

King Solomon and the Talking Door

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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King Solomon and the Talking Door

YOUR MAJESTY," SAID THE GOLDSMITH, "I COME before you this morning to appeal for justice. Last night my shop was burgled. The thief broke in through the front door and stole from me a quantity of gold. In your father's day, such lawlessness was unheard of. Shall it thrive under your rule? For the sake of your own honor, Sire, apprehend this burglar, punish him, and restore to me my gold."

"I shall attempt to do so," said King Solomon, "my honor being precious to me. Tell me—was anyone present in your shop last night, who might help identify the burglar?"

"No, Sire. My family and I live in an adjoining building; and the shop was deserted at the time."

"Did any of your neighbors see or hear anything?"

"They did not."

"And you say the burglar broke in through the front door?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps then," said Solomon, "this door of yours should be questioned. For apparently it was the sole witness to the break-in."

"Question the door, Sire? Can such a thing be done?"

"Possibly—with this." Raising his hand, Solomon displayed his ring. "Among the powers my ring gives me is the ability to speak with birds and beasts, and even with the fishes of the sea."*

* An Islamic tradition attributes this power to one of the four jewels in the ring—a jewel inscribed with the words "All creatures praise the Lord." The jewel had been given to King Solomon by an angel. In *Myths and Legends of Ancient Israel*, Angelo Rappoport relates: "Solomon immediately decided to test the power of the stone.... There were assembled before Solomon all

“But with a door?”

“Why not? I’ve never tried communicating with one. But here’s a chance to test the ring’s capabilities. Your door has witnessed a crime. I shall attempt to speak with it and elicit its testimony. Benaiah, send the herald to this man’s shop. Have him proclaim to the residents of the neighborhood the following announcement: ‘In one hour, a unique event shall take place. *A door shall be questioned by the King.*’”

Adjourning court, Solomon went into the lounge and busied himself for an hour with official reports.

Then, accompanied by Captain Benaiah and three other guards, he left the palace and made his way through the narrow lanes of the city.

A small crowd had already gathered in front of the shop. There was a murmur of expectation as King Solomon arrived.

He approached the door, regarded it with a stern eye, and raised his ring. “O door, hear me,” he said. “A chief virtue, in both men and their implements, is trustworthiness. In that you have failed. For the goldsmith trusted you to safeguard his gold—and you let him down. There is a way, however, whereby you could make amends for your lapse and restore your honor. Would you care to do so?”

Solomon put his ear to the door and listened. Then he turned to the crowd and said: “The door says that, yes, it would like to make amends.” Turning back to the door, Solomon said: “Tell me then, O door, who was the thief?”

Again he put his ear to the door. Beside him, Benaiah was watching with amazement.

“Hmm,” said Solomon. “The door says it doesn’t know the man’s name. Very well, then, can you describe him?... How’s that? Speak up, please....I see, I see. The door informs

sorts of creatures, from the elephant to the smallest worm, and also all sorts of fishes and birds. Solomon conversed with them and was instructed in all their different habits. He also listened to their complaints and rectified many abuses and evil customs amongst the beasts, birds, and fishes. It was, however, with the birds that he entertained himself longest, both on account of their beautiful and melodious speech, which he understood as well as the language of man, and the sentences full of wisdom which they uttered.”

me that the night was moonless and the burglar's features were obscured by darkness. O door, is there *anything* you can tell me? Anything whatsoever that might lead to the apprehension of this man?"

Solomon pressed his ear to the door and listened intently.

"Ah!" he said, turning to face the crowd. "Now that's something. The door recalls that upon entering the shop, the man brushed up against a cobweb—which clung to his cap and may be clinging to it still."

Solomon was peering into the crowd. Suddenly he cried: "Aha!" And pointing to a man in a red cap, he said: "Guards, arrest that fellow. *Who just now reached up to touch his cap.*"

The guards waded into the crowd, grabbed the man, and brought him before the king.

Solomon glared at him and said: "Your fear of discovery, my friend, disclosed your guilt. A fear, by the way, that was baseless. For that cobweb existed solely in my imagination."

The man fell to his knees. "O King," he said, "I confess to the crime. It was I who broke into the shop and stole the gold. Have mercy on me. I shall return the gold and live honestly for the rest of my days."

"We'll discuss mercy at some later date. For now I'm going to toss you into a cell. As a warning to those who would steal the property of another, and promote lawlessness in the realm."

The guards led the thief away. And the crowd began to disperse.

Solomon was rubbing his ring and looking pleased with himself. Captain Benaiah gave him a knowing look. "So," said Benaiah, "talking with the door, were you? Testing the capabilities of the ring, were you? O you're a sly one! Well, Your Highness, I too can talk with doors—and require no ring to do so. Watch me now."

Smirking like a schoolboy, Benaiah stepped up to the door. He grasped the handle and shook it, as if shaking hands.

"Hello there, Mr. Door. A pleasure to meet you. How's everything?" He put his ear to the door and listened. "Oh really? Glad to hear it. All right, see you around. And have

a nice day.”

Benaiah waved to the door, chuckled, and rejoined Solomon.

“I have to hand it to you, Sire. ’Twas a clever ruse.”

“What ruse was that?”

“You know, pretending to question the door, then springing that bit about the cobweb. Talking with a door, indeed. You nearly had *me* believing it! That ring of yours has powers. But a door’s a dumb thing—a mere block of wood. And not even King Solomon’s ring shall lend it a tongue.”

“To the contrary, I was in fact talking with the door.”

“You were?”

“You’re right, though—I did employ a ruse. For as the door spoke, I *misreported* what it was saying. Actually, it told me the thief’s name, described him, and indicated his location in the crowd. But the door’s testimony was problematical.”

“How so?”

“It was insufficient to establish guilt. For our law requires, in a criminal case, at least two witnesses. After all, the door might have been falsely accusing the man. Or it might have misidentified him in the dark. Moreover, a door’s testimony is probably inadmissible as evidence. After all, is not a witness required to be *sentient*? Given these concerns, I needed something more—I needed a confession. So I suppressed its testimony and made up that business about a cobweb. The idea was to trick the thief into incriminating himself.”

“And trick him you did, Sire. With a craftiness one does not expect in a judge.”

Solomon gave him a look of mock innocence. “What better means than a man’s own guilt—when the scales of justice need a tilt?”