

# SOLOMON, DANIEL, AND THE DETECTIVE STORY: THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF A LITERARY GENRE

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As I have demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the testimony of the two women who appear before Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:16–27 constitutes a law-court riddle. The king solves this riddle by means of a ruse based on his godlike insight into human nature. Folk riddles can serve social functions, by leading aspiring riddle-solvers to explore cultural boundaries, in order to keep those boundaries flexible and responsive to social change. The boundary explored in the judgment story is that which separates immediate divine knowledge of the human heart, from the inability of ordinary human beings to fathom the true character of their fellows.

The ideology of this story, and the kind of comforting message it might have carried to the citizens of ancient Israel, can be better understood by viewing it in terms of a special kind of riddle narrative: the classical detective story. As Hutter points out, detectives are “inevitably concerned with the problem of knowledge” (1983, p. 235). Many critics have described detectives as riddle-solvers,<sup>2</sup> and crime itself has been defined in precisely the same terms as the riddle, namely, as “a question that demands an answer.”<sup>3</sup> The modern detective genre arose at the same time as the first urban Detective Department,<sup>4</sup> and for the same reasons. Both were responses to puzzling and unsettling aspects of life in

1. In “The Riddle of Solomon’s Judgment and the Riddle of Human Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” presented at the annual meeting of the SBL in Anaheim, November, 1985.

2. E.g., Cawelti, 1976, pp. 88–89; Most, 1983, p. 342; Aydelotte, 1970, p. 323; Barzun, 1980, p. 148; Alewyn, 1983, p. 68.

3. Porter’s definition of crime (1981, p. 121) and Jolles’ definition of the riddle (1958, p. 129).

4. Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” appeared in 1841, before the word “detective” even existed in English. The first Detective Department came into being a year later. The

the great cities of nineteenth century Europe and America. One critical problem was the inability of ordinary citizens to detect duplicity among their fellows in the urban crowd, a failing which generated what Brand (1985) calls "epistemological anxiety." The detective story served to alleviate such anxiety, by showing that heroes like Dupin, Poe's "detective god" (Daniel, 1967), can see into the souls of all human beings, including the criminals who threaten social order. A review of relevant biblical evidence will indicate that epistemological anxiety was also prevalent among the citizens of ancient urban<sup>5</sup> Israel, anxiety which might well have been assuaged by a tale which highlights the king's ability to unmask a false mother.

When literary critics and biblicists seek to locate elements of the detective story in the Bible, they usually focus on the apocryphal tales involving the detective Daniel.<sup>6</sup> R. H. Pfeiffer (1949, pp. 448-449) is one of the few scholars to go back to Solomon's judgment as "the earliest example of a story containing at least the germ of criminal detection." More recently, Sternberg (1985, pp. 167-169) has interpreted the judgment story in terms of the so-called "fair play" convention of detective fiction, without taking into account specific social and historical conditions in ancient Israel.

In contrast to Sternberg, I will argue that the fair-play rule is not observed in 1 Kings 3, and, more importantly, that the social function of this biblical narrative is based more on the portrayal of Solomon as a detective hero than on the presence of any formal traits typical of the genre. Here I will be clearly at odds with critics like Winks (1980, p. 7), who are willing to entertain the possibility that detective stories might be present in texts like the Bible, but still insist that they do not contain detectives.

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Commissioners of Metropolitan Police thereby gave official recognition to the fact that the police had not totally succeeded in their primary duty, namely, to *prevent* crime (see Collins, 1964, p. 197, and Brand, 1985, p. 48).

5. Because this analogy between ancient and modern urban centers has to do with the subjective experience of individuals as expressed in texts, its validity is not affected by the vast differences in the cities' size and structure. Louis Finkelstein (1940, pp. xviii, xxv-xxvi) makes a similar point when drawing an analogy between Israel in the eighth century B.C.E. and seventeenth century London.

6. Literary critics: Messac (1929, pp. 45-46); E. M. Wrong, 1946, p. 19; Sayers, 1946, p. 74. Biblicists: Zöckler (1891) [cited by Baumgartner (1959, p. 47, n. 4), who qualifies his approval of Zöckler's view by saying that this designation does not exactly capture the stories' genre, and is much too modern]; R. H. Pfeiffer, 1949, pp. 448-449. In his recent exhaustive study of "Susanna," H. Engel rejects Märchen, legal legend, and detective story as appropriate labels for this apocryphal text (1985, pp. 67-68, 175).

Solomon is what might be called a “detective of human nature,” as opposed to a “hero of scientism” (Macdonald, 1984, p. 24) like Sherlock Holmes, or a divinely driven interrogator like Daniel. Human nature detectives, among whom should be included Dickens’ Inspector Bucket and Collins’ Sergeant Cuff, solve crimes by attending to the apparently unfathomable behavior of human beings, ultimately showing that human nature need not remain an unsolvable riddle, at least for those who possess godlike wisdom. That this might also be a basic message of the judgment story takes on added significance when one considers that a number of scholars have recently described human character in the Bible as mysterious, impenetrable, or undecidable (see Lasine, 1986, pp. 48–51).

