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What Went Wrong? Lessons in Leadership from Solomon, the Bible's Wisest and Worst Ruler



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Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate the many insights into successful and unsuccessful leadership that may be derived from the life of King Solomon, who, according to Scripture, was the wisest man who ever lived. Solomon may have been very wise, but made some very serious blunders that ultimately led to the breakup of his empire after the ascendancy of his son. This paper examines the mistakes and/or character flaws which contributed to the decline of Solomon from a great leader to an ineffectual figurehead. This paper will also examine the Book of Proverbs attributed to Solomon and highlight its pertinent leadership lessons. One question that the paper will attempt to answer is whether or not Solomon followed the path of wisdom discussed in Proverbs.

Introduction

There are many ways to learn about the value of ethical leadership. Traditionally, teachers of ethics use case histories and the examination of the works of various moral philosophers (e.g., Kant) as the preferred approaches to teaching ethics, including business ethics. Some scholars advocate using literature as a tool for teaching ethics (Gilbert, 2007; Singer & Singer, 2005; Clemens & Mayer, 1999; Shepard, Goldsby, & Gerde, 1997). Literature (and films) can arouse emotions. Consider the impact of a work of fiction such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. McNamara (2014) posits:

So while it would be an exaggeration to say that Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel caused the Civil War, there's no doubt that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by helping to shape public opinion in the 1850s, was indeed a factor leading to the war (McNamara, 2014).

Recently much attention has been devoted to storytelling and the power of stories. Indeed, storytelling is an important skill in the business world (Bluestein, 2016; Gallo, 2016; Howard, 2016; Knowledge@Wharton, 2016; Prive, 2016). Founding stories are used to connect with stakeholders such as employees, customers, and investors (Bluestein, 2014). Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment Group, found that stories were more effective than PowerPoint presentations in convincing a mayor to provide funding for a new stadium. This is what Guber said about stories: "Stories have a unique power to move people's

hearts, minds, feet, and wallets in the storyteller's intended direction" (Gallo, 2016: 56-57). According to former talk show host Charlie Rose, "What sets TED talks apart is that the big ideas are wrapped up in personal stories" (Gallo, 2016: 63). KPMG, one of the Big Four accounting and consulting firms, found that stories were an effective way for managers to communicate to employees what the company was all about. This strategy helped reduce turnover and increase employee engagement (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016).

Examples of great leaders cited in textbooks generally emanate from social activism (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.), business (e.g., Jeff Bezos, Sir Richard Branson, Warren Buffett, Sam Walton, Oprah Winfrey), politics (e.g., Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, George Washington), and sports (e.g., Michael Jordan). Of course, one problem that often arises when referencing business leaders has been that the *hero of today* might devolve into a *criminal in the future*. In some cases, it becomes apparent with the passage of time that a seemingly successful business leader was not truly effective. In fact, rather than creating a prosperous, thriving firm through visionary and inspirational leadership, these CEOs used deception, dishonesty, and dubious accounting devices to dupe the public into believing that a company was flourishing when it was actually performing very poorly. Moreover, CEOs often are ascribed credit for rendering a company successful when it is really mere chance that actually accounts for 70% of the company's performance (Fitza, 2013). Kahneman (2011: 204-208) also discusses this problem and underscores the point that firms and leaders seen as highly successful by authors of such books including *In Search of Excellence* and *Built to Last*, were not very successful several years later. Much of the success these firms demonstrated was due to luck rather than superior leadership.

According to a *Portfolio Magazine* (2009) ranking, the worst American CEOs of all time – those "who most effectively destroyed value and innovation while displaying the worst management skills throughout their management tenure" – were Richard Fuld (Lehman Brothers), Angelo Mozilo (Countrywide Financial Corporation), Ken Lay (Enron), Jimmy Cayne (Bear Stearns), Bernie Ebbers (WorldCom), Al Dunlap (Scott Paper), Fred Joseph (Drexel), Jay Gould (Financier and railroad developer), John Patterson (NCR), John Akers (IBM), Henry Frick (Carnegie Steel), Bob Allen (AT&T), Roger Smith (General Motors), John Sculley (Apple), Martin Sullivan (AIG), Gerald Levin (Time Warner), Bob Nardelli (Home Depot), Stan O'Neal (Merrill Lynch), Carly Fiorina (Hewlett Packard), and Vikram Pandit (CitiGroup). It is interesting to examine the history of the worst CEOs and try to determine what mistakes they made that caused them to fail as corporate leaders. Sometimes one can learn more from studying mistakes made by leaders than from studying successes. One common mistake made by many of these CEOs was the myopic pursuit of wealth. Indeed, several of the above-named leaders went to prison. More importantly, many were regarded as narcissistic leaders, caring more for themselves than doing what was best for their organizations; in effect, the antithesis of a servant leader.

