natan, naming him Yedidya ("the Lord's beloved")" (Shmuel II 12:24–25).

He next appears many chapters later, in the first book of Melakhim. In chapter 1, we read of the struggle over who would succeed David as king. Shlomo's right to the throne was challenged

6. One argument against Shlomo's being the king referred to in Kohelet is 1:16, where Kohelet says he surpassed "anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before" him, **עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לְפָנָי עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם**. This would seem to indicate a king much later in the dynasty. However, the same phrasing is found in a description of Shlomo himself:

וַיְגַדֵּל יְהוָה אֶת־שְׁלֹמֹה לְמַעַלְהָ לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתֵּן עָלָיו הוֹד מְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־
הָיָה עַל־כָּל־מֶלֶךְ לְפָנָיו עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The Lord granted Shlomo supreme greatness in the eyes of all Israel and endowed him with a royal majesty beyond that of any king of Israel **before him**. (Divrei HaYamim I 29:25)

Just as the verse in Divrei HaYamim praises Shlomo over his predecessors, so too does the verse in Kohelet.

by his brother Adoniya, but in the end Shlomo was accepted as king by all.

In the following chapter, we read of David's deathbed instructions to Shlomo. He begins with this charge:

I am going the way of all the earth; you must be strong and prove yourself a man. You must keep the charge of the Lord your God, following His ways and keeping His laws and commandments, His rulings and decrees, as written in the teaching of Moshe. For then you will succeed in whatever you do, wherever you turn. For then, the Lord will fulfill the promise He made to me, saying: "If your sons keep to their path and walk before Me truly, with all their heart and all their soul, then no one of your lineage will be cut off from the throne of Israel." (Melakhim I 2:2-4)

This mission would follow Shlomo for the rest of his life – for good and for bad.

Chapter 3 of Melakhim I begins with praise of Shlomo mixed with implied criticism that he did not fully follow in the ways of his father:

Shlomo formed a marriage alliance with King Pharaoh of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter in marriage and brought her to the City of David until he had finished building his palace, the House of the Lord, and the wall around Jerusalem. But the people were sacrificing at the high shrines, for at that time a House for the Lord's name had not yet been built. Shlomo loved the Lord and followed the laws of his father David, but he still offered sacrifices and incense at the high shrines. (3:1-3)

Section One: Kohelet and Shlomo

SHLOMO RECEIVES THE GIFT OF WISDOM

Despite deviating to some degree from the ways of his father, his relationship with God remained intact, as evidenced by his famous dream where he asked for, and received, the gift of wisdom:

At Givon, the Lord appeared to Shlomo in a dream. And God said, “Ask – what shall I give you?” And Shlomo said, “You treated Your servant David, my father, with great kindness, for he walked before You in truth and in justice, and with a sincere heart toward You. And You have maintained this great kindness for him by granting him a son and heir to his throne, as is now the case. And now, O Lord, my God, You made Your servant king in my father David’s place, but I am a young boy; I have no experience as a leader.... Grant Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad, for who can judge this immense people of Yours?”

And it pleased the Lord that Shlomo had made this request, and God said to him, “Because this is the request you made – you did not ask for long life, or for wealth, or for the lives of your enemies, but you asked for wisdom to discern in judgment – I have fulfilled your words. Here, I am granting you a wise, discerning heart – no one like you has ever been before you, and no one like you will ever rise again after you. But what is more, I am granting you what you did not ask for, both wealth and honor – not a man among kings will compare to you for as long as you live. And if you follow in My ways and keep My laws and commandments, as your father David did, then I shall grant you long life.” (Melakhim I 3:5–14)

Like Adam and Hava in the Garden of Eden, Shlomo also sought the knowledge “to distinguish between good and bad [*ra*].”⁷ Their pursuit of that knowledge ended in disaster (which we will examine in depth in section two, chapter 11). Why, then, was God pleased with Shlomo’s request? The reason is that Shlomo wanted that knowledge in order to *serve* God, whereas Adam and Hava desired it in order to be *like* God (Bereshit 3:5, 22).⁸ They took the fruit of knowledge without permission, whereas Shlomo, recognizing that God is the source of knowledge, asked God for it. While in some respects this seemed like a repeat of the Garden story, it got off to a much more auspicious start.

