

1 Kings 10

Limits of the Text

1 Kings 10 is a complete literary unit centered on the wisdom and wealth of Solomon. The queen of Sheba tested Solomon's wisdom and observed Solomon's wealth, and his business ventures brought in even more wealth.

Towards Authorial Intent

Whatever conversations Solomon and the queen had, only her summarizing statements are recorded for us. This short **dialogue** reveals not simply that she was impressed, but that Solomon had given the credit to God.

There are also two comments from the author that are helpful. To open the chapter, he stated that the queen of Sheba heard about Solomon's wisdom, and that wisdom was connected to the name of the Lord (1 Ki 10:1). To summarize the chapter, he also stated that Solomon's wisdom and wealth excelled that of every other king, and that wisdom came from God (1 Ki 10:23-24).

External Context

This text continues with the reign of Solomon, particularly the section highlighting his wealth; the next section begins his downfall.

Interpretation

10:1 Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. 2 She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. And when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. 3 And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. 4 And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 5 the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more breath in her.¹

Solomon had expected that foreigners would hear of the Lord's name and come and pray towards the temple; he had asked God to answer their prayers, so everyone would know and fear God (1 Ki 8:41-43). He had desired that God would support Israel, so that all peoples would know that God is the one true God (1 Ki 8:60). And this is exactly what happened; this queen is but one example of the nations coming to hear Solomon's wisdom (1 Ki 4:34). The queen had heard about Solomon's fame, which was directly connected to the name of the Lord. The idea is that Solomon owed his great reputation to God; "she recognizes that only a great God could produce such a great king."² Probably she had heard of his reputation from the fleet of ships that Solomon and Hiram had sent sailing (1 Ki 9:26-28). Sheba is probably a reference to southern Arabia, perhaps the modern-day country of Yemen, a trip of some 1200 miles by land.

The queen tested Solomon with hard questions, a word that could be translated as riddles or enigmatic sayings.³ There are two possible ideas here. One, the queen could have been participating in a contest of wits, a test of "practical sagacity and poetic susceptibility that were part of the diplomatic encounters of the day,"⁴ designed to see if Solomon was really as wise as she had heard. Two, the queen could have been looking for answers; she may have asked serious questions that required great wisdom to answer.⁵ Either way, Solomon's God-given wisdom was more than up to the task.

Solomon's wisdom was sufficient for her hard questions, but the queen also saw other uses for his wisdom: building projects, administration of his household, and the worship of God. This display of wisdom overwhelmed her and left her breathless.

6 And she said to the king, "The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, 7 but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity

¹ ESV.

² House, 161.

³ Brown, 295.

⁴ House, 161.

⁵ Swanson, DBLH 2648.

surpass the report that I heard. 8 Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.” 10 Then she gave the king 120 talents of gold, and a very great quantity of spices and precious stones. Never again came such an abundance of spices as these that the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

The queen of Sheba had arrived as a skeptic, but Solomon had convinced her that the reports of his wisdom were not exaggerated; in fact, his wisdom had exceeded the reports. The queen, although probably not a worshipper of the One True God, recognized several realities about God. He had delighted in Solomon. He made Solomon king and established his throne. He loved Israel (Dt 7:7-8). And others benefited from Solomon’s wisdom. His men and servants were happy. His people received justice and righteousness. And so she blessed (praised) God. Clearly this pagan queen recognized Solomon’s wisdom as given from a God who loved his people, a powerful testimony. The queen of Sheba was one of several foreign monarchs in the Bible who came to know about God while interacting with his people; others included Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Cyrus.

11 Moreover, the fleet of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a very great amount of almug wood and precious stones. 12 And the king made of the almug wood supports for the house of the Lord and for the king’s house, also lyres and harps for the singers. No such almug wood has come or been seen to this day.

These verses, inserted into the midst of the Sheba narrative, seem a bit out of place, so commentators have suggested various reasons for its presence here. The Bible Knowledge Commentary proposes that these verses “reflect a trade arrangement that resulted from the queen’s visit. Ophir may have been close to or a part of the queen’s kingdom.”⁶ Provan, however, thinks that this is a comparison; while the queen paid a marvelous tribute to Solomon, the author was reminding his readers that the fleets of Solomon and Hiram were already bringing in more profits than the queen paid. The net effect of this comparison is to put the queen into perspective; she could not match Solomon’s wisdom, nor could she match his wealth. He outclassed her in every way.⁷

13 And King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all that she desired, whatever she asked besides what was given her by the bounty of King Solomon. So she turned and went back to her own land with her servants.

The visit has a happy ending. The queen gave to Solomon, and he reciprocated. Everyone was friends. The queen of Sheba is mentioned in the New Testament as a

⁶ Walvoord, 1:507.

⁷ Provan, 89.

positive example of making the effort to hear God's truth.⁸ Jesus said, "The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Mt 12:42).

The Sheba narrative was one example of how Solomon's wisdom led to his great wealth; in the next section, the author gave other examples of the wealth that Solomon had accumulated.

14 Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, 15 besides that which came from the explorers and from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of the west and from the governors of the land.

Much of Solomon's income was derived from trade route taxation. Carson explains, "Solomon's empire was so located that he controlled the chief trading routes northwards from the Arabian peninsula, and much of his wealth in gold probably stemmed from that fact. Arabian merchants were forced either to trade directly with Solomon or to pay for access to outlets further north. We may guess that favourable trading arrangements were among the many unmentioned things which the queen of Sheba asked Solomon for."⁹ The queen of Sheba was not the only Arabian monarch to visit Solomon; "kings of the west" is most likely a reference to Arabia.

