

The Divine Pedagogy of Formation - VIII

A FORMEE WHO BEGAN WELL

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Abstract

The elevation of Solomon as the king of Israel came as a surprise. However, soon he managed to attract the attention and admiration of his people and the neighbouring nations thanks to his wise administrative skills. Yahweh was well pleased with his attitude of not asking for long life, wealth or for the destruction of his enemies, but rather for discernment in administering justice. He blessed the chosen one with every blessing conceivable. These splendour and glory slowly turned his heart from God to himself. Instead of performing the task assigned to him by God to become a shepherd of the people, Solomon took recourse to the ways of tyrants who oppressed and exploited the people. He imposed heavy taxes and forced labour upon his people to build the temple, his own palace, the supporting terraces, the wall of Jerusalem, and soon. Thus, we see a well begun formation gradually declining and reaching a disastrous end.

Introduction

“The Lord Loved Him”

Now let us we analyze the story of Solomon. It is said of him as soon as he was born, “The Lord loved him” [2 Sam.12:24]. This sentence, which a casual reader may not even notice during the dramatic and exciting narration of the succession to the throne of David, had already settled the outcome of the story. There were many strong and influential candidates for the kingship, who were fighting each other

for it. Solomon was not even known among the public, and he had no followers. But the fact that the Lord loved him won for him the throne. Yahweh the divine Formator had predestined him as his candidate; He called him as his representative. We do not read why the Lord's selection had fallen upon him. Nothing is mentioned about his virtues, merits and qualifications. Paul's words are pertinent here: "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him... Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" [1 Cor.1:27-31]. This may be the story of the vocation of most of the candidates to priesthood and religious life. Call is a grace; it is not a reward or remuneration. It seems that the Caller had an irrational or obsessive liking and love for a particular person.

Elevation to Kingship

While the ambitious and assertive contenders miserably failed and were tragically exterminated, Solomon who had done nothing to win over the kingship was offered royalty as a gift in a plate [1 Kg.1:11-17, 22, 29-30, 32-40]. His ambitious mother and Nathan the prophet who was sidelined by other candidates, took advantage of the weak and fragile condition of David, and in a certain sense forced him to make Solomon the king. The young man was anointed; he ascended the throne. While the other candidates were acclaimed as king by the crowd, Solomon had no such popular support. Here we can find God's hand behind the scene. Really it was his choice. As Jesus the Master makes clear, it is not humans who opt for discipleship; rather it is He who chooses them to become his envoys on earth [Jn.15:16].

Dealings with the Rivals

As soon as Solomon assumed kingship, he began to assert his authority. In his dealings with the rivals he showed worldly shrewdness. Actually in his heart he had decided to do away with them.

Affair of Adonijah

During this time Adonijah, another son of David had declared himself as king [1 Kg.1:5-10, 41]. When he heard that Solomon was made king, he got afraid and clung to the horns of the altar, saying, "Let king Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword" [1 Kg.1:49-51]. At this Solomon thus reacted: "if he shows himself to be a worthy man, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground; but if evil is found in him he will die" [v.52]. Adonijah was sent

home. Later he requested Solomon's mother to recommend the king to give him Abishag who had waited on David in his old age as his wife [1 Kg.2:13-18]. Accordingly she presented the request before Solomon [1 Kg.2:19-25]. At this the king sharply reacted and swore by the Lord that Adonijah shall be put to death that day. Some scholars think that Adonijah, by marrying Abishag, was aspiring for kingship. Such an opinion does not have solid foundation. Anyhow can we justify the revengeful act of God's chosen one? Was it proper for a formee to react so cruelly? How the divine Formator would have judged it? Remember that Solomon had sworn by the name of the Lord: "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Adonijah does not pay with his life for this request!" [v.23]. This indeed cannot be judged as pleasing to the divine Formator. Still the Lord did not react immediately and chastise the called one. He was tolerant to human weakness and failures.

