

CHAPTER 6

The Reign of Solomon

JOAB was promptly struck down, even though he had sought sanctuary at the altar (1 Kings 2:28ff.). Shimei was forced to move his home to Jerusalem, where his activities could be observed, and he was forbidden to leave the city on pain of death; one single and evidently harmless breach of this royal edict resulted in his summary execution (1 Kings 2:36ff). Nor was Abiathar's support of Solomon's rival overlooked; he was promptly dismissed from the priesthood, which thereby lost its last link with the old priestly line at Shiloh (1 Kings 2:26f.); Abiathar's retirement to private life left Zadok without any rival. It is not recorded that David recommended Abiathar's dismissal, and it is hard to believe that he would have wished it.

Finally, what of the pretender to the throne, Adonijah himself? David gave Solomon no instructions about him either, and one imagines that David would have been as lenient with him as he had been with Absalom. Evidently Solomon took no action against his elder brother until David had died, because the pretext for Solomon to have Adonijah killed was the latter's request to marry Abishag, who was David's concubine at the end of his life (1 Kings 1:1ff.). Quite possibly Adonijah was genuinely attracted by the beautiful Abishag, but the fact remained that to appropriate a king's concubine was tantamount to a claim to the throne, and one may suspect that Adonijah still had hopes of ousting Solomon. Solomon, at least, chose to see his brother's request in this light, and immediately instructed Benaiah to have Adonijah executed (1 Kings 2:13ff.).

The Bible puts it in a nutshell: "Thus Solomon's royal power was securely established" (1 Kings 2:46). Indeed it was; and it is interesting to compare his position now with that of his two

predecessors, Saul and David, at the start of their reigns. Both had faced a measure of suspicion or opposition from their own countrymen; both had met this problem by resolute action, coupled with understanding and leniency. Solomon, however, eliminated his rivals and potential enemies swiftly and ruthlessly. Saul and David had been forced to woo their subjects and win their loyalty, in order to face the major threat posed by the Philistines; Solomon had no similar need for diplomacy, since no foreign power now menaced the realm, and his high-handed actions towards Adonijah and his associates seem to have set the keynote for his reign, to judge by 1 Kings 12:4.

A more striking and more obvious contrast is to be seen in the political situations inherited by Saul and David on the one hand, Solomon on the other. Both Saul and David had come to the throne in circumstances of severe Philistine pressures, and both had had to fight to maintain their positions; but Solomon inherited a large — too large for easy administration — and relatively peaceful realm, and his task was that of organization and consolidation. Israel needed a sound administration and a sound economy.

The Bible offers us some interesting and informative details of Solomon's economic measures. If Israel had relatively little in the way of mineral resources,¹ she was exceptionally well-placed for trade and commerce. Solomon controlled an area which separated the Mediterranean from the great Syro-Arabian desert to the east; overland trade between Arabia and Asia Minor, between Egypt and Mesopotamia, could be carried out only with his good will. Solomon saw lucrative possibilities here, for himself and for the state, and 1 Kings 10 describes, among other things, some of the more exotic and costly treasures which were brought into his court — “gold, silver, ivory, apes and monkeys” (v.22). The final paragraph of the chapter tells how he acted as a middle-man in large-scale trading in horses and chariots. The details of this enterprise are not entirely clear, but it seems likely that he acquired his supply of horses from Cilicia (in south-east Asia Minor), and the chariots from Egypt.²

It is in the same context of trade and commerce that the story of the Queen of Sheba is to be read. The story (told in 1 Kings 10:1ff.) has caught the imagination of countless readers, and it has become much embellished in legend,³ but that should lead no-one to suppose that the original narrative is just a fairy-tale. The queen supplied

1. Modern Israel is aware of many more mineral resources than ancient Israel would have appreciated.

2. Kue (NEB “Coa”) was in Asia Minor, and so was Musri, which is probably the original reading in v.28 (instead of Hebrew *mitsroyim*, “Egypt”); but perhaps “Egypt” should be retained in v.29. See J. Gray, *Kings*, *ad loc*; W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*³ (Baltimore. 1953), p. 135.

3. Not least in Ethiopia; cf. E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, (London, 1968), ch.3.

Solomon with gold, spices and precious stones, in return for which he gave her "all she desired, whatever she asked"; undoubtedly her trade mission resulted in a commercial alliance profitable to both parties. Whether the "Sheba" from which she came was the well-known territory in South Arabia or a smaller kingdom in the northern part of the Arabian peninsula is not certain.⁴

Nor was Solomon's trading confined to overland routes; he had a fleet of ships built at Ezion-geber from which an important maritime trade in the Red Sea could be conducted (1 Kings 9:26ff., 10:11f.). David's conquest of Edom, opening the route to the Gulf of Aqaba, was thus turned to good account.

