

THE REIGN OF KING SOLOMON: DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Solomon, the son of King David and Bathsheba, became king of Judah and Israel in the year 967 BCE at age twenty and reigned until his death in 928 BCE. While Solomon's wisdom is generally perceived as being focused on his parables and poetry (I Kgs. 5:12) or his insights into human nature (I Kgs. 3:28), his political and economic acumen is often overlooked. The rapid expansion of Israel's commerce, trade and industry during his reign was due to a number of reasons, foremost being the political. Either by treaties of friendship or subjugation, David had extended the sphere of Israel's influence so that by the time Solomon succeeded to the throne the nation possessed a vast potential for expanding trade and the inflow of tribute. Displaying political and administrative wisdom, Solomon proved equal to taking full advantage of the unparalleled opportunity for economic growth and development. Still another reason was the freedom from armed conflict during Solomon's reign, a rare phenomenon in antiquity.¹

For the first time in Jewish history, international commercial ties were established and developed to a very advanced degree. Roads were built to meet the new needs of world trade as well as a merchant fleet. Natural resources in mines and stone quarries were exploited and put to use. Foreign trade also brought about a significant change in Israel's domestic economy. From that time onward there emerged a professional merchant class engaged not only in negotiating trade agreements with foreign states, but also in procuring foreign goods for the home market and selling domestic products abroad. It has been said that not until Solomon's reign did the mercantile talents of the Jewish people display such scope and favorable results.²

Above all, however, centralized and magnificent expression was given to the monotheistic religion of Israel through the erection of the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple complex also enabled Solomon to achieve

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legitimacy according to Near Eastern cultural expectations. The Temple's sacred precincts facilitated international trade agreements and helped broker commercial transactions, because an oath before the gods in the ancient Near East cemented political treaties as well as the terms of exchange. Moreover, it provided a sense of shared trust between partners.³

THE PHOENICIANS

Cognizant of both political and economic realities, Solomon realized that it was impossible to compete with the Phoenicians, who possessed the fleet, the resources, the experience and old-established connections on land and on the Mediterranean Sea. Only in collaboration with Tyre, the leading city and capital of Phoenicia, could his own economic plans be brought to fruition. The Phoenicians could not dictate the terms of this relationship, since the Israelite contribution to the partnership was Tyre's access to the inland routes as well as the manpower it provided for joint ventures. This was certainly the case when Phoenician maritime voyages originated at the Red Sea port of Ezion-geber.

In the south, Solomon's kingdom did in fact extend as far as the Red Sea, described in the Bible as *Yam Suf* (Sea of Reeds), which in all likelihood was the reason Solomon chose Ezion-geber as his seaport, in addition to the one at Joppa (Jaffa) on the Mediterranean coast. A wall about 26 feet high and in places 13 feet wide surrounded Ezion-geber, which had acquired both strategic and commercial importance. Nelson Glueck, who directed the excavations there, noted "the tremendous achievement that Ezion-geber represents, owing to the one man, namely Solomon, who possessed the vision, the strength, the authority, the organizing ability, and the resources for a project of such dimensions."⁴

The Phoenicians were experienced in the business of setting up copper furnaces and refineries. Their smelting mines in Sardinia and Spain were called *Tarshish*⁵ after the ships specially equipped for transporting ore and metal cargoes. It is recorded in I Kings 10:22 that the Phoenicians also built a "Tarshish fleet" for Solomon. This would point unmistakably to the type of merchant ship operating from the copper town of Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Akaba.⁶ Hiram, king of Tyre, also sent his experienced mariners to serve in the fleet together with Solomon's men. They sailed to Ophir and brought back

420 talents of gold, which they delivered to King Solomon (I Kgs. 9:27-28). Solomon's fleet of trading ships, along with the ships of Hiram, returned once every three years from trading missions carrying gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks (I Kgs. 10:22).

Solomon made Ezion-geber not only a seaport but his chief industrial city as well. Archeological excavations in that area have revealed large metal refineries built to refine copper for export after it was processed in huge smelting furnaces located in the Sinai peninsula and the Aravah, between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea. Phoenicia provided timber not only for the shipyards, but also to supply fuel for the furnaces and refineries. Clearly, an enterprise on this scale could not have been undertaken without an army of forced labor composed of indigenous as well as foreign workers.⁸

From I Kings 9:28 and 10:11 we know that Solomon's Tarshish ships sailed south from Ezion-geber to Ophir, a region in the southwest corner of Arabia. This is supported by a verse in Genesis 10:29, where Ophir is mentioned as being located between Sheba and Havilah. Now in Genesis 2:11 Havilah is referred to as the land where gold can be found. If, in fact, Ophir lay close to Sheba, Solomon's commercial relations with the land of Sheba and its queen possess historical credibility.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

The biblical narrative, concerning a visit some 3,000 years ago by a nameless Queen of the Arabian kingdom of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem,⁹ has been recorded for posterity in the first 13 verses of I Kings, chapter 10. Over the centuries, this story has been elaborated and retold in many languages, exciting the imagination of simple and sophisticated people alike. Yet, one may ask, is there any historical evidence whatsoever of that celebrated visit? What is known from other sources about the ancient realm of Sheba and its queens, and has archeology uncovered anything that could shed light on the Solomonic kingdom and its neighbors to the north and south?