De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) describe leaders who are transfixed on pursuing and fulfilling their own needs – all grounded in wealth and power accumulation as well as and inflating public adulation. They have the capacity to exploit others, are often branded as autocratic, and are deemed controlling, dictatorial, self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing, and vengeful. As noted by BizShifts (2014), these toxic leaders have the capabilities of inflicting

great harm upon an organization:

These toxic personalities are known as the “dark trio”: They are three personality types recognized by psychologists as having the most toxic effect in the workplace, namely; narcissism, Machiavellian personality, psychopathy... these three personalities types share one common trait—lack of empathy; for them it’s an egocentric world... use of people without regard for their well-being. Research into the behavior of these personalities in corporate culture has consistently shown that while occasionally they may seem to do the organization good, they eventually bring it crashing down... (BizShifts, 2014).

Dame and Gedmin (2013) describe narcissistic leaders as follows:

Narcissism combines an exaggerated sense of one’s own abilities and achievements with a constant need for attention, affirmation, and praise. While the label tends to be applied loosely to anyone behaving in a self-absorbed way, psychologists know narcissism to be a formal personality disorder for some, and a real impediment to their forming healthy relationships. The narcissist lacks self-awareness and empathy and is often hypersensitive to criticism or perceived insults. He or she frequently exaggerates contributions and claims to be “expert” at many different things. If you are part of an organization with a leader exhibiting such characteristics, you have a problem (Dame & Gedmin, 2013).

Burgo (2015) describes what he refers to as “Extreme Narcissism.” According to Burgo, greed and narcissism are highly related:

...the Extreme Narcissist is never satisfied. He needs to continue amassing an ever-larger fortune and flaunting it to everyone around him — all those contemptible losers. Soaring executive pay has received a lot of press lately, most of it negative. Scholarly research on the high incidence of narcissists in the corner office has also been in the news (Burgo, 2015).

Research supports the view that “upper-class individuals tend to be narcissistic, with a clear sense of entitlement. Worse yet, they believe their talents and attributes – genius, even – have earned them a rightful position of status over everyone else” (Buchheit, 2015).

Using the Bible to Teach Ethics and Ethical Leadership

In studying leadership and leadership mistakes, how far back shall we go? The scholarly literature in the area of leadership is beginning to center upon the study of Biblical figures as leaders (e.g., Friedman & Hertz, 2016; Coggins, 2012; Friedman & Friedman, 2012; Laufer, 2006; Morris, 2006; Feiler, 2004; Maxwell, 2002; Friedman & Langbert, 2000; Hazony, 2000; Woolfe, 2002; Baron & Padwa, 1999; Herskovitz & Klein, 1999; Wildavsky, 1984). This is quite reasonable given that the Bible has had a profound effect on a countless number of people. It is the most popular book of all time — it is estimated that as many as 6 billion copies have been printed — and is the source of many stories, metaphors, and situations that can be very helpful to those teaching principles of leadership. The religions of more than half of humanity, the so-called Abrahamic religions (primarily Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), have their roots in the Hebrew Bible.

Even for those who have no interest or inclination to lead, an examination of the deeds and misdeeds of Biblical leaders can be useful in understanding the importance of ethical behavior. The concepts of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991; Greenleaf, 1983), covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003) all have their roots in the Biblical tradition. Lynch and Friedman (2013) use the Bible to demonstrate that adding a spiritual component to the concept of servant leadership, say, encouraging personal growth and incorporating social justice themes into the work environment, completes the paradigm and makes it even more valuable as a leadership theory.

Kass (2003), a prominent bioethicist, finds in the Book of Genesis answers to modern ethical questions such as the permissibility of unrestricted human cloning. The Bible is replete with stories of history's earliest leaders, some successful and others unsuccessful, some with a great deal of charisma and others with none. Moreover, using the Bible as a source of information enables one to consider ethical leadership in discussions of leadership. Friedman & Friedman (2014) demonstrate the importance of introducing spirituality – a concept different from religion – into business courses.

The purpose of this paper is to examine ethical leadership using the Biblical story of Solomon the King. This paper will focus on the arc of Solomon's tenure as a leader and relate it to the philosophy of ethics and leadership recorded in the Book of Proverbs. According to Jewish tradition, Solomon authored the Book of Proverbs, in addition to Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. We shall see that Solomon did not practice what he preached and therefore failed as a leader. The story of Solomon is interesting since it demonstrates how a seemingly small character flaw can transform even the wisest king into one of the worst leaders in history.

