

## Memories of a Golden Age?

In the Temple and royal palace of Jerusalem, biblical Israel found its permanent spiritual focus after centuries of struggle and wandering. As the books of Samuel narrate, the anointing of David, son of Jesse, as king over all the tribes of Israel finalized the process that had begun with God's original promise to Abraham so many centuries before. The violent chaos of the period of the Judges now gave way to a time in which God's promises could be established securely under a righteous king. Though the first choice for the throne of Israel had been the brooding, handsome Saul from the tribe of Benjamin, it was his successor David who became the central figure in early Israelite history. Of the fabled King David, songs and stories were nearly without number. They told of his slaying the mighty Goliath with a single sling stone; of his adoption into the royal court for his skill as a harpist; of his adventures as a rebel and freebooter; of his lustful pursuit of Bathsheba; and of his conquests of Jerusalem and a vast empire beyond. His son Solomon, in turn, is remembered as the wisest of kings and the greatest of builders. Stories tell of his brilliant judgments, his unimaginable wealth, and his construction of the great Temple in Jerusalem.

For centuries, Bible readers all over the world have looked back to the era of David and Solomon as a golden age in Israel's history. Until recently many scholars have agreed that the united monarchy was the first biblical

period that could truly be considered historical. Unlike the hazy memories of the patriarchs' wanderings, or the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, or the bloody visions of the books of Joshua and Judges, the story of David was a highly realistic saga of political maneuvering and dynastic intrigue. Even though many details of David's early exploits are certainly legendary elaborations, scholars long believed that the story of his rise to power meshed well with the archaeological reality. The initial, dispersed settlement of the Israelites in their hill country villages slowly coalesced into more centralized forms of organization. And the threat posed to the Israelites by the coastal Philistine cities would have provided the crisis that precipitated the rise of the Israelite monarchy. Indeed, archaeologists have identified clear levels of destruction of former Philistine and Canaanite cities that they believed marked the path of David's wide-ranging conquests. And the impressive city gates and palaces uncovered at several important sites in Israel were seen as evidence of Solomon's building activities.

Yet many of the archaeological props that once bolstered the historical basis of the David and Solomon narratives have recently been called into question. The actual extent of the Davidic "empire" is hotly debated. Digging in Jerusalem has failed to produce evidence that it was a great city in David or Solomon's time. And the monuments ascribed to Solomon are now most plausibly connected with other kings. Thus a reconsideration of the evidence has enormous implications. For if there were no patriarchs, no Exodus, no conquest of Canaan—and no prosperous united monarchy under David and Solomon—can we say that early biblical Israel, as described in the Five Books of Moses and the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, ever existed at all?

### A Royal Dynasty for Israel

The biblical epic of Israel's transformation from the period of the judges to the time of the monarchy begins with a great military crisis. As described in 1 Samuel 4–5, the massed Philistine armies routed the Israelite tribal levies in battle and carried off the holy Ark of the Covenant as booty of war. Under the leadership of the prophet Samuel, a priest in the sanctuary at Shiloh (located halfway between Jerusalem and Shechem), the Israelites later recovered the ark, which was brought back and installed in the village

of Kiriyat Yearim west of Jerusalem. But the days of the judges were clearly over. The military threats now faced by the people of Israel required full-time leadership. The elders of Israel assembled at Samuel's home in Ramah, north of Jerusalem, and asked him to appoint a king for Israel, "like all the nations." Though Samuel warned against the dangers of kingship in one of the most eloquent antimonarchic passages in the Bible (1 Samuel 8:10–18), God instructed him to do as the people requested. And God revealed his selection to Samuel: the first king of Israel would be Saul, son of Kish, from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was a handsome young man and a brave warrior, yet one whose inner doubts and naive violations of the divine laws of sacrifice, war booty, and other sacred injunctions (1 Samuel 15:10–26) would lead to his ultimate rejection and eventual tragic suicide at Mount Gilboa, when the Israelites were routed by the Philistines.