### *1. The Facts of the Case and Available Evidence*

In 1 Kgs 3:16–22, two harlots come before Solomon and describe their dispute. The complainant explains that both women had given birth to male babies, the speaker three days before the other. She accuses her adversary of having arisen around midnight and stolen her baby while she slept, after having killed her own child by lying on top of it. She testifies that she only discovered the substitution the following morning, when she examined the child after have arisen to nurse it. The respondent then affirms the living child as her own, claiming that the dead baby is the complainant’s. Although Prov 18:17 warns that the person who pleads a case first will seem right until cross-examined by the other, the respondent does not challenge any of the particulars of her rival’s report, not even her claim to know about the respondent’s activities at a time when she herself admits she was asleep.

Solomon resolves this dispute without recourse to ordinary investigative procedures. He chooses to ignore available physical evidence, such as the bodies of the two children and the mothers’ breasts. A modern physician declares that Solomon “cannot be excused” for failing to consider such “clinical clues” (Levin, 1983, pp. 464–465)!<sup>7</sup> In any event, Solomon’s failure to examine obviously relevant evidence shows that his

7. Levin argues that the women must have come before Solomon within one day of the alleged kidnapping, for the live child needed to be fed: “with two women fighting over one hungry baby there was no time to lose” (1983, p. 464). Levin (p. 465) points out that while one mother would still have flaccid breasts at this time, this still cannot decide who is the mother of the live baby. He believes that the decisive clues overlooked by Solomon are (1) that the five day old’s navel would be a hard, thin, shriveled, black cord, while the two day old’s would still be wide, supple, and fleshy, and (2) the stools of the five-day-old would be bright yellow, not black or green-black, like the two-day-old.

judicial wisdom must be *anything but* what McKane (1965, p. 59) supposes it to be, namely, "skill in sifting the evidence." The king also makes no attempt to locate either unnoticed fact-witnesses or character-witnesses.<sup>8</sup> Finally, because Solomon does not interrogate or cross-examine the women, they remain indistinguishable in terms of name, profession, dwelling, reason for pregnancy, and, except for the three day discrepancy, conditions of giving birth.

Far from being able to test the women's inner natures by means of a ruse, the reader is unable to weigh such external factors as physical appearance, dress, and mannerisms (such as those listed in Prov 6:12-13 as characteristic of wicked people).<sup>9</sup> In fact, because v. 26 quotes the king as saying "Give *her* the living child," and not "Give the complainant" or "Give the respondent," the reader who wants to determine whether Solomon is pointing to the complainant or the respondent as the true mother must rely solely on their quoted speech in vv. 16-22.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, it is inappropriate to apply the fair-play rule to 1 Kings 3, as does Sternberg, who claims that "the two detectives [Solomon and the reader] must weigh the same evidence by the same lifelike standards" (1985, pp. 167, 169). Leaving aside the issue of whether detective fiction *ever* gives more than the appearance of fair play with the reader,<sup>11</sup> it is apparent that Solomon has more evidence and investigative options at his disposal.

Still, one might argue that the reader is given full access to the words used by the harlots in addressing the king, if not their intonation. Long

8. It is Solomon's failure to "shin aroun' mongs' de neighbors" which convinces Mark Twain's Jim that Solomon is not so wise as he is supposed to be (Twain, 1958, p. 66).

9. Crenshaw calls this the wicked's "body language" (1981, p. 90). Recent research in legal psychology indicates that juries are often misled by both the verbal and the non-verbal "clues" given by witnesses (see, e.g., G. R. Miller et al, 1981). Legal scholars like Jerome Frank (1960, pp. 731-753) contend that lawyers exploit the cognitive vulnerability of jury members by goading witnesses to exhibit behavior which juries will wrongly take as proof of dishonesty, even when the lawyers know that the witnesses are honest and their testimony is accurate.

10. Translations like the RSV and NEB obscure this fact by rendering Solomon's "Give her . . ." as "Give the first woman." As I demonstrated in "The Riddle of Solomon's Judgment" (see n. 1, above), most readers (including biblical scholars) make the uncritical assumption that the complainant is the true mother, even when they are reading the text in the original. The LXX helps the reader toward this conclusion by removing the complainant's admission that she was asleep at the time of the alleged crime she is reporting.

11. See Aydelotte (1970, pp. 317, 319) and Callois (1983, p. 10), who stress how easily an author can distract the reader's attention from the clues which are technically being included. Also see n. 34, below, for the views of Klein and Keller on the kinds of detective stories in which "fair play" is even conceivable.

