



# Holy Beginnings: God's Wisdom for God's Work (1 Kings 3)

*Commentary: Week One*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

## New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

### II. Solomon's Reign [3:1-11:43](#)

Having detailed Solomon's rise to power, the author next describes the new king's life and work. Now Solomon becomes the story's dominant character rather than simply a candidate for the throne or a young man in the shadow of his more famous father. His career unfolds in three distinct phases. These phases are definitely thematic in nature, but they may also reflect the historical stages of his reign. Each segment has a corresponding visitation from God or a message from a prophet.

The first phase ([3:1-4:34](#)) begins when Solomon offers sacrifices to God, who responds by granting Solomon's wish for wisdom ([3:1-15](#)). Then Solomon demonstrates his God-given wisdom in a series of decisions ([3:16-4:34](#)). In the second phase of the story ([5:1-9:9](#)) Solomon builds the temple and palace, projects that take thirteen years ([5:1-7:51](#)). After the temple is dedicated ([8:1-66](#)), the Lord appears to the king and reaffirms the Davidic Covenant ([9:1-5](#)). The Lord warns Solomon, however, to be faithful or face the consequences ([9:6-9](#)). During the final phase of the story ([9:10-11:43](#)), Solomon carries on the normal activities of a monarch ([9:10-28](#)) and enjoys the great fame and wealth associated with his wisdom ([10:1-29](#)); yet he degrades himself through idolatry ([11:1-13](#)). Because of this sin, God allows several enemies to chip away at Solomon's empire ([11:14-40](#)). Still, Solomon remains rich and powerful until his death ([11:41-43](#)). In the final segment God instructs Ahijah to prophesy the impending division of Israel. Solomon obviously does not heed the warnings in [9:6-9](#).

Though it is impossible to say whether or not the author used other selected sources, the text states explicitly that information has been gleaned from "the book of the annals of Solomon" ([1 Kgs 11:41](#)). This source was either available to the author or included in a larger source that was utilized. Either way, scholars generally agree that there is no reason to doubt the source's basic accuracy. The author no doubt adapted the material to fit the overall scheme of 1, 2 Kings, but this adaptation involved changes of emphasis, not of facts.

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1. Paul R. House, *New American Commentary – Volume 8: 1, 2 Kings*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 105-112.

## Survey of Historical Issues Related to [1 Kgs 3:1–4:34](#)

Because the second major section of 1 Kings is lengthy and unfolds in three phases, it is best to examine the historical data in three stages. [First Kings 3–4](#) describes the first years of Solomon's rule and the fame he gains during this time. Foreign and domestic political situations are mentioned as are religious, literary, and commercial issues. If [1 Kings 1–2](#) establishes Solomon as the successor of David, then [1 Kings 3–4](#) indicates how Solomon begins to fill the rather large void his father left.

Most of the events in [1 Kings 3–4](#) apparently occur during the first four years of Solomon's rule (ca. 970–966 b.c.). At least they are all told before temple construction begins "in the fourth year of Solomon's reign" ([1 Kgs 6:1](#)). Three historical details deserve mention: Solomon's relationship to Egypt, Solomon's organization of Israel into twelve districts, and the extent and cost of Solomon's kingdom. These details are interspersed between the chapters' most important ideas, which are the origin, emergence, and fruits of Solomon's wisdom.

As has been stated, David left a significant kingdom to his son. He had built the nation largely through conquest. Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Syria had fallen to his armies. These nations continued to be under Israel's authority during the first decades of Solomon's era, which presented the new king with an administrative problem, not a military one. Since he controlled virtually all the land between Egypt and the Hittite kingdom, Solomon was a major player in international affairs.

Egypt's pharaoh, "most probably Siamun (ca. 978–959)," recognized Solomon's significance and made an alliance with him by marrying one of his daughters to Israel's king ([1 Kgs 3:1](#)). Perhaps Egypt was weak and needed Solomon's support at this time, or maybe Egypt thought it easier to gain access to Israel's trade routes through negotiation than through war. Whatever the reasons, peaceful relations existed between Egypt and Israel for "some twenty years—until the twenty-first dynasty was superseded by Shishak (ca. 945 b.c.)." Having Egypt as an ally enhanced Solomon's status even more. When this alliance ceased, however, Egypt helped support the man who eventually split Israel into two rival nations (cf. [1 Kgs 11:26–40](#)).

