



First Kings - Chapter Four

I 1 Kings 1:1-11:43 - The Reign of King Solomon (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

The chapter commences with a list of Solomon's government officials. During Solomon's reign the nation knew peace and reached its greatest prosperity. Its borders were extended to those initially promised by God to Abraham. Solomon's wisdom was renowned throughout Israel and the surrounding nations. In addition he had great knowledge of the natural world.

I.c 1 Kings 4:1-19 - Solomon's Administrative Officers

This section provides a summary list of Solomon's government and the roles they were responsible for. Although the NRSVA ends the section at v.19, the Hebrew text treats vv.1-20 as a single unit. Verse 1 indicates that the following verses will concern the king's rule over all Israel, and v.20 provides a fitting climax to this initial description of his reign by telling what the consequences of his organising abilities were, i.e. Judah and Israel were happy. This is the kingdom that results from wise King Solomon's just rule as seen in Psalm 72, a psalm 'Of Solomon'.

¹ King Solomon was king over all Israel, ² and these were his high officials: Azariah son of Zadok was the priest; ³ Elihoreph and Ahijah sons of Shisha were secretaries; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder; ⁴ Benaiah son of Jehoiada was in command of the army; Zadok and Abiathar were priests; ⁵ Azariah son of Nathan was over the officials; Zabud son of Nathan was priest and king's friend; ⁶ Ahishar was in charge of the palace; and Adoniram son of Abda was in charge of the forced labour.

1 Kings 4:1-6

And these were his high officials. Just as the story of the two mothers contending over one baby was an example of Solomon's great wisdom, this chapter also shows Solomon's wisdom. The wise way he selected, trained, empowered, and supervised leaders is clearly seen. Solomon was a leader of leaders. No wise leader does it all themselves. They know how to delegate responsibility and authority and get the job done. However, good leaders never abdicate from their overall responsibilities. Solomon's great wisdom enabled him to see the needs to get, train, and employ the right people to meet those needs.

Priest, secretaries, recorder. Solomon's government was structured much like that in modern nations. He had officials who served as ministers or departmental secretaries over their specific areas of responsibility. Solomon's leadership was organised. He knew that God is a God of design and organisation: <<**for God is a God not of disorder but of peace**>> (1 Corinthians 14:33a), and that things simply operate better and more efficiently when organised.

Among the high officials of the kingdom first described is the (chief) priest, who is surprisingly named not as Zadok as in 1 Kings 2:35, but as Azariah the son of Zadok. For some undisclosed reason Zadok himself is now in a lesser position, along with a possibly reinstated Abiathar who was banished by Solomon in 1 Kings 2:26-27. However, since Abiathar had been exiled by Solomon, his inclusion here as a priest causes a problem for some commentators. It must be remembered, however, that while Solomon could only reassign Abiathar's responsibility, he could not take away his title or his dignity as a priest, which is given to him through his ancestry by God. The new order, designed in God-given wisdom, is different from the old order, in which Zadok had replaced the banished Abiathar.

The secretaries may have had general managerial responsibilities, or more specific tasks such as recording history or writing letters, while the recorder may in fact have been a herald or even the state prosecutor. Jehoshaphat, who had served under David according to 2 Samuel 8:16 and 20:24, continued as recorder. As such, he was more a chief of protocol than a recorder of the past. His status was almost that of a Cabinet Minister or Secretary of State.

Azariah was in charge of the <<**twelve officials over all Israel**>> mentioned in vv.7-19, while Zabud held the office of king's friend, i.e. his personal adviser; just as Hushai was to David in 2 Samuel 15:37, 16:16 and 17:5-16.

Ahishar was the royal steward, a role also mentioned in 1 Kings 16:9 and 18:3, and performed by Joseph for Pharaoh: <<**You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you**>> (Genesis 41:40).

Adoniram was in charge of the forced labour, conscripted men that would have included Israelites as well as foreigners; refer to 1 Kings 5:13-18 and 9:15-22.