King Solomon

Scholars are not in agreement as to when Solomon lived. According to Spiro (2013), Solomon was born in 848 BCE and died in 796 BCE.

The Beginning

When Solomon was a young boy, God appeared to him in a dream and offered him anything that he desired (I Kings 3). Solomon did not ask for longevity, power, or riches; instead, he asked God to provide him with: "An understanding heart to judge people and the ability to discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this great people of Yours" (I Kings 3: 9). Solomon knew that what a leader needs is wisdom, a passion for justice, and concern for people. His request indicated that he was worthy of being a leader and God replied to him:

Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both wealth and honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings (I Kings 3:10-13, NIV).

Solomon was indeed given great wisdom and was known as *chacham mi'kol ha'adam*, the wisest of all people:

His fame spread through all the surrounding nations. He composed 3,000 parables, and his songs were 1,005. He discoursed about trees, from the cedars of Lebanon down to the hyssop which grows out of the wall. He also discoursed about animals, birds, crawling creatures and fish. They came from all the nations to hear Solomon's wisdom, as did all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom (I Kings 5:11-14).

One of the medieval commentaries, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), known by the acronym Rashi, explains the above verse as meaning that Solomon taught the people about the medical and scientific properties of the various plants.

Scripture illustrates the fulfillment of God's blessing of providing Solomon with the wisdom for "administering justice" with the story of the two women who gave birth at the same time (I Kings 3: 10-28). One gave birth to a dead infant and the other to a live infant. The woman who had given birth to the dead infant switched children and placed the dead child in the other woman's bosom as she slept and took the living child for herself. Both women claimed the live infant and Solomon had to use his wisdom to decide who the true mother was. His "solution" was to cut the baby in half; he even asked for a sword. The woman who was not the real mother was satisfied with the verdict. The true mother demonstrated compassion for her son and said: "Please, my Lord, give her the living child, and do not put it to death, for she is his mother!" (I Kings 3:26). King Solomon then knew which of the two women was the real mother – the one who demonstrated love for her son. Cohen (1998) provides a detailed analysis of this story, which he refers to as the "first major recorded and published decision in the history of legal jurisprudence."

The country became very prosperous under the reign of Solomon. Solomon used his great wisdom to ensure that there was peace in the world. Indeed, his name means peace (his name in Hebrew is Shlomo which is derived from the word *shalom* meaning peace). A great leader is not concerned about building an empire through conquest but uses his wisdom to bring peace. A necessary prerequisite for peace is justice, and Solomon was universally known for his wisdom and justice (I Kings 5:14).

King Solomon built the First Temple, which was quite ornate, and took seven years to complete. This was an important achievement and was crucial for the monotheistic faith. All sacrifices to God had to be made in the Temple; private altars which could easily be erected for pagan deities would no longer be allowed. Moreover, three times a year – for the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot – all able citizens had to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Exodus 34:23). This precept is known as *oleh regel* (lit. going up [to Jerusalem] for the Festival). It unified all twelve tribes and made Jerusalem the spiritual center of ancient Israel. In fact, it was the center for ethical monotheism and sacrifices could be brought by both Jews and gentiles. Solomon declares (I Kings 8:43): "May you hear from Heaven, the foundation of Your abode, and act according to all that the gentile calls out to You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear you, as do Your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your name." Hertz (1959: 265) asserts: "The belief in the unity of the human race is the natural corollary of the unity of God, since One God must be the God of the whole of humanity...Through Hebrew monotheism alone was it possible to teach the Brotherhood of Man."

Building the Temple was not an easy feat. In fact, the Temple required a *corvée* of 30,000 men to build (I Kings 5:27). These men were sent to Lebanon on a monthly basis in shifts consisting of 10,000 people. Solomon also needed 70,000 men to serve as carriers and 80,000 stonecutters to hew the mountains, as well as 3,300 foremen to oversee the work (I Kings 5: 29). Clearly, the building of the Temple was a substantial undertaking requiring multitudes of workers. It was an important achievement for a king who understood the importance of teaching the world the Abrahamic values of justice, compassion, brotherhood of man, and peace. The crowning achievement is attained when Solomon and the entire nation dedicate the Temple (I Kings 8).

When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's famous wisdom and came to "test him with riddles" (I Kings 10:1), she was astounded by his great wisdom. She gave the king 120 talents of gold (a talent is about 64 pounds; this would be equivalent to about \$150 million today). She understood what leadership was about and told Solomon (I Kings 10:9): "Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness." She understood that the job of a leader was to maintain *mishpat u'tzedaka* (usually translated as justice and righteousness). Actually, *tzedaka*, as we shall see, which is the word used today for charity, means social justice. The 120 talents might also hint at another Jewish leader, who was known for his humility: Moses. Moses died at the age of 120 (Deuteronomy 34:7).