Affair of Abiathar

Abiathar the priest had joined the company of Adonijah when he had set himself up as king [1 Kg.1:25]. This displeased Solomon. He removed Abiathar from the priesthood of the Lord, and reminded him that he had deserved death [1 Kg.2:26-27]. The king sent him to his fields in Anathoth. Did the act of the king benefit his status of God's called one? Solomon made clear that since Abiathar had carried the Ark of the Covenant and shared all David's hardships, he is not putting him to death. This is indeed a praiseworthy act, proper to the character of a formee.

Affair of Joab

David at his deathbed had reminded Solomon of the wicked acts of Joab, the military commander, and asked his son to punish him [1 Kg.2:5-6]. When Joab heard the fate of Adonijah and Abiathar, he fled to the tent of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar [vv.28-34]. Solomon ordered Beniah to strike Joab down. Thus he justified his action. Killing Joab will clear Solomon and David's family of the guilt of the innocent blood that Joab had shed. "The Lord will repay him for the blood he shed... May the guilt of the innocent blood rest on the head of Joab and his descendants forever!" Here the formee was executing the desire of David. Also he claimed that thereby he was fulfilling the divine vengeance. How to judge such a motive? Here we find the Old Testament thinking that Yahweh will repay people for the blood they shed through human agents. Still it is improper to kill someone in the tent of the Lord and who was holding the horns of the altar.

Affair of Shimei

As David had instructed Solomon [1 Kg.2:8-9], he gave order to strike Shimei down and to kill him [1 Kg.2:36-46]. This was because Shimei had cursed and insulted David during his flight from Jerusalem. Solomon made Shimei to swear by the Lord that he will not leave Jerusalem and cross the Kidron valley. But Shimei violated this oath. Then the king, after reminding him of his evil done towards David, put him to death. Solomon's words are worth citing: "Now the Lord will repay you for your wrongdoing". The called one attributes the slaughter to the divine Formator, who was repaying for the wickedness of Shimei! This was the thinking of the OT times.

Reflection I

In the New Testament these four acts of vengeance and cruelty cannot be justified from the one who was called by God and elevated to the status of the leader of the people. The kings in Israel are supposed to be shepherds who have to bring back the strayed sheep. It is noteworthy that the author makes these cold blooded acts the first operations executed by Solomon immediately after he was gratuitously offered kingship by the magnanimous divine Formator. Should not a called one repay the Lord by acts of unconditional forgiveness and clemency? Somehow these initial acts of Solomon do not appear appropriate for the dignity of the call he received.

Portrait of a True Formee

Chapter 3 [vv.3-9] presents Solomon as an authentic formee.

One who Loved the Master

"Solomon loved the God, walking in the statues of David his father [v.3a]". Here we find the response of the formee to the divine Formator who had loved him while he was born [2 Sam.12:24]. The love first came from Yahweh. Now the formee reciprocates. He did it not simply by words, but deeds. He was careful to walk in the path of divine law. This should be the true response of an ideal formee.

An Act of Gratitude

A further act of the king is mentioned in v.4. He went to Gibeon to offer a thousand burnt offerings on the altar. These generous acts amounted to offering his own self to the Lord as sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. Thereby the formee acknowledged that the Lord is all of all and all in all of his life. It showed his readiness to remain subservient and submissive to the divine Formator forever. Human formees should

learn how to respond to the formative acts performed by their masters by loving their *guru* and offering themselves as submissive and loyal disciples.

The Pleased Formator - I

No human being can excel the divine Formator in benevolence and magnanimity. When Solomon loved Him, walked in His ways and offered sacrifices, the Lord showed his delight by appearing to Solomon during night in a dream and said: "Ask anything and I shall give it to you [v.5]". This was an unconditional offer. The formee can ask for anything. It was as if a blank cheque were offered to him. He can write whatever amount he could imagine. God cannot refuse it. This is indeed the divine pedagogy of formation, to which His human agents could subscribe.

A Proper Response

The reaction of the formee to this wonderful offer was indeed sublime.

A Whole Hearted Confession

Solomon first acknowledged Yahweh's great kindness to his father as well as to him in making him the successor to the throne [v.6].

A Self-Effacing Attitude

He addressed himself the Lord's servant [vv.7, 8, 9] and confessed: "I am only a little child and do not know how to go out or come in" among the great people too numerous to count and number.

