

King Solomon and the Mechanized Throne

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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BORAK AND GORASH CLINKED GOBLET. “HOW GOES the new job?” asked Gorash the messenger. “We never see you here anymore. Have you forgotten the way to Zuki’s Tavern, and the felicities of ale?”

“Asmodeus keeps me busy,” said Borak with a shrug. “As his manservant, I run errands, bring him drinks, tend to his wardrobe. And I keep track of his appointments.”

“He seems to have taken up residence in the palace.”

“They still need him. So the king of the jinn has stuck around. A suite of rooms has been assigned to him; and I am domiciled therein. He calls for me frequently. Indeed, I’ve become indispensable to his daily routine.”

“And what does Asmodeus do with his days?”

“He pursues pleasure—in the form of females, both human and jinn. What an amorous fellow! But he also earns his keep. For he’s in charge of the jinn who are laboring on the renovations.”

“They’re said to be extensive, those renovations.”

Borak nodded. “The palace is being given a totally new look. It’s being ‘modernized.’ They also plan to build a new wing and a Tower of Learning—to accommodate the growing number of both wives and books. Currently they’re remodeling the throne room. King Solomon was reluctant to change it—said he liked its old-fashioned look. But Abhiram, the architect, persuaded him that a shabby throne room does not befit a major power, such as Israel has become. Solomon drew the line, however, at replacing the throne itself. Did you hear about the new throne they tried to give him?”

“New throne? No.”

“What a bizarre contraption! One that left Solomon unimpressed—and *me* bruised and battered. Let me tell you about this prodigy of a throne.”

“I’m all ears.”

Borak took a sip of ale and began his account.

“As part of renovating the throne room, Ab-hiram wanted to replace the throne. He told Solomon: ‘You need something more elegant, more stylish.’ But Solomon steadfastly refused, saying he liked the old one—had grown accustomed to it—found it comfortable. Moreover, it had sentimental value, having been occupied by his father.

“So Ab-hiram acquiesced, and designed the renovations around the old throne. But then Asmodeus approached him with an idea—for a replacement throne that Solomon would find irresistible. Asmodeus dubbed it the Power Throne. It would be innovative and multifunctional, he told Ab-hiram. And it would proclaim the majestic nature of kingship.

“Ab-hiram liked the idea. So he and Asmodeus set out to create this throne, with Asmodeus providing the concepts; Ab-hiram, the mechanical expertise. Their strategy was to build the Power Throne in secret, then present it to Solomon as a surprise. They were sure he would change his mind and adopt it.

“For several weeks they shut themselves up in the workshop, along with a crew of jinn. Finally the throne was completed. Solomon was invited to drop by and take a look at ‘something interesting.’

“So it’s late in the afternoon and into the workshop strolls King Solomon. Ab-hiram welcomes him and leads him over to the throne. We’ve got it covered with a drape. Asmodeus nods and I remove the drape—revealing the Power Throne.

“Solomon looks at it quizzically. He says nothing—apparently is at a loss for words. And understandably so. Let me describe to you the wonder—or blunder!—that’s sitting there.

“The seat itself is fairly ordinary—for a wealthy monarch, that is. It is carved from cedar wood and inlaid with jewels. You can smell the cedar wood; and the jewels glitter like fireflies. The seat is plushly cushioned. And perched on its back is a bronze eagle.

“Now the seat is mounted on a high base; and leading up to it are three stairs. Each stair has a bronze lion at either

end—six lions altogether. But these are not ordinary bronze lions. They are *mechanical*. When the royal foot touches the stairs, the lions are activated. Their jaws open and close—their tails wag—loud roars are emitted. Then, as the King sits, a set of trumpets pops out of the base and delivers a fanfare. At the same time, the eagle crows and flaps its wings. All these actions are powered by mechanisms hidden within the base.

“And there’s more. Over the seat is a *scoreboard*, with symbols and numbers. They indicate the number of Solomon’s wives, subjects, and vassals. And the amount of gold in his coffers. I’m not making this up. The numbers are on cards that flip, and are updated daily.

“On one armrest is a panel of buttons. They control various features of the throne. For example, on the other armrest is a goblet with a tube over it. Press a button and wine flows into the goblet. Another button activates the eagle—it flaps its wings and serves as a fan, to dispel both heat and flies. And another button makes the seat vibrate—providing a massage.

“And listen to this. The Power Throne has wheels. You press a button and it propels itself forward! Thus, the King will be able to travel effortlessly throughout the palace. Or even to tour the city while sitting on his throne.

“How does all this work? Is it sorcery? No—engineering. Inside the base are mechanisms that Ab-hiram has devised, consisting of gears, wheels, rods, and bellows. And there’s a unique source of power.

“Anyhow, Solomon ponders this contrivance. And he doesn’t know what to say. He’s looking both dumbfounded and dubious. So a sales pitch begins. Ab-hiram extols the Power Throne, enumerating its features and capabilities. Then Asmodeus takes over, explaining the *need* for such a throne. The essence of kingship, he declares, is power. A king must convey a sense of his dominion—must have an aura of sovereign authority—must be lionlike! Also, he should prominently display the privileges of kingship. Hence all the amenities on the throne—the wine dispenser, the fan, the massage mode. ‘And look,’ says Asmodeus, ‘you spend a lot of time on your throne. Why not have one that’s

grand and luxurious? *Enjoy* the process of ruling!’ And he points out that the seat is extra wide, enabling its occupant to snuggle up with several wives, if desired.

“After hearing these presentations, Solomon still looks dubious. He inspects the throne and mumbles something. Then he asks—out of politeness or curiosity—what the source of power is. Ab-hiram smiles and opens a panel in the base, revealing its interior. And crammed in with the machinery are two jinn. They’re running on a treadmill!