God granted Shlomo wisdom and added what Shlomo did not request: wealth and glory. However, it is important to note that God’s last promise, regarding the length of Shlomo’s reign,⁹ was contingent on Shlomo’s following the “laws and commandments, as [his] father David did.”¹⁰

Immediately following the dream comes the story of the two women both claiming to be the mother of a baby, whom the king famously suggested splitting in two. In response, the people recognized his wisdom. But they did not merely comprehend that he was wise. They saw that his wisdom came from God, and was

7. The Hebrew word *ra* can mean both “evil” and “bad.” Throughout this book, I will translate it according to the context, even though neither translation fully captures the nuance of *ra*.

8. Avi Ehrlich, *Ancient Zionism: The Biblical Origins of the National Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 148.

9. Bin-Nun and Medan (*Ani Kohelet*, 127–128) maintain that the length of days in the prophecy refers not to Shlomo’s lifespan but to the endurance of his dynasty, as is mentioned explicitly in the Torah in its enumeration of the laws of kings: “He and his descendants will reign long in the midst of Israel” (Devarim 17:20). Since Shlomo did not follow the laws, he did not merit descendants who would have reigns as successful as his.

10. Rashi and Radak on Melakhim I 3:14.

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intended to assist him in his execution of justice: “When all of Israel heard about the case that the king had judged, they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was within him to do justice” (Melakhim I 3:28).

As we continue to read of the success of Shlomo’s reign, his wisdom is frequently recalled, but always with the added comment that God granted it to him:

God had granted wisdom to Shlomo, and deep understanding, and a mind as broad as the sand upon the seashore. Shlomo’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the peoples of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man.... He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. And he spoke of the trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls; and he spoke of the beasts and the birds and the creeping creatures and the fish. People from all nations came to hear Shlomo’s wisdom on behalf of all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (Melakhim I 5:9–14)

The Lord had endowed Shlomo with wisdom, as He had promised him. (5:26)

SHLOMO’S KINGDOM BEGINS TO RESEMBLE EGYPT

The following chapters in Melakhim discuss the building and consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem. As noted in Melakhim I 6:1, this project was the culmination of the process that began 480 years before, when Israel first left Egypt. As such, it should be viewed as the pinnacle of the relationship between God and Israel, with Shlomo finally providing God with a permanent home. The extensive description of the building of the Temple and all its vessels demonstrates the significance of this event.

However, mixed in with these verses are some statements that provide a different context to the state of Shlomo’s reign. For

example, in the middle of a section discussing the panels of the House (the Temple) and a description of the walls of the House, we find the following:

And the word of the Lord came to Shlomo: “Concerning this House that you are building: If you follow My laws and uphold My rulings and keep all My commandments by following them, then I will fulfill My promise through you, the promise that I made to your father David. I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites, and I will never abandon My people Israel.” (Melakhim I 6:11–13)

While God’s promise demonstrates His commitment to Israel, the conditional nature of the prophecy indicates that Shlomo needed to be reminded of his obligations while involved in this massive project.

Although at this point there are no signs of Shlomo’s abandoning God’s laws, rules, and commandments, the verses hint to dark parallels with a more sinister building project. A brief glimpse of this can be found earlier, at the beginning of the narrative describing the building: “King Shlomo began to levy forced labor upon all of Israel; the levy was thirty thousand men” (Melakhim I 5:27). The Hebrew word for “forced labor” and “levy” here is *mas*. It is the same word used to describe the forced labor imposed by Pharaoh on Israel in Egypt: “So they placed slave masters over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor [*mas*]; they built supply towns [*arei miskanot*] for Pharaoh: Pitom and Ramesses” (Shemot 1:11). But the comparison does not end there; it appears in the book of Melakhim again, more explicitly, a few chapters after the one cited above:

For these purposes, King Shlomo imposed forced labor [*mas*]: to build the House of the Lord and his own house,