⁷ Solomon had twelve officials over all Israel, who provided food for the king and his household; each one had to make provision for one month in the year. ⁸ These were their names: Ben-hur, in the hill country of Ephraim; ⁹ Ben-deker, in Makaz, Shaalbim, Beth-shemesh, and Elon-beth-hanan; ¹⁰ Ben-hesed, in Arubboth (to him belonged Socoh and all the land of Hopher); ¹¹ Ben-abinadab, in all Naphtali-dor (he had Taphath, Solomon's daughter, as his wife); ¹² Baana son of Ahilud, in Taanach, Megiddo, and all Beth-shean, which is beside Zarethan below Jezreel, and from Beth-shean to Abel-meholah, as far as the other side of Jokmeam; ¹³ Ben-geber, in Ramoth-gilead (he had the villages of Jair son of Manasseh, which are in Gilead, and he had the region of Argob, which is in Bashan, sixty great cities with walls and bronze bars); ¹⁴ Ahinadab son of Iddo, in Mahanaim; ¹⁵ Ahimaaz, in Naphtali (he had taken Basemath, Solomon's daughter, as his wife); ¹⁶ Baana son of Hushai, in Asher and Bealoth; ¹⁷ Jehoshaphat son of Paruah, in Issachar; ¹⁸ Shimei son of Ela, in Benjamin; ¹⁹ Geber son of Uri, in the land of Gilead, the country of King Sihon of the Amorites and of King Og of Bashan. And there was one official in the land of Judah.

1 Kings 4:7-19

Solomon reorganised the Israelite territory of his kingdom into twelve districts, each of which was responsible to supply the immense provisions for the king for one month out of the year. It appears that Judah, Solomon's tribe, was exempted from this burden. Solomon also fortified key towns throughout his kingdom and built store cities for his economic enterprises. Among his most significant building projects were the temple and his royal palace in Jerusalem, built largely with cedar supplied by King Hiram of Tyre.

Solomon had twelve officials over all Israel. The task of Solomon's representatives in the various regions of Israel was to provide for the king and his household on an annual rotation, each region being responsible for one month in each year. These officials may have been tax supervisors, whose job was to ensure that local government paid its dues to central government. Although the number twelve is the traditional number of the Israelite tribes, and some of the regions mentioned in vv.7-19 may have been based on tribal areas, e.g. Naphtali, Issachar, and Benjamin, what is described here is not strictly a tribal system of support for central government; for example, the hill country of Ephraim in v.8 is

not to be understood as corresponding to the tribal area of Ephraim. In fact, it forms part of the land occupied by Benjamin: <<*Eleazar son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of his son Phinehas, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim*>> (Joshua 24:33). Gibeah lies just to the northwest of Jerusalem. Solomon’s arrangements move beyond the tribal system, while having points of contact with it. The absence of reference to Judah in this list could be explained by the fact there was only one official in Solomon’s homeland; that is, these twelve districts were additional to Judah, which remained unchanged, some say untaxed. This would become a source of discontent and one of the reasons that led to the secessional crisis with the northern tribes following Solomon’s death.



Solomon’s Administrative Districts circa 950 BC

Each one had to make provision for one month in the year. Taxes were paid in grain and livestock, which were used to support the royal court and the central government. Each governor was responsible for one month of the year.

A double-sided board game has been found at the site of Beth-shemesh from the 10th Century BC. Carved into one side of the board is a man's name, 'Hanan.' That name also appears on an ostrakon from Beth-shemesh dating to the 12th Century BC and on a 10th Century bowl found at nearby Tel Batash. The Bible lists the site of Elonbeth-hanan immediately after Beth-shemesh as part of Solomon's second economic district.

One of the earliest Hebrew inscriptions, found at Khirbet Raddana and dating to the 12th Century BC, is a jar handle bearing the words 'belonging to Ahilud.'