Sheba (Sabea) was located in the area of modern Yemen. Its capital was the town of Marib, which still exists about 60 miles north-east of San'a, high in the mountains of Yemen. The name Sheba appears as one of the sons of Joktan in Genesis 10:28, along with other South Arabian toponyms.¹⁰

During the Solomonic era, the people of Sheba were the most advanced inhabitants of Arabia. They had probably lived further north and then moved south, subduing their neighbors before uniting with them to create a state that would dominate southern Arabia, where incense, medicaments, cosmetics and spices passed through on the way between India and Africa. The social structure of Sheba's inhabitants permitted polyandry, which suggests that women enjoyed a high degree of independence and could even account for the fact that women occupied the throne. According to Josephus, the nameless Queen of Sheba in First Kings was actually called Nikaule. She ruled "Egypt and Ethiopia" and brought balsam shrubs to Jerusalem, thereby introducing Dead Sea perfumes to the Land of Israel.¹¹

Solomon's ships plied the Red Sea and his caravans penetrated far into Arabia. In his wide commercial outreach he must have done business – and simultaneously competed – with the famous Queen of Sheba. Her strenuous journey to Jerusalem by camel, traversing over 1,200 miles of inhospitable terrain, was almost certainly dictated by commercial interests, as well as by the pleasure of viewing Solomon's splendor and hearing his wisdom.

The magnitude of the Queen's gift to Solomon of 120 talents of gold (v. 10) may go unnoticed by those unfamiliar with ancient weights, but when one learns that the quantity specified amounted to over four and a half tons and is today the equivalent of well over \$7,000,000, not counting the spices and precious stones, these figures are astounding. Since the sum total of the Queen's gifts to Solomon far exceeded the amount paid as an annual tax by Ammon and Moab to Assyria, one can only surmise that her visit was occasioned by a perceived threat to the commercial ties between Sheba and places along the Jordan highway and the Via Maris which had fallen under the control of Israel's King Solomon and Tyre's King Hiram. That being so, the Queen of Sheba's journey to Israel could very well have been one of the first great trade missions in world history.¹²

Solomon was not a vassal of the neighboring kingdoms, as were some of his successors, but an equal who commanded respect and admiration (vv. 5, 14, etc.). Evidence of the high esteem in which Solomon and his kingdom were held was Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (3:1), an event unique in the annals of both Israel and Egypt.

Royal diplomatic marriages, as a means of cementing international relations and as a practical alternative to warfare, were a cornerstone of Solomon's foreign policy. From ancient Near Eastern records, and especially from the Amarna Letters, there is no evidence that an Egyptian princess was ever married to a foreigner. The singular exception was the marriage of Pharaoh's daughter to King Solomon! Clearly, this was not merely the cementing of an alliance, but a reflection of the real power status of the kingdom of Israel. As a wedding gift, the Egyptian ruler also gave Solomon the city of Gezer (9:16).¹³

Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter inaugurated an Egyptian-Israelite détente which lasted some 20 years until the twenty-first dynasty was superseded by Shishak (c. 945 BCE), who chose to terminate Egypt's partnership with Israel. In response to Shishak's unilateral move not only did Solomon exclude Egypt from his commercial ventures, he even set up a rival cartel, bypassing the traditional Egyptian monopoly over raw materials, precious metals, and exotica imported from Africa.

The visit of the Queen of Sheba must have taken place after Solomon's twenty-fourth year on the throne, since we are told (v. 4ff.) that he received her in his already completed palace. She came to forge commercial ties, thereby securing her hold over trade with South Arabia. Both she and Solomon, we may assume, foresaw an inevitable conflict resulting from the restoration of Egyptian trade in the Red Sea under the aggressive Pharaoh Shishak, and therefore sought to counter this threat.¹⁴

Her visit was undoubtedly prompted by economic and political motives, but there appears to have been a social side to it as well. She arrived with an impressive retinue, including camels bearing precious items from southern Arabia as gifts for the king. Having heard of Solomon's great wisdom, the Queen aimed *to test him with hard questions* (v. 1), all of which he answered. The main purpose of her journey, however, was to conclude an amicable trade agreement, since Solomon's merchant ships had evidently made inroads in the caravan trade that the Sheban monarchy had previously controlled.

The Queen's diplomacy and her conversations with Solomon had the desired effect (vv. 2, 10, 13). A satisfactory commercial treaty was evidently negotiated between the two sovereigns, because we are informed that *King*

Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba everything she wished for, in addition to what [he] gave her out of his royal bounty (v. 13).

