

King Solomon and the Disputed Infant

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



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King Solomon and the Disputed Infant

KING SOLOMON WOULD MOUNT THE THRONE EACH day and dispense justice. Litigants and accused criminals appeared before him; and he pronounced judgment on their cases. One of those cases brought him acclaim for his wisdom. It involved an infant.

The case had been the last on the docket that day. The bailiff had entered the hall with an infant in his arms. Behind him came two women, whom he escorted up to the dais and presented to the king. He identified them as Deborah and Terza, harlots who shared a house. Each, he explained, claimed to be the mother of the infant.

Deborah was the first to testify. A slender, frightened-looking woman, she spoke in a voice that was barely audible. She had recently given birth to a boy, she said—the infant that the bailiff was holding. Three days later, her housemate Terza had also given birth to a boy. But during the night, Terza had apparently rolled over in her sleep, covering her child and suffocating it. Upon discovering the death, Terza “did a wicked thing,” claimed Deborah. She had crept into the room where Deborah slept and exchanged her dead child for Deborah’s live one.

Awakening in the morning, Deborah had been horrified to find a dead child lying beside her. But looking closely, she had discerned that it was not hers—and had realized what must have happened. She had stormed into Terza’s room and accused her of switching infants. Terza, of course, had denied it.

Deborah broke into sobs upon concluding her testimony. And Terza stepped forward to testify.

A hefty woman with a loud voice, she insisted there had been no substitution. The live child was her own, said Terza, bristling with indignation; and a grieving Deborah—to whom the smothered child did in fact belong—was “trying

to pull a fast one.”

The two women began now to argue. Rapping the throne with his scepter, Solomon called for order. Deborah and Terza fell silent, but glared at one another with open hostility.

Solomon asked a few questions; and as each woman responded, he scrutinized her. Then he sat back and pondered.

Finally, he told the bailiff to place the infant on the dais. And he called for Benaiah, the Captain of the Guard, to come forward. Benaiah approached the throne and saluted.

“Captain, is your sword sharp?” asked Solomon.

“Aye.”

“Unsheathe it.”

With a puzzled look, Benaiah took out his sword.

Solomon addressed the two women. “This is a difficult case,” he said. “We have no witnesses—no evidence as to which of you is the mother—no way to ascertain which of you is telling the truth and which is not. So we must seek a compromise, rather than justice. A settlement. Do you follow me?”

They nodded uncertainly.

“Captain,” said Solomon, “divide this living child in two, and give half to one woman and half to the other.”

A gasp arose from the spectators in the hall. Benaiah looked at him in disbelief.

“Do it,” said Solomon.

Benaiah approached the infant, stood over it, and raised his sword.

“Do you accept this resolution of your dispute?” Solomon asked the women.

Benaiah’s sword hovered over the infant. His face was contorted—with either resolve or agony. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow. The hand with the sword was shaking.

“Go ahead,” said Terza. “Divide the babe in two. If I can’t have it, neither shall she.” And Terza cackled triumphantly.

“No!” cried Deborah. Rushing forward, she grabbed Benaiah’s arm. “Give her the child. But please, slay it not!”

His sword still poised over the infant, Benaiah awaited instructions.

“Put away your sword—and give that woman her child,” said Solomon, pointing to Deborah. “Her solicitude for it has revealed her to be the mother.”

As the ploy became apparent, a murmur of approbation rose from the spectators. Deborah, meanwhile, had scooped up the child and was clutching it to her breast.

Solomon pointed now to Terza. “As for you, your shame in this affair shall be your punishment. May GOD forgive you.”

Terza hissed, drew her cloak about her, and fled the hall.

“Court is adjourned for the day,” said Solomon.

Laying down his scepter, he retreated to a lounge behind the dais. With a sigh of relief he plopped down on its sofa.

Benaiah joined him in the lounge. The Captain of the Guard was visibly agitated. His face was flushed; his hand, still shaking. Muttering and shaking his head, he poured himself a goblet of wine.

“I can’t believe you ordered me to do that,” he said.

“It was only a ruse,” said Solomon.

“And if your ruse had failed? Were you prepared to let me cut an infant in two? That would have been monstrous!”

“So it would have been. But I had confidence in you.”

“Confidence?”

“I know you well, Benaiah son of Jehoiada. You are a loyal soldier, sworn to obey me in all things. Yet I was sure that, if it came to slaying the child, *you would disobey me*. Was I wrong?”

Benaiah looked him in the eye and nodded slowly. “I would have disobeyed.”

“Of course you would have. I knew I could count on you to do so. Else I would scarcely have given that order.”

“But confound it! You put me through a bad moment. Was there no other way to discover who the mother was?”

“Oh,” said Solomon with a wave of dismissal, “I already knew who the mother was.”

Benaiah stared at him incredulously. “You already *knew*?”

“I had studied both their faces. One was filled with despair—at the prospect of losing her child. There was also

a glimmer of tenderness upon it, which had to be maternal. The other face was taut with bitterness. Of course I knew who the mother was. It was obvious.”

“Then why did you put me through that?”

“Because knowing is not enough—not in legal matters. I needed proof. That’s where you and your sword came in.”

“Glad to have been of use. And to have undergone one of the worst moments in my life.”

“Look at it this way,” said Solomon. “That sword of yours is an instrument of death—a necessary evil in a dangerous world. Yet today it fostered *life*. In reuniting a mother and her child, it performed a good deed—and is no doubt grateful for the opportunity.”

“I’ll ask it,” said Benaiah. “When I recover.”

And in a single gulp he emptied the goblet of wine.*

* That sword of Benaiah’s had dealt its share of death. According to the Bible, Benaiah had served as one of the Mighty Men, King David’s elite corps of warriors (though he is not be confused with Benaiah the Pirathonite, also a Mighty Man). In the Book of Chronicles he is described as follows:

“Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, the son of a valiant man of Kabzeel [a town near Beersheba], had done many acts: he slew two lionlike men of Moab; also he went down and slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day.

“And he slew an Egyptian, a man of great stature, five cubits [twelve feet] high; and in the Egyptian’s hand was a spear like a weaver’s beam; and [Benaiah] went down to him with a staff, and plucked the spear out of the Egyptian’s hand, and slew him with his own spear.

“These things did Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and had a name among the Three Mighties. . . . and David set him over the Guard.”