(1984, pp. 68–69) seems to consider the very brevity of the respondent's speech as incriminating.<sup>12</sup> Yet "verbose, even courtly" (Long, p. 68) speech like the complainant's is also employed by deceivers in the Bible. This suggests that style and length of speech are not unequivocal indicators of character. A detail study of quoted speech in the Bible would provide ample support for this conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *The Judgment Story and Modern Detective Fiction as Responses to Urban Cognitive Anxiety*

The fact that Solomon shows no interest in physical evidence or additional witnesses implies that these factors cannot, in themselves, resolve difficult cases. Clues derived from these sources, as well as the verbal testimony available to the reader, remain inconclusive if the investigator does not *already* know the true characters of those involved. Many biblical texts also recognize that evidence and witness-testimony can be manipulated to make investigators reach erroneous and unjust conclusions.<sup>14</sup> The society-destroying effects of false witness and other forms of deception are acknowledged not only in the legal collections, but in narrative, prophetic, and sapiential texts.<sup>15</sup>

12. Long (pp. 68–69) does not hesitate to identify the respondent of v. 22 with the second speaker in v. 26, characterizing her as "chilling in her clipped speech . . . , which carries a singularly vindictive tone. . . ."

13. The complainant's "*bi'ādōni*," echoed by one of the women in v. 26, is uttered by a number of very different personages in the Bible, whose common denominator is their dependency and inferiority to the person addressed (see Hoftijzer, 1970, p. 428). Such speakers range from the ingenuous, emotionally torn Hannah (1 Sam 1:26), to Abigail and the wise woman of Tekoa, both of whom use longer forms of the *bi'ādōni* formula (1 Sam 25:24; 2 Sam 14:9; cf. Hoftijzer, 1970, p. 427). While Abigail and the wise woman are generally taken as positive figures, both employ formulas of politeness and flattery in their lengthy speeches in order to manipulate David, their impressionable hearer. Because the wise woman's words are explicitly said to be untrue, it is clear that her polite, verbose speech is no more a reliable indicator of truthfulness than are the "extremely terse" (Hertzberg, 1964, p. 300) responses given to David by the morally suspect servant Ziba in 2 Sam 9:2–5.

14. The misuse of physical evidence is repeatedly illustrated in the Joseph story (see, e.g., Daube, 1947, pp. 8–9, 252). Klopfenstein quotes the description of false witness as a hammer, sword, and sharp arrow in Prov 25:18 as an indication of "how strongly the life- and society-destroying effect of false witness was felt in Israel" (1964, p. 23). That the two or more witness rule in Deut 17:6 and 19:15 is inadequate protection against the dangers of false witness is evident from the stories of Naboth (1 Kgs 21) and "Susanna."

15. E.g., Exod 20:13, 23:1; Deut 19:16–21; Hos 4:2; Jer 7:6; Prov 6:19, 14:5, 25:18. Hos 4:2 indicates that the ninth commandment was later understood in a broader sense, linking false testimony with other kinds of lying. The emphasis on the problem of false witness in

Yet, even the books which are most concerned with these problems are vague about the specific investigative procedures which might correct them. This is equally true of Proverbs, which confidently predicts the exposure of deceivers (26:26), and Deuteronomy, which assumes that difficult cases can be solved through what Weinfeld (1972, p. 235) describes as "the mediation of purely human factors."<sup>16</sup>

All such texts are in harmony with statements in the Hebrew Bible which contrast God's immediate and infallible knowledge of human character with the human tendency to be misled by deceptive words and appearances. This contrast is often expressed in terms of the investigator's ability to "search out" or "test" an individual's true character.<sup>17</sup> Sternberg (1985, pp. 46, 89) goes so far as to assert that in the Hebrew Bible man is opposed to God not so much in terms of mortality as of knowledge. He claims that an "impassable line between God and man" separates divine omniscience and human ignorance.<sup>18</sup>

Modern writers of detective fiction make the cognitive powers of the great detective seem all the more divine by contrasting his methods to the pedestrian procedures of the official metropolitan police and court system. As noted by Hutter (1983, p. 235), the problem of knowledge with which these investigators are concerned is "only intensified by the urban upheaval of the world in which they move, . . ." Similarly, Brand argues that the crimes in Poe's stories not only make the reader aware of

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sapiential texts is significant. As von Rad points out (1972, p. 85), "of the great public institutions, only the law, . . . above all with reference to the important office of witness, actually intrudes into the world depicted in the didactic statements and, . . . in a limited number of passages, the monarchy."

16. Given the fact that both Proverbs and Deuteronomy emphasize the need to reinforce the individual's conscience, precisely because there exist crimes which society *cannot* control (see Weinfeld, 1972, pp. 265-267, 276, 288), and the fact that Deuteronomy admits the prevalence of social injustices caused by undetected duplicity, it is difficult to understand how "purely human factors" could be deemed adequate to solve difficult cases involving deceitful persons. The inadequacy of human strategies would seem to be implied by the very use of the phrase "*kī yippālē<sup>3</sup> mimṣēkā*" to describe the difficult cases of Deut 17:8, for the root *pl<sup>3</sup>* denotes something beyond human powers of cognition and resolution, including insoluble riddles (see Weinfeld, 1972, pp. 258-259).

17. The parade example is 1 Sam 16:7, in which Yahweh cautions Samuel that humans tend to be misled by external visual appearances, whereas God looks into the heart. Also see Jer 17:9-10, Job 13:7-9, and Prov 25:2-3 (all of which employ *ḥqr*, the key Hebrew root for investigation), as well as 1 Kgs 8:39 and Judith 8:14.

