

King Solomon and the Mysterious Palace

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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King Solomon and the Mysterious Palace

KING SOLOMON WAS RETURNING FROM A VISIT TO Persia, when Benaiah—scanning the desert over which their carpet was flying—spotted a palace. He awoke Solomon, who was dozing on the portable throne, and pointed it out.

“Maybe it’s a mirage,” said Solomon, peering down at an array of towers.

“Looks real enough to me,” said Benaiah.

“But what’s a palace doing in the middle of a desert?” said Solomon. His curiosity roused, he ordered the Wind to take them down.

The carpet descended and landed on a sand dune. Solomon disembarked, followed by Benaiah and the Singing Guards. And they gazed up at the mysterious citadel that loomed before them.

Its walls and parapets, domes and towers, glistened in the sun. They were fashioned from a bluish, translucent stone. Strangely, not a single door nor window was to be seen. On the central tower a banner was flapping, in the wind that the travelers had brought. Surrounded by desert, the palace showed no sign of habitation. All was silent, save for the flapping of the banner.

Solomon led the guards in a walk around the palace. But they could find no entranceway. The palace seemed a kind of monument, set in an empty expanse of desert.

“This place is uncanny,” said Benaiah, when they had completed their circuit. “I think we should leave.”

Just then Solomon spotted an eagle, sitting in its nest on one of the towers. He waved his ring and summoned it. The eagle flew down and perched on the throne.

Solomon approached the bird. They greeted one another. Then, in a raucous exchange of squawks, the two conversed. Benaiah shook his head as he watched.

“Gabbing with a bird!” he said. “I’ve seen this before, but it always amazes me.”

Finally, the eagle squawked loudly and flew off. Solomon rejoined his companions.

“His name is Alanad,” said Solomon, “and he has lived here all of his life—some two hundred years. I asked him how one might enter the palace. He said it wasn’t possible—there’s no way in. He recalled, however, a remark made by his grandfather when Alanad was a youth. About there being an entrance on the north side, which over the years had become covered with sand.”

Walking around to that side of the palace, they approached a mound of sand. Over the centuries it had accumulated against the wall. When Solomon poked at it, Benaiah groaned.

“You’re not thinking of having us remove that sand, Sire? With our bare hands? In this desert heat?”

“There’s an easier way,” said Solomon. He raised his ring and uttered a command. And the Wind came swirling about them. With a loud whoosh it blew the sand away—revealing an iron door.

Solomon examined the door. Affixed to it was an inscribed plaque. He read the words aloud.

We dwelt herein for years untold
Our riches waxing thousandfold.
Pleasure was our daily fare
Constant music filled the air.
We kept a thousand prancing steeds
Servants tended to our needs.
But then, O woe! the Steeds of Drought
Trampled o’er us, put to rout
The ample crops that were our pride.
Our amber fields shriveled and died.
And though we ground our pearls to flour
Starvation did us all devour
As one by one we dropped and died
Who in this palace did reside.
So do we leave it to the sands
That like a shroud have draped our lands.

For creeping lizard to behold
We leave this palace, filled with gold.
LET NO MAN ENTER, VERILY
UNLESS A PROPHET OR KING BE HE.
(The key is to the right of the door
For thou who wouldst these halls explore.)

Beside the door was a niche. Solomon reached in and pulled out a key. He unlocked the door, tugged it open, and said: "Follow me, men."

Benaiah and his fellow guards traded looks.

"Sire," said Benaiah, "it says prophets and kings only."

Solomon thought for a moment. Then he said: "A king's entourage is an extension of the king. As private individuals, you would be excluded. As my 'instruments' or 'minions,' you may enter."

Benaiah looked dubious. "You're sure?"

"Fairly sure."

"Sire," said Benaiah. "I have the utmost respect for your legal acumen. But that warning is explicit. When I encounter a sign that says 'Beware of Dog,' do I fancy myself an exception? Do I weigh the meaning of the word 'beware'? Do I debate the matter with the dog? No, I simply—and wisely—heed the sign."

"Come on," said Solomon. "Let's check this place out."

Ducking through the doorway, he passed inside. His companions exchanged looks of helplessness, and followed after him.

Solomon and the guards found themselves in a narrow passageway. Proceeding cautiously along it, they emerged into a sumptuous dining hall. The walls were hung with gold shields, silver figurines, tapestries. The tables and benches were inlaid with gems. Everything was illuminated by an eerie light, which filtered in through the crystalline walls of the palace.

At the far end of the hall they came to a door with an inscription:

The days do flow unto the grave
As swift for monarch as for slave.

The door opened into another hall—a gallery filled with gold and silver artifacts. At its far end was a door with an inscription:

Savor each hour of life. Alas!
The sand moves through the hourglass.

Passing through another hall, they arrived at a door with this inscription:

Prepare thyself. This day or the next
Thy name in the Book of Life...x'd!

And traversing yet another hall, they found a door with a bronze scorpion attached to it. And this inscription:

Our king was dreaded far and near
Yet in the end, he too knew fear.

Solomon touched the scorpion. With a grinding sound, the door opened. Revealed was a small room. Warily, they entered.

The room was empty save for a statue—of a king on a throne. On the king's chest was an inscribed plaque.

As they approached the statue, it began to shake and rattle. Fire shot from its ears.

“Cheap effect,” said Benaiah nervously. “Or so one hopes.”

The statue sputtered and ceased to shake. Wisps of smoke drifted from the ears.

Solomon stepped up to it and read aloud the inscription.

My name, Shadad, the son of Ad
In regal splendor was I clad.
My palace, full of gems and gold
Was a wonder to behold.
A dozen kingdoms did I tame
Whose subjects learned to fear my name.
My word was law, my will supreme
Dictatorial my regime!
Yet when he beckoned me to go,

To pale Death could I say no?
Could I offer him my wealth
In exchange for life and health?
What inducement, threat, command
Could stay that cold and terrible hand?
He led me grimly to a place
Where did await a narrow space.
I was Shadad, the rich and proud!
And in the end, owned but a shroud.
ALL IS VANITY, VANITY I SAY
'TIS GIVEN BUT TO TAKE AWAY.

For a moment Solomon was silent. Then he turned to his companions and said: “Let’s get out of here.”

Hastening from the palace, they reboarded the carpet and flew off.

As the Wind bore them homeward, Solomon sat slumped on the throne. He seemed to be brooding. Now and again he murmured the words of Shadad:

*“All is vanity, vanity I say.”**

* These words are familiar to us from the Book of Ecclesiastes—a work attributed to King Solomon. If Solomon was indeed the author, he was evidently quoting Shadad’s motto.

According to Biblical scholars, however, Ecclesiastes could not have been written by Solomon. The book’s language and ideas, they say, suggest an author who flourished many centuries later. Its philosophy—life is brief, so enjoy the pleasures of the day (“man hath no better things under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry”)—is more suited to an assimilated Jew of the Hellenistic era than to the pious king who built the Temple. Thus, the scholars deem Ecclesiastes to be an example of pseudepigraphy—a literary work to which the name of a figure of the past was attached.

There is also the curious matter of the opening line of Ecclesiastes. In it the author tells us that he *had been* king over Israel. The implication is that, at the time of composition, he no longer was. Why would King Solomon—who continued on the throne until his death—introduce himself thus?

So who wrote Ecclesiastes? In “King Solomon Becomes a Beggar” Ahimaaz points to a candidate.