Before Solomon, Israel's government was fairly informal. Saul and David's kingdoms were not disorganized, but they were forced to focus on waging war rather than managing a peaceful empire. Solomon, on the other hand, was determined to accomplish normal peacetime goals, such as trading and building. Thus, he divided Israel into twelve districts, each of which was ruled by a governor, who "had to provide supplies for one month in the year" ([1 Kgs 4:7](#)). In other words, the governors collected taxes in their districts that went to support a central government. Bright observes that "these districts in some cases coincided roughly with the old tribal areas, more often tribal boundaries were disregarded." Resentment over this redistricting undoubtedly arose, then grew as the districts struggled to pay their apportionment. As Bright concludes about the new system:

In any event, this was a radical and decisive step, and that not only because it imposed upon the people an unprecedented burden. It meant that the old tribal system, already increasingly of vestigial significance, had been, as far as its political functioning was concerned, virtually abolished. In place of twelve tribes caring in turn for the central shrine were twelve districts taxed for the support of Solomon's court!

Without question, Solomon's court needed vast sums to support its many interests. Besides the king, his harem, and his officials, there were chariot horses and regular army horses to feed ([1 Kgs 4:26](#)). Too, the nation's population grew ([1 Kgs 4:20](#)), which necessitated further administrative costs. Since funds could not be gained through warfare, taxes and trade had to provide all the government's income. Only an extraordinarily wise king could fund all these various interests, and even this type of ruler could not do so for an indefinite period of time.

## 1. God's First Appearance to Solomon [3:1-15](#)

After the rather brutal events in [1 Kings 1-2](#), readers may wonder whether the Lord approves of Solomon's rise to power. Other than Nathan's support, Solomon has yet to receive any direct divine affirmation. Chapters [3](#) and [4](#) help alleviate this legitimate concern. In [3:1-15](#) the king has the first of two direct encounters with God. Both visions stress God's covenant with David and God's desire to bless Solomon if he will follow David's example of serving only the Lord.

### (1) God Accepts Solomon's Sacrifice [3:1-5](#)

[3:1](#) The author presents information here that could puzzle, concern, and yet instill pride in the book's first readers. Solomon's ability to make a marriage alliance with Egypt demonstrates the king and nation's newfound prominence, which might produce some nationalistic arrogance. At the same time, marrying a foreign princess might bring destructive foreign religious and political ideas to Israel. The author uses the queen's arrival in Jerusalem as an opportunity to introduce Solomon's most important building projects: the palace, the temple, and defensive walls around the capital city.

[3:2-3](#) With no central worship site, the people "were still sacrificing at the high places." These shrines were located at slight elevations throughout the land, were quite often fairly elaborate in design and construction, and were roundly denounced by the author of 1, 2 Kings after the temple was built. For now this practice is excusable, but Solomon's long-term commitment to the high places is contrary to God's law and David's example.

[3:4-5](#) Solomon demonstrates his love for the Lord by journeying approximately seven miles northeastward to Gibeon and offering burnt offerings there. This text does not say why Gibeon was the most important high place, but [2 Chr 1:5-6](#) explains that while David had brought the ark to Jerusalem, the Mosaic tabernacle and "the bronze altar that Bezalel ... had made" were still in Gibeon. The very necessity of going more than one place to use the traditional implements of worship underscores the need for a central sanctuary. God seems pleased at Solomon's piety, for the Lord appears in a dream and tells the king to ask for whatever he wants.

This offer amounts to a reaffirmation of the Davidic Covenant. Solomon has obeyed God, as David commanded in [2:2-4](#). Now the Lord decides to bless David's son. This verse also indicates that God approves of Solomon's rise to power, the issue left unresolved after chap. [2](#).

### (2) Solomon Asks for Wisdom [3:6-9](#)

[3:6](#) Solomon prefaces his request by acknowledging the continuation of his father's covenant with God. The fact that he rules Israel stems from Nathan's prophecy in [2 Sam 7:12](#) and because his father David remained "faithful ... and righteous and upright in heart." David's covenant loyalty matched God's own kindness to him. Whatever opportunities Solomon may have are based firmly on God's sovereign purpose for those who keep their covenant vows.

[3:7-9](#) In light of the greatness of the Lord's relationship with David, Solomon humbles himself before the Lord. He admits that God is the cause of his rise to power. Further, he says he is but a small child who does not know "how to carry out my duties." This last statement in Hebrew literally says, "I do not know how to go and come," an idiom referring to the skills of leadership (cf. [Num 27:17](#); [Deut 31:2-3](#); [Josh 14:11](#); [1 Sam 18:13, 16](#); [29:6](#); [2 Kgs 11:8](#)).

