

CONSIDER THE LILIES
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In His sermon on the mount, the Lord compared the magnificence of King Solomon to the lilies of the field. "...I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Matt. 6: 29) We're told in the *Arcana Coelestia* that this comparative statement was part of a discourse the Lord was giving about what it is to "trust in the Divine;" to think of "the morrow" without solicitude and without anxiety; to "know that for those who trust in the Divine all things advance toward a happy state to eternity..." (AC 8478) "[I]f God so clothes the grass of the field," the Lord asked, "will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matt. 6: 30)

There is a spiritual sense to all of this... but consider how it would have been understood at the time. Richly colored blossoms in the fields compared to the historic era of King Solomon, a time just about exactly a thousand years before, when the Kingdom of Israel was at its height of economic greatness as an independent nation. How much awareness would the people listening to the Lord's sermon on the mount have had about what is actually recorded about "Solomon in all his glory" in the *First Book of Kings*? Would it have been commonly understood that Solomon, while not the greatest king in the history of Israel, was probably far and away the richest and also the most famous in the world during his own time? What kind of sense might it have made for the Lord to tell those people at that time that Solomon may have had a lot and may have had a lot going for him, but all of it was nothing like a simple, blooming flower?

For us, this saying of the Lord *can* make sense because its internal sense has been revealed in the Heavenly Doctrine.

Lilies were and are "arrayed" with more glory than Solomon in his wealth & wisdom, because they represent goodness that is from the Lord and not from ourselves. "These flowers are beautiful from their inmosts," we read, and so they symbolize "good... from [the Lord that] has in it what is Divine... good from its inmost and [its] first being." (AC 8480) This spiritual representative quality of flowers was something that came to Swedenborg's scientifically experienced awareness very early in his call, as he recorded in his diary of *Spiritual Experiences* in 1747: "[T]hose things which grow from seeds begin from the internal, and grow up or come forth to the externals. [They] are not only beautiful to the sight, but also, the more interiorly they are examined, the more beautiful they are." (SE 252) This is the quality of goodness from the Lord... a goodness which is an *inward reality* that displays itself outwardly; good from the Lord is good from the inside out.

Where does that leave "Solomon in all his glory," then?

If this comparison that the Lord made was a simple matter of holding up goodness from the Lord, which is Divine and good from its inmosts, next to goodness from a merely human or worldly origin (which actually isn't good at all), then the comparison really can't even be made! "While living in the world a person calls things such as wealth and important positions a blessing," we read in the *Arcana*, and the passage continues: "What is meant in the internal sense of the Word, however, are not these temporal blessings but eternal ones, in comparison with which the temporal are nothing at all. For there is no ratio between what is temporal and what is eternal." (AC 8030 edited) There's no ratio; there's no comparison between wealth & important positions (which are only temporal) and true goodness from the Lord (which is eternal).

But maybe the comparison of the lilies of the field with the glories of Solomon isn't so simple & clear cut after all.

According to the literal sense of the story at least, it was *the Lord's will* to bless Solomon with riches & fame. When the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon, and Solomon asked for wisdom with which to judge the Lord's people, this was the Lord's response: "Because you have asked this thing... behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart... And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor..." (1 Kings 3: 11-13) And indeed much of the next several chapters in the *First Book of Kings* consists of what sometimes feels like an inventory of the great worldly wealth that Solomon had amassed and which it apparently pleased the Lord to give to Solomon.

We will look at a specific example of these material blessings for Solomon, but before going further we would do well also to hear a teaching from the work *Divine Providence*. We read: "David represent[ed] the Lord who was to come into the world, and Solomon [represented] the Lord after His coming. And because the Lord after the glorification of His Human had power over heaven and earth... so Solomon His representative appeared in glory and magnificence, and possessed wisdom above all the kings of the earth... This makes clear why it was granted to Solomon to build the temple... and why he was permitted to establish idolatrous worship, and to marry so many wives." (DP 245) Note carefully the language being used; we have inferred from the literal sense that blessing Solomon with wealth & reputation was a matter of the Lord's *will or good pleasure*... and now here in the Heavenly Doctrine we see also that Solomon was *granted* the privilege of building the temple in Jerusalem. But in other areas of his life, in marrying 700 wives and taking 300 concubines and in eventually setting up for them high places for the worship of their foreign, idolatrous gods... all of this is described as only *permitted* by the Lord.