Section One: Kohelet and Shlomo

the Milo, the wall of Jerusalem, Hatzor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had marched up and captured Gezer – he burned it with fire and killed the Canaanite inhabitants of the city – and he gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Shlomo’s wife. Shlomo built Gezer, lower Beit Horon, Baalat, and Tadmor in the wilderness in the region, as well as all of Shlomo’s supply towns [*arei miskenot*], chariot towns, and cavalry towns – all that Shlomo desired to build in Jerusalem, Lebanon, and throughout the land of his dominion. (Melakhim I 9:15–19)

Not only do we again see the forced labor (*mas*), but there is also mention of supply towns – *arei miskenot* – the same type that Israel was forced to build for Pharaoh in Egypt.

While three verses later the text does qualify the situation slightly by distinguishing between “forced labor” and “slavery”: “Shlomo never reduced the Israelites to slavery” (Melakhim I 9:22), the linguistic parallels to the Egyptian slavery (along with the actual political alliance with Egypt) cannot be ignored.

We saw how on the one hand there was major progress in the journey from Egypt to Jerusalem, yet on the other hand we see that Israel is once again facing many of the same forms of oppression from which they suffered in Egypt centuries before.

Shlomo’s long speech at the dedication of the Temple appears in Melakhim I, chapter 8. It mentions Egypt multiple times, all in the positive context of recalling God’s redemption of Israel:

“Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel,” he said, “who made a promise to my father David with His own mouth and has now fulfilled it with His own hand, saying: ‘From the day I brought My people, Israel, out of Egypt, I never chose a city from among all the tribes of Israel, to build a House

where My name would be; but I chose David to be over My people Israel.” (Melakhim I 8:15–16)

And there I have set a place for the Ark, which contains the covenant that the Lord made with our ancestors when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. (8:21)

For they are Your people and Your share, whom You brought out from Egypt, from the midst of the iron crucible. Let Your eyes be open to the plea of Your servant and the plea of Your people Israel; listen to them whenever they call out to You. For You set them apart from all the other peoples of the land as Your own share, as You promised through Moshe, Your servant, when You brought our ancestors out of Egypt, O Lord God. (8:51–53)

At this point in the story, the references to Egypt appear to be positive. In fact, it could be understood that this was the culmination of the process that began with the exodus from Egypt centuries before: Israel was fully liberated from all of its enemies, and even Pharaoh was subservient to Israel. Sadly, however, instead of learning the lessons of the Exodus, Israel had begun to emulate the Egyptian society they were instructed to reject.

SHLOMO'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD FRACTURED

In the following chapter of Melakhim, God appears to Shlomo in another dream. At first God confirmed that He had heard Shlomo's prayer and acknowledged that He would reside in the Temple forever. But again, as in Shlomo's last prophecy, God presented His commitment to Shlomo as conditional. Yet now cracks had begun to appear in the relationship between Shlomo and God,¹¹ for this time the prophecy even included a warning of what would happen if the commandments were not kept:

11. Yehuda Kiel, *Daat Mikra: Melakhim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), 201.

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As for you – if you walk before Me as your father David did, whole-heartedly and sincerely fulfilling all I have commanded you, and if you keep My laws and My rulings, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David: No one of your lineage will be cut off from the throne of Israel. But if you and your sons dare turn away from Me and do not keep the commandments and laws I set before you, and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the face of the land that I gave them, and I will cast away from My presence the House I have sanctified for My name; and Israel will become but a proverb and a byword among all the nations. And whoever passes by this once-exalted House will reel and hiss and say, “Why did the Lord do such a thing to this land and this House?” and they will answer, “Because they left the Lord, their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and they embraced other gods and worshipped them and served them. For this the Lord brought all this evil upon them.” (Melakhim I 9:4–9)

Here, too, there is mention of Egypt, but the connotation is reversed. Instead of reveling in the history of God’s redemption of Israel from Egypt as Shlomo did, God mentioned the redemption from Egypt as the justification for requiring Israel’s obedience, and the subsequent punishment if the laws were not kept.

