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In search of Solomon or It aint necessarily so

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This address is a brief excursion into an interesting period in the history of the ancient Near East. It is loosely based on a lecture given by Professor Philip Davies from the Department of Biblical Studies at Sheffield University to a gathering of English Freemasons.

Since the 1970's in particular, archaeology and the work of Biblical scholars have led to considerable re-interpretation of the events and personalities of the period in which the Bible tells us that David and Solomon ruled over the United Monarchy of Israel and Judah. Although, of course, the information available tells us only a small portion of what actually happened in those far off times, and new discoveries are constantly adding to our knowledge and thereby modifying previously held views. The first thing to be said is that the only direct source of information about Solomon - and his temple - is from the Bible. There is no other source independent of the Bible that mentions either. Solomon is named nowhere by any other ancient contemporary, and the remains of his temple cannot be recovered. We are presented only with a story, or rather a twice-told story, given once in the first book of Kings and again in the second book of Chronicles. The story might be history or legend, or a combination of both. Can we discover the likely truth?

Thanks to work done in the last thirty five years or so, perhaps we can get close. In 1968 four Israeli archaeologists took advantage of Israel's occupation of the West Bank to conduct a series of surveys of the traditional homeland of ancient Israel, in the central highlands of what is now called Palestine. This survey has since been followed up by more detailed excavations of key sites, and as a result we now know something more about the origins of the ancient Israelites than we did before. And this knowledge tells us in turn something about the kingdom of David and Solomon. So let us, if we can, set aside our preconceptions of the Old Testament stories as far as possible and instead ask more basic questions such as "who wrote the books of the Old Testament, when, and why did they do it?" and about the kind of society that the Bible came from?

One very significant statistic, for instance, is that in ancient societies like Israel and Judah something like 95% of the population was poor and illiterate and engaged in agriculture. Writing was confined to no more than 5% of the population, almost entirely urban, and comprising a distinct class. Ancient literature served an economic and political function, and the class of scribes was always in the pay and at the service of temple or court, and wrote at the command of these institutions. Nearly all writing that was not strictly functional, that is, recording taxes as collected, spoils of war, writing reports and letters for administration, was in a sense, propaganda. Into this category come all inscriptions, all monuments, and all records of royal achievements, religious liturgies and histories. Their composition followed fairly standard rules, as we now know from the wealth of writings recovered from the great libraries and archives of the ancient Near East.

The Old Testament is no great exception to this description. It too, is largely the product of scribes in the pay of king or temple, and it is also, largely in the neutral sense of that word, propaganda. A great deal of it is paralleled in the legends and cultures of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Egypt. Two kinds of writing in the Bible are distinctive, however - large collections of the sayings of the prophets, and, long connected historical accounts.

When I say "history", I do not mean an accurate record of facts. That sort of writing is only possible where there are reliable sources, whether written or oral, going back over generations. At best, the ancient historian copied other historians, listened to whatever stories were being told, and/or made up

what was needed. The result was a mixture of truth, half-truth and non-truth, which no reader could easily distinguish, because there was no reliable record of the past. Indeed, there was no interest in the past for its own sake. The past was a time where things began, when the origins and causes of the world happened. It had no measurable connection with the present time, and chronology, where reliably available, was confined to occasional lists of rulers, with more or less reliable years of reign.

The Old Testament explains how the Jewish people came about, justifies their occupation of the land, gives their way of life an origin in divine revelation, traces them back to a single ancestor and claims that their god created the universe and rules it. The main point of this story is not history in our sense, but more like myth, in that it gives the essence of the present - who are we, Jews, or Israelites, where do we come from, and how are we supposed to believe and live? The answers may not be historical, but they provided every reader with a clear sense of identity.

So much for who wrote the biblical books? But who read them? Not the majority of the population, of course, who were illiterate. The Bible's stories are primarily interested in war, cities, kings and religious leaders. They are not really interested in ordinary farmers. Indeed, much of the Old Testament views agriculture with suspicion, as a source of pagan religious ideas! Perhaps rightly! From archaeological discoveries we learn that little female statuettes were very popular, and we also know, from a couple of inscriptions, that the god of Israel once had a partner called Asherah. It is argued that the religion of the Bible is not a religion that people actually believed at the time, but what their intellectuals thought they should believe. The majority of Israelites and Judeans lived in villages from which they probably moved only rarely. Were they much interested in the temple at Jerusalem? Probably not: at least not in the time of the kings. They had their local altars and perhaps their local deities too. The vast majority neither saw nor cared for any such building.