The one official in the land of Judah was most likely Azariah (v.5), to whom the twelve district officials were responsible. This system apparently continued after the death of the king. Evidence for it is perhaps to be found at the excavations of Eshtemoa in the hill country of Judah. There five jars have been discovered, filled with over 60 lbs or 27 kg of silver. The pottery dates to the 9th or 8th Century BC. On two of the jars the word 'fifth' appears; this probably refers to a tax that would equal 20 percent.

I.d 1 Kings 4:20-34 - Solomon and the Nations

Israel's peace and prosperity is based in part on Solomon's dominion over the surrounding kingdoms, which contributed to the prosperity and represent no threat to the peace (vv.21-28). Solomon's wisdom is admired throughout the known world (vv.29-34).

I.d.i 1 Kings 4:20-28 - Magnificence of Solomon's Rule

Under Solomon the people of Judah and Israel prospered and the nation's borders reached their greatest extent - to that which God had promised. There were no wars for all the surrounding nations were either at peace with Israel or subservient to them.

²⁰ Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. ²¹ Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.

1 Kings 4:20-21



The Extent of Solomon's Kingdom circa 971-931 BC

Solomon's reign marked the zenith of Israel's power and wealth in biblical times. His father David had bestowed upon him a kingdom that included Edom, Moab, Ammon, Syria, and Zobah. Solomon would later bring the kingdom of Hamath under his dominion as well, and his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter sealed an alliance with Egypt. His expansive kingdom controlled important trade routes between several major world powers, including Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia (Asia Minor).

Judah and Israel ate and drank and were happy. The reign of Solomon was a golden age for Israel as a kingdom. The population grew robustly and it was a season of great prosperity, allowing plenty of leisure time and pursuit of good pleasures. Solomon's God-given wisdom produced an economic system which, while it ensures that the royal household had enough to eat and drink, was not oppressive. This is true even though the people are as numerous as the sand by the sea, as God had promised to Abraham: <<*I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies*>> (Genesis 22:17); also, Solomon's concern in 1 Kings 3:8-9 that he would not be able to govern so many people should be noted. This is government by the righteous person under the blessing of God: when their leader thrives, the people rejoice: <<*When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan*>> (Proverbs 29:2).

Solomon was not a warrior or a general. This peace was achieved by King David and was enjoyed by King Solomon. It was also assisted, under God's providence, by a season of decline and weakness among Israel's neighbouring states. Solomon exerted a dominating influence over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt, an area further defined as extending from Tiphseh, an important city on the Euphrates, about 75 miles or 121 km south of Carchemish on the main trade route connecting Mesopotamia with Syria, to Gaza, on the western coast of Palestine, in the far south of Philistia. It is a large area, corresponding to the ideal extent of Israel's dominion as promised to Abraham in Genesis 15:18-21.

²² Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ²³ ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. ²⁴ For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates; and he had peace on all sides.

1 Kings 4:22-24

Thirty cors of choice flour. A cor equalled 220 litres or about 48 gallons. The reader can accurately picture thirty 48-gallon drums full of fine flour being delivered for every day.

Ten fat oxen. This was an exceptionally large daily meal for one man and shows Solomon clearly had a problem with gluttony (a small Bible commentator joke - normally avoided). This provision was for Solomon's entire household and his royal court. Some estimate that this much food every day could feed between 15,000 to 36,000 people. It supplied considerably more than Solomon's household, large as it

was. Fatted oxen are pen-fed cattle in contrast to open grazing varieties.

One hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. This list is not meant to stress the idea of opulence and luxury; the stress is on the idea that this daily provision indicated the great prosperity of the kingdom.

Nehemiah describes what his daily allocation of food was as governor, although he never accepted it for it would have been a burden to the fledgling new state of Judæa: <<Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labour on the people>> (Nehemiah 5:18).

²⁵ During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.

