



Days of Preparation for God's People (1 Kings 4-5)

Commentary: Week Two

New American Commentary¹

(2) Solomon Organizes His Government [4:1-19](#)

Solomon now uses his wisdom to organize the kingdom. Settling local disputes like the one between the prostitutes is essential to a successful reign, but his leadership expertise must extend to broader issues. Thus, the author presents whom the king chose to direct the nation's internal affairs. The book's subsequent references to Solomon's many successes indicate the appropriateness of his appointments.

[4:1-6](#) After again highlighting Solomon's rule "over all Israel" ([4:1](#); cf. [2:46](#)), the text lists nine offices and those who held them. Certainly Solomon employed other appointed officials, but these are mentioned because of their prominence in earlier stories (e.g., Benaiah, Zadok, Abiathar) or because of their involvement in future episodes (e.g., Ahishar, Adoniram).

The first reference, "Azariah son of Zadok—the priest," seems to overlap with the fifth notation, "Zadok and Abiathar—priests." Given Zadok and Abiathar's probable age, it is likely that Azariah succeeded Zadok, his father, then served for the majority of Solomon's era. Thus, it is understandable why Azariah is included with the older men. That he is listed first may demonstrate his, and the priesthood's, importance during these years.

Several commentators claim that the next two offices may reflect Egyptian influence, a natural occurrence if Solomon looked to his father-in-law for administrative advice. Though a variety of opinions exists on the actual scope of the "secretaries' " duties, they at least managed the king's home and foreign correspondence. The "recorder," or "the one causing to remember," may have been "the official protocol officer," or one who "transmitted and explained royal commands." In other words, the "recorder" was a liaison between the king and the public.

As [1 Kings 1-2](#) has already stated, Benaiah and Zadok are rewarded for their support of Solomon by being named commander and priest, respectively. Abiathar remains on the list as priest, despite his favoring of Adonijah. This retention of two priests may be due to the delicate political situation at the beginning of Solomon's reign.

Two of Nathan's sons are given high office. Azariah supervises the district officers chronicled in [4:7-19](#), and Zabud acts as special counsel to the king. No doubt they are both capable men, but it is impossible not to notice how the honest yet clever prophet has been rewarded for his help in Solomon's rise to power. Solomon definitely follows David's advice to punish enemies and repay friends.

Ahishar and Adoniram complete the list. Ahishar becomes quite important as the court expands to fill the new palace Solomon builds (cf. [1 Kgs 7:1-12](#)). Likewise, Adoniram oversees the "forced labor" Solomon will draft from Israel and from vassal nations to work on his many construction projects. Adoniram's job must have made him unpopular, a fact the circumstances of his death illustrates ([1 Kgs 12:18](#)).

1. Paul R. House, *New American Commentary – Volume 8: 1, 2 Kings*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 112-124.

4:7–19 Because of Israel's size, diversity, and volatile nature, Solomon could not govern it, much less fulfill his later ambitious goals, without an extensive administrative system. Therefore, he names "twelve district governors" responsible for raising the revenue necessary for sustaining the central government. Four details about these appointments deserve further mention. First, Gray states that "the division of the country, if not ignoring the old tribal boundaries, was not rigidly bound by them" (cf. "Survey of Historical Issues Related to [1 Kgs 3:1–4:34](#)" on p. 106). Perhaps Solomon hoped to neutralize old enemies by linking them with nonallies.

Second, Solomon makes two of his sons-in-law, Ben-Abinadab and Ahimaaz, governors. Presumably these men could also negate enemies through their family loyalties. Third, Solomon entrusts some men with more territory than others. Though the king does reward his friends, he only places capable ones in power and allows the best of these to gain extensive authority. Again, these tendencies reveal the wisdom in Solomon's leadership style. Fourth, through his God-given ability, Solomon manages to rule all the territory God promised to Abraham. The land Moses desired, Joshua conquered, and David subdued now lay in the hands of a man of unsurpassed wisdom.

Modern readers normally miss the significance of such lists and summaries. What should interpreters gain from this passage? R. Nelson asserts: "The reader is intended to marvel at the complexity of a kingdom requiring such a sophisticated system." The lists also "provide the reader with a sense of reality and verisimilitude. This utopia was no never-never land. It involved real people and real geography." It also involved a real God who provided a wise leader for the covenant nation.

(3) Solomon Levies Taxes [4:20–28](#)

4:20–21 Only prosperity keeps people from resenting large government and new taxes. Israel's population grew steadily during Solomon's era. Food was plentiful, and the nation was in good spirits. Solomon gained both divine and popular favor. Part of this prosperity stemmed from tribute money brought to the king by countries his father had subdued. This needed income came from every corner of the promised land and provided the material blessings promised Abraham in [Gen 12:1–9](#).

4:22–26 Such an impressive government required vast resources to continue operations. Estimates of the number of persons Solomon sustained vary from fourteen thousand to thirty-two thousand. Keil contends that these figures are not unusual given what other contemporaries of Solomon spent on their governments and given the many officials Solomon must have employed. Coupled with the military expenditures related to the horses mentioned in [4:26](#), the money earmarked for the central government appears to be great. Still, the money may have been well spent, since the land was at peace.

4:27–28 As [4:7–19](#) has already explained, the twelve district governors collected taxes. Over time this burden became too great for the people to bear, so they asked Solomon's successor for relief ([1 Kgs 12:1–4](#)). For now, though, Israel seems content that they have finally reached the goal they set almost a century before when they asked Samuel for a king: they are like other prominent nations (cf. [1 Sam 8:5](#)).

It is interesting to realize that at this point in the story the author expresses neither approval nor disapproval of Solomon's activities. Certainly the writer presents Solomon as a man made wise by the Lord. Of course, the people seem happy now. Yet Moses' warnings, especially the one against collecting "great numbers of horses" (cf. [Deut 17:14–20](#)), and Samuel's cautions against royal excesses ([1 Sam 8:10–18](#)) linger in the minds of seasoned readers. What long-term good can come of such traditionally non-Israelite practices?