Until the 1970s a standard History of Ancient Israel, could begin with Abraham, survey a patriarchal age dated somewhere between 1900 and 1500BC, try and follow the route of the Exodus from Egypt, discover where the real Mt Sinai might have been, and note how the Israelites, if not so completely as the book of Joshua describes it, nevertheless overcame the Canaanites and took over the land. After some years of being ruled by Judges, the twelve tribes of Israel chose a king, Saul, who was succeeded by David. David chose Jerusalem as his capital and ruled his empire from there.

A decisive step in our understanding of the origins of Israel came after the 1967 war between Israel and its neighbours. Israeli archaeologists conducted a survey of ancient settlements in the West Bank, ancient Israel's homeland, and as a result were able to conclude that they had identified the beginnings of Israel in a small network of villages beginning in the 12th century BC in the northern part of the highlands - around modern Nablus and Ramallah. According to the archaeological findings, the Israelites came from local stock; they were actually Canaanites who gradually became Israelites in a socio-economic process. The settlement processes in the land that became Israel were circular; that is to say, in times of crisis, the tribes became nomadic shepherds, and in periods of abundance they had permanent settlements.

The same survey, however, showed that the northern highlands were settled earlier than the southern ones. The occupation of Judah came about more gradually. At the time when David is supposed to have ruled over his great empire there were only a few villages in Judah. What of Jerusalem? Well, although there are remains of the city in the time before David, and also for the time after him, there is nothing of any significance from his time. If there was a settlement there, it was but a village. If we accept this explanation, the stories of the patriarchs, of Abraham's family trekking from Ur via Harran to Hebron are, then, apparently not history; the Exodus and wandering in the desert is also no part of the experience of all or most ancient Israelites. The exploits of Joshua are fiction. All this had actually been anticipated by a group of German academics on the basis of analysis of the Bible itself and of the archaeological evidence. Now it is the accepted orthodoxy, except among certain evangelical scholars who defend the historicity of the Bible on grounds of principle.

But what matters here are the further implications of this new orthodoxy for the existence of Solomon. If Israel began as a network of highland villages in the 12th century, and not as a ready made nation

with a long history, when did they occupy the cities of Palestine and become a territorial state? And when did the more recent farming settlements in Judah form their own kingdom? When did Jerusalem become a city that might be the capital of a kingdom? These questions are forcing archaeologists to write new histories, quite different from the biblical story.

As yet only one book-length publication has emerged, from the Tel Aviv based archaeologist Israel Finkelstein. In his history the emergence of Israel in Palestine followed the collapse of the economic and political system in the 13th century, after Egyptian control of Palestine ended. This collapse led to war between these cities over a century or two, resulting in the destructions that had been attributed to Joshua.

It was at this time of economic crisis that the relatively less fertile highlands became attractive, because they could sustain a population that the rest of the country now could not. Over time, through collaboration and intermarriage, these villages formed a new society which perhaps took the name "Israel", either alone or in combination with other groups.

Before Israel formed itself into a political state, however, the old Canaanite cities began to revive. Some of the building, such as at Megiddo, Gezer and Hazor, once attributed to Solomon, is due to this revival. But then around 950BC an Egyptian king Sheshonq (mentioned in the Bible as Shishak) campaigned against the major cities of Palestine and destroyed many of them. The power vacuum thus left enabled the now strong and extensive rural society of the highlands, left alone by Sheshonq, to form a territorial state in the northern part of Palestine.

According to Israel Finkelstein, the first king was Omri. In the Bible he comes after several earlier kings. The kingdom of Judah emerged a century or so later, though it was never fully independent of its northern neighbour.

Now this reconstruction leaves no room for David or Solomon, no room for what we call the "United Monarchy", the time when Israel and Judah were ruled by a single king, and no place for Jerusalem as capital city.

