

# Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

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THE account of the visit of the queen of Sheba to the court of Solomon is recorded in I Kings 10:1-13 and II Chronicles 9:1-12. Both passages indicate that the reason for the Arabian queen's journey to Jerusalem was to bask in the wisdom of Israel's king (I Kings 10:1; II Chron. 9:1). Both accounts immediately add that she came to Jerusalem with camels laden by all sorts of precious and exotic gifts. Thus there is found perhaps the real reason why the queen came to Solomon: trade.

The recent brief, but important archaeological work in South Arabia has brought into prominence the role played by the land of Sheba (Sabaea).<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the century most scholars denied the role of Sabaea in the commercial activity of Solomon's day. One such writer was Dr. Lewis Bayles Paton, who suggested that instead of Solomon's fleet sailing from Ezion-Gebr at the head of the Gulf of 'Aqabah (I Kings 9:26) to the land of Ophir, it "sailed presumably" from Dor, going across the Mediterranean as far as Tartessus in Spain.<sup>2</sup> It did not bother Paton that,

<sup>1</sup> The most definitive account is *Archaeological Discoveries in South Arabia* (ed. Richard LeBaron Bowen, Jr., and Frank P. Albright; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1958)—hereafter cited *ADSA*. For a popular account *vide* Wendell Phillips, *Qataban and Sheba: Exploring the Ancient Kingdoms on the Biblical Spice Routes of Arabia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955). Gus W. Van Beek has written several excellent articles, perhaps the most rewarding of which is "recovering the Ancient Civilization of Arabia," *Biblical Archaeologist*, XV (Feb., 1952), 2-18. *Vide* also the following notations.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, *The Early History of Syria and Palestine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 190.

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by so doing, Solomon would be in direct competition with the sea-going Phoenicians. His view merely reflected the general lack of knowledge regarding the posture of Sabaea on the commercial scene of that day. The Israelites were not competitors to the Phoenicians; rather it may be said that both Israel and Phoenicia were competitors to the South Arabians, and that the visit of the queen of Sheba was for the purpose of confronting the Judean king who had dared disturb the trade routes which the Sabaeans had established by putting out a fleet on the Red Sea and by erecting a multi-purpose industrial-commercial complex at Ezion-Geber.

The fact that she is mentioned arriving in Jerusalem with camels is interesting, for it has been established that the camel was effectively domesticated between the 15th and 12th centuries B.C.<sup>3</sup> The use of the camel for caravan purposes was a great step forward in the commercial activity of the Ancient Near East. Prior to this development, overland trade was carried on the back of the ass; but with the camel, larger loads could be carried greater distances. It was the Arabians who made the most effective use of the camel's domestication—indeed, who had actually domesticated the beast—a fact well reflected in the Biblical account.

The trade routes of the Ancient Near East dated from antiquity, but they experienced a great expansion of trade activity with the close of the Late

<sup>3</sup> *Vide* Gus W. Van Beek, "Sabeans," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, R-Z, 145—hereafter cited Van Beek, "Sabeans," *IDB*; Wm. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (3rd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), 96—hereafter cited Albright, *ARI*; and Wm. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (2nd ed.; Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 120f, 164-165, 257.

Bronze and the advent of the Early Iron Ages. The importance of Solomon's kingdom from a commercial point of view lay in the manner in which it straddled the ancient trade routes (Egypt to Syria and Mesopotamia; Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea; Arabia to Damascus). The location of Ezion-Geber, situated as it was at the intersection of several of these trade routes, made an effective port of entry. The world for centuries had beat a path to South Arabia to seek out her products of myrrh and frankincense.<sup>4</sup> With the Phoenicians holding a monopoly on trade to the north, Solomon must turn south if he desired to enlarge his trade program. Thus the South Arabians' lucrative trade routes were threatened, either by taxing their caravans as they entered Solomon's empire at Ezion-Geber, or through direct competition on the Red Sea by means of Solomon's tarshish fleet which was operated in conjunction with the Phoenicians (I Kings 9:27).<sup>5</sup> Feeling the loss of the trade monopoly which she had once enjoyed, the queen of Sheba dared to travel some 1,500 miles to inquire from Solomon how the situation might be altered.