(4) Solomon Exhibits Great Breadth of Knowledge [4:29–34](#)

[4:29–34](#) These verses demonstrate how faithfully God kept his promise to make Solomon wise (cf. [Matt 12:42](#); [Luke 11:31](#)). The king's "wisdom and very great insight" have already been proven by his awareness of how to solve the prostitute dilemma and his skill in organizing the government. Now the text states that his wisdom exceeded that of all the wise men of the East, which is quite a compliment given the impressive wisdom writings produced in Babylon, Egypt, and other neighboring lands. To emphasize the point, the author lists otherwise unknown great men Solomon surpassed.

Further, Solomon "spoke three thousand proverbs," or comparisons drawn from life, and wrote 1,005 songs. Many of these proverbs appear in the Book of Proverbs, and the Song of Songs may be one of his compositions. This notation indicates that Solomon's skill in judgment and speech was matched by his artistic gifts. Finally, Solomon possessed knowledge of botany and biology. This type of encyclopedic knowledge was highly valued in the ancient Near East, so it is no wonder his fame spread to other countries. Without question, God has been faithful to the king. Will this faithfulness be returned in kind?

Canonical and Theological Implications in [1 Kgs 3:1–4:34](#)

Students of the whole of Scripture should be cautiously optimistic after reading these chapters. After all, the passage seems strategically placed to inform readers that promises made by God to Abraham about land and blessing ([Gen 12:1–9](#)), to David about succession and peace ([2 Sam 7:7–17](#)), and to Solomon about leadership skill have come true. Israel enjoys all the benefits that [Deuteronomy 27–28](#) details.

At the same time, a canonical uneasiness lingers. As has been stated, Moses and Samuel warn against wealthy monarchs. Jeremiah expresses similar concerns ([Jer 22:13–17](#)). Common sense and human history should cause readers to wonder if power and money will not eventually corrupt the king. Still, God has assured that Solomon has divine approval as long as he keeps the covenant. Only then can this difficult balance between power and piety be maintained.

Several theological ideas converge in these two chapters. First, the whole notion of covenant emerges again, this time in conjunction with the Lord's decision to bless Solomon as long as he is willing to walk in God's ways and obey God's commands ([1 Kgs 3:14](#)). As always, the covenant offered entails both obligation and opportunity, and also includes both individual and community ramifications. Second, these texts illustrate the principle of promise-fulfillment in Scripture. Throughout the Bible the Lord pledges to bring certain beneficial events to pass. Sometimes these benefits materialize quickly, while at other times they take some time to occur. For instance, the promise to Abraham that his descendants would possess Canaan took over a thousand years, while Solomon received wisdom in a relatively short time frame. W. C. Kaiser observes that God's promises gave meaning to both the present and future of the Bible characters.

Third, God gives individuals the wisdom to perform the tasks to which they are called. This principle extends into the New Testament, where Paul teaches that God equips believers for ministry ([Rom 12:1–8](#); [1 Cor 12:1–11](#)), and where James asserts that wisdom produces purity and peacemaking ([Jas 3:13–18](#)). Solomon correctly assumes that only the Lord can equip him to lead Israel. Fourth, godly leadership requires humility, commitment to God, and administrative insight. Again, these qualities must come from the Lord. Any kind of personal pride or national arrogance is therefore out of place, even dangerous.

Applicational Implications of [1 Kgs 3:1–4:34](#)

Solomon's covenant with God illustrates the primacy of each individual's relationship to the Lord. Certainly the Bible teaches that God makes covenants with groups like Israel and the church, but it specifically teaches that the Lord also desires communion with individuals. Those who seek God's presence and help can indeed receive the wisdom they need to do God's will and serve God's people.

The fact that several promises are fulfilled in [1 Kings 3–4](#) demonstrates the importance of hope in human life. Abraham, Moses, and David could die in peace because they trusted in the hope of God's promises (cf. [Heb 11](#)). They learned to live as if promise and possession were the same. Solomon, on the other hand, enjoyed daily hope as he lived out the wisdom God gave him. He could also know that the Lord's ongoing blessings would benefit his kingdom. Likewise, Scripture offers past, present, and future promises to believers that fit their individual circumstances.

Obviously, leadership is a major issue in the former prophets. The beginning of Solomon's career stands as a basically positive model for leaders who desire to honor God as the source of their ability to lead and who want to help others through their gift of leadership. Prayer and worship appear here as essential components of political, economic, and administrative ability, not as barriers to success in these areas. Still, the canon's previous warnings about leadership's potential excesses warn against thinking that prayer is some magic charm that wards off failure. Faithfulness and righteousness alone please God, and only God decides whether these traits will necessarily bring material wealth or personal recognition.

3. Solomon Builds the Temple and Palace [5:1–7:51](#)

Political, historical, and theological currents flow together throughout 1, 2 Kings but nowhere more so than in the temple-building stories. Solomon learned the political value of centralizing Israel's religion from David, who brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem ([2 Sam 6:12–23](#)). Along with placing the royal court in Jerusalem, this move helped solidify David's position as controller of Israel's military, religious, and government systems. Solomon's decision to construct a permanent home for the ark and the worship that surrounded it completed what his father had begun.

The time was right to build a temple. Historical events were never favorable to such an undertaking before, nor would they have been so in the future. Not only was Israel able to subdue their traditional enemies and make peace with Egypt, but David and Solomon had made an alliance with Tyre, a nation that could provide plans and material for a temple. Solomon was wise enough to seize this opportunity for an unprecedented building program.

