

AMBIGUITIES AND ONE IN SOLOMON'S JUDGEMENT

Saturday Bible Study, September 3

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Conference Video: <http://worldmethodistconference.com/wp-content/uploads/wmc2016-videos/Wmc16-satbiblestudy-yoo-v2-1.m4v>

Good morning! My name is Yani Yoo. I bring greetings from sisters and brothers in Asia. It is a great honor to be here with you mighty Methodists from around the world! I am a lecturer teaching of the Old Testament at Methodist University, Seoul, Korea. and I am a pastor of an English speaking congregation within a mega Korean Methodist Church.

Growing up as a girl in the 60s and 70s in Korea, education was a luxury. My father would not send us girls, above elementary school. Unlike our brothers, he sometimes said, 'girls will soon get married. Why waste the money?' Out of my two older sisters, one finished elementary and the other finished middle school. While raising their children after marriage they pursued their education including college. What my sisters went through was common to women born some years after the Korean war. As for me, I had to prove my worth to be sent to school and finished high school. During middle school, I became Christian. At a revival, I got a call to ministry. Since there was no support from my then non-christian parents, in 1980 after high school I decided to be on my own and pursue my calling. So I left my country home and became a factory worker in a big city. I was going to save money for my seminary Bachelor of Theology, which was then good enough for ordination. But the wage of \$60 a month barely covered the rent and food. And the freezing winter, I walked miles to the factory because there was no money for transportation. I spent nights without heat. I could feel the dampness in my back coming from the floor through a thin blanket. I was afraid that in the next morning, they would have found a frozen dead body in the room. So every night I prayed, 'oh God if you give me another day, I will live every second eagerly.'

Those days, I did not feel poor or lonely because I strongly relied on God. Also found a wonderful church, my first Methodist Church. In our young adults group, there were about 200 members. There were many young girls between ages 15 and 25 who like me, left their country hometowns to make money at garment and electronic companies. But their goal was to support their families, especially their brothers' education. These girls became Christian in the city. I was inspired by their strong faith. They hardly ever had a day off, even though there was a labor law. The factories made them busy to be part of the miracle of []. To earn the opportunity to come to church, they volunteered to clean the factory and the dorm rooms they shared with 30 other girls each. Sometimes, they were very loving and sharing out of their meager means. Sometimes they left a pair of socks and a half pound of meat in my room and even briquettes to heat the room. Then, it was my honor to share my dream to study and boost their own desire to pursue their own education. We were like the early church in the New Testament. Then we went our separate ways.

Two decades later, we had a reunion. It was when I finished my study in the USA and went back to Korea. About 30 showed up that day. One woman said to me, last night, I could not sleep a wink in expectation of seeing you. You are the one I am wishing to see next to God. You changed my life. It was an honor to hear that. Because of my constant nagging and pushing many girls pursued education. See, young people listen to their friends, not to their parents. On the reunion day, I found out that they became school teachers, Kindergarten Directors and social workers. Not only that, they became devoted church women. I was so proud of them and thankful to them. Since, at that time I was appointed

a regional missionary into Asia and the Pacific, and the Women's Division of the United Methodist Women, I could appreciate that they along with other church women had been the backbone of the Korean Church, which had made a miraculous growth. But at the same time I was sad because the church had not recognized their gift and grace enough. They were still cleaning the church and cooking in the church kitchen but invisible in the decision-making body. For example, in the Korean congregation, the Korean speaking congregation of my mega church, there are sixty lay elders and all are men, except one. I wonder in this postmodern age, why so many women are leaving the church in Korea. Women's gifts and grace could be fully recognized and used for God's Kingdom.

Going back to my seminary story, about a year after working at a factory, I entered seminary. After all those cold risky nights, I went on to finally study theology in great joy and become a minister. At last, to my shock, I learned at the Korean Church did not ordain women. God called me, but the Methodist Church did not. By the way, the church started giving full-time ordination in 1989, after I left the nation. I was so disappointed with the church, but by God's grace and with the help of so many people including the new annual conference of the United Methodist Church, I did not give up and this morning I am sharing here with you.

Yet, I'm sad because women pastors in Korea are still struggling to find churches to serve and to make a living. So starting with my personal experience, little by little, I could start to see other women around the world who suffer from similar problems. I could see the poor, the migrants, homosexuals and other minorities who suffer from systematic evils and other biases. That is why, I have a passion for them. It was natural for me to read the Bible with the point of view of people who do not feel fully belonging in the worlds. I believe this biblical interpretation empowers those who want to belong to the one full circle of God. Those who work hard to include all in that one circle of God.

So this morning we are going to read the story of Solomon's judgement, in 1 Kings 3:16-28, from the perspective of women and common people with concept of ambiguities and one. We understand the [] as the synonym of unity and the opposite of separation and division. According to the traditional understanding of this Biblical story, it says that Solomon was wisely judged a difficult case. Many translations reflect this understanding in the title of the story. Could this Biblical interpretation be really all? One day as I was reading the story, I found some ambiguities. Now, I invite you to read the story with me. And as we read it together, please try to find questions and ambiguities in the text. Let us read the whole text together.

16 Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. 17 The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. 18 Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. 19 Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. 20 She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. 21 When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." 22 But the other woman said, "No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours." The first said, "No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine." So they argued before the king.