18. Jackson (1979, pp. 42-43; cf. p. 38) also stresses the "binary opposition" of human and divine cognition, suggesting that the norms expressed by the laws in Exodus 22 governing cases beyond the capacity of human judges were included in part to stress the difference between human and divine cognition.

his vulnerability to urban violence, but also to the breaking of “epistemological laws” (1985, pp. 40, 50). Because the moral character of people in the urban crowd cannot be “read” from their faces or everyday behavior, they are unknowable, and therefore unpredictable. This creates anxiety which Poe exploited and then allowed to be resolved by a detective who is “a superhuman and panoramic interpreter” (p. 54).

Those citizens of ancient Israel who were convinced of their inability to detect deceit in the hearts of their fellows would have good reason to experience anxiety over this fact, not only in judicial situations, but in all phases of their social and economic lives. This would be particularly true during the period of rapid urbanization spurred by the institution of the monarchy, the period to which the judgment story is usually dated. The kinds of social injustice condemned by the eighth-century prophets like Amos have been called evils “inherent in the economic life of a city” (Sandmel, 1978, p. 60). More unsettling than one’s vulnerability to deceit in the marketplace was the inability to detect deception by one’s most intimate friends and relatives. Micah’s warning not to trust a close friend (*ʿallûp*) or even “she who lies in your bosom” (7:5), is particularly significant in the present context, for, in Phillips’ words, it occurs within a larger “description of a society in which no one could be trusted” (1982, p. 222). Similarly, while the speaker in Psalm 55 wants to flee from the bustle of the city, where oppression and guile never depart from the marketplace (v. 12b), his greatest agony is over the betrayal of a former friend (*ʿallûp*; *mēyuddāʿî*), whom he thought he knew intimately (v. 14). Overholt (1970, p. 84) is correct to conclude that Jacob-like untrustworthy brothers and neighbors (Jer 9:1–5, 7; cf. Ps 123:3) signal a national disease which “has extended to the very heart of the social order.”

Anxiety over one’s vulnerability to betrayal by “brothers and neighbors” is also discernible in modern detective fiction. As Knight points out (1980, p. 89), seven of the first twelve Sherlock Holmes stories focus on breaches of fidelity and a failure to respect the rights of others. Even more significant is the fact that deception is often practiced by members of one’s own family, particularly fathers, husbands, and fiancés. In many of these cases no “actionable” crime ever occurs, as Holmes himself points out to Dr. Watson (1976, p. 157). Such acts of deceit and betrayal may have devastating or even fatal effects on those whose trust is abused, but, as biblical law also recognizes,<sup>19</sup> they are not the kind of

19. This recognition is expressed by the emphasis on addressing the individual’s conscience (see n. 16, above). If appealing to the individual’s conscience were an effective

"crimes against the state" which are punishable by society as a corporate entity.

Finally, even some of the most common conventions of the classical detective story assume that ordinary people cannot detect the malefactors in their midst. This is most clear with the "least likely person" rule. The fact that the criminal can turn out to be the person considered least likely by both reader and others in the text, means that ordinary cognitive powers cannot distinguish between an evildoer and his *total opposite*.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. *Solomon as a Detective of Human Nature*

#### A. *Solomon and Modern Detective Heroes*

The scene of the crime is still  
the human heart.

Ross Macdonald<sup>21</sup>

Solomon shows himself to be a detective of human nature when he goes to the heart of the matter by going to the hearts of the disputants. His mock death-order causes both women to respond spontaneously and sincerely, their contrary emotions of compassion and envy providing a true witness to their natures. As Bird (1974, p. 61) points out, compassion and envy are *both* "primary characteristics" of the mother in the historical writings. This conveys the message that general maternal nature is stable, and that one can predict how specific "true" and "false" mothers will act. This message is underscored by the narrator, who leads the reader to conclude that it is only natural for a true mother to be compassionate enough to save her child by surrendering it (whether she

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deterrent, it would fulfill what was supposed to be the primary function of the new 19th century police, namely, the prevention of crime. See n. 5, above.

20. Alewyn (1983, p. 70) believes that this device betrays a doubt about the aptitude of our organs of experience, undermining trust in reason and science. Aydelotte (1970, p. 323), on the other hand, contends that the least likely person idea does serve a comforting function. The reader is said to get tremendous vicarious satisfaction when the criminal is identified, for this confirms he is right to suspect everybody. Yet, what is confirmed for Aydelotte's hypothetical reader is merely his epistemological inadequacy. This confirmation would not seem to bring "tremendous satisfaction," unless it were followed by the assurance that there exist special human beings who *can* see into the souls of all criminals, no matter how unlikely they may appear.

21. Macdonald, 1984, p. 22. Macdonald argues that the emotions of violence, concupiscence, anger, and fear of the ape in Poe's Rue Morgue story are just as much human qualities as the detective's reason.



be a harlot, as in this case, or the mother of Moses, as in Exodus 2). He does so by twice telling the reader that the living baby is “her child” *before* she makes her compassionate plea (v. 26). This also predisposes the reader to take the other woman’s echoing<sup>22</sup> of Solomon’s death-order as what a false mother would naturally say when she is tricked into betraying herself.