Though politically advisable and historically possible, it is incorrect to think the temple would have been built regardless of Solomon's theological beliefs. The Davidic promise came as a result of David's desire to build God "a house" ([2 Sam 7:1–2](#)). In promising to build David a house (family) instead, the Lord stated that David's son would build the temple David had envisioned. [First Chronicles 22:1–19](#) and [28:1–21](#) say that David collected some of the material for the project and told Solomon what some of the temple's implements should be. It is not so surprising, then, for Solomon to fulfill his portion of the covenant by finishing what David started. Besides this family concern, Solomon wanted God to bless the people, as [1 Kings 8](#) will demonstrate. Finally, several times in Deuteronomy Moses predicts that someday God would choose one central place for Israel to worship. This centralization of worship would hopefully combat the rise of rival religions and the pollution of Mosaic-covenant faith.

Certainly Solomon's other building projects during this era were significant. His own palace took thirteen years to build ([1 Kgs 7:1](#)). He also constructed a hall of justice ([1 Kgs 7:7](#)) and a palace for pharaoh's daughter ([1 Kgs 7:8](#)). In later years he undertook other significant projects ([1 Kgs 9:10–28](#)).

The fact that the text mentions these secular pursuits in passing while describing the temple's construction in great detail illustrates the author's writing strategy. For the author, palaces and law courts are not unimportant; they just do not help readers understand God's rule in history to the same extent as the temple. Again, history has been written, but it is a history that places God's activity at its core.

Historical Events Related to [1 Kgs 5:1–9:9](#)

Virtually all of the historical details noted in the comments on [1 Kings 3–4](#) apply to [5:1–9:9](#) too, but in addition the reader will observe the importance of Tyre in these accounts. Chapter [5](#) says that "Hiram king of Tyre" had enjoyed good relations with David and thus sent envoys to Solomon, obviously hoping to continue the alliance ([5:1](#)). Solomon sends back a reply that states his plans to build a temple, asks for cedar, requests some laborers, and suggests payment for these favors ([5:3–6](#)). Who was Hiram, and why would he help Solomon?

Hiram ruled Tyre, the capital of Phoenicia, for over thirty years, from David's old age until he and Solomon were veteran kings. DeVries observes: "Tyre had a mainland base but occupied also an offshore island, which kept it invulnerable to siege warfare up to the time of Alexander the Great, 333 B.C." From its Mediterranean port Tyre was able to establish an impressive shipping fleet. Israel had aided Tyre's sailing efforts by defeating the Philistines, the other regional power traditionally involved in sea trade. Therefore, an Israel-Tyre alliance was a natural, mutually beneficial result of Israel's newly won prominence. Together the two countries could create a monopoly by exploiting Israel's control of the land-based trade and Tyre's expertise in shipping.

Besides these national common interests, Solomon and Hiram were both aggressive young kings. Both used the historical situation to their advantage. They both expanded their capitals and built central worship centers. Both desired to make their nation wealthy without military conquest, and both suffered when Egypt reasserted its power late in their reigns.

One other historical fact deserves mention. Israel's temple building was similar to what many nations were attempting before and during this time period. As was already stated, Hiram himself built worship centers. He "set up a golden pillar in the sanctuary of Baal Shamem, and built new temples to Melqart and Astarte." In *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, his extremely thorough survey of ancient temple buildings, V. Hurowitz charts how nations like Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, and the Canaanites constructed temples and how they wrote about their projects. Hurowitz concludes, "As far as the thematic structure of the biblical building stories is concerned, it is possible to state that they are all typical, routine ancient Near Eastern building stories."

Besides attesting to the accuracy of the biblical accounts, this observation reminds readers of the literary nature of 1, 2 Kings. Israel is not portrayed as doing odd, astounding things. Rather, their activities, which appear like those of other nations, are significant because of how they display or fail to display Israel's faith in God. They also reflect God acting in history through a chosen people. Thus, the uniqueness of the events lies in the inherent meaning that emerges from a people responding faithfully to the one true God who alone deserves worship.

(1) Hiram of Tyre Provides Temple Materials [5:1–12](#)

[5:1–7](#) [Second Samuel 5:11](#) records the fact that Hiram "sent messengers to David, along with cedar logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David." This episode explains the "friendly terms" between Hiram and David. Eager to maintain his mutually beneficial relationship with Israel, Hiram sends his representatives to welcome Solomon to the throne. Like Solomon, Hiram makes wise decisions at key times.

Solomon seizes the chance for Tyre to help him as they once helped his father and to maintain the relationship between the nations. Long correctly states that Solomon's response to Hiram continues the text's emphasis on God's making the king wise (cf. [1 Kgs 3:12–13](#)). Here Solomon is "wise in statecraft, gaining international agreements, establishing peaceful conditions in the kingdom, laying the groundwork for building activities." So far the Lord has given Solomon judicial ([3:16–28](#)), administrative ([4:1–28](#)), intellectual ([4:29–34](#)), and political ([5:1–7](#)) skill. Any one of these abilities is impressive in its own right. As a group they are awe-inspiring. God's faithfulness is evident.

The letter to Hiram itself is structured in a common ancient format but is composed in covenantal terms. For instance, Solomon says that David could not build the temple until "the LORD put his enemies under his feet." Then he adds that "the LORD my God has given me peace [lit., "rest"] on every side," language that reminds readers of Joshua's conquest of the promised land (cf. [Josh 11:23](#)). Finally, Solomon bases his desire to build on God's promises to David in [2 Samuel 7](#), which removes any notion that he only loves God because of the success he has enjoyed. It is a theological reading of history that encourages Solomon to seek Hiram's help, not just a sense of political expediency. With good reason, Hiram is pleased with Solomon's answer, and his own response in [5:7](#) affirms that God has kept all promises made to David.

[5:8–12](#) Hiram's return message basically agrees to Solomon's requests in [5:6](#). Tyre will provide "cedar and pine logs" by floating "them in rafts by sea to the place you specify." Two alterations are made in Solomon's request. The men from Tyre and Israel will not work together, and Hiram wants food for the "royal household" instead of wages for his workers. These terms are met, the nations remain at peace, the kings make a treaty, and temple construction is under way. Again, this whole episode demonstrates God's gracious giving of wisdom to Solomon.