We repeatedly see a parallel between Israel and Egypt. This is not surprising, because for the first time in Israel’s history a comparison between the two nations could be made. Israel had become a regional power, with massive building projects and a powerful monarch. In principle, these were all positive developments. A unified people, blessed with peace and prosperity, and a magnificent Temple for God had been the nation of Israel’s goals for centuries.

However, there were significant dangers if Israel became like Egypt. In fact, according to many opinions, the Torah does not even command that Israel appoint a king,¹² even though without a strong monarchy the permanent Temple might never have been built. Instead, we see that appointing a king is dependent on the desire of the people to have one:

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, should you say, “I will set a king over me, like all the surrounding nations,” set over you a king whom the Lord your God chooses. The king you set over you must be one of your own people. You may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. (Devarim 17:14–15)

Yet even after the king is appointed, there are limitations on him – unparalleled at that time in history:

Further, he must not acquire many horses for himself, he must not make the people return to Egypt to acquire more horses, since the Lord has told you: “You must not go back that way again.” He must not accumulate wives and let his heart be led astray, nor should he amass large amounts of silver and gold. (Devarim 17:16–17)

Note that here, too, Egypt is mentioned – it is forbidden for the nation to return to Egypt. But we see that as time passed, Shlomo yielded to the temptations of the throne and violated each of these restrictions. Despite the prohibition against amassing silver and gold, he possessed unparalleled quantities (Melakhim I 10:14–21).

12. See R. Nehorai’s opinion in Sanhedrin 20b; Abrabanel on Devarim 17:14; Ibn Ezra on Devarim 17:15.

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He ignored the proscription against keeping many horses, and notably acquired them from Egypt (Melakhim I 10:26–29).

Finally, Shlomo violated the restriction on the number of wives, and as predicted, they led his heart astray:¹³

King Shlomo loved many foreign women besides the daughter of Pharaoh¹⁴ – Moabite women, Amonite women, Edomite women, Sidonian women, Hittite women – from the nations of which the Lord had warned the Israelites: “You must not join with them, nor must they join with you, for they will turn your hearts astray after their own gods.” Shlomo clung to these in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal rank and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart astray. By the time Shlomo grew old, his wives had turned his heart to other gods, and his heart was not entirely with the Lord, his God, as his father David’s heart had been. Shlomo went after Ashtoret, the god of the Sidonians, and after Milkom, the abomination of the Amonites. Shlomo did what was evil in the Lord’s sight and was not fully with the Lord, as his father David was. It was then that Shlomo built a high shrine to Kemosh, the abomination of Moav, on the hill overlooking Jerusalem, and to Molekh, the abomination of the Amonites. He did

13. A daring midrash brought by Rashi in his commentary on Melakhim I 10:13 says Shlomo’s earlier encounter with the Queen of Sheva led to the future birth of Nevukhadnetzar, who destroyed the very Temple that Shlomo built. While the text of Melakhim does not indicate any physical relationship between Shlomo and the queen, the Sages certainly picked up on the problematic nature of Shlomo’s relationships with foreign women. See also Sanhedrin 21b for a midrash that connects Rome’s eventual conquest of Israel with Shlomo’s marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh.

14. While there was no criticism mentioned when Shlomo’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter first appeared in Melakhim I, 3, her inclusion in this list retroactively casts a shadow on what first appeared as a savvy diplomatic achievement.

the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrifices to their gods. (Melakhim I 11:1–8)

There is a sharp contrast between Shlomo's love of foreign women here and Shlomo's love of God in Melakhim I 3:3.¹⁵ He "clung to" and "loved" these women – a formula found in the commandments regarding our devotion to God (Devarim 11:22, 30:20). Shlomo's heart had long since forsaken its earlier devotion to God. The special relationship he had with God demanded loyalty, and once that loyalty was gone, their relationship could not be repaired.