Before the Fall: Solomon's Mistakes as a Leader

After the Queen of Sheba returned home, it becomes apparent how wealthy Solomon has become. His gold receipts totaled 166 talents per year supplemented by taxes from merchants and vassal kings. He also had a "Tarshish" fleet that brought him great wealth (I Kings 10: 22). It is difficult to estimate how much his estate was worth, but \$100 billion is probably reasonable. What is more relevant is whether or not he used his wealth to "maintain justice and righteousness." Apparently not. Scripture makes what appears to be a gratuitous remark when speaking of his magnificent throne: "Nothing like it had ever been made for any of the kingdoms" (I Kings 10: 20)."

Solomon's blunder began when he lost connection with the basic tenets of ethical leadership. A leader is not supposed to be concerned with his/her own wealth and pleasure. After such a vast undertaking for the Temple, Solomon should have erected a modest palace for himself. There was no reason for a man with so much wisdom to devote so much time and money on such an ostentatious palace. His major error as a leader was foregoing authentic governing to pursue of the trappings of leadership – wealth, fame, and power. He spent an enormous amount of money to build his home (I Kings 7), an effort which took thirteen years to complete. It was no accident that he expended more time on his palace than on the Temple. Scripture hints at his miscalculation, one that would eventually cause serious problems for Rehoboam, his son and successor. By investing more time on his own home than the Temple, he made clear which one was more valued to him. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon (according to tradition, Kohelet, son of David, king of Jerusalem, is another name for Solomon) says:

Vanity of vanities, says Kohelet, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What gain does man have

for all the toil at which he toils beneath the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1: 1-2).

The word used by Kohelet is *hevel*, vapor or mist, which is usually translated as vanity, futility, or emptiness. This word is a key to understanding the text and is used 38 times in the book (Dor-Shav, 2008). Dor-Shav believes that Kohelet is concerned with the transience of life, not that it is meaningless. Life clearly has a purpose but, sadly, it is so short and mankind wastes so much time on pursuits such as acquiring wealth, power, social status, physical pleasures, and even wisdom (Mykoff, Rubin & Schapiro, 1998: 577-578). Those can be quite meaningless when one sees what all these pursuits have accomplished.

Solomon is said to have written the book of Ecclesiastes towards the end of his life when, perhaps, he realized that his most grievous mistake was in dedicating so much time and wealth to a palace that would not last and would contribute to the end of everything he had built. Unlike King David, his father, Solomon did not have a son who would accomplish anything; he died without a worthy successor. This is quite amazing given that Solomon had a harem of 1,000 wives and concubines.

An Abundance of Personal Wealth

A spectacular palace was not enough for Solomon; he made (I Kings 10:18) “an immense ivory throne and overlaid it with glittering gold.” The throne was quite glorious and contained 12 golden lions – one on each side of each of the six steps leading up to it (I Kings 10: 18-20). It is surprising that a man with so much wisdom would spend so much on worldly pleasures. The amount of gold that he received each year was equal to 666 talents. His goblets were of gold, and there was so much wealth that silver was practically worthless (I Kings 10:21). Solomon also had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 riders (I Kings 10:26). He became obsessed with acquiring horses and imported the best ones from Egypt (I Kings 10: 28). He also married an unusually large number of women and had 700 royal wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3). The Torah actually forbids a king from having too many horses, having too many wives, and accumulating too much wealth (Deuteronomy 17: 16-17). What the king was supposed to do was keep a copy of the Torah with him and read it regularly “so that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren and that he not turn aside from the commandments right or left, so that he will prolong his days over his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel” (Deuteronomy 17: 20).

Solomon may have had great personal wealth but he did not use it to help the people. Rather, his massive expenditures resulted in a substantial tax burden on the people and ultimately caused complications for Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and successor. The vast debts incurred by King Solomon may explain the following:

At the end of twenty years, during which Solomon built these two buildings – the temple of the Lord and the royal palace – King Solomon gave twenty towns in Galilee to Hiram king of Tyre, because Hiram had supplied him with all the cedar and juniper and gold he wanted (I Kings 9: 10-11).

Several commentaries have difficulty accepting that King Solomon would be willing to decrease the size of the Holy Land by giving away 20 cities. The Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi), a major medieval biblical commentator, citing II Chronicles 8:2, where it states that Hiram gave towns to Solomon, suggests that King Hiram and King Solomon exchanged

towns to strengthen the accord between them; thus, the size of Israel was unchanged. Not everyone agrees with this explanation.