(2) Solomon Conscripts Workers [5:13–18](#)

[5:13–18](#) In order to have enough workers to complete his project, Solomon finds it necessary to institute the unpopular practice of drafting laborers. This imposition on commoners was used by many ancient nations. Even David used forced, or *corvée*, labor. R. D. Patterson and H. J. Austel explain: "In the list of David's officials, Adoniram is said to be over the forced labor. This would indicate that David used the *corvée* system to a limited degree. ... Solomon, however, used it extensively. The more splendid the royal court, the greater the demand on the people." At least those conscripted are allowed eight months at home alongside their four months of forced labor.

Scholars disagree about the identity of the thirty thousand Israelite laborers mentioned in [5:13](#). Part of the problem stems from [1 Kgs 9:20–22](#), which describes Solomon's forced labor, then states, "But Solomon did not make slaves of any of the Israelites" ([9:22](#)). Gray, Skinner, Matheny, and others think these two references ([5:13–18](#) and [9:20–22](#)) contradict each other. Keil, Patterson and Austel, and Jones disagree. Linguistic analysis may help explain the perceived contradiction, since the text uses different terminology to describe the laborers in [5:13–18](#) and [9:20–22](#). In the former text they are called simply "laborers" (*mas*) while in the latter they are called "servant [slave] laborers" (*mas 'obēd*). Apparently, the Israelite workers were required only to toil four months of the year until the task was done. Forced labor does not necessarily entail slavery. On the other hand, foreign workers were permanently assigned to forced labor.

Another difficulty arises when one compares [5:15–16](#); [1 Kgs 9:23](#); [2 Chr 2:17–18](#); [8:10](#). The first passage mentions 150,000 laborers beyond the 30,000 listed in [5:13](#) and also states that 3,300 foremen "supervised the project and directed the workmen." On the other hand, [1 Kgs 9:23](#) says 550 officials led the work project. Further, [2 Chr 2:17–18](#) states that the 150,000 were non-Israelites and that 3,600 foremen were assigned "to keep the people working." Finally, [2 Chr 8:10](#) claims 250 officials supervised

the forced labor. Interestingly enough, Kings and Chronicles each arrives at 150,000 foreign workers and 3850 foremen, but by counting them differently. The exact numbers make an outright contradiction unlikely. Why the variance? Keil probably answers this question when he writes:

We must therefore follow J. H. Michaelis, and explain the differences as resulting from a different method of classification, namely, from the fact that in the Chronicles the Canaanitish overseers are distinguished from the Israelitish (viz. 3600 Canaanites and 250 Israelites), whereas in the books of Kings the *inferiores et superiores prefecti* are distinguished. Consequently Solomon had 3300 inferior overseers and 550 superior (or superintendents), of whom 250 were selected from the Israelites and 300 from the Canaanites.

The forced laborers had two simple yet time-consuming and backbreaking tasks. They were to quarry and fashion the temple's huge foundation stones. They also "cut and prepared the timber and stone" necessary for the main portion of the temple. Given the nature of this work, it is no wonder many men were needed, and it is no wonder only conscripted men would attempt the task.

Understanding the Bible Commentary Series²

6. Solomon's Rule over Israel ([1 Kgs. 4:1-20](#))

The NIV divides the text into sections in such a way that [v. 20](#) is divorced from [v. 19](#) and forms the introduction to the next section, which is headed *Solomon's Daily Provisions*. It is the case, however, that the Hebrew text treats [verses 1-20](#) as a single unit—as a single chapter in fact (Hb. [ch. 4](#))—with our English [4:21-5:18](#) being treated as Hebrew [chapter 5](#). Certainly it makes much better sense to take all of [4:1-20](#) together. [First Kings 4:1](#) indicates that the following verses will concern the king's rule over all Israel, and [4:20](#) provides a fitting climax to this initial description of his reign by telling us what the consequences of his organizing abilities were (**Judah and Israel ... were happy**). [Verses 21-34](#) then go on to speak about Solomon's rule over “all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines” and his impact on the world more generally. Israel is seen in these verses in a much broader context. Accordingly, [4:1-20](#) is treated here as a unit (*Solomon's Rule over Israel*), and [4:21-34](#) is dealt with separately (*Solomon and the Nations*).

Wise king Solomon sits on the throne of Israel, then, enabled by God to rule in justice ([1 Kgs. 3:4-28](#)). What kind of kingdom results? [First Kings 4:1-20](#) begins to describe it. It is a well-ordered place ([4:1-19](#)); it is a happy, prosperous place ([4:20](#)). It is the sort of kingdom one would expect, when a king has been gifted by God to rule (cf. [Ps. 72](#), “Of Solomon”).

[4:1-6](#) / The **chief officials** are first described to us: those at the very top of the hierarchy, just one step down from the king himself. **Azariah son of Zadok—the priest** ([v. 2](#)) comes as something of a surprise. In this context, at the head of such a list, **the priest** most naturally refers to *The Priest*, i.e., the chief priest, in distinction to mere (though still important) **priests**, without the definite article, in [verse 4](#). Apparently we are meant to understand (although we have nowhere been told) that **Zadok** ([v. 4](#)) has stepped (or been pushed) aside into a lesser position, to be succeeded by his son. What of **Abiathar** ([v. 4](#))? We last met him in [2:27](#), where he was deposed from the priesthood by Solomon. His apparent reinstatement here is unsurprising, if the king's change of heart in [1 Kings 3](#) is taken seriously. This is a new order, an order devised out of God-given wisdom. It stands apart from the order based on the old wisdom of [chapter 2](#). Nothing could symbolize this more clearly than the restoration of the banished Abiathar to the royal court and the nullification Zadok's consequent promotion. Both Zadok and Abiathar now stand as equals once again—though with Zadok's son in charge.