Prior to the recent archaeological labors in South Arabia, it was impossible to place Sabaea in proper relationship to other Arabian tribes and cultures. The major reason for placing Sabaea late derived from the normal economic movement of a culture on the want-to-prosperity continuum. The developed wealth of Sabaea naturally caused scholars to place her amazing

rise after such established Arab states as Ma'in, Qataban and Hadhramaut. It was often thought that Sabaea was a nomadic tribe, centered in North Arabia. This position was reflected by Montgomery in his monumental commentary on *Kings*, in which he claimed that as late as the time of the queen of Sheba Sabaeans still lived in the north and controlled the northern ends of the trade routes emanating from South Arabia.<sup>6</sup> More recent work in the field has dissolved this position. In spite of the lingering feelings of some scholars today,<sup>7</sup> there is no question but that Sabaea—or Sheba—preceded all other South Arabian states, as Van Beek has adequately demonstrated.<sup>8</sup>

It is quite valid to claim to this day that apart from the Biblical record there is little evidence of any independent Southern Arabian queens as early as Solomon's day; there is even less evidence, however, that the Northern Arabs engaged in any kind of commercial activity which would have warranted the visit of such a one as the queen of Sheba to Solomon's court to discuss interference in North Arabian trade<sup>9</sup>—a visit which can "no longer be regarded as fictional."<sup>10</sup>

The first reference to Sheba in literature is the visit of its anonymous queen to Jerusalem in the 10th century B.C.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (International Critical Commentary; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 215.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Arthur Jeffery, "Arabians," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, A-D, 182.

<sup>8</sup> Van Beek, "Sabaeans," *IDB*, R-Z, 145.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of this interpretation, *vide* Harold M. Parker, Jr., "The Reign of Solomon in the Light of Archaeology," (unpublished Th.D. dissertation; Denver: Iliff School of Theology, 1966), chap. V—hereafter cited Parker, "Reign of Solomon."

<sup>10</sup> Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1965), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Frank P. Albright, "Excavations at Marib," *ADSA*, 215; Wm. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (rev. ed.; New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1963), 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> By far the most comprehensive, yet succinct account of this important trade has been given by Van Beek in an article in the *Biblical Archaeologist* which has been reprinted with some revision, "Frankincense and Myrrh," *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, Vol. II (ed. D. N. Freedman and Ed. F. Campbell, Jr.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1964), 99-126.

<sup>5</sup> James A. Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 175—hereafter cited Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible*.

Sheba politically was probably a city-state, one of the many "known to have flourished in King Solomon's times."<sup>12</sup> The trade that centered around the city-state of Tyre demonstrates how the existence of such a simple form of government belies its potential impact and outreach. Built much as Phoenicia was on trade rather than military conquest, Sheba at one time or another controlled the important ports of Muza, Ocelis and Aden. The vast wealth that flowed into her coffers caused her to be called "Arabia elix" by the Romans in a later day. The extent of her vast trade is evidenced by a clay stamp with a South Arabian inscription which was found at Bethel, dated in the 8th century B.C.—just two centuries after the visit of Sheba's queen to Solomon. Thus the claim is demonstrably substantiated that contact was made between Israel and South Arabia in the first millenium B.C. In addition is the Biblical tradition of the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon's luxurious court.<sup>13</sup>

Solomon's numerous enterprises at Ezion-Geber embodied not only the smelting of copper ore and manufacturing, but they also included commercial aspects inimical to the South Arabian economy. Not only did tarshish ships depart from the port to fetch cargoes of wealth and curiosity (I Kings 9:28; 10:11, 12), but the port also straddled ancient and important caravan routes. Due to the relatively recent domestication of the camel, these routes had suddenly burgeoned with commercial importance. The rather lengthy trip from the extreme south of the Arabian peninsula to Jerusalem was no longer as long in time due to the speed of the camel in traversing long distances in a short time. The great scholar

of Arabian history, Philip K. Hitti, has even suggested that at the height of their commercial power the Sabaeans had planted colonies along the transport routes leading through the Hejaz to the Medeterranean ports.<sup>14</sup> At the same time there is evidence of a growing Sabaeen commercial and political hegemony which extended westward into Ethiopia, where Arabian colonies were established.<sup>15</sup> Thus it can be readily ascertained that the entrance of the Hebrew-Phoenician navy into this area, coupled with Solomon's control of the important and valuable caravan routes, threatened the very existence of a large portion of Sabaeen economy, necessitating the visit of the Sabaeen queen.