In contrast to his own personal and experiential lack of stature, Solomon must lead a people whose greatness is first measured by the fact that they were chosen by God. Solomon now becomes the head of

the nation once led by Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David. According to [Deut 17:14–20](#), he must embody God's standards for the people. Israel's greatness is also measured by its growing population. Solomon senses that perhaps old ways of governing may not meet the current needs of his subjects.

Given this personal dilemma, Solomon requests "a discerning heart." This phrase literally means "a listening heart" or "an obedient heart." In the Old Testament "hearing" and "obeying" come from the same word, a linguistic trait with practical implications. Only those who obey authority figures have really *heard* them. Solomon must obey the Lord by keeping God's commands in order for his heart to be prepared to lead others. This listening to God will also enable him to listen to others.

Solomon's desire for an obedient, listening heart is based on his wish to administer justice in Israel. Justice can only emerge when the king is able "to distinguish between right and wrong" (lit., "good and evil"). Justice can become a quite complicated goal, as [3:16–28](#) proves. Only knowledge of what God considers fair and unfair can guide the king to act justly with any consistency. Though Solomon has already exhibited political craftiness, he knows that long-term wisdom and success reside where David found it—in an ongoing relationship with the Lord.

### **(3) God's Promises to Solomon [3:10–15](#)**

[3:10–13](#) God is pleased with Solomon's attitude. Though Solomon could have asked for selfish favors such as wealth, long life, or revenge, he desires the ability to help others. Thus, in the first of four revelations to Solomon, God not only agrees to grant the request but makes promises beyond what Solomon imagined. He will indeed have "a wise and discerning heart," one that will set him apart for all times. Solomon's wisdom will exceed those before and after him. Further, though he did not ask for wealth and fame, these blessings will be his as well. What all kings want, yet rarely achieve, Solomon will have because of God's answer to his prayer.

[3:14–15](#) "All" Solomon must do to secure these blessings is to follow David's example of adherence to the Sinai covenant. If he keeps the "statutes and commands," Solomon will honor his father and thereby have "a long life." This reference to [Exod 20:12](#) underscores the continuity of God's covenant with Israel, with David, and with Solomon, the new generation. It also emphasizes the conditional nature of Solomon's kingship, an idea that is repeated every time God addresses Solomon directly (cf. [6:11–13](#); [9:3–9](#); [11:11–13](#)). Long notes that in these four addresses "the editor-author(s) forged a kind of unity of exhortation out of the material, which then can be turned on end to become a deadly serious, twice-repeated message of conditions violated, promise lost, glory tarnished (ch. [11](#))." God's covenant with David is eternal, but Solomon can be replaced with another "son of David" if he disobeys the Lord.

When the king awakes from this life-changing dream, the king seals the agreement. A celebration marked by sacrifices and a feast prove his sincerity and determination to keep the covenant. God's approval of Solomon has finally been clarified.

## 2. Solomon Demonstrates His Wisdom [3:16–4:34](#)

### (1) Solomon Solves the Prostitutes' Dilemma [3:16–28](#)

[3:16–23](#) This story is one of the best known in the whole Bible. Having been promised wisdom, Solomon will now have this wisdom tested. Israel's kings were sometimes called upon to settle particularly hard cases ([2 Sam 12:1–6](#); [14:1–11](#)), and this situation is quite perplexing. Two prostitutes have had babies. One woman quite carelessly smothers her child in the night, then switches babies while her colleague sleeps. Now both women claim the living child as their own. Without other witnesses or evidence, Solomon must devise some way to solve the case. Will God's promised sagacity materialize? Will Solomon wilt under this newly imposed pressure?

[3:24–28](#) The king quickly produces his own evidence. He decides to try the case based on the women's maternal instincts and human compassion. Calling for a sword, he orders the child cut into halves, with each woman getting an equal share. The real mother, who has already cared enough for her child to plead her case before the king, acts out of "compassion for her son." She begs Solomon to give the baby to the other woman. In startling contrast the careless, dishonest woman is willing to take her "half." Her cruelty has been revealed, just as the other mother's kindness has emerged.

Solomon can now give a just verdict. The compassionate woman is given the child. He has the insight to see the difference between just and unjust persons even when he has no corroborating evidence. When this verdict becomes public knowledge, the nation was in awe of (lit., "feared") the king. This comment reinforces the statement in [2:46](#) that the "kingdom is now firmly established in Solomon's hands." Most importantly, this respect stems from the knowledge that wisdom like Solomon's can come only from God. Israel now understands, as does the reader, that "the wisdom of God is in his heart to do justice." If so, the nation will flourish under his leadership. So far Solomon has been faithful to the God who has kept the promises made to the new king.