“So what do you think?’ asks Ab-hiram, closing the panel. ‘Wouldn’t this make a perfect centerpiece for the throne room?’

“I don’t know,’ says Solomon. ‘I’ll have to think about it.’

“Why not try it out?’ says Asmodeus. ‘Climb up on the Power Throne and get a feel for it. We think you’re going to like it.’

“But the King is adamant and declines even a brief trial. Ab-hiram and Asmodeus are dismayed. They have worked many hours to build this thing—and Solomon is showing no interest in it whatsoever. But like salesmen, they’re not about to let him walk away. So Asmodeus offers a demonstration. His manservant, he says, will serve as a stand-in. And he tells me to get up on the throne.

“Now my instincts tell me this is not a good idea. But I’m just a flunky. So I do as I’m told and start to climb the stairs.

“Instantly, the Power Throne goes into action. Jaws snap and tails wag as the lions let out roars. Afraid of getting nipped, I dash up the stairs. And I plop down on the seat—which sets off the trumpets. They pop up and blast out a fanfare. And the eagle starts crowing and flapping its wings. Finally the actions cease and it’s quiet again. I sit there trying to look regal.

“Press the first button,’ says Ab-hiram, ‘and demonstrate the wine dispenser.’

“I hit the button and wine flows from the tube. The goblet fills up and threatens to brim over. I ask how to shut off the dispenser. Press the button again, says Ab-hiram. But I hit the wrong one and the eagle starts flapping its wings. Meanwhile, the wine has overflowed and is running down onto the throne. Thinking quickly, I grab the goblet and

down its contents.

“Excellent vintage,’ I remark, smacking my lips. I return the goblet to its place. And it starts to fill again. So I jab at the buttons—and this time activate the massage. The seat starts to vibrate and shake. And I’m vibrating along with it! But I manage to drain the goblet again.

“Suddenly the seat starts to shake wildly, like it’s about to explode. I panic, jump up, and start down the stairs. That sets off the lions—they start roaring and snapping their jaws again. I jump back onto the seat and jab at buttons.

“And now the Power Throne starts traveling across the room—I’ve activated its wheels. Everyone jumps out of the way. The throne strikes a table, knocking it over and going into a spin. Ab-hiram is shouting for me to hit the brake. But I have no idea how. I’m spinning and yelping! Then the throne comes out of its spin, heads toward a wall, and crashes.

“The next thing I remember, they’re lifting me out of the seat. I’m dizzy and battered. They sit me down on a bench and ask if I’m all right. Can they get me anything?

“Some more wine,’ I murmur.

“Solomon thanks them for all the work they did. And he praises their ingenuity and craftsmanship. But he’s going to stick with the old throne, he says—the Power Throne just isn’t his style.

“And that’s the story of the Power Throne. Ab-hiram kept it in his workshop for a while, in case Solomon should reconsider. Finally, he had the jinn haul it away and store it in the basement. And that’s where it is now, and shall remain.”

“What a shame,” said Gorash. “It could have become a tourist attraction. People would have come from around the world, just to see the wondrous throne of King Solomon.”

“Better they should come to hear his wisdom, however modest the seat from which it emanates.”

“Well said, my friend. I’ll drink to that.”

They clinked goblets again and downed their ales.*

* That King Solomon possessed a “wondrous throne” is attested to by a number of sources. The Book of Kings gives this description: “And the king made a great throne of ivory, and over-

laid it with the best gold. The throne had six steps, and the back of the throne was rounded. There were armrests on either side of the seat, and two lions stood beside the armrests. And twelve lions stood on the one side and the other of the six steps. There was none like it made in any kingdom.” The Book of Chronicles has a similar description, and mentions a golden footstool. And Josephus speaks of the “prodigious largeness” of the throne.

In rabbinic literature, the throne is depicted as being even more extraordinary. “Solomon’s throne was studded with precious stones and pearls,” says Rabbi Eliezer, “to make it glitter like the very heavens in purity. And oxen, beasts, and birds were attached to the throne.” These animals were mechanical, says Rabbi Yohanan—they would lift Solomon with their paws and pass him up the stairs, from animal to animal. A royal escalator! And the throne had wheels, according to a commentary on the Book of Esther, and would take Solomon wherever he wished to go.

Josephus refers to Solomon’s throne as “the seat of justice”—a function that was not overlooked by the rabbis. They tell us that the mechanical menagerie produced a cacophony of sounds—roars, growls, hoots, shrieks, and howls—at the approach of a perjurer. And inscribed on the lions were admonitions to Solomon, relating to the administration of justice.

What became of this marvelous throne? It is said to have passed into the possession of a succession of foreign kings. Among them were Pharaoh Sheshonk (who carried it off to Egypt); Sennacherib (who was forced to return it to Jerusalem); Pharaoh Nekho (who was injured by the lifting mechanism); Nebuchadnezzar (who also got injured); Darius (who wisely refrained from using the throne); Alexander the Great (who acquired it during his conquest of Persia); and Antiochus Epihanes. Antiochus had the throne shipped to him from Egypt; but it was badly damaged in transit. The last reported sighting of King Solomon’s throne was in the second century, when Rabbi Eliezer viewed remnants of it during a visit to Rome.

Could fragments of it still be there, moldering in some museum?

Solomon’s throne is not to be confused, by the way, with the so-called “thrones of Solomon.” These are rocks or ruins, on mountaintops in Asia, containing what is supposedly the imprint of his foot. Solomon is said to have flown to the mountains via his carpet—to escape the burdens of kingship and refresh his soul.