Benaiah ([v. 4](#)) we have also met already. The other characters are, however, entirely new to us. **Elihoreph and Ahijah** ([v. 3](#)) hold the office of **secretaries** in this new administration. Precisely what their function was is unclear: did they have a general managerial responsibility, or was their task a more limited one to do with writing (annals, letters)? **Jehoshaphat** ([v. 3](#)) is the **recorder** or “herald” or perhaps even “state prosecutor”—again, the nature of the office is unclear. **Azariah** and **Zabud** ([v. 5](#)), sons of **Nathan** (who is surely meant to be taken as the well-known prophet of [chs. 1-2](#)), are respectively **in charge of the district officers** of [verses 7-19](#) and **priest and personal adviser to the king** (lit. “friend of the king,” cf. Hushai in [2 Sam. 15:37](#); [16:16](#); and esp. [17:5ff.](#) for the basis upon which the NIV, no doubt correctly, arrived at the function of the “friend”). **Ahishar** ([v. 6](#)) is **in charge of the palace**, i.e., the royal steward (cf. [1 Kgs. 16:9](#); [18:3](#); etc.). Finally, **Adoniram** is **in charge of forced labor** (cf. [1 Kgs. 5:13-18](#); [9:15-22](#)).

2. Iain W. Provan, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series – 1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "6. Solomon's Rule over Israel (1 Kgs. 4:1-20)"; "7. Solomon and the Nations (1 Kgs. 4:21-34)"; and "8. Preparations for Building the Temple (1 Kgs. 5:1-18)".

4:7-19 / Next we are told about Solomon's representatives in the *regions*: the **twelve district governors** whose job it was to provide **for the king and the royal household** throughout the twelve months of the year. The NIV appears to be following a minority Hebrew reading here, *nešîbîm*, **district governors**, instead of *niššabîm*, "district officers." We are surely not to understand, however, that the men in **4:7** are different from those in **4:5** (Hb. *niššabîm*) and **4:27** (*niššabîm*, in all but one Hb. MS). It is much the better course of action to read *niššabîm*, "district officers," in all three places. As to the precise role that these men played, we cannot be entirely sure. Were they simply tax supervisors whose job was to ensure that local government (however we conceive of this) paid its dues to the center? Or did they have a broader administrative role?

It is, of course, not only the months of the year that number **twelve**; this is also the traditional number of the Israelite tribes. The casual reader might well assume, therefore, that we have here a tribal system of support for central government. But this is not so. It is true that some of the tribal names known to us from elsewhere in the OT do appear here (**Ephraim, v. 8; Naphtali, Asher, Issachar, Benjamin, vv. 15-18**). **Naphtali, Issachar, and Benjamin** may well have been districts based entirely on tribal areas. **The hill country of Ephraim** is not, however, to be understood as corresponding to the tribal area "Ephraim," but as including at least part of Manasseh as well (**Josh. 17:14ff.**), and **Asher** is not a district by itself, but only in conjunction with the unknown **Aloth**. Other districts are either named after towns that presumably gave their names to regions (e.g., **vv. 4:9, 12**), or by regional name (**v. 19**), not after Israelite tribes. Here traditional tribal boundaries have had no defining impact upon the new system (e.g., **v. 9**, where the second district comprises both **Shaalbim**, assigned to Dan in **Josh. 19:42** and **Judg. 1:34-35**, and **Beth Shemesh**, assigned to Naphtali in **Josh. 19:38** and **Judg. 1:33**). Solomon's arrangements thus move beyond the tribal system, while having points of contact with it. They represent a new order.

It has often been asserted, in spite of the claim in **verse 7** that the district officers were **over all Israel**, that the authors did not mean us to understand these arrangements as involving Judah. As a corollary to this argument, it has usually been maintained that **all Israel** does not necessarily imply "all twelve tribes" in Kings, but can refer simply to the northern tribes, "Israel." For all its popularity, however, the position is not strong. We shall return to the general claim about the meaning of **all Israel** in Kings when we discuss **1 Kings 12**. So far as **1 Kings 4:7** in particular is concerned, the phrase is unlikely to be referring to the northern tribes alone. Its scope is sufficiently defined by the opening and closing verses of the Hebrew chapter: "Solomon ruled over all Israel" (**v. 1**) ... "the people of Judah and Israel were happy" (**v. 20**). But the broader context is also important. On the one hand, there is no case in **1 Kings 1-11** where the phrase cannot refer to the whole united kingdom (or representatives from all its tribes) once ruled by David (**1:20; 11:16**) and now by Solomon (**3:28; 8:62, 65; 11:42**). In several cases, on the other hand, it is simply implausible or impossible that the northern tribes alone are meant (**3:28; 8:65; 11:42**). The authors clearly meant **all Israel** when they used the phrase in these chapters, and they meant this also in **4:7**.

The reason why readers have had so much difficulty with this most natural reading of our verse, it seems, is that they have doubted whether there is any reference to Judean territory in the list of districts itself. The difficulty is more perceived than real. **Verse 10** is the crucial verse. The name **Hepher** certainly has mainly non-Judean associations in the OT (**Num. 26:32-33; 27:1; Josh. 17:2-3**) even though it does appear in the list of clans of Judah in **1 Chronicles 4:1-23 (v. 6)**. **Socoh**, however, is known in the OT only as the name of a Judean town (either in the Shephelah, **Josh. 15:35; 1 Sam. 17:1**, or in the hill-country, **Josh. 15:48**). There is no northern Socoh known within the biblical tradition. This leaves us with **Arubboth**, which is otherwise entirely unknown in the OT. **Joshua 15:52** lists a town named "Arab," however, whose root consonants are identical with our Arubboth; this is a Judean town. We thus have one Judean town mentioned along with another that could be Judean, in a district whose name can plausibly be connected with a third. It therefore seems apparent that the **twelve district governors** represented Solomon in all of **Israel**, including Judah.