A Sincere Supplication

Hence he requested the divine Formator: "give your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and bad [vv.7-9]".

Reflection II

Here we find an authentic profile of a genuine formee. Solomon knew well that he did not merit the kingship. It was due to the great kindness [*hesed*] of the Lord that elevated both his father David and himself to the throne. David was a mere shepherd boy; Solomon was an unknown person to the public, who never considered himself a worthy candidate to succeed the old king. The Hebrew words *hesed gadol* [great compassion] are used twice. Here Solomon delves deep into the mysterious character of Yahweh. The only reason for the creation, liberation, elevation to the status of children by covenant and giving of

the land, is God's *hesed*, which includes the ideas of merciful, steadfast, unchanging and everlasting love of the Lord. David however was faithful to Yahweh and righteous and upright in heart. Concerning himself Solomon could not claim such qualification.

The designation, 'servant', is the most fitting title for a formee. He is a mere *ebed* [the Hebrew term for servant] before the Lord, practically nobody. The more one becomes conscious of this attitude, the more he/she grows into maturity in formation. Mary, the Mother of Christ, is its best example.

Another trait of a mature formee is the knowledge that he/she is a little [*qaton*] child who does not know "how to go out or come in [v.7]". Humans are mere *qaton*, little ones, or insignificant beings in the presence of the Almighty. They are unable to do what is needed in each situation. Hence they have to cling to the Lord for their survival. Solomon's words manifest that he had acquired such an attitude. Now the divine Master has entrusted him with the duty to govern a great nation [v.9]. Hence he needed an understanding heart to judge the people [he calls them *your* people twice in v.9] and the ability to discern between good and bad, which meant to find out what is right and what is wrong. When one becomes conscious of this urgent need, he/she will spontaneously turn to the Lord for the necessary help.

The Pleased Formator - II

Yahweh became more delighted at this attitude of the formee who had not asked like ordinary humans for long life or wealth and for the destruction of the enemies, but rather for discernment in administering justice (3:10-15a). The called one was not thinking about himself, but about doing justice to the task entrusted to him by the divine Master. This should be the model for the present formees.

The gratified Formator not only granted the grace requested by Solomon, but also magnanimously provided him riches, greatness and renown. At the same time Lord set a condition for giving the formee a long life. He had to walk in God's ways and obey His statutes and commands (v.14). This was indeed a wise and pedagogical method to enthuse the formee to become more faithful to his call.

In 4:29 it is said: "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore." The author of the book of Kings continues: "Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and greater than all

the wisdom of Egypt... his fame spread to all the surrounding nations... men of all nations came to listen to his wisdom..." (vv.30-34).

A Grateful Formee

Solomon bountifully responded to this munificent act of the divine Formator. He returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant and sacrificed burnt offerings and peace offerings. Moreover, he gave a feast to all his dependents (v.15b). Thus he turned to the Lord in gratitude, praise and worship. To this vertical relationship the formee added the horizontal fellowship with his people. Solomon made them happy by giving them a sumptuous banquet.

A Wise Administrator

In 3:16-28 we find the formee exercising the divine grace granted to him for discerning between right and wrong. He judged the cause of two prostitutes both of whom claimed the same child as their own. Solomon wisely found out the real mother of the child. At his verdict the people were happy, and held him in awe, seeing that the king was gifted with the divine wisdom. Blessed are those formed ones in whom the ordinary people find the face of God!

A House for the Divine Formator

Construction and Furnishing

Now the attention of the formee was turned to build a temple for the Lord. He wanted thus to express his love for the divine Master who had done great things for him. Chapter 5 presents the preparations for building the temple; the details of the constructions and furnishings are given in 6:1-38 and 7:13-51. Solomon meticulously attended to the minute details of the constructions and furnishings. Here we find an ideal face of a disciple of the Lord.