## Understanding the Bible Commentary Series<sup>2</sup>

### Solomon and Wisdom ([1 Kgs. 3:1-15](#))

Wisdom (Hb. *hokmâ*) has already played an important role in the narrative, guiding Solomon in his treatment of those who were a threat to him ([1 Kgs. 2:6, 9](#)). It will play an even more central role now in [1 Kings 3](#). Solomon has a dream wherein he confesses a lack of discernment before God and is promised (among other things) a "wise and discerning heart" ([3:4-15](#)). He then hands down a legal judgment in which his use of this new gift is of crucial importance ([3:16-28](#)). The major question of interpretation is how to understand this new material on Solomon and wisdom in the light of both the general context provided by [1 Kings 1-2](#) and the more specific context provided by [1 Kings 3:1-3](#). How does [1 Kings 3](#) function to carry the Solomon story forward, particularly in its characterization of the king?

We shall come to [1 Kings 3:1-3](#) in a moment. We must first reflect critically, however, on the fact that Solomon's story has so often in the past been divided into two fairly self-contained parts: an earlier period, in which he was obedient to God and was consequently (along with Israel) blessed; and a later period, in which he was disobedient to God and was consequently (with Israel) judged by God, and the

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2. Iain W. Provan, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series – 1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "4. More on Solomon and Wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:1-15)" and "5. A Wise Ruling (1 Kgs. 3:16-28)".

kingdom was “torn away” (cf. [11:11](#)). This is undoubtedly a neat scheme, but it represents a massive over-simplification. It arises in large measure from reading the story, in practice if not in theory, as beginning in [1 Kings 3:4](#), with [3:3a](#) perhaps slotted in beforehand. But before [3:4-15](#) we have read, not just [3:3a](#), or even [3:1-3](#) together, but [1:1-3:3](#). And that narrative—also about Solomon’s early days—is far from unambiguous in its assessment of the king’s actions after his accession to the throne and is quite unwilling to allow any easy correlation between the “obedience” of the house of David and the fact that David’s son now rules. **The kingdom is firmly established in Solomon’s hands** ([2:46](#)), but this, our authors suggest, has to do more with God’s sovereignty than with royal righteousness ([Prov. 16:12](#)).

[3:1-3](#) / It is not just [1:1-2:46](#) that undermines the simplistic view of Solomon’s reign, however. Before we ever get to the new “wisdom material” in [3:4ff.](#) (the seed-bed for so much of the tradition that has grown up about the early and “good” Solomon), we must first read [1 Kings 3:1-3](#). And these are verses that provide us with a number of further grounds for questioning the notion that Solomon is presented in the early chapters of Kings as an unambiguously virtuous character. “The kingdom” is “firmly established.” What is the first thing that the new king does, after the dubious acts of [2:13-46](#)? He makes **an alliance with Pharaoh** by marrying **his daughter** ([3:1](#))—another dubious act! **Egypt** is, of course, a name that resonates throughout OT tradition with negative connotations: oppressor, arch-enemy of old, source of temptation (e.g., [Exod. 1-15](#), esp. [13:17-18](#)). Deuteronomy, in particular, had warned against “a return to Egypt” ([Deut. 17:16](#)) in terms of too-close relations with that nation, and it had explicitly forbidden intermarriage with foreigners, lest Israelites be led into apostasy ([Deut. 7:3-4](#): the verb is *h̄tn*, as in [1 Kgs. 3:1](#); [2 Kgs. 8:18](#)). [First Kings 3:1a](#) cannot, therefore, represent anything other than a criticism of Solomon, particularly in view of what David has said in [2:1-4](#) about keeping the law of Moses (cf. §2 above for the links between this passage and Deuteronomy) and in view of what happens to Solomon in [chapter 11](#). We are shown right at the beginning of Solomon’s reign what the authors perceive to be the very root of his later apostasy (cf. [11:1-8](#); cf. also the fate of Jehoram in [2 Kgs. 8:18](#)).