One natural resource from which Solomon profited to a limited extent was the copper abundant in the Negeb, in the far south of his realm. In this area some copper mines were exploited, and no doubt some of the copper was exported from Solomon's Red Sea port of Ezion-geber (the Elath of later times).

N. Glueck, who first excavated Ezion-geber, described it as the "Pittsburgh of Palestine",⁵ but more recent assessment of the site indicates that it was not in fact a refinery, although refining was carried out near the mines, and metal work in Ezion-geber.⁶ 1 Kings 7:46 mentions a foundry, further north, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea; if the ancient Greek translation of this verse is to be believed, a process of sand casting was employed here.⁷ Archaeological evidence suggests that Solomon did not employ his country's mineral resources so thoroughly as he might have done.

Two major trade alliances were concluded, with Egypt and Phoenicia. Solomon married an Egyptian princess, and reaped an immediate advantage, for the dowry proved to be an important city, Gezer, which lay between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean coast. Even David had never wrested it from the Canaanites, but the Egyptian king had recently attacked and captured it (1 Kings 9:16). No doubt Solomon went on to reap many commercial benefits from the alliance with Egypt. No such political marriage was necessary in the case of Phoenicia, for the king of Tyre, Hiram, had been on treaty terms with David and remained so with Solomon.⁸ Hiram must have gained considerable commercial profit from the alliance, but Solomon benefited even more, since he was able to call upon Phoenician skills as yet undeveloped by the Israelites, in particular seamanship and architecture.

So much for the credit side of the ledger; there is no doubt that

4. See J. Gray, *ad loc.* Yet another possibility is the "Horn" of Africa.

5. N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan* (New Haven, 1940), p. 94.

6. See Y. Aharoni, *LB*, p. 274n.

7. So JB. See F. F. Bruce, *op cit.* p. 36, for other possible meanings of the verse.

8. Cf. F. C. Fensham, *VTS* 17 (Leiden, 1969), pp. 71-87.

Solomon achieved a state income undreamed of by Saul or even David. He had inherited peace, and he took every opportunity to turn peace into prosperity. In the early and middle years of his long reign he must have achieved this aim; yet he left a largely bankrupt kingdom to his son. The trouble was that his income was exceeded by his expenditure. Much of the expenditure was necessary and legitimate, but much besides was wanton personal extravagance. He and all his court despised silver, we are told, while where his many building projects were concerned, he denied himself nothing (1 Kings 10:21; 9:19). The description in 1 Kings 10 of the magnificence of his court includes no moral comments; the details speak for themselves.

Solomon's most famous building project was the temple at Jerusalem, though it may be doubted whether it was his greatest architectural feat; it took nearly twice as long to build the royal palace adjoining the temple. He also enlarged the city considerably, and repaired its fortifications. Both buildings required an enormous amount of materials and workmanship from the Phoenicians, and Solomon could not afford to pay full costs; he had to detach twenty cities of Galilee from his kingdom and donate them to Hiram — who clearly felt he had got the worst of the bargain (1 Kings 9:10-13).⁹ The royal palace was the last word in luxury; and Solomon's harem was of no less luxurious dimensions (1 Kings 11:1ff.). Even in his maritime trading ventures he found himself dependent on Phoenician skills and co-operation. Long before his reign ended, Solomon was obliged to rely heavily on taxation and on forced, unpaid labour (*corvée*). David's wars had ensured a good supply of slave labour, for so prisoners-of-war were regularly employed in the ancient world; but Solomon fought no wars, and he was forced eventually to raise a levy of 30,000 free-born citizens of Israel (1 Kings 5:13). It would seem from the sequel (1 Kings 12) that he took steps to impose a lesser burden on his own Judah than on the other tribes.

Thus the state revenues suffered and the citizenry suffered from Solomon's excesses. Nor was that all; in his anxiety to achieve good terms with his neighbours, he showed a religious tolerance towards them which, in the biblical writer's view of the matter, amounted to prostrating himself before their gods (1 Kings 11:33). Indeed, he went so far as to build idolatrous shrines in and around the holy city itself (1 Kings 11:4ff.). It is probable that he also built a number of shrines outside Jerusalem dedicated to the God of Israel, to judge by the temple recently excavated at Arad.¹⁰

9. 2 Chronicles 8:1f. suggests that subsequently Solomon retrieved this lost territory; see J. M. Myers, *2 Chronicles*, (AB: Garden City, 1965), p. 47.

10. Cf. Y. Aharoni in D. N. Freedman and J. C. Geenfield, *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology* (Garden City, 1969), pp. 28-44.

Yet we cannot fault him for building the temple, nor for his administrative endeavours to bring order and stability to his kingdom. The twelve administrative districts he organised are listed for us in 1 Kings 4:7-19. Their primary purpose, however, was "to improve the efficiency and intensity of tax collection",¹¹ so Israelite citizens must have viewed the greater administrative efficiency with mixed feelings. Solomon's military measures, again, must have cost a pretty penny, even though their aims were good and their planning shrewd. Strong fortresses were established at strategic intervals throughout his kingdom, from Ezion-geber in the south to Hazor, north of the Sea of Galilee, and in them he stationed his 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses (1 Kings 10:26). Solomon was as determined to avert internal revolts as he was to discourage invasion from outside his realm.