Even as Saul still reigned as king of Israel he was unaware that his successor had already been chosen. God instructed Samuel to go to the family of Jesse from Bethlehem, "for I have provided for myself a king among his sons" (1 Samuel 16:1). The youngest of those sons was a handsome, red-haired shepherd named David, who would finally bring salvation to Israel. First came an awesome demonstration of David's battlefield prowess. The Philistines gathered again to wage war against Israel, and the two armies faced each other in the valley of Elah in the Shephelah. The Philistines' secret weapon was the giant warrior Goliath, who mocked the God of Israel and challenged any Israelite warrior to engage in single combat with him. Great fear fell upon Saul and his soldiers, but the young David, sent by his father to bring provisions to his three older brothers serving in Saul's army, took up the challenge fearlessly. Shouting to Goliath—"You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD" (1 Samuel 17:45)—David took a small stone from his shepherd's pouch and slung it with deadly aim at Goliath's forehead, killing him on the spot. The Philistines were routed. David, the new hero of Israel, befriended Saul's son Jonathan and married Michal, the daughter of the king. David was popularly acclaimed Israel's greatest hero—greater even than the king. The enthusiastic cries of his admirers, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands!" (1 Samuel 18:7), made King Saul jealous. It was only a matter of time before David would have to contest Saul's leadership and claim the throne of all Israel.

Escaping Saul's murderous fury, David became leader of a band of fugitives and soldiers of fortune, with people in distress or deep in debt flocking to him. David and his men roamed in the foothills of the Shephelah, in the Judean desert, and in the southern margins of the Judean hills—all regions located away from the centers of power of Saul's kingdom to the north of Jerusalem. Tragically, in battle with the Philistines far to the north at Mount Gilboa, Saul's sons were killed by the enemy and Saul took his own life. David proceeded quickly to the ancient city of Hebron in Judah, where the people of Judah declared him king. This was the beginning of the great Davidic state and lineage, the beginning of the glorious united monarchy.

Once David and his men overpowered the remaining pockets of opposition among Saul's supporters, representatives of all the tribes duly convened in Hebron to declare David king over all Israel. After reigning seven years in Hebron, David moved north to conquer the Jebusite stronghold of Jerusalem—until then claimed by none of the tribes of Israel—to make it his capital. He ordered that the Ark of the Covenant be brought up from Kiriyath-jearim.

David then received an astonishing, unconditional promise from God:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from

Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

(2 SAMUEL 7:8-16)

David then initiated sweeping wars of liberation and expansion. In a series of swift battles he destroyed the power of the Philistines and defeated the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Edomites in Transjordan, concluding his campaigns with the subjugation of the Arameans far to the north. Returning in triumph to Jerusalem, David now ruled over a vast territory, far more extensive even than the tribal inheritances of Israel. But David did not find peace even in this time of glory. Dynastic conflicts—including the revolt of his son Absalom—led to great concern for the continuation of his dynasty. Just before David's death, the priest Zadok anointed Solomon to be the next king of Israel.

Solomon, to whom God gave "wisdom and understanding beyond measure," consolidated the Davidic dynasty and organized its empire, which now stretched from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:24). His immense wealth came from a sophisticated system of taxation and forced labor required of each of the tribes of Israel and from trading expeditions to exotic countries in the south. In recognition of his fame and wisdom, the fabled queen of Sheba visited him in Jerusalem and brought him a caravan of dazzling gifts.

Solomon's greatest achievements were his building activities. In Jerusalem he constructed a magnificent, richly decorated Temple to YHWH, inaugurated it in great pomp, and built a beautiful palace nearby. He fortified Jerusalem as well as the important provincial cities of Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer, and maintained stables with forty thousand stalls of horses for his fourteen hundred chariots, and twelve thousand cavalrymen. He concluded a treaty with Hiram, king of Tyre, who dispatched cedars of Lebanon for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and became Solomon's partner in overseas trading ventures. The Bible summarizes Solomon's reputation: "Thus king Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind" (1 Kings 10:23-24).

## Did David and Solomon Exist?

This question, put so baldly, may sound intentionally provocative. David and Solomon are such central religious icons to both Judaism and Christianity that the recent assertions of radical biblical critics that King David is “no more a historical figure than King Arthur,” have been greeted in many religious and scholarly circles with outrage and disdain. Biblical historians such as Thomas Thompson and Niels Peter Lemche of the University of Copenhagen and Philip Davies of the University of Sheffield, dubbed “biblical minimalists” by their detractors, have argued that David and Solomon, the united monarchy of Israel, and indeed the entire biblical description of the history of Israel are no more than elaborate, skillful ideological constructs produced by priestly circles in Jerusalem in post-exilic or even Hellenistic times.