The use of terms like these might remind us of what could be called the taxonomy of the Lord's Divine providence: "The things which are from the Lord are either nearer to, or more remote from Him," we read. "The things which are from will are most nearly from Him; those which are from good pleasure are somewhat more remotely from Him; those which are from leave still more remotely; and those which are from permission are most remotely from Him." (AC 9940) As we consider just one example of the glories of the time of Solomon (and what they might indicate for us about life in our world today), it would be good to keep in mind this wide range of providential possibility in that story, from the Lord's will for good all the way out to His permission of evil.

There is much that could be said about the material wealth that came into Jerusalem in the time of Solomon as it is described in Chapter 10 of the *First Book of Kings*. When the Queen of Sheba came, she brought gold, precious gems, and a once-in-history quantity of costly spices. (1 Kings 10: 10) In Solomon's time, gold was plentiful and silver was commonplace. (1 Kings 10: 21, 27) Solomon received visitors from all over the world, seeking his wisdom, and "[e]ach man brought his present: articles of silver and gold, garments, armor, spices, horses, and mules..." (1 Kings 10: 25) If we turn back to Chapter 4 we can see the staggering quantities of food that were provided for Solomon's royal household every day. Chapter 5 describes the quarrying of stone and the importation of precious cedar & cypress wood used in the construction of the temple and in Solomon's other extensive building projects in Jerusalem.

But back in Chapter 10 at Verse 22, we read this: "...the king had ships of Tarshish at sea... Once every three years [they] came bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks."

“Ships of Tarshish...” No one knows for sure, but the consensus of scholarship places the land of Tarshish in modern Spain, *far to the west* of Jerusalem, all the way across the Mediterranean Sea. And so, Solomon’s “ships of Tarshish” would have been a class of sailing ship equipped for a long voyage. A ship of Tarshish would be something quite different from, for example, a fishing boat used in the Sea of Galilee; it would be bigger & sturdier, with large cargo holds and the buoyancy to stay afloat & cut through the water fully loaded. A ship of Tarshish is a deep-sea-worthy, commercial trading vessel.

And what was the cargo in these ships of Tarshish that would triennially bring new riches to Solomon in Jerusalem? It says that there was gold and there was silver and that there were also ivory, apes and peacocks. The three Hebrew words used for these last three (ivory, apes & peacocks) are attention-getting not just because they’re exotic-sounding imports for Solomon to have brought into Jerusalem; they are also attention-getting for linguistic reasons. This verse in the *First Book of Kings* is the only time those three words are used in the Old Testament Word. And in each case, linguistic scholarship strongly suggests that the Hebrew words used have origins in Sanskrit, Tamil or other languages of the Indian subcontinent *far to the east*. Does this mean that that’s where the ivory, apes and peacocks were imported into Jerusalem from? From India or from other eastern lands? We can’t know for sure, but it does seem possible or even likely.

Either way, though, what do these facts tell us about the world within which this story from the Word is being told? Much of the story told in the books of *Joshua* and *Judges* and in the two *Books of Samuel*, is about Israel as a collection of twelve tribes, falteringly forming themselves into a nation, and their mutual antagonism with the tribal nations that were on their borders. It’s local story of a local people. But here, in the *First Book of Kings*, we see King Solomon, on the throne in Jerusalem just like his father David before him, but now sending out merchant ships capable of distant voyages, possibly as far as India (sailing perhaps from a Red Sea port on the Gulf of Aqaba), to bring home riches, treasures and curiosities from overseas. In the reign of King Solomon, the story of Israel has become cosmopolitan and international; the Lord’s people are now participants in a global, commercial economy.