1 Kings 4:25

During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and under his fig tree. The people lived under God's blessing: <<Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield>> (Joel 2:22), which contrasts with: <<He struck their vines and fig trees, and shattered the trees of their country>> (Psalm 105:33), and: <<They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters; they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; they shall destroy with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust>> (Jeremiah 5:17), having a degree of economic independence – somewhat akin to living in the kingdom of the 'last days' foreseen by the prophet Micah, when swords will be beaten into ploughshares and every man will have a stake in the land; refer to Micah 4:1-4. It is also seen in: <<Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: "Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern">> (Isaiah 36:16), and: <<On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree>> (Zechariah 3:10).

The peace enjoyed under Solomon was promised to David by God: <<See, a son shall be born to you; he shall be a man of peace. I will give him peace from all his enemies on every side; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days>> (1 Chronicles 22:9). There will come a time when the people of God will once again know peace: <<In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'>> (Jeremiah 23:6).

From Dan even to Beer-sheba. This phrase was commonly used to speak of the entire land of Israel, from north to south; examples can be found in Judges 20:1, 1 Samuel 3:20, 2 Samuel 24:2, 1 Chronicles 21:2 and 2 Chronicles 30:5.

²⁶ Solomon also had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen.

1 Kings 4:26

Forty thousand stalls of horses. Based on the available OT source documents, the number of stalls is uncertain. Although most Hebrew manuscripts place the number at 40,000, a Greek Septuagint manuscript and one Hebrew manuscript place the number at 4,000, which is also the number indicated in 2 Chronicles 9:25; hence the number here could possibly be a copying error. This is confirmed by the 1,400 chariots and twelve thousand horses in 1 Kings 10:26, which would suggest fewer than 40,000 horse stalls. In either case, such a large number of stalls, even 4,000, would violate the prohibition in Deuteronomy 17:16a that the king <<**must not acquire many horses for himself**>>. Tripartite pillared buildings have been unearthed at numerous Iron Age sites – Megiddo, Hazor, Beth-shemesh, and elsewhere. Each unit has a central hall flanked by two parallel aisles, separated by rows of pillars. These buildings have been identified by numerous scholars as stalls or stables, although some argue they are storehouses, army barracks, or bazaars and, indeed, some of them date to the time of Solomon.

²⁷ Those officials supplied provisions for King Solomon and for all who came to King Solomon’s table, each one in his month; they let nothing be lacking. ²⁸ They also brought to the required place barley and straw for the horses and swift steeds, each according to his charge.

1 Kings 4:27-28

The horses and swift steeds. The darker side of Solomon is once again hinted at, even in the midst of the glories of the early part of his reign. As stated above, Deuteronomy 17:16a forbids the king from acquiring many horses for himself and forbids him further from making the people return <<**to Egypt in order to acquire more horses**>> (Deuteronomy 17:16b). First Kings 10:26-29 refers again to Solomon’s acquisition of chariots and horses, and refers to the cost of their importation from Egypt.

Each according to his charge. Spurgeon preached a sermon on this verse, focusing on the idea that Christians each have a charge to fulfil in the Kingdom of God, and they should be diligent to perform it and be expectant in being supplied for this duty. He said, “In Solomon’s court all his officers had a service to carry out, every man according to his charge. It is exactly so in the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we are truly his, he has called us to some work and office, and he wills us

to discharge that office diligently. We are not to be gentlemen-at-ease, but men-at-arms; not loiterers, but labourers; not glittering spangles, but burning and shining lights.” He also said, “Many a servant girl gives her fourpenny-piece to the offering, and if the same proportion were carried out among those who are wealthy, gold would not be so rare a metal in the Lord’s treasury. A tithe may be too much for some, but a half might not be enough for another. Let it be, Every man according to his charge, as to measure as well as to matter.” Spurgeon concluded the message on a high note, “Everything for Jesus, the glorious Solomon of our hearts, the Beloved of our souls! Life for Jesus! Death for Jesus! Time for Jesus! Eternity for Jesus! Hand and heart for Jesus! Brain and tongue for Jesus! Night and day for Jesus! Sickness or health for Jesus! Honour or dishonour for Jesus! Shame or glory for Jesus! Everything for Jesus, Every man according to his charge. So may it be! Amen.”