Admittedly, Mendenhall denies that the spite of the woman who wants the child divided marks her as the false mother. Resisting the narrator’s direction and authority, he argues that this call for the child’s death could “just as easily” characterize a true mother who “would rather see her child killed than give him up to an unscrupulous bitch” (1974, p. 324). While Mendenhall clearly believes that such emotional evidence is equivocal, most commentators agree with Freud’s definite conclusion (1959, pp. 52–53) that it is “the bereaved woman [who can be] recognized by this [death-]wish,” even when they are not influenced by the narrator’s identification of the true mother.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that other God-inspired biblical personages like Joseph and Nathan<sup>24</sup> also use strong emotion as a “truth serum” provides further evidence that in the Hebrew Bible suddenly provoked feelings can be relied upon to unmask a person’s true character. Even deceivers like the

22. While the false mother echoes the king’s order to “divide” the child, the king proceeds to echo the true mother’s earlier plea to “give her the living child, and by no means slay it” (vv. 26, 27). He uses her exact words, including the rare *yālūd* for the child, changing (in the MT) only the negative particle from *ʾal* to the stronger *lōʾ*.

23. Many of the commentators who have attempted to fathom the false mother’s reasons for encouraging the division of the child have done so by showing how her action conforms to *their own* assumptions about human nature. Suggested motives include envy, spite, jealousy, and fear of reproach. Hammond (n.d., pp. 64–66) speculates that the woman might be attempting to flatter the king by agreeing with him, a conjecture which recalls Simeon ben Shetah’s advice to “thoroughly examine the witnesses and be guarded in your words, lest through them they learn to falsify” (*ʾAbôt* 1.9).

24. In 2 Sam 12:1–6, Nathan uses his mawkish ewe-lamb story to trigger a vehement and unguarded response from Solomon’s father David (see Lasine, 1984). Joseph employs similar devices to discover how the characters of Judah and his other brothers might have changed. Like Solomon, Joseph prompts a strong emotional response from others by restraining his own strong emotions (namely, “warmed compassions”; Gen 43:30), a fact which has led Brueggemann (1972, p. 68) to accuse Solomon of being “calloused” and Coats to call Joseph “cruel” and “Machiavellian” (1976, p. 88). Ironically, the same David who is judged by Nathan through his hot emotional response to the lamb story, is himself *truly* callous when he acts as judge of the Mephibosheth/Ziba dispute (2 Sam 16:1–4; 19:25–31). While Hertzberg (1964, p. 367) calls David’s verdict “Solomonic,” the king’s precipitous and unjust division of Mephibosheth’s property is a totally “un-Solomonic” solution to that difficult case.

false mother give their true selves away when, in the words of the speaker in Ps 39:2–4, they can no longer keep a “muzzle” (*maḥsôm*) on their emotions.

While many modern fictional detectives rely on logical analysis and the examination of seemingly trivial details to discover the truth, most of the famous detective heroes of the nineteenth century do use their insight into the human heart to solve the riddle of crime. Thus, Poe’s Dupin boasts that “most men, in respect of himself, wore windows in their bosoms” (1975, p. 144). Similarly, Dickens’ Bucket can “dip down to the bottom” of a person’s mind in a moment (1964, p. 319), while one of Sherlock Holmes’ prospective clients tells him that she has heard that he “can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart” (1976, p. 99).<sup>25</sup>

In many cases, the detectives who display such extraordinary insight into human nature are themselves regarded as something more than human. Thus, the Parisian police consider Dupin’s solution of the Rue Morgue murders to be “little less than miraculous” (1975, p. 170; cf. p. 214). Poe scholars have even dubbed the aristocratic Dupin a “demi-god,” and likened him to an “Apollonian deity” (Moldenhauer, 1968, pp. 290–291; cf. Daniel, 1967, p. 104). Even middle-class detectives like Bucket and Cuff, and the gentlemanly “class hero” Holmes (Porter, 1981, p. 157), are viewed or described as being more than human.<sup>26</sup>

These detectives are also godlike in the sense that others view them as inscrutable.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Most (1983, p. 343) asserts that the detective is a

25. Bucket is also perceived by others as being “cognizant of everything” (Dickens, 1964, p. 644), and the narrator notes that “nothing escapes him” (p. 717). He can see through a charlatan whose false facade has deceived the otherwise keen eyes of the book’s protagonist (p. 779). Similarly, Sergeant Cuff, the detective in the first English detective novel, Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, is viewed by one narrator as being able to read his thoughts (1966, pp. 150, 163, 193).