Bringing the Ark

When the temple was well furnished, Solomon made arrangements to bring up the Ark of the Covenant to the temple (8:1-21). This was most solemnly celebrated. All Israel took part in this festival. After sacrificing innumerable sheep and cattle the sacred Ark was brought into the inner sanctuary of the temple. The Lord blessed the act by filling the temple with His glory. Then Solomon blessed the crowd by uttering words of divine praise (vv.15-21). He gratefully acknowledged the mighty deeds of the divine mercy to his father and to himself. Here we can find the true portrait of a real formee.

Prayer of Dedication

This invocation which Solomon uttered, standing before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly, spreading out his hands towards heaven (8:23-53), should be an ideal prayer which has to be found in the mouth of every disciple of Christ. He calls his father and himself “your servant” (Vv.24, 25, 26, 28(twice), 29, 30, 32, 52). The people are named “your own inheritance” (v.53) – thereby avowing that they belonged to Yahweh alone and not his subjects with whom he could do whatever he liked. Solomon began the prayer praising God’s unique position in heaven and on earth, who keeps His covenant of love and promises ever (vv.23-26).

Then the formee intercedes for his people who may transgress the covenant laws (vv.21-51). He asks for mercy and forgiveness of the Lord and entreats to desist from punishing them. Also Solomon pleads for the welfare of the land and the people, begging the divine Master to give them prosperity, peace and success. As an ideal leader he is presenting before the Lord the eventual infidelities of his subjects and tries to bail them out. This should be the true behaviour of every Christian leader. The formators have to try their best to engender in the formees this aptitudes and attitudes.

A Blessing Prayer

After rising from the kneeling position Solomon stood up and blessed the whole assembly of Israel (vv.56-61). It began with words of divine praise and invoked for the incessant presence of the Lord, and asked the Master to turn the hearts of the king and the people to Him so that they could walk in the divine ways. This way all the humans of the earth may know that the Lord is God and there is no other god beside Him. The king concluded his blessing prayer by asking the people to fully commit themselves to Yahweh and to live by His commands. Here also Solomon stands out as an authentic disciple who had delved deep into the heart of the divine Formator.

The concluding dedication ceremonies (vv.62-66) present Solomon as an ideal formee.

The Pleas'd Formator - III

Formation is a dialogical process. The grateful and generous action of the formee has to be reciprocated by the formator. The divine Formator provides the best example for such a spontaneous dynamic response. Yahweh appeared (9:1-9) to the formee and told him that He had heard the prayer of dedication and guaranteed his abiding presence in the

temple. The divine Master promised Solomon an everlasting dynasty, if he would walk in God's presence in integrity of heart and uprightness. In case the formee and his sons become disloyal, Yahweh will reject the temple and Israel will be banished from the land. Here we find the stick and carrot policy of the divine Pedagogue.

A Palace for Oneself

Solomon was not a fully self-sacrificing disciple. Before furnishing the temple he built a luxurious palace for himself (7:1-12). Perhaps one may notice here the first trace of degenerating process. When the one who is chosen to lead others turns his/her attention to himself/herself, and tries to amass riches and comforts, there begins the down fall.

Trends of Deterioration

As the divine Master had put in the heart of Solomon the divine wisdom he became the wisest man on earth so that the whole world sought audience with him, bringing with them articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices and horses and mules (10:23-25). The splendour and glory slowly turned his heart from God to himself.

Pursuit of Pleasure

Though initially Solomon loved Yahweh (3:3) gradually his affection turned towards foreign women and he married them against the divine warning about intermarriage (11:1-3). His wives turned his heart after their gods. He followed the goddess of the Sidonians and the god of Ammonites. Thus Solomon did evil in the eyes of Yahweh (vv.4-8). Earlier he had married the daughter of Pharaoh and brought her to his palace (3:1; 9:24). He accumulated golden utensils and everything in the household was made of gold (10:14-29). Thus addiction to pleasure, lust and fame made the formee a man of world, and not of God.