The fourpenny-piece referred to by Spurgeon above was a mid-19th Century coin referred most commonly to as ‘a groat.’ It probably represented a week’s pay for lowly servant girls.

I.d.ii 1 Kings 4:29-34 - Fame of Solomon’s Wisdom

Solomon was so wise that his renown reached all the neighbouring nations. He also had a tremendous knowledge of natural history.

²⁹ God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations.

1 Kings 4:29-31

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding. In the glory years of Solomon’s kingdom, he used the great wisdom God gave. Sadly, he did not always use this wisdom and later fell away from his devotion and worship of God; refer to 1 Kings 11:1-11.

The wisdom of all the people of the east, all the wisdom of Egypt. Solomon’s wisdom exceeded that of people from places renowned for their wisdom, including all the people of the east, which were exemplified by the three wise men or Magi of Matthew 2:1-12. Egypt specifically provides many examples of wisdom literature, e.g. ‘The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope,’ which many OT scholars believe influenced Proverbs 22:17-23:12. Solomon’s wisdom was also greater than that of the named individuals famous for their wisdom.

He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol. Ethan is the author of Psalm 89 and Heman, also an Ezrahite, the author of Psalm 88. The other names are only mentioned in this passage.

His fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. Solomon became a prominent and famous man even among kings. In a strong sense, this is the fulfilment of the great promises to an obedient Israel described in Deuteronomy: <<*If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth*>> (Deuteronomy 28:1), and: <<*All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you*>> (Deuteronomy 28:10). In a sense, these blessings came upon Solomon more for David's obedience than for his own. David was far more loyal and intimate with God than Solomon; yet God outwardly blessed Solomon more for David's sake than he had blessed David himself.

³² He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³ He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. ³⁴ People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

1 Kings 4:32-34

He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. Solomon's great wisdom - divinely inspired wisdom, in fact - makes up a considerable portion of the Book of Proverbs. Solomon also composed many songs but few psalms in the sense that David was <<*the sweet psalmist of Israel*>> (2 Samuel 23:1d ESV). This goes back to Solomon's inferior relationship with God as compared to his father David.

He would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. Solomon's wisdom was not only applied to understanding life and human problems, but also to understanding the world around him. He had a divinely gifted intellect and ability to understand. Careful observation of the natural world and how it works is one of the 'normal' ways in which people gain wisdom, e.g. Job Chapters 38-41, Proverbs 30:15-31 and Matthew 6:25-34. Solomon was concerned with the natural world, from the largest tree (the proverbially high cedar that is in Lebanon) to the smallest plant, e.g. hyssop, and including all sorts of fauna. Wisdom 'from below' (as here) and wisdom 'from above' (as received by Solomon in 1 Kings Chapter 3) are thus combined in this one person, the wisest of all Israel's kings.

The old rabbis said that even animals brought their disputes to Solomon. A man walked in a field on a hot day with a jug of cool milk when he came upon a serpent dying of thirst. The serpent asked the man for some milk but he refused. Finally, the serpent promised to show the man some hidden treasure if he gave him some milk, and the man agreed. When they went to the place of hidden treasure, the man moved a rock and was about to take the treasure when the serpent pounced upon him and coiled around his neck. The man protested that this was unfair, but the serpent insisted the man would never take his treasure. The man said, "Let us take our case to Solomon," and the serpent agreed. When they went to Solomon the serpent was still coiled around the man's neck. Solomon asked the serpent what he wanted, and the serpent said, "I want to kill this man because the Scriptures command it when they say that I will strike the heel of man." Solomon told him to first let go of the man, because the two parties in a trial must have equal standing. When the serpent went to the floor Solomon asked him again what he wanted, and the serpent again said that he wanted to kill the man based on the verse <<***you will strike his heel***>>. Then Solomon turned to the man and said, "To you God's command was to crush the head of the serpent - do it!" And the man crushed the serpent's head.