26. The narrator of *Bleak House* compares Bucket to “a homely Jupiter” (p. 746), and his fat forefinger to a familiar demon which charms the guilty to their destruction (p. 715). Bucket appears to others to have the ability to be everywhere at once (pp. 639, 644). Cuff, for his part, makes predictions and prophecies which appear “marvelous” to one narrator (pp. 232, 354), is viewed as a hero and treated as a celebrity, and is even compared to the wise Solomon himself (p. 174). However, while both Bucket (p. 716) and Cuff (pp. 151, 158, 174) are tender toward human infirmity and folly, their acceptance of human foibles is not that of a merciful deity. Holmes, on the other hand, is described by Most (1983, p. 352) as displaying the smile of wisdom of the Greek gods, which “signifies not only the incomparability of his skill but also the benevolence with which he will use it.”

27. For example, others see Cuff as having an “impenetrable manner,” and as being paradoxical and inscrutable (pp. 133, 149, 491). Bucket and Holmes are adept at disguises, while Dupin simply uses green colored spectacles to prevent one brilliant adversary from fathoming his mind.

“far deeper and more authentic mystery” than the crime-puzzle he solves. In this respect the detective resembles the kings lauded in Prov 25:2–3, whose glory it is to search out a matter, while their own hearts are unsearchable, as is God’s understanding (Isa 40:28).

Like Solomon, modern detectives of human nature also use ruses or traps to make wrongdoers betray themselves.<sup>28</sup> For example, Holmes tricks one female adversary into revealing the place where she has hidden certain letters by using a distracting hoax. He bases his stratagem on his knowledge of the nature of women, whose “instinct” is to rush at once to the thing which they value most when they think their house is on fire. Similarly, in one of Poe’s stories (1975, pp. 490–501), the guilty party is made to confess when his victim’s corpse literally springs up<sup>29</sup> to accuse him (with the aid of a ventriloquist), using the words Nathan spoke when springing his trap on David: “Thou art the Man.”

### *B. Solomon and Daniel as Detective Heroes*

In the apocryphal tale “Susanna,” young Daniel intervenes to prevent Susanna from being executed on the false charge of adultery brought against her by two elders whose sexual advances she had just repelled. Her accusers are not only elders but judges (v. 41).<sup>30</sup> The story exposes the folly of assessing the truth of witnesses’ testimony on the basis of their rank and reputation.<sup>31</sup> As in the case of the two harlots, stress is placed on the fact that there were no other disinterested parties present when the alleged crime took place (vv. 17, 18, 20). By cross-examining the two elders separately, Daniel exposes a factual conflict in their testimony, concerning the kind of tree under which the adultery allegedly took place.

Daniel’s strategy does bear some similarity to that of Solomon. For example, he chooses not to seek other possible witnesses, or to examine

28. Bucket lays traps for the murderer Hortense, by catching her off guard. Cuff chooses to examine the servants suspected of stealing a valuable diamond by “searching their thoughts and actions, . . . instead of searching their wardrobes” (p. 150). Similarly, Dostoyevsky’s murderer Raskolnikov is told by his friend that the examining magistrate Porfiry likes to lead people up the garden path (1966, p. 262), and Raskolnikov himself tells this official that he knows his method includes putting people off their guard (p. 349).

29. The corpse had been packed into a wine crate (the corpse was doubled up and spring-loaded with a similarly doubled up piece of stiff whalebone down its throat) and sent off to the unsuspecting, wine-loving, culprit.

30. References are to the text of Theodotion, unless otherwise noted.

31. Although the accused is also of high standing and has a spotless reputation, her servants are “greatly ashamed” when they first hear the elders’ tale (vv. 26–27). While the

the accused or crime-scene for relevant physical evidence. Moreover, he exposes the falsehood of the elders' testimony before an audience who are astounded at the revelation (v. 60), as they were at Daniel's initial intervention (v. 47). The element of audience amazement, which leads to increased awe for the hero (LXX, vv. 60, 64; Th v. 64), is also present at the end of the judgment story.

At the same time, Daniel's procedure differs from Solomon's in several crucial ways. Unlike Solomon, Daniel does not trick the complainants into voicing their true feelings in order to unmask their true character; he merely trips them up over a detail. His technique does not function equivalently to God's insight into the human heart. Rather, he knows their wickedness and guilt even before he cross-examines them (v. 52). Although he knows because of God-given power, this is not the kind of previously bestowed judicial understanding displayed by Solomon (1 Kgs 3:9, 12). According to the text of Theodotion, God arouses the "holy spirit" already within the young Daniel, while in the LXX, an angel gave Daniel a spirit of understanding, as he had been ordered to do (v. 45). In neither version is Daniel's divine charisma akin to Solomon's godlike knowledge of human nature.

Admittedly, Daniel does lead the elders to convict themselves "out of their own mouths" (v. 61), just as Solomon did with the false mother. However, Solomon gives no indication of knowing which woman is the true mother before they respond to his trick. Nor does he berate or otherwise intimidate either disputant directly, as does Daniel. On the contrary, Solomon must show no emotion if he is to evoke emotional responses from the women which expose their true natures (see n. 24, above).