An Abundance of Women

The Book of Proverbs ends with a paean to the woman of valor (singular). Solomon had a total of 1,000 wives and concubines. It is quite reasonable to believe that he married some of these women for political reasons. It is highly doubtful that he needed so many wives; no other king had so many wives. Moreover, the Torah prohibits a king from having too many wives since they will cause his “heart to stray” (Deuteronomy 17:17). This is exactly what happened to Solomon. Scripture states:

King Solomon, however, 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. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done (I Kings 11: 1-5, NIV).

The term “loved” is used several times indicating that these marriages were not simply for political reasons. He loved these women and they were idolaters. Solomon was not permitted to marry an idolater. Moreover, the job of the king was to eradicate paganism and spread monotheism to the world. By erecting temples to foreign pagan deities in Jerusalem, where he had built the Temple, he made it appear as though all of them were legitimate.

The Talmud does not believe that Solomon himself worshipped idols. Rather, Scripture considers it *as though* he himself worshipped these pagan deities since he did not stop his wives from practicing idolatry (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 56b). If the purpose of the Temple was to spread ethical monotheism, the marriages to all these pagan women had the opposite effect. Solomon was punished for this sin. Scripture states that God said to him:

Since ... you have not kept My covenant and My laws that I have commanded you, I shall surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant. But I will not do this in your days, for the sake of your father David; instead, I will tear it away from your son. Only I shall not tear away the entire kingdom from him; I will give your son one tribe for the sake of My servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen (1 Kings 11:9-13).

At the End

With so many wives and concubines, one would expect Solomon to have many children. We only know of three: Rehoboam and two daughters Taphath and Basemath, who married two of Solomon's regional commissioners (I Kings 4: 11,15). It is quite likely that Solomon had many more children from his wives but they are not mentioned because they did not identify as Jews. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon was probably referring to his 1,000 wives and concubines when he said the following:

And I have discovered something more bitter than death: the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will capture... while I was still searching but not finding... One upright man among a thousand I have found, but not one upright woman among them all (Ecclesiastes 7:26, 28).

The last few years of his life, Solomon had two adversaries: Hadad the Edomite and Rezon. They joined forces and ruled over Aram (I Kings 11: 14-25). They made trouble for Solomon until his death. Because Solomon focused on his own needs and sinned before God, he was punished when Hadad and Rezon were able to break the long peace: “Rezon was Israel's adversary as long as Solomon lived, adding to the trouble caused by Hadad. So Rezon ruled in Aram and was hostile toward Israel” (I Kings 11:25).

Solomon's Successor

Rehoboam was approached by the people after the death of his father and asked to lighten the huge tax burden placed on the people to finance the overindulgences of Solomon (I Kings 12:4). Rehoboam sought counsel from two different sets of advisors. He was advised by the elders to take a soft, gentle approach with his followers and thus ensure their eternal loyalty (I Kings 12:7). The elder advisors understood that the job of a leader is to serve one's followers, not oppress them. Unfortunately, Rehoboam's young advisors told him to act in a tough, autocratic manner and tell the people (I Kings 12:14): “My father made your yoke heavy, and I shall add to your yoke! My father chastised you with sticks; I shall chastise you with scorpions!”

Rehoboam followed the counsel of his young advisors and responded in a harsh, unsympathetic manner. This caused the people to rebel against him and join Jeroboam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim. The tough leadership approach demanding obedience from followers can easily cause a rebellion. Rehoboam did not understand that leaders can accomplish more by inspiring followers with kind words than by threatening them with harsh words. Israel was thereafter split into two kingdoms: The Southern Kingdom of Judah consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (David, Solomon, and Rehoboam were from the tribe of Judah) and the Northern Kingdom consisting of the other ten tribes. Jeroboam became the King and established idol worship so that his people would not go to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the Temple (I Kings 12).

By the fourth year of Rehoboam's reign, the people of Judah also “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” and worshipped pagan deities (I Kings 14:22-24; II Chronicles 12:1). In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, King Shishak of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and looted the treasures of the Temple and the King's palace (I Kings 14:25). The great wealth accumulated by Solomon ended up in Egypt. Eventually, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and dispersed the 10 tribes. The 10 tribes disappeared and probably assimilated. All this would not have happened had Solomon not deviated from his original mission of being concerned with righteousness and justice and living a simpler life, rather than a sybaritic and extravagant one.

