



Lessons from Solomon: Celebrating God's Provision (1 Kings 10)

Notes: Week Eight

New American Commentary¹

7. Solomon's Wisdom and Wealth [10:1-29](#)

If any doubts about Solomon's greatness remain after chap. 9, surely [1 Kgs 10:1-29](#) removes them. So far the text has presented the monarch's exploits from an Israelite's point of view. In [10:1-13](#), however, an outsider's opinion is included. The queen of Sheba travels some 1,500 miles to examine his wisdom. Perhaps she also wanted to explore future trading ventures as well (cf. [1 Kgs 10:11-12](#)), but her primary purpose "was to verify Solomon's reputation for wisdom and devotion to Yahweh (v. 1)." She is not disappointed. Solomon exceeds her expectations. The author follows up this story with more data intended to convince readers of Solomon's political, financial, and military splendor ([1 Kgs 10:14-29](#)).

(1) The Queen of Sheba's Visit [10:1-13](#)

[10:1-5](#) Two reasons for the queen's journey are given. First, she "heard about the fame of Solomon" (cf. [2 Chr 9:1](#)). His abilities have earned him the reputation of being the wisest man in the ancient world ([1 Kgs 4:29-34](#)). This very rich, very successful woman intends to see if he deserves such acclaim. Second, she comes because of Solomon's "relation to the name of the LORD." In other words, she recognizes that only a great God could produce such a great king. C. F. Burney explains:

The meaning is that the fame of Yahweh's name led to a diffusion of a report concerning the wise and prosperous king who enjoyed His favor and protection; and this is in full accordance with the prominence which the queen in this story assigns to Yahweh as the chooser and supporter of Solomon (v. 9).

She decides "to test him with hard questions," or "riddles," such as those mentioned in [Prov 1:6](#) or the one posed by Samson in [Judg 14:12-14](#). Gray comments that "such tests of practical sagacity and poetic susceptibility were part of the diplomatic encounters of the day." However, she may seek more than intellectual combat. She may also desire "truths hidden in some of the enigmatic sayings known to her." Indeed, she seeks spiritual insight from one famous for possessing the Lord's wisdom.

The queen's arrival must have caused a commotion in Jerusalem. Her questions, on the other hand, may have been difficult, but they were not "too hard for the king to explain to her." Thus, she *hears* his wisdom in an unmistakable way. Furthermore, the queen *observes* Solomon's wise decisions and organizational genius in his palace, his court, and the temple. Solomon's words are matched by his deeds. Given the king's brilliance, the queen realizes he has won the battle of wits. She is "overwhelmed," or "totally out of breath, or spirit." There are no more questions.

[10:6-10](#) Before she actually meets Solomon, the queen finds the reports of Solomon's wisdom and wealth too fantastic to be believed. After this encounter, however, she admits to him, "You have far exceeded the report I heard." His servants are privileged to be in earshot of his wise speeches. As a

1. Paul R. House, *New American Commentary – Volume 8: 1, 2 Kings*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 160-164.

token of the queen's esteem, she gives Solomon a large amount of gold and an even greater amount of spices. In this way she pays tribute to one she considers her superior (cf. [Gen 14:20](#)).

Between the confession of Solomon's greatness and the offering of the gifts, the queen makes an important statement about the Lord. She claims that God deserves praise for choosing him to rule Israel. In fact, the presence of Solomon on the throne proves "the LORD's eternal love for Israel." This love has motivated God's choice of Israel ([Deut 7:7–8](#)), David ([2 Sam 7:15–16](#)), and now Solomon. How must Solomon reflect God's love? By maintaining justice and righteousness in the land, the very gift Solomon requested in [1 Kgs 3:1–9](#). These comments are similar to those Hiram makes in [1 Kgs 5:7](#). Both non-Jewish monarchs recognize God's primacy in Israel's history. Quite ironically, Solomon and future kings of Israel choose to ignore what even noncovenant rulers seem to know is true: God rules Israel, and God blesses obedient Israelite kings.