The same is probably true of [1 Kings 3:2-3](#). Much, however, depends on how we read [3:1b](#). Is it simply descriptive, with no implications in terms of the portrayal of Solomon in [chapter 3](#)? It has often been taken as such. This seems very unlikely, however; once more, what we find later in the Solomon account helps us to gain a clearer perspective. For there ([1 Kgs. 6:38-7:1](#)) we find authors who are determined to emphasize that Solomon spent almost twice as much time building the palace (*his house*, Hb. *bêtô*) as he did building the temple (the house of *the LORD*, Hb. *bêt yhw̄h*) and who, by the positioning of the account of building the palace, imply that it interfered with and delayed the completion of the other project. The order in which the projects are mentioned in [1 Kings 3:1b](#) (**he finished building his palace** [*bêtô*] **and the temple of the LORD** [*bêt yhw̄h*])—which is not their chronological order in the narrative (cf. [1 Kgs. 6-7](#); [9:1](#), [10](#))—is likely to be significant, preparing us (as [3:1a](#) does) for later parts of the story. It is likely to represent a comment on the ordering of Solomon’s priorities; the palace was more important to him than the temple. Indeed, we cannot help but ask whether the authors do not also intend us to see the influence of his foreign wife in this. For the question of divided loyalties has already been raised by the *h̄tn* of [3:1a](#) (foreign wives lead Israelites to apostasy), and this particular foreign wife, living in temporary accommodation while her new palace is being built, has a particular vested interest in the progress of the building program.

If blame is being attached to Solomon in all of [3:1](#), and not just in [3:1a](#), then it also seems likely that the critique is continued in [3:2](#). This verse is usually read in such a way that the emphasis falls upon exonerating the people; it was all right for them to sacrifice **at the high places** because **a temple had not yet been built**. However, it is much more probable in view of [3:1](#) that we should place the emphasis upon the second part of the verse, i.e., Solomon was to blame for the people’s continued worship at these places because of his delay in building the temple. And again, we should see here the influence of his foreign wife: for it is precisely the influence of the foreign wives in [1 Kings 11](#) that dulls the edge of Solomon’s concern about **high places** and indeed involves him in proliferating them and following after other gods ([11:7-8](#)). [Deuteronomy 12](#)—the text lying in the background here—explicitly associates

purity of worship around the one sanctuary with the removal of those foreign influences that would tempt Israel in different directions. There is, of course, nothing in [1 Kings 3:2](#) to suggest that the people have already succumbed to temptation. The implication is that they do worship **the Name**, even if is not in the ideal place. But the potential for disaster is clear enough, and [11:33](#) will tell us of a people who eventually follow Solomon into sin.

All of this must influence our reading of [1 Kings 3:3](#). Here we are for the first time told something about Solomon that seems unquestionably positive: he displayed **love for the LORD**. The point about this rather positive looking statement is, however, precisely that it is so heavily qualified by the two surrounding statements regarding worship at the **high places**—the second of which now implicates not just the people but Solomon himself in this worship ([3:3b](#)). At the very least, then, the authors are again asking us to see (as in [3:1a](#)) that Solomon’s love for God, even at this early stage in his career, was not entirely wholehearted. He does not keep the law of Moses; he does not take action quickly enough with regard to this matter of worship. As in [3:2](#), there is no hint yet of apostasy. His worship at Gibeon ([3:4ff.](#)) is worship of the LORD. Yet we are bound to ask: what kind of “love” is this, that does not issue in the keeping of the Law? Certainly not a love that involves all of Solomon’s heart and soul and strength ([Deut. 6:4](#)). As in [3:1-2](#), the atmosphere is rather that of divided loyalties. And in a way the choice of the word **love** (*’hb*) itself reflects that—at least within the context of the book of Kings. It is certainly a word that has been carefully chosen; Solomon is the only king in Kings, in fact, who is said to have “loved” the LORD. It is not a verb used in relation to other kings’ religious orientation. And it is difficult to avoid the impression that its use here has quite a bit to do with the fact that it reappears twice in [1 Kings 11](#) ([vv. 1](#) and [2](#)) in relation to Solomon’s other great “loves”—the foreign women, of whom Pharaoh’s daughter is one. The questions that are raised in [chapter 3](#) about the completeness of Solomon’s love for God, in other words, are compounded if one is aware of the end of his story and knows how fragile this love did indeed turn out to be.

[First Kings 3:1-3](#) presents us, then, with a Solomon who loves God—who does share his father David’s basic commitment to God ([3:3](#))—but who right at the beginning of his reign also carries with him the seeds of his own destruction. His lack of wholeheartedness, already outlined here, will eventually become fully evident ([11:4](#)), and in the end his lack of personal unity or integrity will be the catalyst, not only for his own apostasy but also for the fracturing of Israelite unity that we shall read about in [chapters 11-12](#).