The great empire King Solomon had established did not last very long. One may safely assume that the huge tax burden was the direct result of all the extravagances that included the royal palace, the enormous harem, and the acquisition of great wealth for his treasury. It

is surprising that with all his wisdom, Solomon did not realize that his preoccupation with self-aggrandizement would be harmful to his kingdom. Had Solomon used his wisdom to strengthen the kingdom and help his people, the kingdom would not have broken up. This breakup weakened Israel and the Assyrians had no problem conquering the Northern Kingdom and driving the ten tribes into exile.

One is also surprised that Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, did not give his son advice on how to be a good ruler. He could have used his own work, the Book of Proverbs, which has many interesting points to make about leadership.

Lessons about Leadership from the Book of Proverbs

If Solomon had only followed his own guidelines for ethical leadership set forth in the Book of Proverbs, perhaps we would now be discussing his tenure as a successful ruler rather than a failed leader. Dose (2012) feels that the Book of Proverbs provides many useful lessons for contemporary organizations and their leaders.

Greed

By now we, unlike the protagonist of the movie *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987), know that greed is *not* good. What does the Book of Proverbs have to say about greed and covetousness?

- A greedy person stirs up strife but he who trusts in God will have abundance (Proverbs 28: 25).
- A ruler who lacks understanding is a great oppressor, but one who hates covetousness will prolong his days (Proverbs 28:16).

It is very important for a leader to not become greedy and hate “covetousness.” Erich Fromm, distinguished psychoanalyst, understood the perils of greed as is clear from two of his famous quotes: “Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction”; and “Greed has no satiation point, since its consummation does not fill the inner emptiness, boredom, loneliness, and depression it is meant to overcome.” Solomon said the same thing in Ecclesiastes (5:10): “Whoever loves money will never be satisfied with money; whoever loves luxury is never satisfied with abundance. This too is futility.” Actually, it is not only greed; the same can be said of the pursuit of physical pleasure.

About the Physical Pleasures

Like much of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Proverbs is not silent about sexual desire. Taken to extreme, it can become a force as dark as greed. A life dedicated to womanizing and pleasure seeking has destroyed many leaders. As noted above, no good came of Solomon’s huge harem.

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 intoxicated with her love (Proverbs 5: 15-19, NIV).

Here Solomon makes it clear that he understands the harm that can result from selecting the wrong kind of wife. No good can come from a beautiful woman who lacks good sense.

Also,

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion (Proverbs 11: 22).

Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. For she has brought many down to death; her victims are numerous. Her house is a highway to the grave, descending to the chambers of death (Proverbs 7: 25-27).

For the lips of a strange woman drip honey and her palate is smoother than oil. But her end is bitter as wormwood, as sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave (Proverbs 5: 3-5).

The “strange woman” is also a metaphor for false religions.

Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for rulers to imbibe strong drink (Proverbs 31:3-4).

Here, the queen-mother is telling her son that a life dedicated to sexual pleasures and/or drinking intoxicating beverages is not appropriate for a leader. The Book of Proverbs ends with the advice of the queen-mother to king Lemuel. Many scholars believe that Lemuel is supposed to be King Solomon himself. Lemuel is a contraction of two Hebrew words meaning belonging (or devoted) to God.

Social Justice

Leadership is about righteousness and justice, not self-aggrandizement. The Book of Proverbs is replete with guidance about social justice. For example,

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern (Proverbs 29:7).

A king who judges the poor honestly – his throne shall be established forever (Proverbs 29:14).

Open your mouth for the mute; for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and obtain justice for the poor and the needy (Proverbs 31: 8-9).

Leadership is about speaking up for the “mute” – those who have no one to defend them. It is about compassion for the destitute and needy.

One who oppresses a poor man blasphemes his Maker; but he who is gracious to the needy Honors Him (Proverbs 14:31).

Tzedakah (charity and social justice) uplifts a nation, but the kindness of states is a sin (Proverbs 14:34).

Generous people do not become poor from helping the indigent. Hirsch (1998: 232) translates this verse from Proverbs (14:34) to mean that the kind of justice in which all people are guaranteed their rights, uplifts a nation. Kindness practiced by states implies favoritism to benefit one group at the expense of others. These special privileges do not uplift a nation.

Performing *tzedaka* (charity and social justice) and *mishpat* (legal justice) is preferred by God to a sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3).

Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who avert their eyes to them will suffer many curses (Proverbs 28:27).

The Hebrew word *tzedakah* suggests more than charity. Sacks (2009) posits the following:

What does it mean? *Tzedek/tzedakah* is almost impossible to translate, because of its many shadings of meaning: justice, charity, righteousness, integrity, equity, fairness and innocence. It certainly means more than strictly legal justice, for which the Bible uses words like *mishpat* and *din*.

He concludes that justice together with compassion equals *tzedek*. A legal system without compassion can generate inequity; a decent society needs both (Sacks, 2009).