#### *4. Ideology and the Social Function of the Judgment Story*

The ability of the judgment story to allay cognitive anxiety may have depended on whether its ancient audience believed that the king's wisdom could be emulated by ordinary human beings. Does the basic judgment story "assure everyone that justice lay within his or her grasp," a message which, according to Crenshaw (1981, p. 48), explains the popularity of the incident? If Solomon's success is due to intuition, and not method, as von Rad suggests (1972, p. 297), would readers assume that such intuitive powers are limited to those with God-given wisdom? Put another way, should one follow Noth (1955) in stressing the secular

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elders repeat their account at the trial the following day, no one ever asks Susanna to give her version of what had occurred.

character of the king's judicial wisdom, or scholars like Mettinger (1976, p. 243), who highlight the element of "divine charisma?"

The fact that Solomon chooses not to interrogate or cross-examine the disputants aligns the king with divine, as opposed to human, investigative procedures. This is recognized by a midrashic commentary on the judgment story, in which David prays to God to give his son "Thy power in the rendering of judgments: Even as thou art able to render judgment without witnesses and without warning, so may Solomon be able to . . . [do so]" (*Midr. Teh.*, 72.2). Thanks to His perfect insight, God can judge "without investigation" (*lō<sup>2</sup>-hēqer*; Job 34:24).<sup>32</sup>

Readers who focus on the king's godlike wisdom might be tempted to adopt a passive attitude when confronted by apparent acts of deceit, confident that the judicial "detectives" who maintain order in their society are able to solve all such riddles. From this angle, the judgment story becomes what Coats (1973, p. 290) calls a "political legend," exhibiting not simply Solomon's wisdom in handling a ticklish problem, but the people's awe of the power possessed by this ideal, "almost superhuman," figure, who is meant to become a model for edification of subsequent generations.

Such emphasis on the idealization and elevation of the hero could also support Mendenhall's view that the story is monarchical propaganda, which transforms a verdict of power into divinely inspired wisdom beyond and therefore immune from ordinary human critical evaluation (1974, p. 324). In Mendenhall's reading, the function of the judgment narrative resembles that of the Sherlock Holmes stories, if one agrees with scholars who believe that the Holmes tales express an anti-democratic ideology (e.g., Aydelotte, 1970, pp. 323-324; Macdonald, 1984, pp. 24-25). Holmes himself boasts that he is "the last and highest court of appeal in detection" (1975, p. 3; cf. 1976, p. 60) and "my own

32. While "Susanna" highlights the fact that Daniel knows all "without investigation," that is, *before* investigation, without having to use his clever device to locate the truth for *himself*, the judgment story describes the revelation as totally the result of Solomon's fabrication. In that sense, Solomon's methods are more "secular," and therefore more capable of emulation, than Daniel's. In fact, Moore (1977, p. 88) contends that "other interrogators and 'jurors' could not have followed Daniel's example since, unlike him, they could not count on divine revelation to provide them with the necessary insight." However, Daniel's actual method is quite detached from the nebulous description of divine influence. In itself, that method invites emulation. The element of divine revelation may serve merely to legitimate its use as a new legal technique (cf. Daube, 1961, p. 13 and Jackson, 1977, pp. 38-39). According to Daube, Daniel's charge that Susanna had been sentenced without examination of witnesses and certain knowledge is made in terms which allude to the laws in Deut 13:15, 17:4 and 19:18. This implies that "these laws . . . were properly fulfilled only the new method," which is thereby granted scriptural support (1961, pp. 13-14).

police" (1976, p. 69). It should therefore not be surprising that detectives like Holmes have been called "supermen" who are outside and above the law, and above criticism (Macdonald, 1984, p. 24; cf. Aydelotte, 1970, p. 324). As Macdonald puts it, nobody asks "who is going to investigate the investigator" (1984, pp. 24–25).

Like other scholars who describe the judgment story as an example of "royal ideology" or propaganda (e.g., Whitlam, 1979, p. 162), Mendenhall is viewing the narrative in terms of the "interest theory" of ideology (see Geertz, 1973, pp. 201–202). That is, the story is assumed to promote the interests, and maintain the social power, of those at the top of the political hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> In this interpretation, it is the king himself who receives the most "comforting" message.

Sternberg's interpretation tends toward the same conclusion. A reader who is being challenged to "match wits with Solomon and, indirectly, with his heavenly source of inspiration," only in order to replace his "illusion of equality" as a detective with "an admission of inferiority" (1985, pp. 166–167, 169), might well conclude that monarchical judgments must be accepted solely on the king's authority. Nevertheless, Sternberg believes that it is still "comforting to the loser," that is, the reader, to deduce that "God's wisdom was in [the winner Solomon]" (p. 169).<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, if Solomon's technique is considered to be imitable, this would decrease the distance separating the hero and the ordinary person. That his method can be imitated is assumed by Josephus (*Ant.* 8.2.2.§26), and is implicit in at least one variant of the judgment story listed by Gressmann (1907, pp. 213–214).<sup>35</sup> The way Joseph tests

33. Because the judgment story in its present form may express the outlook of the powerful and "wise," whom Pleins recently called "the purveyors of urban values" (1987, p. 61), it is worth noting that classical detective stories were often written by the "wise" (that is, intellectuals), for an audience of the same sort (see, e.g., Holquist, 1971, pp. 143–144).