Yet from a purely literary and archaeological standpoint, the minimalists have some points in their favor. A close reading of the biblical description of the days of Solomon clearly suggests that this was a portrayal of an idealized past, a glorious Golden Age. The reports of Solomon’s fabulous wealth (making “silver as common in Jerusalem as stone,” according to 1 Kings 10:27) and his legendary harem (housing seven hundred wives and princesses and three-hundred concubines, according to 1 Kings 11:3) are details too exaggerated to be true. Moreover, for all their reported wealth and power, neither David nor Solomon is mentioned in a single known Egyptian or Mesopotamian text. And the archaeological evidence in Jerusalem for the famous building projects of Solomon is nonexistent. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century excavations around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem failed to identify even a trace of Solomon’s fabled Temple or palace complex. And while certain levels and structures at sites in other regions of the country have indeed been linked to the era of the united monarchy, their dating, as we shall see, is far from clear.

On the other hand, strong arguments have been marshaled to counter some of the minimalists’ objections. Many scholars argue that remains from the Solomonic period in Jerusalem are missing because they were completely eradicated by the massive Herodian constructions on the Temple Mount in the Early Roman period. Moreover, the absence of outside

references to David and Solomon in ancient inscriptions is completely understandable, since the era in which they were believed to have ruled (c. 1005–c. 930 BCE) was a period in which the great empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia were in decline. So it is not surprising that there are no references to either David or Solomon in the rather meager contemporary Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts.

Yet in the summer of 1993, at the biblical site of Tel Dan in northern Israel, a fragmentary artifact was discovered that would change forever the nature of the debate. It was the “House of David” inscription, part of a black basalt monument, found broken and reused in a later stratum as a building stone. Written in Aramaic, the language of the Aramean kingdoms of Syria, it related the details of an invasion of Israel by an Aramean king whose name is not mentioned on the fragments that have so far been discovered. But there is hardly a question that it tells the story of the assault of Hazael, king of Damascus, on the northern kingdom of Israel around 835 BCE. This war took place in the era when Israel and Judah were separate kingdoms, and the outcome was a bitter defeat for both.

The most important part of the inscription is Hazael’s boasting description of his enemies:

[I killed Jeho]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel, and [I] killed [Ahaz]jahu son of [Jehoram kin]g of the House of David. And I set [their towns into ruins and turned] their land into [desolation].

This is dramatic evidence of the fame of the Davidic dynasty less than a hundred years after the reign of David’s son Solomon. The fact that Judah (or perhaps its capital, Jerusalem) is referred to with only a mention of its ruling house is clear evidence that the reputation of David was not a literary invention of a much later period. Furthermore, the French scholar André Lemaire has recently suggested that a similar reference to the house of David can be found on the famous inscription of Mesha, king of Moab in the ninth century BCE, which was found in the nineteenth century east of the Dead Sea. Thus, the house of David was known throughout the region; this clearly validates the biblical description of a figure named David becoming the founder of the dynasty of Judahite kings in Jerusalem.

The question we must therefore face is no longer one of David and

Solomon's mere existence. We must now see if the Bible's sweeping description of David's great military victories and of Solomon's great building projects is consistent with the archaeological evidence.

### A New Look at the Kingdom of David

We have already seen that the first stage of Israelite settlement in the highlands of Canaan was a gradual, regional phenomenon in which local pastoralist groups began to settle down in the sparsely populated highlands and form self-sufficient village communities. In time, with the growth of the highland population, new villages were founded in previously unoccupied areas, moving from the eastern steppe land and the interior valleys toward the western rocky and rugged niches of the highlands. At this stage, cultivation of olives and grapes began, especially in the northern highlands. With a growing diversity among the location and crops produced by the various villages throughout the hill country, the old regime of self-sufficiency could not be maintained. Villagers who concentrated on orchards and vines would necessarily have to exchange some of their surplus production of wine and olive oil for basic commodities like grain. With specialization came the rise of classes of administrators and traders, professional soldiers, and eventually kings.

Similar patterns of highland settlement and gradual social stratification have been uncovered by archaeologists working in Jordan in the ancient lands of Ammon and Moab. A fairly uniform process of social transformation may have happened in many highland regions of the Levant, once they were freed from the control of the great Bronze Age empires or the lowland city-state kings.