Before the end of Solomon's reign, however, the empire David had skilfully created showed signs of breaking up. We read of Solomon's "adversaries" in 1 Kings 11. It is not entirely clear what they accomplished, and the role of the kingdom of Egypt is particularly uncertain, but between them they must have been a thorn in Solomon's side, to say the least. It was vital to Israel's economy that the trade routes with the south should be maintained and kept open, but they were all too vulnerable along the 150 mile stretch between Beersheba and Ezion-geber. The mountainous Edomite region offered sanctuary to those who were of a mind to harass the caravans, and the natives of Edom had no love for Israel, especially since the massacres by Joab in David's reign. At that time a royal prince of Edom, Hadad, by name, had escaped to Egypt but at the very start of Solomon's reign he returned home and stirred up trouble. Undoubtedly Solomon managed to hold his activities in check — even after Solomon's death and the breaking up of his kingdom, Judah was able to dominate Edom for several generations.

Damascus became another centre of disaffection. The Aramaean states had probably never been controlled by David or Solomon in the same sense that Edom or Moab were; it may well be that many of them were happy to benefit from the commercial network Solomon had organized, and so were amenable to Solomon's "influence". At any rate, one less well-disposed Aramaean, Rezon by name, saw his chance to take control of Damascus. Solomon never dislodged him, evidently, and Rezon went on to found a long-lived dynasty, which in process of time came to pose a major threat to the very existence of Israel. But at the present juncture, we know only that Rezon and his band of men caused Solomon some trouble.

Nor is the trouble caused by Jeroboam to be discounted, even though it was not till after Solomon's death that he achieved

11. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, p. 277.

anything like success. He plotted revolt, clearly, and if the rising proved abortive,¹² the very fact that it happened indicates some of the tensions that were building up in the heart of Solomon's homeland. Jeroboam's connexions were with the important central tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, where he was probably in charge of the compulsory labour system,¹³ and it is interesting, to say the least, that he had prophetic support and incitement.

Jeroboam fled to Egypt in the final years of Solomon's reign, after the death of the Egyptian king who was Solomon's father-in-law. The new king, Shishak (935-914), was establishing a new dynasty (the 22nd) in Egypt, and his intentions towards Israel were not friendly. But it was the previous king, Solomon's father-in-law, who had offered asylum to the Edomite Hadad, and one wonders just how well disposed to Solomon he really was. Was his capture of Gezer purely for the purpose of donating the city to Solomon (1 Kings 9:16)? Professor Aharoni argues that David had conquered Gezer, and that the Egyptian attack on the city was part of an attempt to wrest the Philistine area from Solomon's kingdom. If so, Solomon was strong enough to resist the Egyptians, and retrieve Gezer.¹⁴ On the whole, however, this seems an unlikely interpretation of the evidence.¹⁵ At the very end of his reign it is beyond doubt that Solomon felt the need for first-rate southern defences, and strongholds such as Gezer and Arad were well fortified and well garrisoned.

The "golden" quality of the Solomonic era was clearly not unalloyed, any more than Solomon's famed wisdom extended to all his deeds. It is worth noting, perhaps, that his wisdom resided very much in his words, not his deeds. He exhibited it in conversation with the Queen of Sheba, in his tongue-in-cheek judicial decision in the case of the two claimants to the one child, and most notably in the many proverbs he created and fostered — fully three thousand, we are told (1 Kings 4:32). He could "speak" admirably of trees, flora and fauna (1 Kings 4:33); but his deeds did not always match the wisdom of his words.

The least adulterated "gold" of his era, it would seem, was the flourishing literature. Since the time of their wilderness wanderings, the Israelites had had all too little peace, all too little opportunity to devote themselves to the arts. Solomon's reign of forty years (the figure may or may not be a round one) at last allowed the possibility of great Hebrew literature, and we need not doubt that some of the finest narrative material in the Old Testament dates in its polished

12. The Septuagint gives many more details, of uncertain reliability, than does the Hebrew Bible; English Bibles follow the Hebrew text.

13. Noth expresses doubt about this, p. 206n. See also J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 154ff.

14. Cf. *MBA*, p. 72.

15. See K. A. Kitchen in *NBD* (s.v. "Egypt") for a more probable view.

form, based on earlier records to be sure, from the Solomonic era. "Wisdom" activity, too, culminating in books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, was first fostered in Israel by him; it was to continue for many centuries, into inter-testamental times.¹⁶

16. E.g. the Apocryphal books Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon. The Book of Proverbs was of course not completed in Solomon's reign, as the reference to King Hezekiah proves (Proverbs 25:1).