4:20 / The consequence of the new system of organization is that **Judah and Israel ... ate ... drank ... were happy**. Solomon's concern in [3:8-9](#) had been that he would not be able to govern so many people. Even though **the people are as numerous as the sand on the seashore** (a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in [Gen. 22:17](#)), he has proved equal to the task, for his wisdom is of equal measure (as [4:29](#) will make explicit). He has devised an economic system that, while it ensures the royal household has enough to eat and drink, does not oppress or deprive the king's subjects of what they need. It is government by the righteous person; when he thrives (lit. "grows great") the people rejoice ([Prov. 29:2](#)). It is not government by the wicked person who makes the people groan ([Prov. 29:2](#); cf. [1 Sam. 8:10-18](#)). This picture of harmony in Israel is, of course, implied by [1 Kings 2:5-9](#)—all tribal dissension is banished, and Israel and Judah are united around the king's table as the symbol of their unity (cf. also [4:27](#)).

Additional Notes

4:19 / **He was the only governor over the district**: The NIV is somewhat obscure. We have been told in [v. 7](#) that there are twelve district governors over all Israel, only to be told now in [v. 19](#) that Geber was the only governor over the twelfth district. Is this meant to imply that the others had more than one? Why would we be told this now? A different interpretation surely has to be sought. The Hb. text is lit. "And one governor who was over the land." It has sometimes been argued that this implies a reference to Judah (the LXX explicitly provides one), "land" being taken as "homeland" and Judean authorship of the list being presupposed. This would, however, increase the number of officials mentioned in this list covering "all Israel" to thirteen, rather than twelve, creating a conflict between the numbers in [v. 7](#) and in [vv. 8-19](#). A more fruitful line of interpretation begins with the observation that Hb. *nešîḇ*, "governor," in [v. 19](#) is, in fact, a different word from Hb. *niššab*, "district officer," in [vv. 4:5, 7, 27](#). This implies that we are to differentiate between this one person "over the land" and the others who are in charge of districts. It seems best, therefore, to take the last part of [v. 19](#) as a reference to the Azariah of [v. 5](#): there was one governor (*nešîḇ*) over the whole land of Israel, to whom the twelve district officers just listed (*niššabim*) were responsible.

7. Solomon and the Nations ([1 Kgs. 4:21-34](#))

The previous section, [4:1-20](#), was clearly defined by its beginning and ending ("all Israel ... Judah and Israel"). It was a passage about Solomon's rule over Israel. With [4:21](#) we begin a new section concerning Solomon's rule over other kingdoms and his impact on the world more generally. It is revealed that Israel's peace and prosperity are related to Solomon's dominion over the surrounding kingdoms (they contribute to the prosperity and represent no threat to the peace, [vv. 21-28](#)). It is further revealed just how great Solomon's wisdom is: it is unsurpassed ([vv. 29-34](#)).

4:21-28 / Solomon not only ruled over Israel ([4:1](#))—he also **ruled over all the kingdoms from the River** (that is, the Euphrates) **to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt**. This area is further defined in [verse 24](#) as extending from **Tiphshah** (on the Euphrates, east of Aleppo in Syria) to **Gaza** (on the western coast, in the far south of Philistia). It is a large area, corresponding to the ideal extent of Israel's dominion as promised in [Genesis 15:18](#) (cf. [1 Kgs. 4:20](#) for another aspect of the Abrahamic promise picked up in reference to Solomon) and overlapping quite a bit with the area of David's dominion as deduced from texts such as [2 Samuel 8:1-14](#) and [2 Samuel 10](#). The countries in this region, we are told, **brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life**. So it is that an enormous quantity of food flows into the kingdom from outside, with the result that all Israel, from very north to very south (**Dan to Beersheba**) lived **each man under his own vine and fig tree**. That is to say, they lived under God's blessing ([Joel 2:22](#); [Mic. 4:4](#); contrast [Ps. 105:33](#); [Jer. 5:17](#)), having a degree of economic independence (cf. [2 Kgs. 18:31](#) for an explicit threat to such independence). This fits in very much with the thrust of [4:7-20](#) (that Solomon's economic arrangements were not oppressive and that his subjects were happy and prosperous under his rule); indeed, it gives us the broader context in which to

comprehend these verses. It is at least partly because of the flow of goods into Israel that the system of districts described in [4:7-19](#) does not create economic difficulties for the people ([4:20](#)). If this is indeed the line of argument then it is no surprise that, having described the broader economic picture, the authors should return to the local scene in [verses 27-28](#). It is because of Solomon's international position that the **district officers** are able to do their job.

The picture is a glorious one. It is very much the picture that the book of Micah paints of the kingdom of the "last days," in which swords are beaten into plowshares, in which everyone sits without fear under vine and fig tree, in which the nations come in pilgrimage to Zion ([Mic. 4:1-5](#)). The gathering around Solomon's **table** described in [1 Kings 4](#) represents in essence a kind of proto-messianic banquet (cf. [Matt. 8:11](#)), with Solomon as the ideal king!

But what about the **horses** referred to in [verses 26](#) and [28](#)? Do they merely attest to Solomon's great wealth? This seems unlikely. We noted in [chapter 3](#) how the authors are intent, even in a passage that is otherwise very positive about Solomon, to make us see his darker side—that Solomon, in breaking God's law early in his reign (and particularly the law as it is found in Deuteronomy), was storing up trouble for himself in the future. Aware of this precedent, we need also to be aware of [Deuteronomy 17:16](#), which forbids the king from acquiring "great numbers of horses for himself" and further forbids him from making the people "return to Egypt to get more of them." Solomon clearly infringes the first part of this prohibition in [1 Kings 4:26](#); he will infringe the second in [1 Kings 10:26-29](#), just before we hear again of Pharaoh's daughter ([11:1](#); cf. [3:1](#)) and of Solomon's apostasy. Once more, as if to bring us down to earth in the midst of this heavenly picture of the great king and his kingdom, the authors drop into the text (in a curious place, as if to catch our attention—why not place [vv. 26](#) and [28](#) together?) something of a time bomb. It is a bomb that will tick away quietly, along with all the others in [1 Kings 1-11](#), until the combined explosion occurs in [chapters 11-12](#).