At a time when the entire world was coming to life again in the Iron Age, new kingdoms were emerging that were wary of their neighbors and apparently marked themselves off from one another by distinctive ethnic customs and the worship of national deities. Still, their process of specialization, organization, and group identity is a far cry from the formation of a vast empire. Extensive conquests of the kind ascribed to David take enormous organization, manpower, and armor. So, scholarly interest has begun to focus on the archaeological evidence of population, settlement patterns,



TABLE TWO  
 THE KINGS OF THE UNITED MONARCHY

KING	DATES*	BIBLICAL TESTIMONY	ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS
Saul	ca. 1025–1005	First king, appointed by the prophet Samuel	In the highlands continuation of Iron I settlement system
David	ca. 1005–970	Conquers Jerusalem and makes it his capital; establishes a vast empire covering most territories of the Land of Israel	No evidence for David's conquests or for his empire. In the valleys Canaanite culture continues uninterrupted. In the highlands continuation of Iron I settlement system
Solomon	ca. 970–931	Builds the temple and the palace in Jerusalem. Also active at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer	No sign of monumental architecture, or important city in Jerusalem. No sign of grand-scale building activity at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer; in the north, Canaanite material culture continues

\* According to Galil's *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah*

and economic and organizational resources in David's home region of Judah to see if the biblical description makes historical sense.

The recent archaeological surveys in the highlands have offered important new evidence of the unique character of Judah, which occupies the southern part of the highlands, roughly stretching southward from Jerusalem to the northern fringes of the Negev. It forms a homogenous environmental unit of rugged terrain, difficult communications, and meager and highly unpredictable rainfall. In contrast to the northern hill country with its broad valleys and natural overland routes to the neighboring re-

gions, Judah has always been marginal agriculturally and isolated from the neighboring regions by topographical barriers that encircle it on all sides except the north.

On the east and south, Judah is bordered by the arid zones of the Judean desert and the Negev. And on the west—in the direction of the fertile and prosperous Shephelah foothills and the coastal plain—the central ridge drops abruptly. Traveling westward from Hebron, one is forced to descend more than thirteen hundred feet down steep, rocky slopes in a distance of just a little over three miles. Farther north, west of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the slope is more moderate, but it is even more difficult to traverse since it comprises a set of narrow, long ridges separated by deep ravines. Today, the flat central plateau, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and to Hebron, is crisscrossed by roads and extensively farmed. But it took millennia of concentrated labor to clear the rocky terrain enough to allow these activities. In the Bronze Age and in the beginning of the Iron Age the area was rocky and covered with dense scrub and forest, with very little open land available for agricultural fields. A mere handful of permanent villages were established there at the time of the Israelite settlement; Judah's environment was far better suited to pastoral groups.

Judah's settlement system of the twelfth–eleventh centuries BCE continued to develop in the tenth century. The number of villages and their size gradually grew, but the nature of the system did not change dramatically. North of Judah, extensive orchards and vineyards developed on the western slopes of the highlands; in Judah they did not, due to the forbidding nature of the terrain. As far as we can see on the basis of the archaeological surveys, Judah remained relatively empty of permanent population, quite isolated, and very marginal right up to and past the presumed time of David and Solomon, with no major urban centers and with no pronounced hierarchy of hamlets, villages, and towns.

### Searching for Jerusalem

The image of Jerusalem in the time of David, and even more so in the time of his son Solomon, has for centuries been a subject of mythmaking and romance. Pilgrims, Crusaders, and visionaries of all kinds have spread fabulous stories about the grandeur of David's city and of Solomon's Temple.

It was therefore no accident that the quest for the remains of Solomon's Temple was among the first challenges taken up by biblical archaeology in the nineteenth century. The quest was hardly easy and very rarely fruitful, due to the nature of the site.

Lived in continuously and highly overbuilt, Jerusalem lies in a saddle to the east of the watershed of the Judean hills, very close to the fringe of the Judean desert. In the heart of its historical part is the Old City, which is surrounded by Ottoman walls. The Christian quarter lies in the northwest of the Old City, around the church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Jewish quarter lies in the southeast, overlooking the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount. The latter covers the southeastern corner of the Ottoman city. To the south of the Temple Mount, outside of the walls of the Ottoman city, stretches the long, narrow, relatively low ridge of the city of David—the old mound of Bronze and Early Iron Age Jerusalem. It is separated from the surrounding hills by two ravines. The eastern one, the Kidron valley, separates it from the village of Siloam. The main water source of biblical Jerusalem—the spring of Gihon—is located in this ravine.