Nor is the 10th century visit of the queen of Sheba to Jerusalem the solitary reference to South Arabian trade in the Old Testament. Old Testament references to Sheba's commerce are both interesting and extensive, from the standpoint of the materials of trade in which the Sabaeans engaged, as well as of the length of time covered by the documents as they are approached from the stance of literary criticism. Jeremiah (6:20), Ezekiel (27:22-23), Deutero-Isaiah (60:6), Job (6:19), Joel (3:8) and the psalter (72:10, 15), which represent literary compositions from the 7th to the 4th centuries, ascribe to the reputation Sheba continued to enjoy in international commerce. Thus from the reign of Solomon to the Greek period there exists consistent attestation to Sheba's commercial prowess. She is mentioned as trading gold, spices and precious stones (I Kings 10:10), frankincense (Is. 60:6; Jer. 6:20), and slaves (Joel 3:8). In Job 1:15 there is reference to an act of brigandage and cattle-

<sup>12</sup> Richard S. Sanger, *Where the Jordan Flows* (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1963), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Gus W. Van Beek and A. Jamme, "An Inscribed Clay Stamp from Bethel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 151 (Oct., 1958), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (2nd rev. ed.; London: Macmillan, 1940), 42—hereafter cited Hitti, *Hist. of Arabs*.

<sup>15</sup> Van Beek, "Sabaeans," *IDB*, R-Z, 145; "Arabs," *Pictorial Biblical Encyclopedia* (ed. Gaalyahu Cornfeld; New York: Macmillan, 1964), 117—hereafter cited "Arabs," *Pict. Bib. Enc.*

raiding on the part of the Sabaeans.

Brief mention has been made of the queen of Sheba. For the present there is no literary or other evidence outside the Biblical record that she existed. She remains anonymous. Hitti suggested that she may have been from one of the Sabaean outposts or garrisons to the north on the caravan route. He further adds that it was not for two centuries after the age of Solomon that Yemenite kings began to figure in inscriptions.<sup>16</sup> (The ancient capital of Sabaea, Marib, was located on the eastern border of Yemen.) The first named Arabian queen in Assyrian records was Zabibi, an independent ruler who was subjugated by Tiglath-Pileser III, and forced to pay tribute to him in 736 B.C.<sup>17</sup> References to Arabian queens continue to be made by the Assyrians until the reign of Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.).<sup>18</sup>

Inasmuch as the compiler of Kings does not have the tendency to exaggerate the materials incorporated into his work,<sup>19</sup> and since just two hundred years after Solomon Arabian queens were mentioned in Assyrian documents, one may hazard the assumption that the narrative in Kings touching the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon's court has a valid historical basis. And with her visit coming as it does in the midst of the passage which treats Solomon's commercial enterprises, it can further be proposed that the visit was not so much to adulate Solomon for his God-given wisdom and wealth as it was to enter into some sort of negotiations

with him over the disrupted Sabaean trade routes.

Two events seem to have arisen simultaneously which demanded attention: the growing caravan trade by the Sabaeans resulting from the domestication of the camel and the trade fleet which Hiram and Solomon had launched on the Red Sea. Sea trade might be time-consuming, but in the long run far more merchandise could be transported by one boat than by scores of camels. The queen of Sheba needed assurance that she had access to Judaeian markets, especially through the new complex at Ezion-Geber which straddled the caravan routes; and Solomon needed permission to enter Arabian harbors. There is no question but that Solomon held the upper hand. The perplexity, nevertheless, was not one-sided. Albright, for instance, conceives of the expanding camel trade interfering with the sea trade.<sup>20</sup> It is more realistic, however, to interpret the quandry as emerging from the presence of the Hebrew-Phoenician tarshish ships on the Red Sea which broke up the monopoly of the Midianite and Arabian traders whose camels up to this point had carried merchandise from Arabia.<sup>21</sup> Yet the ships could not have emerged in trade without an understanding with the queen of Sheba who controlled the points or origin. Thus both parties stood to gain from whatever agreement or treaty could be arrived at.