And, finally,

A king establishes the country with justice, but a man who raises levies (*ish terumoth*) will ruin it (Proverbs 29:4).

The term *ish terumoth* is difficult to translate. The Hebrew word *terumah* usually refers to the heave offerings given to priests. This may be why it is translated by many of the commentaries as one who receives gifts or bribes. Hirsch (1998: 236-237) sees the *ish terumoth* as a ruler who imposes heavy taxes on his subjects. This actually describes Solomon who imposed heavy taxes on the people; at first, for the Temple but later for his own palace and personal aggrandizement. This is the guiding principle that Solomon violated when he overtaxed the people so that he could live in an elaborate mansion.

Integrity

As noted above, the Queen of Sheba respected Solomon for understanding that leadership is about upholding righteousness and justice and eliminating corruption. Regarding personal integrity, the Book of Proverbs says,

There are six things that the Lord hates, and the seventh is an abomination of His soul: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict among brothers (Proverbs 6:16-19).

A leader should be evaluated not only for his personal integrity but also for that of this “throne.”

Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness. Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value the one who speaks what is right (Proverbs 16: 12-13, NIV).

Kindness and truth preserve a king; and by kindness he upholds his throne (Proverbs 20:28).

A leader who is a great oppressor lacks understanding, for he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days (Proverbs 28:16).

If a ruler listens to falsehoods, all his servants are wicked (Proverbs 29: 12).

Kings despise wrongdoing since they understand that if they wish to prolong their realm (and their own lives) they must rule with integrity and justice. Leaders who listen to lies and slander will find themselves surrounded by sycophants who wish to curry favor by false accusations and dishonesties.

And what about fiscal integrity?

Deceitful scales are an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight (Proverbs 11:1).

Diverse weights are an abomination before the Lord and deceptive scales are not good (Proverbs 20: 23).

It is important for a leader to make sure that all weights and measures are honest. Today, this would include financial statements.

Humility

Collins (2005) states that boards of directors “frequently operate under the false belief that a larger than life, egocentric leader is required to make a company great.” The reality is that successful leaders tend to have humility and a willingness to learn from others (Friedman, Fischer, & Schochet, 2017).

Pride precedes destruction, and haughtiness comes before failure (Proverbs 16: 18)

The result of humility is fear of God, wealth, honor, and life (Proverbs 22:4)

A man’s pride shall bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor (Proverbs 29:23)

To acquire wisdom, one first needs a bit of humility. In addition, people who wish to acquire wisdom are good listeners. Intelligent people learn by listening to others.

Discussion

Arguably, the most important lessons to be learned from the Book of Proverbs are the importance of integrity, humility, and social justice. Much of Proverbs derides the fool, a person who is deceitful (Proverbs 14:8). Solomon, in an eerie sort of foreshadowing, declares that “The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright shall flourish” (Proverbs 14:11). A wicked person builds a house which is much sturdier than the upright person’s tent. Yet the house will be destroyed since it was not built on a foundation of integrity and justice. An upright person is concerned with spiritual values and thus renounces the pleasures of this world; hence, the tent. Yes, this righteous person flourishes. We also see that leaders should not be greedy (Proverbs 28:16).

King Solomon may be the perfect person to learn from about leadership. Why Solomon? He was the wisest man who ever lived yet he failed as a leader. He ruled the country for 40 years and acquired a great deal of influence and wealth for Israel, yet he was ultimately responsible for the division of the Kingdom of Israel. Only a short time after his death, the country was divided into two much weaker kingdoms. This is a textbook study in failed leadership.

The decline of King Solomon’s empire began when he became increasingly concerned with

living in a magnificent house, obtaining great wealth, and acquiring a substantial number of wives and concubines, and correspondingly less with social justice. He did not follow his own blueprint as laid out in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs also has a great deal to say about pursuing strange women and philandering. A wise man understands that humankind has a higher purpose than pursuing physical pleasures. A person cannot be wise if he becomes obsessed with satisfying his sexual urges. No good can come from having such a large harem as it distracts a ruler from his true job. This message is repeated in Ecclesiastes. Solomon, at some point in his life, probably when he was much older, realized that all physical pursuits such as the pursuit of wealth, fame, power, pleasure, and sex are meaningless. What truly matters is leading a spiritual life dedicated to helping others.

It is strange that the wisest person who ever lived did such a poor job in maintaining his own kingdom. Solomon, with his great wisdom, understood that a “good name is preferred to wealth and goodly favor than silver and gold” (Proverbs 22:1). He also understood the importance of choosing the right spouse. Despite all this, Solomon fell into the trap of living an ostentatious, sybaritic life. This lifestyle resulted in the breakup of all that he built. Solomon forgot the most important lesson of all: leadership is not about what you can do for yourself, it is about helping your organization and your people.

