

# Exegetical Brief: Was Solomon A Misogynist?

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Was Solomon a woman-hater? This question is sometimes raised in connection with Ecclesiastes 7:28, where the Preacher says:

While I was still searching but not finding—  
I found one upright man among a thousand,  
but not one upright woman among them all.

Did Solomon believe all women were evil? Did he have a biased, negative view of women?

If the question is being asked about Solomon the *person*, we could answer our last question, "Maybe, sometimes, in part." His personal conduct revealed a grossly deficient view of the right relationship of a husband and a wife in marriage. Ironically, the "thousand" mentioned in our text above corresponds to the number of women Solomon held in his harem—seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred lesser "wives" (1 Kg 11:3). Whether the motive for these marriages was politics, sex, or prestige, or a combination of the three, these women were, to use a modern term, "trophy wives." These women were being used, though many of them may have been more than willing participants as Esther was in a similar sordid situation. They perceived enough benefits in the deal to offset the negatives. Without a doubt, many of the marriages were political statements, but the women were undoubtedly carefully chosen to please Solomon. The historical account says, "King Solomon loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, 'You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.' Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love" (1 Kg 11:1-2). It seems that, regardless of the connotation of the word "love" in this context, more than politics was involved in these marriages. Solomon felt enough "love" for the women that they were able to turn his heart toward idols. The biblical account of this situation is one of the many cases in which the Old Testament deals very frankly with the sins and shortcomings of the characters who played important roles in the drama of salvation (Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's lies, David's adultery, and on and on.)

But here our concern is not with the conduct of Solomon the man but with the statements of Solomon the author. We accept Solomon's writing in Proverbs, the Song, and Ecclesiastes as the inspired Word of God. We believe that everything that these writings teach is true. These writings teach us practical wisdom for life. What is the view of man and woman in marriage expressed by Solomon the author?

Ecclesiastes advocates the love of one man with one woman. "Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun" (Ec 9:9). The wise father of Proverbs advises:

Drink water from your own cistern,  
    running water from your own well.  
Should your springs overflow in the streets,  
    your streams of water in the public squares?  
Let them be yours alone,  
    never to be shared with strangers.  
May your fountain be blessed,  
    and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.  
A loving doe, a graceful deer—  
    may her breasts satisfy you always,

may you ever be captivated by her love (Pr 5:15-19).

Solomon never advises, "Enjoy life with your wives."

Though interpretation of Song of Songs is one of the most difficult problems of biblical interpretation, it is clear that the ideal praised there is the principle that God established at creation—the one-flesh relationship of one man and one woman. Though it is a much-debated point, I do not believe the man and woman in the Song are real characters from Solomon's life. They are ideal characters who are being pitted against the sad reality of Solomon's sexual life (just as the book of Ecclesiastes is ultimately a rueful repudiation of the material side of Solomon's life). In the Song Solomon is an observer, not one of the characters in the drama. For example, in chapter 8 Solomon's vineyard is contrasted with that of the woman:

<sup>11</sup>Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;  
he let out his vineyard to tenants.

Each was to bring for its fruit  
a thousand shekels of silver.

<sup>12</sup>But my own vineyard is mine to give;  
the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon,  
and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.

If Solomon wrote the Song using the same hard-won wisdom which he used to write Ecclesiastes, it would be natural for him to use his own conduct as the contrast to true love, just as he uses his futile efforts to find happiness in possessions as the foil to true wisdom in Ecclesiastes 1 and 2.

Solomon's vineyard seems to be distinct from the woman's. He has a large vineyard (his harem), but her vineyard (her body) is her own (compare 1:6), and she is proud and happy to keep it for her lover alone. "Baal Hamon" means "lord or husband of a crowd." This too may be a satiric reference to Solomon's harem. Solomon must hire keepers for his vineyard, but the woman tends hers alone. Solomon's vineyard is a business transaction. His interest is just in making the best deal, keeping the profit high. The woman's vineyard is a labor of love. As far as the woman is concerned Solomon can keep his wealth. She won't compete for a place in the royal harem as Esther did. No amount of money can buy her love (compare 8:7). The appearance of Solomon in chapter three of the Song also seems to use Solomon as an observer, contrasted to the groom.