And today, we live in a cosmopolitan, international world, participating in a global, commercial economy. This is a story about Solomon and it’s also a story about us. All of the stories in the Word are in some way about about us, but maybe we can see ourselves a little more clearly in the way this one is told in its literal sense. In the far-reaching yet interconnected world we live in, what are we “importing” into our spiritual lives?

“Trading,” we’re told, “which is chiefly done by ships, signifies acquiring knowledges for oneself and communicating them to others.” (AE 514) We could also note that another means of freight transport mentioned in this chapter is the camel train the Queen of Sheba used to bring her gifts from her Arabian homeland to Jerusalem. And camels in the Word “signify the general memory-knowledges in the natural man” (AC 3048); in other words, the importation process that built up the fantastic wealth that Solomon was materially blessed with, the commercial fleets & caravans, all of that is a picture of how we come to know the things we know, the ways we’ve learned of living in the world, that we have come by for ourselves and have passed on to our children and to others, and that serve as a foundation to our rational and (hopefully) spiritual life.

And those things can come from anywhere and take many forms: ethical standards of behavior; societal norms; folk wisdom; traditions, expectations & preferences; opinions, informed or otherwise; cultural etiquette; politeness & civility and much more. This is the “wealth,” intellectual & conceptual wealth, that we acquire that has the potential to serve us in the upbuilding of a rational & spiritual life.

Things like ivory, apes & peacocks may have been sources of beauty or amusement or satisfaction to King Solomon but what really made him rich was the gold, six hundred sixty-six talents coming in every year; that would be something like a billion and a half dollars-worth annually in today's prices. And gold represents (or at least can represent) "the goodness of love from the Lord." (AR 912) It seems clear that it was the Lord's will to bless to Solomon not just with wisdom but also with worldly riches & international fame. And yet we also know that the Lord only permitted (as evil is permitted) some of the things in his life, such as his many wives & concubines. There's a specific warning from the Lord in the Law of Moses about kings of Israel having too many horses and especially horses imported from Egypt (Deuteronomy 17: 16)... and Solomon had a lot of horses and a lot of them were imported from Egypt (1 Kings 4: 26, 10: 28). Was *that* the Lord's will? Or did the Lord only permit that?

Of course, the real question for us is: out of all of the conceptual wealth that we have acquired, that we have "imported," about how our lives in the world are to be conducted... is what we know and what we think and what we believe a matter of the Lord's will or is it something the Lord is only permitting?

Just like we seem to see a range in the life of Solomon, there's probably a range in us, too; we probably have some good ideas and we probably have some not-good ideas, too. How can we tell the difference?

"Consider the lilies..." When we hear the Lord in His sermon on the mount counseling the people to "consider the lilies" in comparison with the tremendous wealth of King Solomon, we can also hear the Lord urging us to go for our life's wisdom to a Source that is truly good, Divinely good, good from the inside out, just like a lily of the field.

And that source is of course the Word and it would seem in this regard especially the Heavenly Doctrine. The doctrines of the New Jerusalem, "revealed... out of heaven" (NJHD 7), can inform and shine a heavenly light on the knowledge & understanding we use to live in the world and those heavenly doctrines can bring our worldly wisdom into such an order that by means of life in this world, we can be initiated into the things of heaven. (see AC 5006[4])

The case could be made that King Solomon was the first to bring the nation of Israel into the modern world; he certainly didn't have the instant access to information & all the knowledge of the world that we do today, but he did start to open up access to the richness & variety that existed in the world of his time. And as the Lord said would happen, Solomon was blessed with wealth & fame beyond comparison with any other king of Israel. So too, the Lord has blessed us with the freedom & rationality to live in our own world with its own richness & variety. The Lord wants us to find our own way; to learn things & figure things out; what is the best way to live? That's a question for each of us to answer ourselves. And still, the Lord also wants us to "consider the lilies, how they grow." As we live in the world, we can do so in a way that lets true goodness, from the inside out, from out of heaven, shine through.

"[T]he lilies of the field... neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ...[S]eek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (Matt. 6: 28-30, 33)