[3:4-15](#) / We are now in a better position to approach the story of Solomon’s request for wisdom. For it is the Solomon we have met in [1:1-3:3](#)—a divided, conflicted, sinful Solomon, with only a very partial grasp of God’s dealings with his house—who comes now to the **high place in Gibeon** to make his **burnt offerings** to God and to whom God appears **in a dream**, inviting him to make his request. As Solomon makes this request, it is that same limited grasp of theology that first comes to expression. The basic covenant position as he understands it is that God has **shown great kindness** to David because he was **faithful and righteous and upright in heart** ([3:6](#))—that is why Solomon sits on the **throne** ([3:6](#)). Not for the first time, however, what Solomon has to say is undermined for the reader who knows the story, by aspects of the way in which he says it. It is, of course, quite true that David’s basic orientation was towards God. Both the narrator of Kings (e.g., in [3:2](#)) and God himself (e.g., in [3:14](#)) will often confirm this, portraying David as a model against which other kings can be measured. Yet it is equally clear from both Samuel (cf. the discussion of [2:13-46](#) above) and Kings (e.g., [1 Kgs. 15:5](#)) that even David’s righteousness is regarded as only relative. Royal righteousness alone (even David’s) cannot be the explanation for Solomon’s occupation of the throne. It is significant, then, that even in Solomon’s own words to God in [verse 6](#), we find that double use of the word *hesed*, **kindness**. A much better translation of this noun is “covenant love,” as in [1 Kings 8:23](#) and, more to the point, [2 Samuel 7:15](#). For it is here that God promises David that he will never take away his love from David’s successor *even if he does wrong*. The noun *hesed*, therefore, reminds us that even though Solomon is focusing upon conditionality, the nature of God’s dealings with the Davidic dynasty is unconditional. It reminds us that

God has already treated David as he promises to treat David's descendants ([2 Sam. 7](#)). He has treated him differently from Saul—even though both sinned.

Of this truth Solomon himself shows no conscious knowledge. His grasp of reality where David is concerned seems entirely the same as in [chapter 2](#). Yet what is equally striking in [3:4-15](#) is the very fact that, confronted by God in this dream, he *is* apparently prepared to admit that *his* kingship thus far has not been without flaws. He has used wisdom before in dealing with affairs of state, seemingly with great competence, yet now he confesses ignorance ([3:7](#)) in the face of a task that is too great for him ([3:8](#)) and asks for **a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong** ([3:9](#)). Is this to be seen as a confession of the inadequacies and sinfulness of his behavior up to this point? Is he saying that he has not done very well up till now and that he wishes to make a fresh start? Certainly God is **pleased** with his request precisely because Solomon has not sought in making it to confirm his own position in life ([3:10-11](#)). He has not asked for **long life** or **wealth**; nor has he sought (as in [ch. 2](#)) **the death** of his **enemies**. What is more, when God then promises to give Solomon the things for which he had *not* asked ([3:13-14](#)), the death of enemies is not mentioned (although long life and wealth are). The whole implication of all this is that Solomon has recognized and God is confirming that the “wisdom” of [chapter 2](#) was of a highly unenlightened, self-serving sort, which must now be replaced with a higher sort, in order that the king may rule justly and well over his subjects ([3:9](#), [11](#)). An important theme of the OT is brought to mind by such a reading: it is the fear of the LORD that is truly the beginning of wisdom ([Job 28:28](#); [Ps. 111:10](#); [Prov. 15:33](#)). Solomon has apparently only just learned this. Because he has learned it, however, and has now placed himself in a humble and submissive position in relation to God, seeking the common good rather than simply his own, the blessings of God are now to follow. Much of the succeeding narrative about Solomon will, in fact, be concerned to describe the **riches and honor** ([3:13](#)) that he accumulated in the course of his **long life** ([3:14](#)). Before that, however, we read of an occasion when Solomon's new God-given wisdom in relation to his subjects was amply illustrated and Israel first came to perceive Solomon as the wise king *par excellence*.