[10:11–12](#) These verses remind readers of the Hiram-Solomon trading practices mentioned in [9:26–28](#). Probably the author wants to remove any doubts the preceding verse may have raised about Solomon's ability to bring gold and spices to Jerusalem. He and Hiram were able to accomplish this task effectively on their own. Therefore, the queen's gift grows in significance given the magnitude of Solomon's trading successes.

[10:13](#) Now the story ends amiably. Solomon gives the queen tangible gifts to supplement the intellectual and spiritual gifts he has given her, and she returns to her country.

Various interpretations of this story arose over time in Jewish, Ethiopic, and Christian circles. One Jewish legend holds that Solomon fathered a son for the queen, which was her ultimate "desire." Ethiopic tradition parallels the Jewish tradition, for it claims "the royal Abyssinian line was founded by the offspring of Solomon and the queen of Sheba." Neither of these traditions has any historical basis, nor can they be substantiated by the biblical text. Jesus uses the queen as an example of the effort one should be willing to make to hear God's truth ([Matt 12:42](#)). She traveled 1,500 miles to question Solomon, but Jesus' audience refuses to listen to the Son of God himself.

(2) Solomon's Wealth [10:14–29](#)

[10:14–17](#) Solomon's annual tax revenues were enormous during his glory days. Many tons of gold ("666 talents") flowed into the treasury each year. As with most of the numbers reported in 1, 2 Kings, scholars dispute whether the amount of gold listed here is exaggerated or accurate. Those who question the total wonder if the "666 talents" is compiled by adding figures mentioned in [9:14](#), [28](#); [10:10](#). Those who accept the total think the numbers are not fantastic given the fact that they include all Solomon's major pursuits. The lesser income mentioned in [10:15](#) simply made the revenue greater. Soggin explains that Solomon "functioned as a middleman," connecting and profiting greatly from the economic interests of Egypt, Syria, Arabia, and the Mediterranean world. He was thus a key figure in international trade.

Given the variety and extent of these endeavors, it appears impossible to contradict the biblical witness. Besides, had the author intended to emphasize the king's wealth by exaggeration here, he could have done as the Chronicler does in [2 Chr 1:15](#) ("The king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones") as he does later in the passage at vv. [21](#), [27](#).

Because of the influx of gold, Solomon was able to make shields of gold, which were probably used during ceremonial occasions (cf. [1 Kgs 14:26–28](#)). These shields were kept in the summer palace, "the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon." Perhaps the shields were also a good way of stockpiling gold without having to utilize the treasury itself.

[10:18–22](#) Solomon used ivory gathered during Hiram's three-year voyages to build a magnificent throne. There does not seem to be any particular significance in Israelite religion to the number of steps or the presence of lions on the throne. Gray thinks the design reflects Phoenician influence, which is logical given this same influence on the temple's construction. What remains unclear is whether such designs reflected non-Yahwistic beliefs.

Verses [21–22](#) reemphasize the abundance of gold mentioned in [10:14–17](#). Even Solomon's drinking vessels were made of gold. Much of the gold came from far away since Hiram's ships brought it to Israel. Such was the availability of gold that "silver was considered of little value in Solomon's day." This statement would make the poor, exiled original audience of 1, 2 Kings gasp. The contrast between their present experience and the way things once had been could hardly be more obvious or telling. Such also is the spiritual bankruptcy caused by sin.

[10:23–25](#) These verses offer the final confirmation that God has indeed kept his promise to make Solomon wiser than all who came before or follow after him ([1 Kgs 3:12](#)). As in [1 Kgs 4:29–34](#), Solomon's wisdom is said to exceed "all the other kings of the earth." Just as the queen of Sheba seeks his wisdom in [10:1–13](#), so now other kings come to hear his instruction. Those who come bring gifts, which both shows their appreciation for Solomon and swells his treasury. Will he continue to serve God as the natural response to the Lord's faithfulness? Will he remain wise to the end?