16 King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold; 600 shekels of gold went into each shield. 17 And he made 300 shields of beaten gold; three minas of gold went into each shield. And the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. 18 The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. 19 The throne had six steps, and at the back of the throne was a calf's head, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, 20 while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. The like of it was never made in any kingdom. 21 All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. 22 For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.

Having stated in verses 14 and 15 that Solomon was making lots of money from trade route taxation, the author of Kings then illustrated his point. Solomon had so much gold he used it to make shields. Gold isn't a strong material, so these shields must have been ornamental, used for military parades or other ceremonial purposes. The House of the Forest of Lebanon, part of the palace complex (1 Ki 7:2), evidently served as an armory of sorts.

⁸ House, 162.

⁹ Carson, 1 Ki 10:14.

Solomon had so much gold he overlaid his entire throne with it. The animals carved into the throne are symbolic, but the sources of symbolism are unknown. On the one hand, some have speculated that the twelve lions represent the twelve tribes and that the lion was the symbol of the tribe of Judah; on the other hand, others have speculated that the calf represented Canaanite Baal worship.¹⁰

Solomon had so much gold he made his cups out of them! House captures well the effect such a statement would have had upon his original readers: “The contrast between their present experience and the way things once had been could hardly be more obvious or telling.”¹¹

And as a not-so-subtle-reminder to his readers, the author stated that Solomon had other sources of income, such as the trading ships that he and Hiram partnered on (1 Ki 9:26-28, 10:11).

23 Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. 24 And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. 25 Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year.

This paragraph provides a concluding summary of the chapter as well as another reminder of God’s faithfulness. In 1 Ki 3:12, God had promised to make Solomon the wisest man on the earth; 1 Ki 4:29-34 has already stated that God fulfilled this, and 1 Ki 10 restates it. His wisdom was also a source of income, as those who came to hear his wisdom brought him gifts; that’s the third source of income mentioned in this chapter.

It’s interesting to note that Solomon’s wisdom is tightly connected to God. In 1 Ki 10:1, Solomon’s fame is connected to the name of God. In 1 Ki 10:9, God loved Solomon, made him king, and enabled him to give justice. And in verse 24, everyone came to hear Solomon’s wisdom, which came from God. The author made it clear that everyone knew that God had blessed Solomon with wisdom and wealth; Solomon was careful not to take the credit for himself.

26 And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen. He had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. 27 And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah. 28 And Solomon’s import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king’s traders received them from Kue at a price. 29 A chariot could be imported from Egypt for 600 shekels of silver and a horse for 150, and

¹⁰ DeVries, 140.

¹¹ House, 164.

so through the king's traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Syria.

Finally the author adds a last word about Solomon's wealth; not only did he have much gold, but he also had many horses. The author noted two things about his horses. First, they were a military deterrent. "Chariots were the most effective and dreaded military machines of that day. Their mobility and versatility gave Israel a great military advantage and discouraged enemies from invading the wealthy nation."¹² Second, they were yet another source of income, as Solomon acted as a middleman, importing horses from Egypt and exporting them to other countries.

As we review this chapter, we are forced to confront the issue that Solomon was exceedingly wealthy. Was this good or bad? Some commentators note that Dt 17: 17 forbids kings from accumulating gold, yet this is exactly what Solomon had done, thus they conclude that Solomon must have been doing wrong. Provan goes so far as to say that Solomon's wealth was entirely self-indulgent.¹³ Yet this line of thinking forgets one rather important detail: God promised to make Solomon rich (1 Ki 3:13). God voluntarily promised to give Solomon wealth and faithfully fulfilled his promise, thus I'm unable to absolutely condemn Solomon for his wealth. On the hand, I think there is a disturbing undercurrent in the text. Dt 17:16-17 also forbids kings from accumulating horses and wives, the former because Israel was to trust in God for protection (Ps 20:7), the latter because they would lead them astray. Chapter 10 is all about his gold, yet it ends with his horses, and chapter 11 begins with his wives. I think the author is subtly—or perhaps not so subtly—transitioning from Solomon's greatness to Solomon's fall.

¹² Walvoord, 1:508.

¹³ Provan, 87. Provan conveniently forgets all the building projects in the previous chapter.

Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story about the wisdom and wealth of King Solomon.
2. National History – This is a story about the financial apex of the United Kingdom of Israel, the rewards of an obedient nation.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God blessing his people who live with him in a covenant relationship.

Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind's **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We to forget that God enjoys blessing his people, and when he does we tend to claim the credit for ourselves and hoard the blessing.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need? God enjoys blessing his people. He provides opportunities to use these blessings to bless others.

Outline

1. Solomon's wisdom and wealth impressed the queen of Sheba (1 Ki 10:1-13).
2. Solomon's wisdom and wealth surpassed all other kings (1 Ki 10:14-29).

Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 10 in order to demonstrate that God had blessed Solomon with great wisdom and wealth.

Teaching Outline

God blesses his people, and God wants us to understand why he blesses us. From 1 Kings 10, we are going to see two reasons why God blesses us.

1. God blesses his people so they will be a blessing to others (1 Ki 10:1-13).
2. God blesses his people so they will be a testimony before others (1 Ki 10:14-29).

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