[4:29-34](#) / This negative note notwithstanding, we proceed now with an exultant passage about the wisdom of Solomon, which seeks to exalt him above all others who have ever claimed to be wise. His **wisdom** was certainly great enough ([v. 29](#)) to govern the numberless people of [verse 20](#). It was greater, even, than the wisdom of any of those folk from places ([v. 30](#)) proverbial for their wisdom (**the East**, cf. [Matt. 2:1-12](#); **Egypt**, cf. [Acts 7:22](#)). It was greater than named individuals ([v. 31](#)) famous for their wisdom (**Ethan, Heman, Calcol, and Darda**; cf. [1 Chron. 2:6](#); [6:33ff.](#); and the headings to [Pss. 88:1](#); [89:1](#)). So wise was Solomon, indeed, that he was actually famous all over the world ([v. 31](#)), attracting visitors to Israel **to listen** to what he had to say (cf. [1 Kgs. 10:1-13](#)), whether in **proverb** ([v. 32](#); e.g., [Prov. 10:1](#)) or **song** ([v. 32](#); e.g., Song [Sol. 1:1](#)), whether about flora or fauna ([v. 33](#)). The gift of [chapter 3](#) has truly produced the glory of [chapter 4](#).

Additional Notes

[4:26](#) / **Four thousand stalls for chariot horses:** The **stalls** may well be "teams" (of horses) for chariots. See G. I. Davies, "'*Urwoi*' in [1 Kgs. 5:6](#) (EVV. [4:26](#)) and the Assyrian Horse Lists," *JSS* 34 (1989), pp. 25-38. Chariots, of course, do not conjure up any better associations in the OT, when linked with kings, than do multitudes of horses (e.g., [1 Sam. 8:10-18](#)). It will be noted that the NIV prefers the minority Gk. reading **four thousand** to the MT's "forty thousand" here. One wonders why. We find equally fantastic numbers at precisely those other points in the Solomon story where [Deut. 17:16-17](#) is most obviously the text in the background—where Solomon is accumulating both gold (e.g., [1 Kgs. 10:14](#)) and wives ([1 Kgs. 11:3](#)). The extremely large number in the Hb. text of [5:6](#) is to be expected in view of what the text is trying to say about Solomon as the archetypal multiplier of horses—and numbers in the OT characteristically do aim to do much more than simply communicate facts (see the introduction).

4:33 / He described plant life ... animals: Careful observation of the natural world and how it works is one of the “normal” ways people gain wisdom in the OT (cf., for example, [Job 38-41](#); [Prov. 30:15-31](#)), as in the NT (e.g., [Matt. 6:25-34](#)). Here Solomon himself is characterized as someone concerned with the natural world, from the largest tree (the proverbially high **cedar of Lebanon**) to the smallest plant (the small wall-plant **hyssop**), from **birds** to **fish**. Wisdom “from below” (as here) and wisdom “from above” (as received in [ch. 3](#)) are thus combined in this one person, the wisest of all Israel’s kings.

8. Preparations for Building the Temple ([1 Kgs. 5:1-18](#))

In the MT, the material in these eighteen verses form part of [chapter 4](#); that is, they are part of the same unit as the material on Solomon’s rule over the surrounding kingdoms and his immense wisdom. This has the effect, much more explicitly than would otherwise be the case, of making the events concerning the preparation for the building of the temple a part of the discourse about Solomon and the nations. It is implied that Hiram, king of Tyre, was simply one of those who were “Solomon’s subjects all his life” ([4:21](#))—something that is much more explicitly affirmed in [9:19](#), where we are told that Solomon “ruled” over Lebanon (the Hb. root *msl*: see the additional note on [4:21](#)). At first sight, this seems to create something of a difficulty for the reader of [5:1-18](#). Undoubtedly Hiram acknowledges, as all other people have acknowledged ([4:34](#)), that Solomon is wise ([5:7](#)). Goods arrive in Israel from Tyre ([5:8-18](#)) in the same way that they have arrived from places that are subject to Solomon ([4:21-22](#)). Yet at first it appears that Hiram is more an equal of Solomon than his vassal and that his goods flow into Solomon’s kingdom more as a matter of trade than of tribute. What is the truth of the matter? Does Solomon really “rule” over Lebanon?

5:1-7 / Hiram, king of Tyre had been, as the text says, **on friendly terms with David** ([2 Sam. 5:11-12](#)), sending him materials and men to help build his palace. Solomon’s response to his greetings takes Hiram back to that important moment in David’s life ([2 Sam. 7:1-17](#)) when he was addressed by God, not only about the succession (which has just happened) but also about the temple (which has not yet been built). David had not been able to build a temple because his was a time of war rather than of peace ([2 Sam. 7:10-11](#); cf. [8:1-14](#); [10-11](#); [12:26-31](#); [15-20](#)). Now, however, God has given Solomon the peace (lit. **rest**, as in [2 Sam. 7:11](#)) on every side that he had promised David and has **put his enemies under his feet** (cf. [Ps. 110:1](#)). The time is right for the commencement of the temple building project, divinely ordained as the task for David’s successor ([2 Sam. 7:12-13](#)). Accordingly, Solomon asks for the same kind of help (men and materials, specifically **cedars**) that David received from Hiram in building his palace.