Jerusalem has been excavated time and again—and with a particularly intense period of investigation of Bronze and Iron Age remains in the 1970s and 1980s under the direction of Yigal Shiloh, of the Hebrew University, at the city of David, the original urban core of Jerusalem. Surprisingly, as Tel Aviv University archaeologist David Ussishkin pointed out, fieldwork there and in other parts of biblical Jerusalem failed to provide significant evidence for a tenth century occupation. Not only was any sign of monumental architecture missing, but so were even simple pottery sherds. The types that are so characteristic of the tenth century at other sites are rare in Jerusalem. Some scholars have argued that later, massive building activities in Jerusalem wiped out all signs of the earlier city. Yet excavations in the city of David revealed impressive finds from the Middle Bronze Age and from later centuries of the Iron Age—just not from the tenth century BCE. The most optimistic assessment of this negative evidence is that tenth century Jerusalem was rather limited in extent, perhaps not more than a typical hill country village.

This modest appraisal meshes well with the rather meager settlement pattern of the rest of Judah in the same period, which was composed of only about twenty small villages and a few thousand inhabitants, many of

them wandering pastoralists. In fact, it is highly unlikely that this sparsely inhabited region of Judah and the small village of Jerusalem could have become the center of a great empire stretching from the Red Sea in the south to Syria in the north. Could even the most charismatic king have marshaled the men and arms needed to achieve and hold such vast territorial conquests? There is absolutely no archaeological indication of the wealth, manpower, and level of organization that would be required to support large armies—even for brief periods—in the field. Even if the relatively few inhabitants of Judah were able to mount swift attacks on neighboring regions, how would they have possibly been able to administer the vast and even more ambitious empire of David's son Solomon?

### How Vast Were David's Conquests?

For decades, archaeologists believed that the evidence uncovered in many excavations outside Jerusalem supported the Bible's account of a vast united monarchy. The most prominent of David's victories, according to the Bible, were against the Philistine cities, a number of which have been extensively excavated. The first book of Samuel offers great detail on the encounters between Israelites and Philistines: how the Philistine armies captured the ark of God at the battle of Ebenezer; how Saul and his son Jonathan died during the wars against the Philistines; and of course, how the young David toppled Goliath. While some of the details of these stories are clearly legendary, the geographical descriptions are quite accurate. More important, the gradual spread of the Philistines' distinctive Aegean-inspired decorated pottery into the foothills and as far north as the Jezreel valley provides evidence for the progressive expansion of the Philistines' influence throughout the country. And when evidence of destruction—around 1000 BCE—of lowland cities was found, it seemed to confirm the extent of David's conquests.

One of the best examples of this line of reasoning is the case of Tel Qasile, a small site on the northern outskirts of modern Tel Aviv, first excavated by the Israeli biblical archaeologist and historian Benjamin Mazar in 1948–50. Mazar uncovered a prosperous Philistine town, otherwise unknown in the biblical accounts. The last layer there that contained characteristic Philistine pottery and bore other hallmarks of Philistine culture was

destroyed by fire. And even though there was no specific reference in the Bible to David's conquest of this area, Mazar did not hesitate to conclude that David leveled the settlement in his wars against the Philistines.

And so it went throughout the country, with David's destructive handiwork seen in ash layers and tumbled stones at sites from Philistia to the Jezreel valley and beyond. In almost every case where a city with late Philistine or Canaanite culture was attacked, destroyed, or even remodeled, King David's sweeping conquests were seen as the cause.

Could the Israelites of the central hill country have established control not only over small sites like Tel Qasile, but over the large "Canaanite" centers like Gezer, Megiddo, and Beth-shean? Theoretically, yes; there are some examples in history of rural people exerting control over big cities—especially in cases where highland warlords or outlaw chieftains used both the threat of violence and the promise of godfatherly protection to secure tribute and professions of loyalty from the farmers and shopkeepers of lowland towns. But in most cases these were not outright military conquests and the establishment of a formalized, bureaucratic empire so much as a more subtle means of leadership in which a highland chieftain offered a kind of security to lowland communities.