Forced Labour and Cruelty

Instead of performing the task assigned to him by God to become a shepherd of the people, Solomon took recourse to the ways of tyrants who oppressed and exploited the people. He conscripted forced labour to build the temple, his own palace, the supporting terraces, the wall of Jerusalem, and towns Hazor, Meddigo and Gezer (9:5). He tried to kill Jeroboam one of his officials, whom the prophet Ahijah nominated as the leader of future kingdom of Israel (11:26-40). Thus the formee, whom Yahweh loved and elevated to the kingship, failed to live up to his call.

The Divine Chastisement

Till now the divine Formator had been restraining his anger. He was very much saddened at the gradual downfall of his chosen one. Even when the Master was bestowing his graces on the called one, He was careful to give warning about the consequences of eventual infidelity (9:4-9). Now the king had turned away from Yahweh and disregarded the divine admonitions. Solomon practised the idol worship in order to please his foreign wives, and transgressed the first commandment, thereby giving licence to the people to embrace idolatry (11:4-8). At this Yahweh became angry (11:9-10). He announced the tearing of the kingdom away from Solomon and giving it to somebody else (v.11). Still the divine Formator was kind to the unfaithful formee and postponed the division of the kingdom till his death. Also the merciful Lord did not want to deprive the house of David of kingship, giving it one tribe (vv.12-13).

The formee not only broke the vertical relationship with the Master, but also the horizontal fellowship with his people. Yahweh had entrusted Solomon with the task of providing Israelites justice and righteousness so that everyone could enjoy a peaceful and just life. But the king enrolled the people to forced labour to build not only the temple, but also his palace, its supporting terraces, the wall of Jerusalem and the cities. This was blatant violation of the covenant law.

How to turn the formee to the righteous path of God? Solomon needed chastisement, which may help him to come to his senses. For this the Lord raised up against the king an adversary, Hadad the Edomite. This young man fled to Egypt and became a favourite of Pharaoh who gave him a princess as wife (11:14-22). As Hadad heard about the death of David, he together with his band returned to Israel, and began to engage in skirmishes. Further, Yahweh raised up against Solomon another adversary, Rezon, who gathered men around him and became the leader of a group of rebels and created troubles in the country (vv.23-25). Also Jeroboam one of the officials rebelled against the king (vv.26-28). He was destined by Yahweh through the prophet Ahijah to rule over ten tribes of Israel (vv.29-39). Solomon did not learn the lesson intended by the divine Formator. To exterminate these adversaries he used violence mercilessly. The king tried to kill Jeroboam (v.40). Anyhow the last period of his reign was not peaceful, and the rebels created restless days for him. The account of the book of I Kings does not mention that Solomon repented and turned back to Yahweh.

Reflection III

How to evaluate the story of Solomon from the formation perspective? He was practically a nobody. Still the divine Master is said to have loved him. Humanly speaking it was irrational and illogical. On account of this love the divine Formator called him and gave him the kingship. The first part of the story speaks of a well-begun formation. The candidate wholeheartedly, gratefully and gracefully cooperated. He did what was pleasing in the eyes of the divine Pedagogue. With all humility and loyalty the called one sought the divine guidance and prayed for the grace to govern the people with equity, righteousness and sagacity. The pleased Guru granted him all the requested graces. Further, He was generous to shower on Solomon the gifts of wisdom, wealth, prosperity and celebrity. Solomon put his heart and soul to construct a temple for his beloved Master. The delighted Master appeared to his favourite disciple and promised him that He will establish his loyal throne over Israel forever. Still the Formator put a condition: "If you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness... and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws..." (9:4)

Solomon did not pay attention to this divine warning. His passionate, obsessive attachment to his foreign wives led him astray. His inordinate craving for luxuries, riches and fame made him an ego-centred man. The initial love for Yahweh was lost, and he was willing to promote offering sacrifices to the other deities in order to please his women. The king did evil in the sight of his Master by oppressing and exploiting the common people. Instead of practising a politics of justice and compassion, Solomon embraced the ideology of secular empires and cruelly dealt with those who did not side with him. The anger of Yahweh and chastisement did not help him to forsake the evil, cruel and inhuman paths which he was following. The divine Formator could do nothing before the freedom given to the humans! Thus a well begun formation did not crown with success at the end. The story of Solomon seems to be repeated again and again in the modern formation field.