### Additional Notes

**3:2 / The high places:** The term refers to local places of worship, as opposed to the one place of worship described in [Deut. 12](#) and taken in the book of Kgs. to be the temple. The continuation and proliferation of worship at these shrines, unchecked by royal intervention, is one of the main concerns of Kgs. It is always wrong to worship at them, so far as the authors of Kgs. are concerned; it is particularly wrong when this worship becomes idolatrous. In this respect Solomon's own life sets the pattern for what happens in the life of Judah later in the narrative. He begins by sitting lightly to God's law, tolerating worship of the LORD at the high places ([3:2](#); cf. [1 Kgs. 22:43](#); [2 Kgs. 12:3](#); [14:4](#); [15:4](#), [35](#)), and he ends up being drawn into full-blown apostasy at them ([11:7-8](#); cf. [2 Kgs. 18:4](#); [21:3-9](#)).

**3:7 / I am only a little child:** Rehoboam must have been born right at the very beginning (or shortly before the beginning) of Solomon's reign (cf. [1 Kgs. 11:42](#) with [1 Kgs. 14:21](#)). Solomon must therefore have been old enough to procreate. The statement does not, of course, concern biology, any more than does [Luke 18:17](#), with its concern that we should enter the kingdom of God “like a little child.” It is a statement about how inadequate Solomon feels in view of his great task (cf. also [Jer. 1:6](#)). Yet we should not dismiss the idea of youthfulness entirely from our minds, since the Hb. word pair *yš' /bw'* (lit. “to go out—to come in”) that lies behind the NIV's **to carry out my duties** probably has a military connotation, and may imply here lack of military experience. See further A. van der Lingen, “*Bw'-yš'* (‘To Go Out and To Come In’) as a Military Term,” *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 59-66.



**3:12 / I will give you a wise and discerning heart:** The emphasis of the line, and indeed of the whole section [3:4-15](#), is that this wisdom comes as a supernatural gift from God. It is not innate (as it is implicitly in [2:1-4](#)); it is not acquired by patient hard work, utilizing careful observation and self-discipline (as it is explicitly in much of Prov. and in [1 Kgs. 4:29-34](#)). This is wisdom from above, not below. See further R.E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), esp. pp. 94-122.

It is of some interest to note the similarity in theme between [3:11-13](#) and both [Matt. 6:25-34](#) and [Luke 12:13-21](#), the first of which explicitly mentions Solomon as an archetypal figure of **riches and honor**. The essential element of these NT passages is that people ought to seek God and the kingdom of God first of all, rather than the things of this world. If they do, [Matt. 6:25-34](#) tells us, then these other things will follow. In the same way, Solomon's seeking of God's kingdom rather than self-aggrandisement will bring in its train material blessings. See further D. McL. Carr, *From D to Q: A Study of Early Jewish Interpretations of Solomon's Dream at Gibeon*, *SBLMS* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991), pp. 164-70.

**3:14 / If you walk ... I will give you a long life:** The language again has the atmosphere of the promise to David as it is described in [2:4](#). It is conditional in nature. Yet we shall see that Solomon apparently goes on to have a long life even though aspects of it are no more in conformity to God's **ways and statutes** after this dream than they were beforehand. Once again, then, a question is asked about the relationship between law and grace. Fulfillment of the promise *involves* the active and obedient participation of the human party, but does it really *depend* on it? God demands obedience and sets out terms, but will he necessarily bring down the full penalty of the law if the terms are not met?

**3:15 / He returned to Jerusalem ... sacrificed:** The significance of this second set of sacrifices is unclear. Does Solomon now realize where he should have been worshipping all along (**before the ark**, rather than at the high place)? If so, the first effect of his newly received wisdom is to help him to distinguish in *himself* between right and wrong ([3:9](#)).

## 5. A Wise Ruling ([1 Kgs. 3:16-28](#))

“The lips of a king speak as an oracle,” [Proverbs 16:10](#) tells us, “and his mouth should not betray (or ‘act treacherously against’) justice.” Quite so. For the king is the hub around which the whole legal process revolves. He is the highest court of appeal and the foundation of all administration and justice. To invent a proverb: if the core is rotten, then there is no hope for the apple (cf. [Prov. 28:15-16](#); [29:2](#)). Yet the picture that we have of Solomon in [1 Kings 1-2](#) has indeed raised the question of whether he has not hitherto “betrayed” justice in his dealings with certain of his subjects, and our reading of [3:1-15](#) has also suggested it. [First Kings 3:16-28](#) now wishes us to see how the new wisdom he has just received from God makes all the difference in his ability to “distinguish between right and wrong” ([3:9](#)) and to administer justice ([3:11](#)). In this passage Solomon is much more a wise king than he was before, “winnowing out all evil with his eyes” ([Prov. 20:8](#), [26](#)) and searching out things that are concealed ([Prov. 25:2](#))—the model king, in fact, who is described by so many of the OT texts that talk about wisdom and politics.