34. According to Klein and Keller (1986, p. 167), stories in which the detective and reader operate deductively to interpret clues give the reader the illusion of fair play, so that the reader's failure prompts future attempts to imitate the detective's method and perhaps succeed next time. However, when deduction is not used, readers can admire, but not emulate, the detective. Now, because human nature detectives do not use deductive methods, the fair play rule might not be relevant, so that its absence would not necessarily preclude the possibility of emulation by readers.

35. This story, the prototype of the chalk-line and chalk-circle stories, exposes true and false mothers by their willingness to acquire possession of the child by yanking him across a line, chancing that he might be seriously harmed in this tug of war. In this version the audience is allowed to participate in the solution to the extent that after the ordeal the wise detective does not pronounce his judgment himself, but elicits it from the audience, by asking first which kind of mother would have a tender heart toward her child, and then

his brothers and Nathan traps David also indicates that at least some other individuals in positions of power can successfully employ such a ruse.

Similarly, when modern detectives like Sherlock Holmes stress the fact that their so-called "deductions" are examples of elementary logic and common sense, they imply that their techniques are, in Knight's formulation (1980, p. 87), within "the epistemological grasp of the man in the street." Yet the fact that Dr. Watson is so often astounded at his friend's solutions implies that imitation is not really possible.

In terms of the biblical opposition between human and divine cognitive powers, readers who attempt to emulate Solomon would be accepting the challenge to see how far humanly available insight and method can correct for the tendency to be deceived by outward appearances, once they have recognized that tendency. They would be challenged to redraw the boundary line between the "wondrous things" (*nīplā'ōti*) beyond human investigation and comprehension, and the "revealed things" accessible to humans, without the need for a superhuman "detective" hero to go to heaven or across the sea to bring them back to the people (see Deut 29:28; 30:11-13).

As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Lasine, 1986), aspiring riddle-solvers do not need to find the solution to a riddle for it to teach them about such cultural boundaries, or to prompt them to decrease their anxiety about the limits of their knowledge by exploring, or even challenging, those limits in play. Detective fiction has also been described as serving such a didactic function. According to Cawelti (1976, pp. 88-89), when the detective explains his solution to the crime-riddle, the reader feels "surprise and admiration at the solution and delight at being confronted with *a new way of seeing*" (italics mine).

If the judgment story leads the reader to challenge prevailing assumptions about human cognition, the new perspective it fosters merely reconfirms that human nature is stable and knowable. In this it agrees with the classical detective story. Admittedly, Callois (1983, p. 11) overstates his case when he proclaims that, unlike the novel genre, detective fiction "would abolish human nature altogether if it could."<sup>36</sup> Cawelti (1976, p. 90) is closer to the mark when he contrasts novels which intensify "the inexhaustible mystery of human . . . character," to detective stories, in which the detective's explanation "is precisely a denial of

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whether the mother would be the woman who held on to the child or she who let him go. Here the "fair-play rule" is in effect, in the sense that all in the audience are assumed to know all the necessary facts about human nature.

36. The kind of detective fiction he has in mind is merely abstract puzzle literature.

mystery and a revelation that human motivation and action can be exactly specified and understood."<sup>37</sup>

To the extent that the judgment story functions like a detective riddle, it must be viewed in terms of the "strain theory" of ideology. As Geertz points out (1973, pp. 201–203, 219), because no social arrangement can successfully cope with all its functional problems and antinomies, especially during periods of social change, ideologies must attempt to define (or obscure) social categories, and maintain (or undermine) social norms. In the case of riddles, social categories are "undermined" so that they *can* be "maintained"—in a form capable of dealing with social strain (see Lasine, 1986, pp. 66–69). Ideological literature (including detective fiction) also undermines categories, by reviving anxiety-producing contradictions in order to "manage" them (see Jameson, 1979, pp. 141, 144). To some critics, this means that such literature must expose the limitations and failings of the very ideology it is designed to promote (see Macherey, 1978, p. 155; Belsey, 1980, pp. 116–117). Regarded from this perspective, the judgment story appears obliged to concede that a person's true character cannot be discerned from speech or appearance, so that it can go on to show how one human being overcame such cognitive limitations in order to prevent an injustice. Yet, if this concession is being made so that readers can learn to keep the cognitive boundary between God and humanity flexible in times of social strain, we must conclude that it too promotes the stories' ideology.<sup>38</sup>

37. The degree to which detective stories are committed to affirming that human nature is both stable and knowable can be illustrated by a reference to Collins' *The Moonstone*. While the great Sergeant Cuff fails to solve his case because he misreads the motives of the enigmatic character Rachel, this does not imply that human cognitive powers are limited and fallible. On the contrary, Cuff's failure vindicates the cognitive powers of the three non-detectives in the novel who refused to entertain the notion of Rachel's guilt, precisely because they were certain they knew her character. Thus, Collins sacrifices the comforting figure of an infallible detective hero, in order to convey the even more comforting message that at least some ordinary people can see into the heart of another.

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