

Chapter 5 The Kingdom of Solomon, the Great, Son of David

The people of Israel entered upon the world scene during the reigns of their kings David and Solomon, and Israel remained an integral part of Mideastern life for slightly more than a thousand years.

The first date that can be located with precision in Israel's history is the death of King Solomon. He died in 925 B.C., and his death precipitated the division of this recently mighty nation. This date is a fixed point to work back to other dates that are not so precisely fixed. The Bible states that Solomon reigned for forty years and that David, his father, ruled Israel for about the same period of time. "Forty years" was sometimes a convenient way of saying that these men had had a long and satisfying period of rule but at other times it was an actual historical length of time. In this instance the number appears to be a fairly exact figure. This means that the reign of Solomon began about 965 B.C. and that of David around 1000.

That Israel emerged into the world scene at this time was the result of the major geo-political factor of mideastern life. To the south and west of the territory lay the land of Egypt. It was situated along the Nile river, and that river made possible agriculture, cities, culture and civilization. To the north and east (what is now Iraq) were two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates; and as civilization grew in the Nile, it also developed in this river basin. In between, though touching neither, was the Jordan river in Canaan, running north to south from Mount Hermon to the Dead Sea and irrigating the area that borders the Mediterranean Sea. This land mass, anchored on the south by the Nile and in the northeast by the Tigris and Euphrates and passing through Canaan, has been called "The Fertile Crescent." In this land mass a complex civilization arose, and within this civilization the life of the people of Israel was acted out.

Here, then, was the major premise of Mideastern geopolitics: during the period in question the opposite ends of the fertile crescent were populated by civilizations that were in a polar relationship to each other. By "polar" I mean they attracted each other, and they repelled each other. This one fact provided the motive power for for most of the history of the Middle East for more than three thousand years.

At one pole was always Egypt.

Egypt's life reflected her river: the Nile rose and fell with life-giving regularity, and while dynasties of pharaohs also rose and fell - thirty and more in three thousand years - the Egyptian search for well-being, triumphs of art and architecture, wealth and power dotted the grain-swept shores of the Great River. Egypt was always there on the southwest pole of the Fertile Crescent, rising in power and moving toward north and east, over-extending its resources and retreating to its small corner again.

Mesopotamia's life also took on the characteristics of her rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and these rivers never settled into predictable patterns. Flooding at irregular intervals made the growth of crops precarious; the silting of the river beds dammed up the carefully constructed irrigation canals; and the land turned sour with their saline water. These rivers made life in Mesopotamia precarious, and as a result the center of power on this northeastern pole shifted frequently. Ur was ascendant in the fourth millennium B.C., Sumeria in the third to be followed by Akkadia, Assyria, and Babylonia; and these frequent changes of rulership indicate clearly that conditions on the northeastern pole of the Fertile Crescent were in constant ferment. One kingdom rose, had its moment in history, was swallowed by another and that by yet another until at the time David came to power in Israel there was no strong nation to the north and east of Canaan that could command control. In fact, under David and Solomon, Israel became that power; Israel filled the vacuum and was itself the northeast terminus of the age-long polarity between Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Did David recognize this? We do not know: experienced it more than recognized it, perhaps: experienced the fact that there was no external pressure aside from the Philistines that would prevent him in kingdom-building; so he set himself to the task of constructing the nations of Israel.

David himself was a member of the tribe of Judah, a tribal unit that traced its ancestry back to Jacob, the son of Isaac. David's people had moved into the land called Canaan in the migrations of the 13th century B.C. The Judahites helped to form a new federation of tribes called Israel, and these Israelites were not above pushing the Canaanite tribes out of land or city if it suited their purpose. But soon both Canaanites and Israelites were confronted with an outside threat to their life. The challenge came from a sea people of Greek origin, moving south along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the great migrations celebrated in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and which came to a climax in the Trojan War. These people were called Philistines, and they were strong; they had horses and chariots, had established a monopoly over the production of iron and they possessed the only iron weapons in the whole area. They began to dominate the seacoast of Canaan, and the tribes of Judah and Dan felt their pressure.

About 1050 B.C. these opposing forces locked in a decisive battle. Near Aphek, on the coastal plain, the Israelites fought to stem the Philistine advance and were resoundingly defeated: ark, army, priests, all, were cut to pieces. Their central city of Shiloh was destroyed, and Israel was driven to the mountains. Control of the land was in Philistine hands.

From their mountain hideouts Israel fought back. The seer Samuel began to rally them and after some hesitation took a decisive step. He appointed a huge man from a tiny tribe to be king of Israel: Saul of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul's career was a spotty one. More a charismatic leader than a king, he began his rule with a series of small victories over the Philistines. But in a climactic battle of Mount Gilboa, Saul's army was defeated, he and his sons were killed, and Israel found itself worse off than it was before.

It was David who picked up the pieces of Israelite defeat. A sometime ally of Saul, a sometime enemy, David and a small group of followers lived as outlaws in the mountains of Judea. After Saul's death, David became king over the tribe of Judah, with his capital at Hebron. He wooed the followers of Saul, and they proclaimed him king over all of Israel. He captured the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital. By this time the Philistines realized the threat David posed to their rule, but it was too late. He attacked their armies and broke their power. He then moved to consolidate all of Canaan under his rule. Suddenly, there it stood, the nation of Israel, united under the kingship of David, centered in Jerusalem, the foremost power in Canaan and Syria, stretching from Dan to Beersheba, as strong as any nation in its contemporary world.

This was the kingdom to which Solomon was heir on the death of his father. Note the date: 965 B.C. With Solomon came further changes in the life of Israel. Whereas David had been a man of war, Solomon's ideal was the wealthy worldly, cultured gentleman, and he meant to organize his kingdom around that idea.

In pursuit of his ideal, Solomon became a builder. He built the Temple at Jerusalem, the king's palace, an armory, a judgment hall, a treasury, and a palace for Pharaoh's daughter. He built and rebuilt cities all over Canaan. All Israel remembered his part in creating "Jerusalem the golden."

He brought economic prosperity to Israel. He himself, with his income from trading and industrial monopolies, became enormously wealthy. At the same time, the standard of living of all Israel rose. Population probably doubled in the fifty years since the time of Saul. It was boom time in Israel under Solomon.

Administrative changes were also made. Solomon reorganized the kingdom into twelve districts. In some cases, these districts coincided with the old tribal boundaries, in other instances the lines disregarded them completely. Twelve proved an appropriate number. Not only did it remind Israelites of the twelve tribes of the past, but it also provided a suitable tax base, since each area of approximately 100,000 people was designed to furnish provisions for the court for one month of the year. Twelve taxing districts replaced the twelve tribes of antiquity!

This show of wealth and power brought unwelcome changes to Israel also. To support his programs Solomon began to establish forced labor gangs to do some of his civic work. His mines in the Negev were manned by slave labor, usually Canaanites from the old populations that Solomon had incorporated into Israel. He began to sell outlying territories to nearby kings and kingdoms. Even worse were the changes of mind and spirit that these excesses brought with them. The tribal life, with its sacred institutions and strict ethical practices, gave way to the dynastic state which claimed control over both the life of the individual Israelite and of national policy itself. The consequence was that Solomon's Israel did not survive Solomon. Hardly had the echoes of the mourners's wails over his death ceased to reverberate through the hills than the Kingdom of Israel divided into two parts.