23 Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead'; while the other says, 'Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.'" 24 So the king said, "Bring me a sword," and they brought a sword before the king. 25 The king said, "Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other." 26 But the woman whose son was alive said to the king – because compassion for her son burned within her – "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!" The other said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it." 27 Then the king responded: "Give the first woman the living boy;

do not kill him. She is his mother.” 28 All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice. (1 Kings 3: 16-28, NRSV)

Please see if the ambiguities you found include some of these. Why is the king anonymous, not named as Solomon? How come lower class women interact directly with the king and what does this indicate? Why is there no pursuit of evidence or witnesses? Why does a sword appear? Does the king really know who the birth mother of the living boy is? Why no punishment for the accuser? Does the statement that the people were afraid of the king, mean that they were literally afraid of his violence?

Scholars have paid attention to these ambiguities and have come up with various answers. Ambiguities of the text are open to many interpretations. According to the Webster’s Dictionary, ambiguity means a word or expression that can be understood in two or more possible ways. Ambiguity is a common literary device. It both confuses and invites the reader into to new insights. At a glance, our text delivers a clear cut message. But because of ambiguities, it can have meaning opposite to our traditional understanding. In reading between the lines, we observe what divides and what unites. In the process, we see that although the two women look divided as rivals, there is a possibility of there being one. We also see that the king is not only unwise, but divides people and makes them afraid. Then we will understand the purpose of the story in a new light.

Here we will deal with seven ambiguities: the women’s relationship, demonstrative pronouns, the trial process, the sword, wisdom, people’s response, the purpose of the story. Now let us dive into the sea of ambiguities.

Number one ambiguity: The Women’s Relationship. The narration tells us that the women were prostitutes and they each gave birth draws the attention of the audience. They represent the lower class. They may reveal that the king cares about low class people. At the same time it makes the king liable to be degraded with his interactions with the women. In fact the women do not take a low profile or appear servile. Many people tend to take sides with one of the women. I have not encountered any commentary that sees the two women as one. As scholars often regard them as enemies. Following the surface of the text, some consider the plaintive as the true mother of the living child. Others believe that the defendant is the true mother. But if we take the women only as litigants, we are fooled by the significance of the story. Since we have the theme of One in Mind, I’d like to focus on the cause relationship between them. Their oneness. And the rest of this translates, 3:17b as, “and I gave birth while she was in the house.” Taking the Hebrew word ‘ema’ with her, as “while she was.” But the literal translation gives an interesting meaning, “I gave birth with her in the house.” Then it may well indicate that the second woman helped the first woman give birth, working as a midwife. 1 Kings 3:18 reads, that there is no one else in the house. If so, the second woman had to help the first woman giving birth, despite her own pregnancy. She too gave birth to a boy, 3 days later. The next verse tells of mutual support. On the third day, after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We are together. Scholars tend to put these verses together in a lump along with following, there’s no stranger with us in the house. Only two of us in the house. To give a simple meaning, that there were only the two women in the house. But if we place the sentence, “we are together” in the context of a child’s birth, it sheds new light on the women’s relationship. I gave birth with her in the house. This woman also gave birth and we were together. Each woman helped the other with childbirth. They were close and needed each other for survival. The Hebrew word for house also means family. Four occurrences of the word in the story also indicate that the women were like a family. At least to this point, their relationship was not broken. After the first woman finishes speaking a long speech, the second woman, described as the other woman, started speaking. What is expected of this woman is to give us her own persuasive story to repute the first

woman. She can pinpoint two contradictions to the first woman's speech. Firstly, the first woman said she was asleep when the second woman swapped the baby. As if she was watching wide awake. Of course, she can reasonably reconstruct the incident, although she was asleep. But she said in her own words, she got up in the morning to nurse her son. In verse 21, she mentions the phrase, in the morning, twice. The fact that she got a sound night sleep, makes herself liable to be the one who laid on her own son in the night, not even knowing it. This is the second internal contradiction. So the second woman can use these discrepancies from other stories to attack the first woman. But surprisingly, she does not do that. She simply and briefly says, "no surely my son is the living and your son is the dead." Then the first woman retorts with a similar expression, reversing the words of the other woman, "No surely your son is the dead and my son is the living." What is intriguing is that the women talk to each other rather than talking to the judge. They say my son and your son not her son. Later the birth mother asks the king, to give her son to the other woman in order to let her son live. The other woman still speaks to the mother, not to the king. It shall be neither mine nor yours, divided. The women seem to be more interested in the relationship with each other than winning the case.

Come to think of it, the women have a lot in common. Both women are prostitutes and live in one house. Both give birth to a son almost at the same time, three days apart. Both assist each other's childbirth. Both lay their boy at their breast while they sleep. Both get up. Both speak in a similar way. The two women have so many points of likeness that actresses with similar likeness would be cast if the story were made into a movie.

We will have discussion opportunities. You will be given 5 minutes. You will find a partner or a neighbor to share your ideas over this question. You can use your imagination. There is not right answer. At the end of 5 minutes I will say, "Ding, Dong, Dang." I would appreciate if you would end your discussion. So the question is, " Could there have been other ways for the Biblical women to solve their issue, rather than bringing it to the king, to the point of breaking up? Now you have 5 minutes.

"Ding, Dong, Dang."

[more to be filled in]