### The Stables, Cities, and Gates of King Solomon?

The heart of the debate took place not over evidence of David's conquests, but rather their aftermath. Did Solomon establish a glorious reign over the kingdom conquered by David? Even though no trace of the Solomonic Temple and palace in Jerusalem has ever been identified, there have been many other places for scholars to look. The biblical narrative describes Solomon's rebuilding of the northern cities of Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer (1 Kings 9:15). When one of those sites—Megiddo—was excavated by an expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, some of its most impressive Iron Age remains were attributed to Solomon.

Located in a strategic spot, where the international highway from Egypt in the south to Mesopotamia and Anatolia in the north descends from the hills into the Jezreel valley, Megiddo was one of the most important cities of biblical Israel. And apart from 1 Kings 9:15, it is mentioned also in 1 Kings

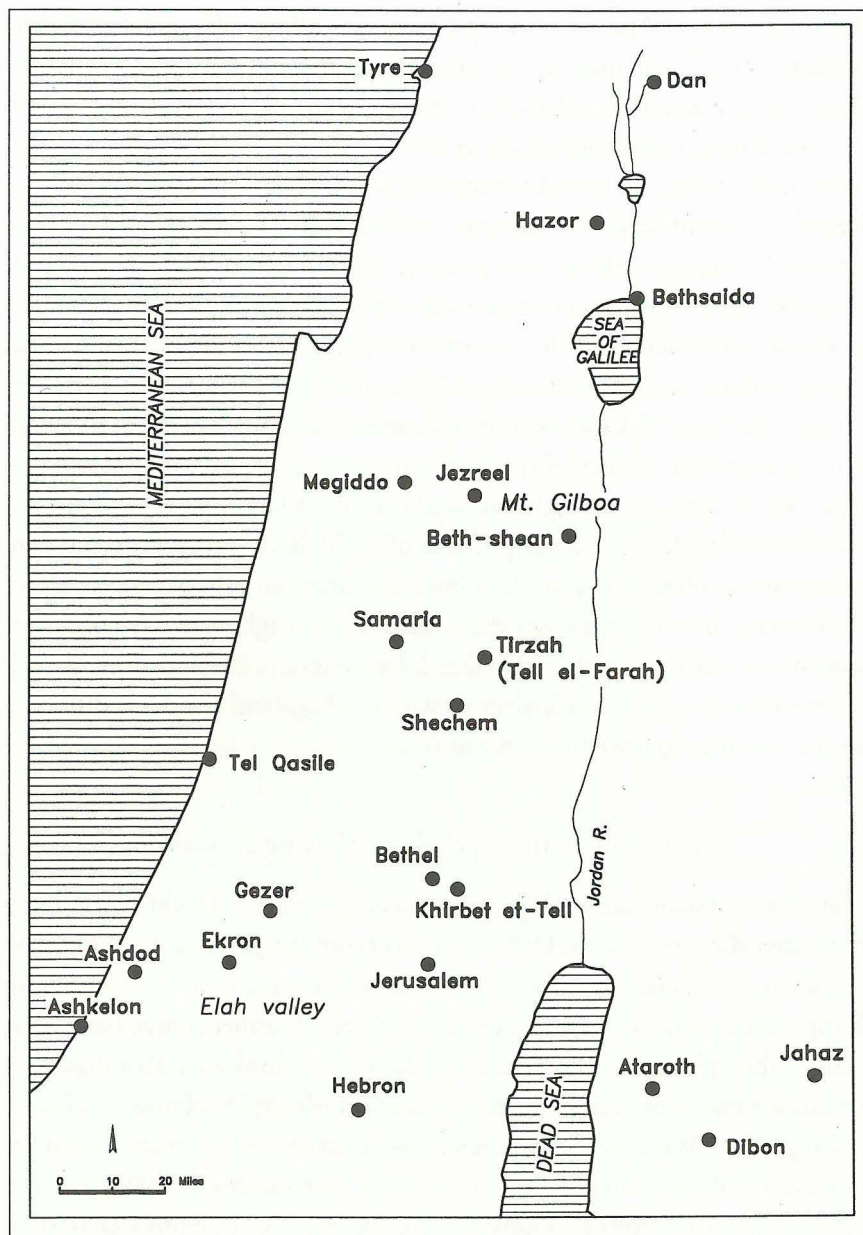


Figure 16: Main sites of the monarchic period.