A story that has fired the imagination traces the ancestry of the Ethiopians to Menelik, a son of Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. If the Ethiopians, who immigrated to Africa from Arabia, proudly claim that their monarchs had such a biblical origin, this legend must surely be based on an historical connection between the land of Sheba and the kingdom of Solomon. *Targum Sheni* to the Book of Esther (1:2) relates in detail the Jewish legend telling how the two rulers met in Jerusalem.

THE DECLINE

Foremost among Solomon's extensive building projects was the Temple. It was constructed over a period of seven years with material gathered by David during his reign, supplemented by material and craftsmen from Phoenicia. The Temple's splendor is described in chapters 6-7 of First Kings. The palace complex took 13 years to complete. In addition, there was a palace for Pharaoh's daughter and shrines for the other foreign wives (11:7-8). Solomon's building projects, which included imposing fortifications in Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer, drained the royal treasury.

To pay his debt to Hiram, Solomon was obliged to give him 20 towns in the Galilee region. In order to administer the corvée and collect taxes efficiently, Solomon divided the country into twelve districts. This may have been a deliberate attempt to strengthen the central government at the expense of the established tribal hierarchy.

Instead of securing the kingdom, Solomon's numerous diplomatic marriages paved the way, following his death, to its division and decline. It was both a national and a personal disaster. His foreign wives were allowed to continue practicing their idolatrous worship on the heights overlooking the Temple Mount – in disregard of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 7:1-5. Of the many deities to which his foreign wives turned Solomon's heart, perhaps the best known in the ancient world was Ashtoreth, *the goddess of the Sidonians* (11:5, 33). She was a fertility goddess, known as Astarte among the Greeks and Ishtar in Babylon. Although it was his foreign wives who offered sacrifice to pagan gods at the shrines that Solomon built, chapter 11:1-13 also implicates him in this idolatry.

Resentment of Solomon's burdensome economic measures and heathen practices (bordering on apostasy) mounted during his lifetime and culminated, after his death, in a revolt by the ten northern tribes and the dismemberment of the kingdom he had inherited from his father. Yet despite the violation of a biblical prohibition in his old age, Solomon's charismatic leadership, vision, diplomacy and commercial initiatives, surpassed by the essential timelessness of his spiritual and literary creations, have enabled Solomon to remain, after over three millennia, a towering presence in the biblical narrative and in the post-biblical writings, ancient and modern, Jewish and non-Jewish, to this very day.

In conclusion, the reign of King Solomon depicts the recorded success and failures of an incomparable leader, administrator, builder, merchant prince and sage. Biblical tradition and scholarly reconstruction combine to portray Solomon as the economic commander of his time. He presided over an empire that took full advantage of its geostrategic position, embracing Phoenicia in the north and Arabia in the south. He contracts with Hiram of Tyre, does business with the Queen of Sheba, and provides horses for the Egyptians.¹⁵ His bureaucracy sees to the construction of monumental edifices, socio-economic reorganization, taxation and conscription, establishing an era of general and unwonted prosperity.¹⁶

It was indeed a unique chapter in the economic history of ancient Israel, especially concerning its relations with Egypt, Phoenicia, and Sheba. According to A. Malamat, "It was the only point in history that the Holy Land ever attained primary status in international politics . . . Solomon's kingdom was the major power of its day."¹⁷

NOTES

1. D. C. Hopkins, "Solomon and Economic Reconstruction," in *The Age of Solomon*, ed. L. J. Handy (Leiden: Brill, 1997) pp. 300-311.
2. A. T. Olmstead, *History of Palestine and Syria* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931) p. 341.
3. M. Silver, "Economic Structures of Antiquity," in *Contributions in Economics and Economic History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pub., 1995) pp. 3-38.
4. N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1940) chap. 3, pp. 89-114.
5. H. Katzenstein, "Some Reflections on the Tarshish Ships," *Studies in Honor of Di Sabatino Moscati* (Pisa-Roma, 1997) pp. 237-248.

6. N. Glueck, *Biblical Archeologist* 1, Sept. 1938, p. 14.
7. "Once every three years" denotes a very long voyage, and should not be read as an attempt to indicate its exact length. . . Given the realities of such a journey, its length was due as much to the rigors of ancient seafaring as it was to the distance to the final port of call. . . Long layover periods likely account for much of the 'three years' mentioned" (*The Anchor Bible*, I Kings, pp. 319-20).
8. J. A. Soggin, "Compulsory Labor Under David and Solomon," in T. Ishida, ed., *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982) pp. 259-67.
9. All references henceforth will refer to I Kings 10, unless otherwise indicated.
10. I. Eph'al, ANET, 1982, pp. 82-84.
11. *Antiquities* 8.174; 158-9.
12. A. Malamat, BAR 2, p. 91f.
13. H. Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1954) pp. 67-89.
14. Gees W. van Beek, "The Land of Sheba," in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974) pp. 40-63.
15. Y. Ikeda, "Solomon's Trade in Horses and Chariots in its International Setting," in T. Ishida, ed., *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1982) p. 238.
16. Cf. note 1.
17. A. Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel*, vol. 7: *A Political Look at the Kingdom of David and Solomon* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) p. 207.



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