Overtures for treaties usually initiate with the party that stands to gain the more. Unquestionably, this was the reason for the queen's visit to Solomon. He held the cards of straddling the caravan routes and ships on the Red Sea. He controlled the entire northern terminus of Arabian trade. At the same time with his ships he could by-pass Arabian trade routes which were established along the west coast of the Arab-

<sup>16</sup> Hitti, *Hist. of Arabs*, 42; *vide* also his article, "Arabia, Ancient," *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religion Knowledge*, I, 58; Arthur Jeffery, "Arabia, Arabs," *A Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. James Hastings; rev. ed., ed. F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (ed. D. D. Luckenbill), I, 276.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 400.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the historiographical methodology of the editor of Kings, *vide* Parker, "Reign of Solomon," 9-22.

<sup>20</sup> Albright, *ARI*, 134-135.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Bible Atlas* (ed. Herbert G. May *et al.*; London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 66.

ian peninsula, and trade with Ethiopia and Somaliland in direct competition with Arab traders.

The narrative of I Kings 9:26-10:29 shows how the incident of the visit of the Sabaean queen is interwoven with the record of Solomon's commercial ventures. Through the assistance of the principles of *Formgeschichte* the various strands in this topical unit which essentially deals with Solomon's commerce may be separated.<sup>22</sup>

Passage	Resume of Content
9:26-28.	Solomon and Hiram build a fleet at Ezion-Geber, brings back gold from Ophir. <sup>23</sup>
10:1-9.	The queen of Sheba arrives in Jerusalem, accompanied by many gifts, ostensibly to question Solomon in relation to Yahweh.
10:10.	She offers Solomon gifts of spices, gold and precious stones.
10:11-12.	A description of other merchandise brought back by the Red Sea tarshish ships of Solomon and Hiram.
10:13.	Solomon gives the queen all her desires, plus gifts. She returns home.
10:14-15.	Revenue is received by Solomon from kings everywhere, but especially from the kings of the "ereb."
10:16-21.	The affluence of Solomon's reign as the result of trade.
10:22.	Another list of cargo brought back by the tarshish ships.
10:23-24.	The wealth and wisdom of Solomon are presented.
10:25.	Tribute is offered Solomon by "every man."

<sup>22</sup> For a trenchant introduction to *Formgeschichte*, vide Martin Rist, "What is *Formgeschichte*?" *The Iliff Review*, II, No. 1 (Winter, 1945), 159-169.

<sup>23</sup> This is not the place to attempt to locate Ophir. It is this author's contention that Ophir is located on the west side of the Red Sea, and is identified with the Biblical Punt. For a resume of the problem of locating Ophir, vide Parker, "Reign of Solomon," 293-296.

10:26-29. Solomon's venture in trading horses and chariots.

In the above account several pericopes of lesser subject material have been lumped together in typical editorial style by the compiler: the very unusual and profitable sea trade venture, Solomon's great reputation for wisdom and wealth, the visit of the queen of Sheba, the receipts Solomon received from the fees levied against caravans transversing his empire, the tribute given him by quasi-independent feudal kings, and his venture into trading horses and chariots. Thus it is not by chance that the visit of the queen of Sheba has been meshed into the accounts of Solomon's commercial enterprises, because his trading ventures were fouling up the commercial *status quo* and some kind of equitable arrangement must be arrived at. In the agreement which followed the necessary petition from the queen, Solomon reaped great advantages, for according to I Kings 10:15 the result was "certainly profitable to the Jewish monarch, taxes and duties from Arabian trade flowing into his treasury."<sup>24</sup> Trade with Arabia was quite natural, for Israel, also. Here was Solomon's nearest neighbor—geographically as well as ethnically and culturally. Israel was closer to the Arabs in common religion and social institutions than she was with the Philistines, Phoenicians or Aramaeans, and the greater civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia were both distant and alien.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the possibility of making allowances for trading posts in both countries, there may also have been provided arrangements for the exchange of each country's products. Arabian incense could well be bartered

<sup>24</sup> "Arabs," *Pict. Bib. Enc.*, 118; Nelson Glueck, "Ezion-Geber: Solomon's Naval Base on the Red Sea," *Biblical Archaeologist*, II (1938), 14; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 194.

