

The Stones Cry Out: King Solomon

King Solomon represents the zenith of the royal period in Israel. While David consolidated the Israelite nation, Solomon expanded, enriched and fortified it. Both David and Solomon built palaces, but Solomon also built a temple that was one of the wonders of the ancient world and stood for 400 years until the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 B.C.

While David was a national figure, known throughout Israel, Solomon was an international one, renowned beyond Israel's borders and also trading with the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and even as far as Africa. The Bible says he obtained gold from Ophir and horses from Egypt. Solomon had numerous foreign wives, including the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh. The Queen of Sheba reportedly came to see Solomon and remarked that his "wisdom and prosperity exceeded the fame of which I heard" (1 Kings 10: 7-8)

A fascinating account in 1 Kings 3: 16-28 illustrates Solomon's wisdom. Two women came to the king with a child that each of them claimed was hers. With seemingly no way to resolve the impasse, Solomon proposed the child be cut in half. "Give half to one and half to the other." The woman whose child it was pleaded, "Please spare the life of my baby. Give it to her." The other said, "Neither of us shall have him. Cut him in two." Solomon ruled, "Give the living baby to the first woman. She is his mother."

The biblical stories around Solomon, including this one and the account of the Queen of Sheba, read like a parable. Thus in the nineteenth century—the Age of Enlightenment—the so-called "higher critics" of the Bible came to the conclusion that these accounts were mythical.

These weren't archeologists. They didn't do field work to see if they could find evidence for anything. Rather, they were sedentary critics, saying, in effect, "From here, sitting in my armchair, it doesn't look to me like any of this really happened."

Historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries raised a different objection. There were several great empires in the region in antiquity, including the Egyptians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians. How could a small country like Israel be called an empire or even a powerful nation? More likely, these historians said, the Jews were subjugated vassals of one of the dominant empires.

Then there are the biblical minimalists. While they do not necessarily dispute Solomon's existence, they dispute the visit from the Queen of Sheba. They dispute the existence of a temple that was unrivaled anywhere. They dispute that Solomon had a large and prosperous nation with a centralized administration. The biblical accounts, they insist, were written centuries later; there is not even good evidence of literacy in Solomon's day.

Let's begin with two important artifacts that illuminate the state of literacy in Solomon's Israel. The first is the Gezer calendar, so named because it was found in the ancient city of Gezer by archeologist R. A. S. Macalister in 1908. Written in old Hebrew and dated to the tenth century B.C., the limestone tablet lists the seasons and their accompanying agricultural activities: sowing, pruning, harvesting, and so on.



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This calendar, which might have served the purpose of helping young people to memorize their work activities through the agricultural seasons, shows that writing existed even among ordinary people in the Solomonic era. Solomon's Israel was not

an illiterate society.

Then there is the Ophel Pithos inscription, dated to the same period, found in the Ophel area of Jerusalem by archeologist Eilat Mazar in 2012. The inscription is a mere fragment, but scholars believe that it refers to the trade of incense or spices from southern Arabia, written in the ancient South Arabian script of the kingdom of Sheba.

The Ophel inscription shows that writing didn't merely exist but was used in international communication. This implies the existence of a literate administrative group in Jerusalem capable of maintaining such a correspondence.

Yet the existence of a powerful Solomonic kingdom raises a problem. Where were the Hittites, the Egyptians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians? How come they didn't subjugate Solomon and make his kingdom subservient to them? In earlier centuries, archeologists can confirm the existence of these great empires. But remarkably, all of them either collapsed or were greatly weakened in Solomon's day.

The Hittite empire disintegrated between 1200-1150 BC. During the same period, Egypt lost its Asian possessions, suffered setbacks at the hands of the Philistines, and entered a terminal decline. Babylonia was sacked in 1155 B.C., not to rise again until much later. The civilization of the Mycenaean Greeks also imploded, for reasons not well known, and Greece entered a "dark age" that lasted through the sixth century B.C.

There was an interregnum of a couple of centuries—an unlikely gap or pause—before new empires, notably the Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires, gathered strength and established their dominance over the entire region. Israel would be sorely tormented by these empires. But it is during this 200-year gap that Israel had its royal period and reached its apogee or high point under King Solomon. The problem disappears.

King Solomon's greatest achievement is undoubtedly the construction of the temple. No temple existed under David, who used a tent-like tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant. According to the Bible, Solomon's temple, constructed on a foundation or temple mount, was a magnificent structure, adorned with carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees and flowers. It had a spacious courtyard with a sacrificial altar and a bronze vessel, known as the Sea of Bronze.

So where are the ruins of this temple? Alas, virtually none of them exist. That's because Solomon's temple was razed and burned by the Babylonians. A new temple, the so-called Second Temple, was built on the same site, but that too was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., and now an Islamic victory monument, the Dome of the Rock, and the al-Aqsa mosque occupy the site.

Moreover, the very destruction of the Solomonic temple by the Babylonians—an event well-attested in both historical and archeological records—proves its prior existence. How could the Babylonians have destroyed a temple that did not exist?

Archeologists have found several examples of Hebrew temples constructed in other parts of Israel, all built according to the general biblical outline and schema. Temples elsewhere in the Near East also display recognizable features of the Solomonic design. So, yes, Solomon built the temple, just as the Bible says he did.

Now we turn to evidence for the scope of Solomon's rule over Israel. The Bible says that King Solomon constructed fortifications in four cities: Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. (1 Kings 9:15) Such fortifications were accompanied by a city gate, which controlled access to the city. We learn from various passages in the Old Testament, which offhandedly mention city gates, that such gates were used for defensive purposes, but also for ritualistic ceremonies and juridical practices. City elders sat in judgement at the gates and also heard the pleas of the poor and needy there.

The biblical reference to constructions at Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer is a valuable clue to the reach of Solomon's rule. The Israeli archeologist Yigael Yadin found six-chambered gates at each of these strategically-located cities, along with monumental city walls and palaces or administrative structures. Yadin recognized that these were all constructed in the same way and dated to the Solomonic period. He correctly interpreted his findings as supporting the biblical record.

But many archeologists, of a more secular mindset, dismissed his interpretation. Only recently have scholars, using more precise carbon dating techniques, confirmed the dating of the gates to Solomon's time. Now the mainstream of scholars connect the gates and accompanying structures of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer to the size and scope of a unified Solomonic nation.

In 1986, archeologists Benjamin and Eilat Mazar uncovered a fourth, parallel gate structure at Jerusalem, with measurements matching the others in some cases to the nearest inch—evidence, in the assessment of Eilat Mazar, of a centralized authority with a “blueprint” for the construction of such structures as far away as northern Israel.

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