

King Solomon and the Brothers Who Sought Wisdom

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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WORD SPREAD OF KING SOLOMON'S WISDOM; AND men came from afar to hear it and grow wise. Among them were three brothers, who had arrived in Jerusalem and become members of the court. There they had spent a year, listening to the king in the hope of gaining wisdom.

But after a year the brothers were dissatisfied. "A full year we have been here," said one, "and what wisdom have we acquired? None!"

So they decided to seek permission to leave the king's service and return to their families.

Solomon gave them permission—and granted them a bonus. "You have served me loyally," he said. "To each of you I shall give either a bag of gold or three tips. Which is it to be?"

The brothers discussed the choice among themselves. Finally, each chose the gold. It was loaded onto their horses; and they departed the capital.

But they had not gone far when the youngest brother, Jacob, stopped short. "What have we done?" he said. "We came to King Solomon for his wisdom. Yet upon being offered a portion of it, we choose gold instead. Surely a mistake! We must go back."

But his brothers laughed at him. So Jacob rode back alone to the palace. There he begged Solomon to exchange his bag of gold for the three tips.

"No problem," said Solomon. "Ready?"

"I am ready, Sire."

"Tip number one. When traveling, set out each morning at the crack of dawn. But call it quits a few hours before sunset. That way you'll have ample time to locate a good

campsite, with wood, water, and grazing for your horse.

“Tip number two. Seek not to cross a swollen river, but wait patiently until it subsides.

“Tip number three. Never reveal a secret to a woman—not even to your wife. Okay, there you have them. My three tips.”

“Thank you, Sire.”

Jacob departed the palace, jumped on his horse, and hurried after his brothers. When he overtook them, they were eager to hear the three tips. But Jacob refused to reveal what he had been told. “Whatever wisdom I have acquired,” he said, “is for me alone. You have your gold.”

The two brothers shrugged. And together they and Jacob journeyed on.

As evening approached, Jacob recalled the first tip and said: “Let us stop and camp here. There is wood and water and grazing for our horses.”

“Don’t be a fool,” said one of his brothers. “We can cover another five miles before dark.”

“I’m staying here,” said Jacob.

“Suit yourself.”

Jacob watched as his brothers rode off. Then he set to gathering wood. With it he made himself a fire and a crude shelter. And he lay down to sleep.

Meanwhile, his brothers kept riding till the last possible moment. With the coming of night, they found themselves on a barren hillside. There they were forced to camp.

During the night a fierce snowstorm arose. Caught without fire or shelter, the two brothers perished.

The next day Jacob came along and discovered their bodies. He wept for his brothers, lamenting their folly. Then he buried them, loaded their gold onto his horse, and rode on.

At length he came to a river. It had become swollen from melting snow. Recalling the second tip, he camped and waited for the waters to subside.

As he waited, two merchants on horseback came along. They were leading a horse laden with bags of gold. Disdainful of Jacob’s warning, the pair tried to cross the river. They were swept from their horses and drowned.

Jacob waited for the waters to subside. Then he crossed the river—retrieving the merchants’ gold and loading it

onto his horse.

At last he reached his village. His sisters-in-law came running from their houses and asked about their husbands. Jacob could not bring himself to reveal what had befallen his brothers. So he said that they had remained in Jerusalem to learn the wisdom of Solomon.

That night Jacob showed the gold to his wife. Her eyes widened with astonishment. How had he acquired it? she asked. But Jacob—recalling the third tip—refused to say. “That must remain a secret,” he told her.

With the gold Jacob bought fields, vineyards, and cattle, and built a new house. But his wife kept pestering him to reveal the source of the gold. Finally, he relented and told her the whole story.

Then one day Jacob was quarreling with his wife, and threatened to strike her. Whereupon, she shouted in anger: “So, first you murder your brothers, and now you would murder me!”

This slanderous outburst was overheard by his sisters-in-law. They accused Jacob of murder. He was brought before a magistrate, judged guilty, and sentenced to die. Desperate, he appealed to King Solomon.

Brought before the king, he recounted all that had happened since their last meeting. Solomon believed him and ordered him set free.

“One thing though,” said Solomon. “Shouldn’t you share that wealth of yours with your sisters-in-law?”

“I shall do so, Your Highness,” said Jacob. He bowed and started to leave.

“And Jacob.”

“Sire?”

“Three tips worth gold, and coming from me? A wise man surely heedeth *all three*.”

“So I learned, Your Highness—the hard way.”

“Next time, try the easy way. Listen to advice.”

“Yes, Sire.”

And Jacob departed the palace—wise at last.*

* King Solomon’s wisdom often expressed itself in pithy sayings—tips, maxims, sage pronouncements. A compilation of

these may be found in the Book of Proverbs (whose Hebrew title is *mishle shelomoh* [משלי שלמו], or “Sayings of Solomon”). Like Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, the king offers a set of moral precepts that relate to everyday life.

We are told, for example, that “pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” As with Franklin’s, the sayings often have a homespun quality: “Whoever diggeth a pit shall fall therein; and he that rolleth a stone, it will return unto him.” And like Franklin, Solomon endorses such basic virtues as industry: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” Yet while both men see worldly success as a worthy aim, Solomon sets priorities: “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.”

The Book of Proverbs is essentially a manual of practical wisdom—of *sekel* (שכל), or good sense. At the same time, its underlying theme is religious. Repeatedly, Solomon tempers his pragmatism with this admonition: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” A wise man, he insists, should “trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy path.” The essence of wisdom, we are constantly reminded, is to walk with GOD.

Like *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, the Book of Proverbs has been neglected by modern readers. Some shrewd publisher might consider repackaging it as a self-help book. Titled “King Solomon’s Guide to Health, Wealth and Happiness,” or “Wisdom 101,” this ancient work might find a large and appreciative audience.