<sup>25</sup> Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible*, 184-185.

for copper ingots from Ezion-Geber. An interesting insight into the queen's visit is seen in the gifts she brought Solomon—spices, gold and precious stones (I Kings 10:2). So imposing is the list that D. S. Margoliouth in his *Schweich Lectures* for 1921 denied that the visit of the queen took place, because it seemed to him that the "time when a ruler of Saba could afford such luxuries would seem to be later by many centuries; and, indeed, Josephus does not think Saba good enough and prefers to make the lady a queen of Egypt and Ethiopia."<sup>26</sup> However, the more recent archaeological excavations have substantiated the early affluence of the Sabaeans, and Kent aptly pointed out that the queen's gifts were the very luxuries the Hebrews wanted.<sup>27</sup> Nor should the Hebrew desire for Arabian frankincense and myrrh be overlooked—two other products which the petitioning queen of Sheba was willing to offer in order that she might obtain relief from a merchant prince whose commercial policy was threatening her economic existence. Thus, while the compiler of Kings does not specifically state it, the very fact that the queen arrived with gifts and left with her "desires" satisfied indicates that some sort of treaty was arrived at.

If it appears strange that the editor would lump together such materials, it must be pointed out that this is characteristic of the prophetic editor of Kings. In the first two chapters of I Kings he points out how Solomon came to the throne—material probably taken from the Court History of an earlier writer. In Chapters 5-8 he goes into detail about the Temple—its building, materials and dedication. In Chap.

11 he compiles the various failures of Solomon's personal life as an explanation for the revolts that came during his reign as well as for the cause of the division of the Kingdom following his death. Surely, not all the revolts came at one time, or even at the close of his life; rather they were spread throughout his reign. It was not the purpose of the editor to give a chronology of Solomon's life, but rather to weigh the impact of his reign on subsequent events. Thus it was necessary to list Solomon's sins, but not as they occurred. They were simply collected at the close of the story on Solomon. Interestingly enough, the Chronicler deliberately omitted any reference to sin or revolt during the reign of Solomon, for the builder of the Temple must be presented impeccably! Thus in the above passage (I Kings 9:26-10:29) the editor grouped together Solomon's commercial enterprises, one of which had disrupted the economy of Sabaea and resulted in the visit of its queen and some kind of a subsequent treaty.

Arabia posed no political threat to Solomon, but he posed an economic threat to that well-established commercial state. Thus Denis Baly has correctly and succinctly interpreted the true nature of the Sabaean queen:

... The famous visit of the queen of Sheba . . . was clearly an economic mission to arrange terms with the new power which had arisen at the north end of the route and which, by virtue of its fleet of ships . . . was threatening the south Arabian monopoly.<sup>28</sup>

And the methodology of *Formgeschichte* enables the contemporary student to extricate her visit from the broader background of commercial enterprise. The two are closely interrelated.

The contributions of archaeological significance in the Arabian peninsula

<sup>26</sup> D. S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: The British Academy, 1924), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Foster Kent, *A History of the Hebrew Peoples From the Settlement in Canaan to the Division of the Kingdom* (12th ed.; New York: Scribner's 1926), 179.

<sup>28</sup> Denis Baly, *Geographical Companion to the Bible* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963), 108.

at present are being halted by various wars. At present the fluid political situation prohibits any continuous, constructive excavation from being undertaken. Were it possible to study Arabia as thoroughly archaeologically as has

been done with other areas of the Ancient Near East, it is quite possible that considerably more light could be thrown on the unique relationship between Solomon and Sheba.

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