[10:26–29](#) Solomon's wealth, as depicted in these and earlier verses, is further proof of the Lord's covenant keeping (cf. [1 Kgs 3:13](#)). The king has horses for an army that he barely has to use. Metaphorically speaking, he becomes so gold-laden that silver seems "as common in Jerusalem as stones." His horses and chariots are quite expensive, though some costs are recovered by resale to other nations.

A more positive financial picture could hardly be imagined. Still, readers must ask if Solomon will keep his end of the covenant. God has kept all promises (cf. [1 Kgs 3:12–13](#)). Will Solomon follow David's example by keeping God's commands (cf. [1 Kgs 3:14–15](#))? As R. Hubbard observes, "The chapter offers one last picture of Solomon at his best—the king above all ancient kings. ... Its point is that Solomon enjoyed God's special favor." The point of the book's next episode is to explore what Solomon did with this favor during his last years in power.

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9:26-10:13 The supply of gold pouring into Solomon's coffers continues, with the assistance of hapless Hiram, as his ships sail to **Ophir** in Arabia ([Gen. 10:29](#); cf. [Ps. 45:9](#); [Isa. 13:12](#) for its fame). It is not merely gold that arrives at Solomon's court from that region, however. A queen now travels from **Sheba** (cf. [Gen. 10:28](#)) to see him and **to test him with hard questions** ("riddles," [1 Kgs. 10:1](#); cf. [Judg. 14:12-19](#)). Here again a theme is picked up from earlier in the narrative: the worldwide fame of Solomon, which attracts foreigners to his court ([4:29-34](#)). The ease with which he answers her questions combined with her own observation of his wealth leaves this queen of the south breathless (rather than **overwhelmed**, [v. 5](#)), if not speechless. Her words ([vv. 6-9](#)) largely confirm what our authors have already told us elsewhere. Yet her emphasis is slightly different from theirs. They had stressed the practical benefits of Solomon's **wisdom** ([v. 4](#)) for all his subjects ([4:20, 25](#)). She, however, refers in the first instance much more narrowly to the blessing Solomon must be to his **men**, his court **officials** ([v. 8](#)), focusing on their appreciation of his wise *words*. This is consistent with the whole atmosphere of [chapter 10](#), where the focus is very much upon the benefit that wisdom brings to the royal court and particularly to Solomon himself rather than upon any benefit that might flow out to the people. The influx of food described in [chapters 4-5](#) has been replaced by an influx of luxury goods ([vv. 10:2, 10-12, 22, 25](#)), and Solomon's use of all this wealth is entirely self-indulgent ([vv. 14-29](#)). We are reminded of Samuel's warnings about kingship ([1 Sam. 8:10-18](#)). We wonder, in the midst of the silence of [1 Kings 10](#) about happenings elsewhere in the land, whether this particular king is also now living in luxury (cf. [1 Sam. 8:13](#)) at the expense of his subjects. Do the Queen of Sheba's fine words about **justice and righteousness** ([v. 9](#)) have any relation to social reality outside the court? Solomon clearly knows all the answers ([1 Kgs. 10:3](#)), but is he any longer asking the right questions? Have "wise words" playfully exchanged with visiting dignitaries entirely displaced wise *action* on behalf of his people?