God had warned Shlomo multiple times about his failure to follow the commandments, and his punishment was quick to come:

Then the Lord raged against Shlomo, for his heart had turned away from the Lord, God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and commanded him about this very matter – not to follow after other gods. But he failed to keep the Lord's command. And the Lord said to Shlomo, "Because this has been your will, and you failed to keep My covenant and My laws, which I commanded you – I will surely tear the kingdom away from you, and I will give it to your servant.¹⁶ But for the sake of your father David, I will not do this in your own lifetime; I will tear it away from the hand of your son. And even so, I will not tear the whole kingdom away; I will grant a single tribe to your son for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen." (Melakhim I 11:9–13)

15. Kiel, *Daat Mikra: Melakhim*, 45–46.

16. This fulfills the promise made in Melakhim I 3:14, where God makes Shlomo's success conditional on his following God's edicts: "And if you follow in My ways and keep My laws and commandments...."

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Immediately following this, we read of various foreign adversaries that rose up against Shlomo, culminating in the rebellion of Yorovam, one of Shlomo's own servants.¹⁷ The last verse before Shlomo's death describes his pursuit of Yorovam.¹⁸

Early in his reign, Shlomo ignored the warning in the book of Devarim against reliance on Egypt and tried to advance political and economic goals by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. However, in the end, his enemy took refuge in Egypt:

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ שְׁלֹמֹה לְהַמִּית אֶת־יָרֵבֶעָם וַיִּקָּם יָרֵבֶעָם וַיִּבְרַח מִצָּרִים אֶל־
שִׁישַׁק מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם וַיְהִי בְּמִצְרַיִם עַד־מוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה:

Shlomo **sought** to put Yorovam to death, but Yorovam **fled** straight to Egypt, to King Shishak of Egypt, and he remained in Egypt until Shlomo's death. (Melakhim I 11:40)

This verse has strong parallels to a verse in Shemot:

וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מִשָּׂה
מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הַבְּאֵר:

Word reached Pharaoh and he **sought** to kill Moshe. But Moshe **fled** his presence and went to live in the land of Midyan. There he sat down beside a well. (Shemot 2:15)

Just as Pharaoh sought to kill the fleeing Moshe, Shlomo sought to kill the fleeing Yorovam.¹⁹ Like a classical tragedy, we see the final downfall of Shlomo – he had become like Pharaoh. As narrated in the book of Shemot, the exodus from Egypt was the foundational

17. Melakhim I 11:14–40.

18. Ibid., v. 40.

19. Just as after Pharaoh died, Moshe could return to Egypt (Shemot 4:19), after Shlomo died, Yorovam could return from Egypt (Melakhim I 12:2–3).

event of the people of Israel. However, in Shlomo's time, we find the opposite recounted in the book of Melakhim: Instead of Israel leaving Egypt, Israel had come to mirror the same Egypt we were commanded to reject.

Although David, Shlomo's father, had also sinned, he otherwise always remained loyal to God: "For David had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord and never turned away from all He commanded him throughout his life – except in the matter of Uriya the Hittite" (Melakhim I 15:5).

There is no comparison between David and Pharaoh or Israel and Egypt during King David's reign. When David sinned, he confessed and repented (Shmuel II 12:13). Shlomo was instructed to be like his father, and did not succeed.²⁰ In the end, there is no sign of Shlomo repenting, and as we shall see, there is evidence that instead of confessing his sins, he rationalized them. God has patience for those who give in to their evil inclination and sin, if they repent. But rationalizations, which justify the rebellious behavior as normative, preclude any such repentance; in these cases, God is much less likely to forgive. As we shall see, this is a major lesson taught in Kohelet.

20. David's faithfulness to God is reflected in the fact that he is called a "servant of God" (Shmuel II 3:18; Melakhim I 3:6; Yehezkel 34:23; Tehillim 18:1, 36:1), a phrase applied to no other biblical figures except Moshe and Yehoshua. The Midrash (*Sifrei Vaethanan* 27 on Devarim 3:24) notes there are those whom God called His servants, and those who called themselves God's servants. David fits in both categories. Shlomo is in the group of those who called themselves God's servants (Melakhim I 3:9), but God never called Shlomo His servant. The Midrash notes that when addressing Shlomo, God always referenced his father David as His servant. This emphasizes the essential difference in the relationships of David and Shlomo to God.