**3:16-22 /** The occasion of Solomon's famous demonstration of discernment is a legal case involving **two prostitutes living in the same house** who both claim a particular newborn **child** as their own. It is probably not insignificant in the context that they are prostitutes (Hb. *zōnôt*). Prostitutes appear in [Proverbs 1-9](#) as one category of women that men do well to avoid, setting their heart instead on a relationship with Lady Wisdom ([6:26](#); [7:10](#); cf. also [23:27](#); [29:3](#)). With Wisdom's help they will be able to see through the seductive and misleading words of these other women (e.g., [Prov. 2:16-19](#); [5](#); [6:20-29](#)), and so avoid disaster. The language of prostitution also appears in numerous texts that concern idolatrous worship (e.g., [Deut. 31:16](#); [Judg. 2:17](#)) or improper relationships with foreign nations (e.g., [Ezek. 16:26-28](#)). All these ideas are, of course, important in the context of the Solomon story. Solomon

has already entered an improper relationship with a foreign nation (3:1) and will enter several more (11:1-2). This in due course leads to idolatrous worship (11:7-8). For the moment, however, he is on honeymoon with his new wife, Wisdom, and remains faithful to her. He will thus have no difficulty in seeing through the words spoken to him by the two women who stand before him. He will be able to “discern” (Hb. *byn*, 3:9, 11-12) in the midst of their testimony what is actually true.

The testimony that he hears comes mainly from one side (cf. vv. 17-21, 22b), the side of the person we may term “the complainant.” The other person, “the respondent,” speaks only in verse 22a. No one else is involved—which is perhaps why we find the case before the king at all. There is no second witness to corroborate the testimony (Deut. 19:15) and allow the legal process to take its normal course. From this complainant Solomon hears about the death of the respondent’s child during the night and her own discovery in the morning that this dead child had been exchanged for her own living one. The respondent answers this charge with a flat denial. Impasse. What is the king to do?

**3:23-28** / The resolution of the story is well-known. Faced with claim and counter claim, Solomon gives instructions that the child be cut in two. The true mother is willing to give her child up alive to another rather than see him die; the other woman is happy to have death deprive the first of her son, as it did her. The identity of the true mother, the one who gives up her child out of love, is thus revealed to Solomon, and Solomon is revealed to his subjects as one who has **wisdom from God to administer justice** (v. 28).

So far so good. But while this may be the end of the story for Solomon and his subjects, it is not the end of the story for the reader. For we have not been let in on the secret as to *which* of the speakers in verses 16-22 is the mother who cries **Don’t kill him** in verse 26. The NIV has the potential to mislead on this point; it has Solomon say in verse 27, **Give the living baby to the first woman**. The wording might well make us think that the woman in question is not simply the first speaker in verse 26 (which is certainly correct) but also the first speaker in verses 16-22 (cf. v. 22, **the first one**, the complainant). It has certainly been the assumption of the majority of exegetes that the complainant has been telling the truth. There is nothing in the Hebrew text of 3:27, however, that implies this. This text reads simply “Give the living baby to *her*,” not strictly specifying which woman is in view at all. Perhaps Solomon was pointing when he spoke, but we, unlike those present, cannot see him. And we are consequently in the dark about which of the two speakers in 3:16-22 is the true mother, and which was lying.

An interesting question is whether this darkness has been deliberately created for our benefit. Are the authors trying to put us in the same position as Solomon was in, denying us a neat resolution to the story so that we too may grapple with the problem he faced and come to realize how wise he really was? Certainly the focus of the narrative’s conclusion is not on what has happened to the women, but on what has happened to Solomon. The transformation of the king is by the end of the story complete. His old “wisdom” had led to the use of the **sword** for executions whose justice is questionable. His new wisdom leads him in more constructive paths. He still uses the sword, but in a more positive way, threatening execution only to achieve justice. The sword is functioning in the service, not of the ruthless self, but of the kingdom as a whole. Solomon’s sword has become what it is elsewhere in the hands of God (e.g., Ps. 17:13): the instrument of right judgment, of kingly “truth, humility and righteousness” (Ps. 45:2-4).

### **Additional Notes**

**3:27 / Give the living baby to the first woman:** For an interesting exploration of the issues raised by the ambiguity of this instruction in the Hb. text and some of its other features, see S. Lasine, “The Riddle of Solomon’s Judgment and the Riddle of Human Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” *JSOT* 45 (1989), pp. 61-86.