It was only 150 years after Israel's destruction by the Assyrians in 720BC, during the reign of King Josiah, that Judah rose up to greatness, developing the monotheistic approach - one state, one God, one capital, one temple, one king. At that time, the Assyrian empire collapsed, the kingdom of Israel no longer existed, so Josiah's officials decided to put into practice their religious and territorial ideas.

The United Monarchy was conceived because they sought to seize control of the territories of the kingdom of Israel, saying "Many years ago one of our kings, David, ruled in Jerusalem over both Judah and Israel, so we have a claim to them."

The legends of earlier periods were devised for the same purpose. The people of Judah began to market the story of Joshua's conquest of the land in order to give moral justification to their territorial ambitions, and to the conquest of the territories of Israel. These were folktales that were handed down from generation to generation, local traditions and legends, and these were the basis for the creation of the Biblical narrative. The scribes of the period of Josiah collected these materials and forged them into a coherent story.

Archaeology appears to show that the conquest has no historical basis. Many of the sites that are mentioned in the story of the conquest were not even inhabited in the relevant period, so there was nothing to conquer. Jericho was not fortified and had no walls, and it is doubtful even if there was a settlement there at the time.

Calculating backward from the point at which we have historical documentation, such as the Assyrian writings about the monarchy of Ahab in the Ninth Century, it is estimated that the story of the Biblical conquest would have occurred at the end of the Thirteenth Century. At that time, the Egyptians were in control, and ruled with an iron hand.

In the Fourteenth Century there are stories about local kings who ask Pharaoh for help against one another, for instance, asking him to send fifty soldiers to restore order- in other words, that was the number that was considered sufficient to impose order there.

As for the existence of Joshua: perhaps there were memories of some great commander or general. However, the biblical text describes something that happened in the Thirteenth Century and was written in the Seventh - 600 years later - by people who did not have access to written archives, for at the time of the events described there was no written alphabet.

What of the United Monarchy? There is a stream of research that says that David and Solomon were not historical figures. However, there is an inscription from Tel Dan from the Ninth Century that mentions the southern kingdom by the name of the "House of David." So it stands to reason that they existed, but all the evidence appears to be against whether they ruled a large empire.

In the Bible, there is a large difference between the David stories and the Solomon stories. The whole character of Solomon is that of an Assyrian king; rich, resplendent, wise, having many wives, and a great trader with neighbouring nations. While David is none of these things, because he is given a complex description, and there are unpleasant stories about him that give him a human dimension. And according to archaeology, there is no hint of magnificence or pomp in Tenth Century Jerusalem (when Solomon is claimed to have been king). Until the end of the Eighth Century, until the Assyrian period, and after the destruction of Israel, when refugees from the north began streaming into the city, it was a small remote, unfortified village.

As for the United Monarchy - the villages in the north in the Tenth Century were Canaanite villages. David and Solomon ruled in Jerusalem and probably the southern hill region, and maybe part of the northern hill region. They did not rule in the northern valleys or in Galilee, and therefore there was no split in the monarchy. From the beginning, there were two entities, northern and southern - but the Bible story is meant to justify Joshua's conquest when the stories were written in the Seventh Century.

The stories of the patriarchs are seen as folklore about forefathers that the authors of the Bible in the Seventh Century salvaged from the mists of history in order to reinforce their hold on the cultural heritage. They were ancient forebears, and the goal was to create a myth saying that Judah is the centre of the world, of the Israelite way of life, against the background of the reality of the later kingdom.

There are, and no doubt will continue to be, protests against this reconstruction. But it is hard to find either the David or Solomon of the Bible in the archaeological remains. It is perhaps significant that by comparison with the apparently exact figures and formulas on the reigns of later kings, for David and Solomon we do not. Yet we can all expect that these conclusions, however well based they are on the evidence currently available, will continue to be challenged. The rest of us will continue the debate from our various perspectives.

In conclusion, as far as the temple is concerned, my own view is that if we forget about the historical circumstances of the first Jerusalem temple, and focus instead on the remarkable symbolism that developed around it, we may better understand what it is that we are really being told.