The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 21b) uses the story of Solomon to explain why the Torah does not provide reasons for most its laws. The Torah did provide reasons for two laws and Solomon disobeyed both of them because he thought that with his great wisdom he would not stumble. The reason provided in the Torah (Deuteronomy 17:17) for not having too many wives is so that the king’s “heart will not turn astray” from God. Solomon had a huge number of wives and was indeed led astray by them. The Torah provides a reason for the king not having too many horses: so that “he will not return the people to Egypt in order to increase horses” (Deuteronomy 17:16). Solomon did ultimately obtain horses from Egypt (I Kings 10: 29). Solomon’s hubris resulted in his belief that he was so great that he could do anything and not be led astray.

There are many examples of this type of arrogance among leaders today, in both the corporate and political arenas, especially when it comes to greed and lust. One example is Angelo Mozilo, former CEO of Countrywide Financial. He started out as a butcher’s son and built a large company. He may have entered the corporate world with good intentions – the goal of helping poor people buy homes. Yet, thanks to him, millions of people lost their homes. This is what *Portfolio Magazine* has to say about him:

Meet the man who made subprime a household word. Once a symbol of self-made accomplishment – a butcher’s son who built the largest mortgage lender in the country – Mozilo became blinded by success and began going after the riskiest and most unsavory of borrowers to boost his company’s market share. In doing so, he legitimized a sector that would ultimately bring down the economy (Portfolio, 2009).

Vladimir V. Putin is famous for saying that “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” is the collapse of the Soviet Union.” Clearly, this is a leader who is more concerned about respect and fear than what is best for the people. One would think that the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century were communism and fascism. Hitler, Mao, and Stalin were responsible for the deaths of 126 million people (White, 2012: 529). Communism, a failed

economic/political system, was responsible for the deaths of 67 million (White, 2012: 554). Apparently, Putin does not understand what true leadership is about. The respect a country or leader generates via intimidation is not something to be admired. Chinggis (Genghis) Khan received a great deal of “respect,” but proceeded to kill 40 million people (White, 2012: 529). It is not terribly surprising that Putin linked ending the “humiliation” of Russia to annexing Crimea and denouncing the West (Myers & Barry, 2014).

Greed and lust have destroyed many CEOs who started out with lofty ideals. Think of how many leaders (and celebrities) have been accused of sexual harassment and other kinds of sexual misconduct (e.g., Dominique Strauss-Kahn, John Ensign, Bill Clinton, Dov Charney, Roger Ailes, Mark Hurd, Anthony Weiner, Harvey Weinstein, Charlie Walk, Donald Trump, Eric Schneiderman, Steve Wynn, Paul Marciano, Roy Price, Justin Forsyth, and John Lasseter, to name just a few). The #MeToo movement is having a significant impact all across the world. George (2011) provides a solution to the problem.

Leaders can avoid these pitfalls by devoting themselves to personal development that cultivates their inner compass, or True North. This requires reframing their leadership from being heroes to being servants of the people they lead. This process requires thought and introspection because many people get into leadership roles in response to their ego needs. It enables them to transition from seeking external gratification to finding internal satisfaction by making meaningful contributions through their leadership (George, 2011).

This means surrounding one’s self with people who are not afraid to speak up. As former Senator John Ensign told his fellow senators after resigning because of a sex scandal:

When one takes a position of leadership, there is a very real danger of getting caught up in the hype surrounding that status ... Surround yourselves with people who will be honest with you about how you really are and what you are becoming, and then make them promise to not hold back... from telling you the truth (George, 2011).

Conclusion

While the Book of Proverbs – the root of three major world faiths – sets forth a number of traits regarded as indicative of true ethical leadership (e.g., social justice, integrity, humility), the personal characteristics and general rule of Solomon reflect a divergence from these commonly regarded attributes – unfortunately reflected in so many leaders of government and industry today. The story of Solomon and the Book of Proverbs should be read over and over by leaders; this is a powerful story that demonstrates that even the wisest among us can lose their way as leaders. Scripture reminds us that leadership should never be about the quest for wealth, fame, power, getting even with others, or sexual gratification. In fact, nearly 2,000 years ago, the Talmud stated: “Envy, lust, and [seeking] honor remove a person from the world” (Avos 4: 21).

There is only one true purpose of leadership: that of helping others. The Dalai Lama asserts: “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them” (Brainyquote, 2018). If this is true of ordinary people; all the more so when it comes to our leaders: The purpose of leadership is to help others, not just one’s self.

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