At any rate, all the writings of Solomon extol the beauty of the one-flesh relationship which God designed to be between one man and one woman. To be sure, in Proverbs Solomon speaks much of the sorrow of a bad marriage (12:4, 19:13, 21:19, 25:24), but he speaks even more of the blessings brought by the wife of noble character (12:4, 18:22, 19:14, 31:10). In the opening drama of the book the woman Folly is outdone by the lady Wisdom. Throughout his inspired writings Solomon consistently praises and advocates the relationship of husband and wife which God designed in Eden.

So how then do we deal with the verse that is the subject of this article? We can, of course, note that many of the sentiments voiced by the Teacher Qohelet are not correct. He is throwing out viewpoints of life under the sun which he will later correct (compare 3:21 and 12:7). Parallel statements in Scripture are the many wrong or inadequate sentiments expressed by Job and his friends in the course of their argument or the complaints of Jeremiah and Habakkuk. But that does not seem to be the primary factor here.

The comment in verse 28 may well reflect Solomon's sad experience in court and harem, but the point becomes clearer when we recognize the type of parallelism used here. Sometimes parallelism involves two halves of a whole:

A wise son brings joy to his father,  
but a foolish son grief to his mother. (Pr 10:1)

To express the whole idea we would have to substitute the more literal but less literary:

A wise son brings joy to his father and mother,  
but a foolish son grief to his father and mother.

Another factor is the use of successive numbers to express an incomplete or representative sample. When Amos catalogs the "three sins and even four" of various nations in the opening of his book, he is not attempting to give an exhaustive list, but he is simply saying "of their many sins here is a sample." In Ecclesiastes 11:2, "Give portions to seven, yes to eight," Solomon is not advocating that our giving stop at eight gifts, but indicating that it should keep on going. A similar thing is happening in reverse in the New Testament when Paul says, "I did not baptize anyone" but then adds "Well, yea, I did baptize this guy, and then there was that one too. And maybe a few more" (1 Co 1). His point was not to give a mathematically precise tally of baptisms but to declare that being baptized by Paul was not something to boast about.

Solomon makes frequent use of this numerical device in Proverbs, usually with the pairings three/four, six/seven, or seven/eight.

There are six things the Lord hates,  
seven that are detestable to him: (6:16)

This is not an exhaustive list of the things God hates, seven and no more. It took ten commandments to provide even a basic summary of things God hates. If we wanted to be exhaustive, the list of things God hates could easily go into triple figures. Proverbs 30 provides several more examples of the use of this numerical device to provide progressive lists.

The seven/eight idiom provides open-ended ascending lists. Our text carries the device as far as it can go in the opposite direction, one/zero. The point is that there is no one who is good, as the Preacher says directly, without poetic figure, in verse 20, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." Verse 28 says the same thing in a more poetic form, as is made clear in verse 29 which elaborates on our text: "This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." The main point is not to compare man and woman, but to compare the totality of the human race with the standard God set for them. One in a thousand is not exactly a rousing affirmation of males in contrast to females.

I suppose the question remains, "But why did he place man in the 'one' half of the verse and woman in the 'zero' half?" One possible answer is that it is not so clear what he intended.

אֶדָם אֶחָד מֵאֶלֶף מְצָאתִי  
וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל-אֶלֶף לֹא מְצָאתִי:

One person from a thousand I found  
And a woman in all of these I did not find.

In the first half of the verse he does not use *ish*, the distinct word for male, but *adam*, the word which provides the name of Adam but also the name of the whole human race. In the second half of the verse he uses *ishah*, the distinct word for woman. This is a strange combination. Perhaps he is signaling that it is mankind that is his target, yet he uses a word for woman in the second half. Perhaps this flows from Solomon's experience summarized in the preceding verse.

I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare,  
whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains.

Among the thousand women he had, he had not found a true spiritual companion who corresponded to him (or to what he should have been but was not). This is not so much an indictment of women in general, but of Solomon, who was looking for love in all the wrong places: Egypt, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and Hatti. This was not the place to find a woman after God's own heart.

Our text thus reflects two truths: the departure of the human race from what God meant it to be and Solomon's failure to find even the good that still remains in the order God created because he had departed from God's order.