10:14-29 / The closing verses of the chapter press this issue upon us still more forcefully. The accumulation of **gold** continues. It is mentioned no fewer than ten times in [verses 14-29](#) ([vv. 10:14, 16-18, 21-22, 25](#)). What does Solomon use it for? He decorates his palace ([v. 16](#)) with it; he overlays the finest **throne** ever seen with it ([vv. 18-20](#)); he makes household items with it ([v. 21](#)). If he does not bother much with **silver** ([Deut. 17:17](#)), it is only because it was **of little value in Solomon's days** ([v. 21](#)). This does not, however, prevent him from accumulating it anyway ([vv. 10:22, 27](#)), along with **chariots and horses** ([v. 26](#)). We have discussed the accumulation of horses before (cf. the commentary on [4:26](#)). Again, it is the addition to the theme which is significant: **Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt** ([v. 28](#)). All but one of the instructions about kingship in [Deuteronomy 17:16-17](#) are thus seen to have been abrogated by Solomon in these verses. That remaining one ("he must not take many wives") we shall be told about in [chapter 11](#). Is this a wise way for any Israelite king to behave?

Additional Notes

10:1 / **The queen of Sheba:** The visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon's court is also referred to in [Matt. 12:42](#) and [Luke 11:31](#), as Jesus addresses the "wicked generation" who will not recognize that "one greater than Solomon is here."

10:11 / **Hiram's ships brought gold:** Why, we may ask, does this note about Hiram appear here? It seems even more out of place than the story in [9:10-14](#), for it not only partly concerns (like [9:10-14](#)) materials used in the construction of the temple but also interrupts the account about the Queen of Sheba. Yet the interruption is not without point. We have just been told that the queen herself brought gold and precious stones to Solomon, as well as an unparalleled amount of spices ([v. 10](#)). The authors want to set this gift very firmly in context. Solomon was already receiving precious stones from the

2. Iain W. Provan, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series – 1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "15. Glory under a Cloud (1 Kgs. 9:10-10:29)".

Arabian region and much more gold than the Queen of Sheba had brought with her (the **gold from Ophir** of [v. 28](#)—note that her gift is exactly the same size as Hiram’s *first* installment in [9:14](#), now superseded by his second in [9:28](#)). Moreover, he was already importing unparalleled amounts of almuq wood (evidently a wood whose value was equivalent to or greater than that of the spices, although we cannot identify it). Solomon was, in short, a vastly wealthier person than the queen—something that is underlined in [v. 13](#). She cannot eclipse him.

10:15 / The Arabian kings: The **NIV** takes its cue here from the parallel passage in [2 Chron. 9:14](#). The **MT** actually reads “kings of the evening” (Hb. *‘ereb*), which is somewhat obscure. It seems possible, however, that it is a poetic reference to kings of the *west* (where the sun sets), and that we are meant to understand this, along with **governors of the land**, as a reference to the rulers of the various kingdoms within the Solomonic empire, which was located to the *west* of the Euphrates river ([4:24](#)). Certainly **governors of the land** is best understood in the light of the organization of the later Persian empire, when the land described in [4:24](#) as *lit.* “Across-The-River” (often “Trans-Euphrates” in the **NIV**) was indeed administered on behalf of the Persian emperor by **governors** (Hb. *pahôt*; cf. [Ezra 8:36](#); [Neh. 2:7, 9](#)). Solomon’s wealth, then, comes not only from explorers (better than the **NIV**’s **merchants**; cf. Hb. *twr* in [Num. 13:2ff.](#)) and **traders**, perhaps working outside the empire, but also from revenue deriving from within.

10:22 / Trading ships: *Lit.* “ships of Tarshish.” Tarshish often appears in the OT as a distant port, far to the west (cf. [Isa. 66:19](#); [Ezek. 27:12-15](#); [38:13](#); [Jonah 1:3](#); [Ps. 72:10](#)), a place that, like Ophir and Sheba, has exotic overtones. A “ship of Tarshish” is a ship capable of a journey to such a faraway place. This second Solomonic fleet (not to be confused with that of [9:26-28](#)) sails to lands so distant, indeed, that it takes three years to return with its extraordinary cargo. The whole world, throughout its entire extent, contributes to Solomon’s wealth—a point that [vv. 24-25](#) underline, with their picture of the **whole world** flocking to Jerusalem, each person bringing “tribute” (**NIV gift**; but cf. the translation of this same Hb. *minhâ* in [5:1](#)).