

1 Kings 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] 1 Kings chapter 10 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. 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. And Solomon answered all her questions. There was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 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.

And she said to the king, The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes have seen it.

And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity surpassed the report that I heard. Happy are your men. Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom.

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.

[1:18] Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty 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.

Moreover, the fleet of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a very great amount of almagwood and precious stones. And the king made of the almagwood supports for the house of the Lord, and for the king's house, also lyres and harps for the singers.

No such almagwood has come or been seen to this day. And king Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all that she desired, whatever she asked besides what was given to her by the bounty of king Solomon.

So she turned and went back to her own land with her servants. Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold, 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.

King Solomon made two hundred large shields of beaten gold. Six hundred shekels of gold went into each shield. And he made three hundred shields of beaten gold. Three miners of gold went into each shield.

[2:31] And the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon. The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps, and the throne had a round top, and on each side of the seat were armrests, and two lions standing beside the armrests, 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. 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. 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.

Thus king Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth, in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.

Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses and mules, so much year by year. And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen.

[3 : 44] He had one thousand four hundred chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities, and with the king in Jerusalem. And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Sheffala.

And Solomon's import of horses was from Egypt and Qa, and the king's traders received them from Qa at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred and fifty.

And so through the king's traders, they were exported to all of the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of Syria. The rise of Solomon's glorious kingdom reminds us of the Garden of Eden, and of its glories.

Solomon builds a magnificent garden palace for the Lord, overlaid with gold, and filled and surrounded with images of palms, pomegranates, cherubim, lilies, springs of water, and other such imagery.

Solomon, as a new Adam, dwells alongside his heavenly father, in his house near the Lord's own house, within the temple complex. The gold from the outlying lands is being brought in on fleets of ships.

[4 : 49] There is peace on all sides, and the land and its people are entering into a great Sabbath rest. Now, at the zenith of Solomon's glory, the woman is brought to the new Adam.

The Queen of Sheba inspects the glorious labours of Solomon. Many historians identify Sheba with the land of the Sabayins, in South Arabia, around the area of modern-day Yemen.

The Queen of Sheba had heard of all of Solomon's wealth and his wisdom, all of his fame, and she comes to test him with riddles, wanting to see whether his wisdom was all that it had been rumoured to be.

Perhaps we should imagine something similar to what we see in Judges 14, when Samson tested the Philistines at his wedding feast with his riddle. The fame of Solomon is concerning the name of the Lord.

It is a fame that redounds to the Lord's glory. Solomon, insofar as he is faithfully serving the Lord, and ruling as the Lord's son, displays the glory of God himself to the nations around about.

[5 : 45] The Queen of Sheba arrives in Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with riches, exotic spices and treasures. The arrival of Sheba is also a fulfilment of the Lord's promises concerning the fame that Israel would gain among the nations.

Being famed for the Lord's blessings and for the wisdom that he has given them. What really amazes the Queen of Sheba the most is the glorious order and splendour of Solomon's feasts and his court, and the extravagance of his sacrifices.

The author of the books of the kings has already highlighted the importance of the attention that Solomon gave to good order. Solomon's kingdom is glorious in its wealth, but also has the dignity of wise order.

Solomon is not just a powerful potentate. He's a great man, a man with unrivalled breadth of mind, who surrounds himself with majesty, whose court is one of splendour and dignity.

He's a refined and civilised man, a man with an eye for the details, a man who's learned and wise. Such great spectacles are one of the ways in which rulers, whether ancient or modern, could maintain their power.

[6 : 50] Or inspiring spectacle, the architectural grandeur of great public buildings, beautiful works of art, costly and magnificent clothing, the pomp and the circumstance of state occasions, bountiful feasts, courtly manors, grand processions, and all these sorts of things, are each of them ways that rulers capture and hold the gaze and admiration of their peoples and their neighbours.

Royalty almost always has an element of theatre and pageantry to it, and Solomon's kingdom was exemplary in this regard. Sheba responds to Solomon's glory with delight and wonder.

She had heard the rumours of Solomon's greatness, but they did not do justice to the reality. She recognises that the glory of Solomon is a glory that had been given to him by the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord.

The visit of Sheba is an example of the riches of the Gentiles coming into Zion. Her visit seems to be recalled in texts such as Isaiah chapter 60, verses 4 to 14.

Lift up your eyes all around and see, they all gather together, they come to you. Your son shall come from afar and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant. [8 : 00] Your heart shall thrill and exult because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah.

All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you.

They shall come up with acceptance on my altar and I will beautify my beautiful house. Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their windows? For the coastline shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them.

For the name of the Lord your God and for the Holy One of Israel because he has made you beautiful. Foreigners shall build up your walls and their kings shall minister to you. For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favour I have had mercy on you.

Your gates shall be opened continually. Day and night they shall not be shut. That people may bring to you the wealth of the nations with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish.

[9 : 08] Those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the Cyprus, the plain and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary. And I will make the place of my feet glorious.

The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. In this chapter the age of Solomon is described quite literally as a sort of golden age. It's a high water mark of the fortunes of the people, and they will look back on this in the future and see it as a glorious anticipation of the time when the riches of the Gentiles will come flooding into Zion.

Treasures and resources are being brought into Jerusalem as gifts, tribute, and through trade, exploration and labour. Solomon constructs a remarkable throne with ivory and gold, imposing with lion guardians and steps.

Hearing of his wisdom and wealth, people from all over the earth come to Solomon with presents. Solomon starts to develop a large standing army of chariots and horsemen. He becomes an arms trader in the region, acting as a go-between for his father-in-law Pharaoh and exporting them to Syrians and others.

[10 : 19] In Deuteronomy chapter 17 verses 14 to 20, the Lord had given instructions concerning the appropriate behaviour of the king when Israel was established in the land. When you come to the land that the Lord your God has given you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me, you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother, only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again.

And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests.

And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

In chapters 10 to 11 of 1 Kings, Solomon disobeys these instructions. In chapter 10 verses 14 to 27, there is a mind-boggling accumulation of silver and gold by Solomon.

[11 : 54] In verses 28 to 29, we discover that not only was Solomon returning to Egypt for horses and chariots, he was also establishing Israel as Egypt's chief trading partner and avenue to the various other nations in the region.

Indeed, while he built a war machine for Israel, he was also helping to export chariots and horses to the Syrians, who would later turn against Israel. Solomon's wisdom isn't forsaking him here. He is a shrewd political mind, and such a mind would readily see the advantage in such trading and alliances and in developing such a strong military. However, these were actions that, while wise by human wisdom, rejected the instruction of the Lord, and as a result, they would come to nothing. A question to consider. What might we learn from such a chapter about the dangers of wisdom?