This is an interesting scene, not only because Hiram is presented in [5:6](#) as someone who has a certain right to set his own terms and conditions (a point to which we shall return in a moment) but also precisely because of the links between palace building and temple building that are evoked. Although Solomon does not mention it, it was precisely the fact that David felt guilty about his palace of cedar that put the idea of building a temple into his head in the first place ([2 Sam. 5:11](#); [7:2](#)). David recognized that something was wrong if a king was living in better accommodation than his God (cf. [Hag. 1:2-11](#) for a similar message). Solomon seems to have the same perception, as we would expect of a **wise son** ([v. 7](#)). He is determined to build God’s house, and in his message there is no mention of any house for himself. Surely this is a king who has his priorities exactly right! Having contemplated the **cedars of Lebanon** ([1 Kgs. 4:33](#)), he knows, in his wisdom, what they are to be used for ([5:6](#); cf. [6:9](#), [10](#), [15](#), [16](#), [18](#), [20](#), [36](#)). Yet it will only be a little while (as [3:2](#) has already hinted) until Solomon, having started so well, apparently loses his vision and turns his attention prematurely to his palace. Not for the first time, we are prepared for the future by the way in which the present is described and the past evoked.

[5:8-12](#) / Solomon had suggested to Hiram a co-operative venture (“my men will work with yours,” [v. 6](#)) and, possibly (although the Hb. is ambiguous), that Hiram should set the level of wages to be paid to his men. Hiram responds with proposals of his own. He suggests that his own men alone should deal with the cutting and the transporting of the wood down the coast to Israel and that Solomon’s men should be involved only after this has been done ([v. 9](#)). The “wages,” moreover, are to be paid not to the laborers, but to *his royal household* in the form of food supplies ([v. 9](#)). It is this second proposal upon which the narrative focuses in the first instance, describing Solomon’s compliance with it ([v. 11](#)). Solomon thus gets what he wanted (Hb. *hepeš*, [vv. 5:8, 10](#)) in the shape of the materials for the temple, but so too Hiram has his **wish** (Hb. *hepeš*, [v. 9](#)) for provisions granted. For the first time we hear of goods leaving rather than entering Israel, of another king besides Solomon having his household well catered for. It is a happy arrangement, sealed by a **treaty** ([v. 12](#)): an arrangement that is testimony to the **wisdom** God has given to Solomon ([v. 12](#)).

What are the implications? Is the treaty between equals? It is certainly true that Solomon *treats* Hiram, not as a vassal who is *required* to supply goods and men to his overlord, but rather as someone who is to be worked with cooperatively. It is also true that Solomon is prepared to enter into a degree of *negotiation* on the matter. Does this imply equality, or is it merely that Solomon in his wisdom has chosen to “rule” in a way least likely to cause himself trouble? We must read the end of the story for the answer.

[5:13-18](#) / It is often overlooked that by [verse 13](#) we have heard nothing more about Hiram’s *first* counter proposal to Solomon about work methods ([v. 9](#)). Yet this issue, picked up now in [verses 13-18](#), is crucial to a proper understanding of the relationship between the two kings as it is presented in [5:1-18](#). The point is this: the narrative proceeds as if Hiram had said nothing about work methods at all! In spite of his attempt to avoid cooperation of the sort that Solomon sought in [verse 6](#), it is *exactly* such cooperation that we find described in [verses 14](#) and [18](#). A task force was dispatched to Lebanon **in shifts** to help with the timber ([vv. 13-14](#)), the Israelites spending **one month** working in Lebanon and then **two months at home**. At the same time another group was working **in the hills** (lit. “on the mountain,” we know not where), cutting and collecting the **stone** for the **foundation** ([vv. 15-17](#)). The whole venture involved not only the **craftsmen** of Solomon and Hiram but also the men of **Gebal** (Byblos), on the coast to the north of Tyre. Solomon has had his own way—although he is happy to negotiate with Hiram to a certain extent, he is also prepared to ignore terms that do not suit him. It seems, then, that Solomon’s “rule” over the kingdoms mentioned in [4:21](#) is real enough, even if he chooses (in his wisdom) to deal in friendly ways with some of the kings over whom he is dominant. Cooperation there may be, but it is cooperation between a senior partner and a junior who ultimately has no ability to resist his will. This becomes even more apparent in [1 Kings 9:10-10:29](#), where it also becomes obvious who is the real beneficiary of the “treaty” between the two kings (cf. the commentary on [7:13-14](#); [9:10-14](#), [26-28](#); [10:11-12](#), [22](#)).

Additional Notes

[5:13](#) / **Solomon conscripted laborers:** The description of the task force is often taken as implying that Solomon conscripted *Israelites* (**from all Israel**, [v. 13](#)) to work abroad; [1 Kgs. 11:28](#) and [12:3-4, 18](#) are drawn into the discussion to provide support for this view. Yet [9:15-23](#) go out of their way to deny that this is so, explicitly stating that he conscripted workers only from the *Canaanite* population of Israel. This is exactly what the Hb. word *mas* (**[he] conscripted laborers**, is in Hb. *ya’al mas*; cf. also **forced labor**, *mas*, in [v. 14](#)) itself implies to the reader who knows the story of Israel up to this point (cf. [Josh. 16:10](#); [17:13](#); [Judg. 1:28, 30, 33, 35](#), where the Canaanite population becomes a labor force for the Israelite settlers). It seems clear that two quite distinct groups are intended in [5:13-18](#) and [9:15-23](#). One comprises 30,000 Canaanites drawn from throughout Israel (**from all Israel**), and is supervised by 550 officials ([5:13-14](#); [9:15-23](#), esp. [v. 23](#)). The other comprises 150,000 Israelites, and is supervised by 3,300 foremen ([5:15-18](#)). It is the latter group that is viewed in [1 Kgs. 11:28](#) and [12:3-4](#), a group that is never described by the word *mas* (cf. the commentary on these verses and on [12:18](#)).