4:12, in the list of districts of the Solomonic state. The city level called stratum IV—the last to be almost fully exposed over the entire area of the ancient mound—contained two sets of large public buildings, each composed of a series of long chambers attached to one another in a row. Each of the individual chambers was divided into three narrow aisles separated from one another by low partition walls of stone pillars and troughs (Figure 17).

One of the directors of the expedition, P.L.O. Guy, identified these buildings as stables dated to the time of Solomon. His interpretation was based on the biblical description of Solomonic building techniques in Jerusalem (1 Kings 7:12), on the specific reference to the building activity of Solomon at Megiddo in 1 Kings 9:15, and on the mention of Solomonic cities for chariots and horsemen in 1 Kings 9:19. Guy put it this way: “If we ask ourselves who, at Megiddo, shortly after the defeat of the Philistines by King David, built with the help of skilled foreign masons a city with many stables? I believe that we shall find our answer in the Bible . . . if one reads the history of Solomon, whether in Kings or in Chronicles, one is struck by the frequency with which chariots and horses crop up.”

The apparent evidence of the grandeur of the Solomonic empire was significantly enhanced in the 1950s, with the excavations of Yigael Yadin at Hazor. Yadin and his team uncovered a large city gate dated to the Iron Age. It had a peculiar plan: there was a tower and three chambers on each side of the gateway—thus giving rise to the term “six-chambered” gate (Figure 18). Yadin was stunned. A similar gate—in both layout and size—was uncovered twenty years earlier by the Oriental Institute team at Megiddo! Perhaps this and not the stables was the telltale sign of Solomonic presence throughout the land.

So Yadin went to dig Gezer, the third city mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15 as being rebuilt by Solomon—not in the field but in the library. Gezer had been excavated at the beginning of the century by the British archaeologist R.A.S. Macalister. As Yadin paged through Macalister’s reports he was astounded. In a plan of a building that Macalister had identified as a “Maccabean castle” dated to the second century BCE, Yadin could easily identify the outline of one side of exactly the same type of gate structure that had been found at Megiddo and Hazor. Yadin did not hesitate any longer. He argued that a royal architect from Jerusalem drew a master plan for the

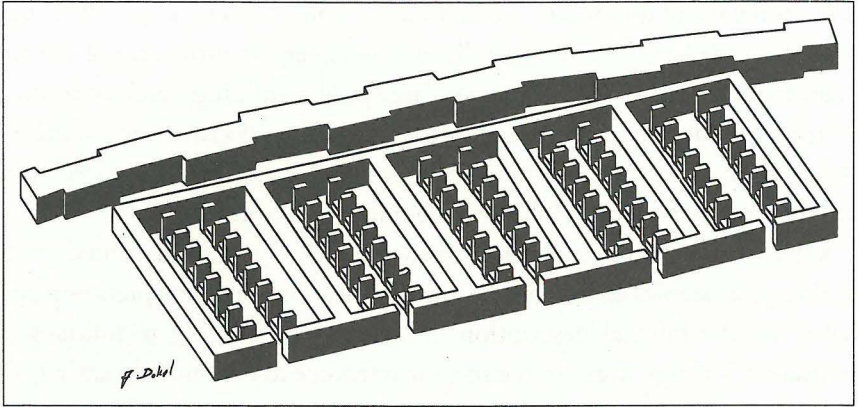


Figure 17: A set of pillared buildings at Megiddo, identified as stables.

Solomonic city gates and that this master plan was then dispatched to the provinces.

Yadin summed it up this way: “There is no example in the history of archaeology where a passage helped so much in identifying and dating structures in several of the most important tells in the Holy Land as has I Kings 9:15 . . . Our decision to attribute that layer [at Hazor] to Solomon was based primarily on the I Kings passage, the stratigraphy, and the pottery. But when in addition we found in that stratum a six-chambered, two-towered gate connected to a casemate wall identical in plan and measurement with the gate at Megiddo, we felt sure we had successfully identified Solomon’s city.”

### Too Good to Be True?

Yadin’s Solomonic discoveries were not over. In the early 1960s, he went to Megiddo with a small team of students to clarify the uniformity of the Solomonic gates, which at Gezer and Hazor were connected to a hollow casemate fortification but only at Megiddo linked to a solid wall. Yadin was sure that the Megiddo excavators had mistakenly attributed a solid wall to the gate, and that they missed an underlying casemate wall. Since the gate had been fully exposed by the University of Chicago team, Yadin chose to excavate east of the gate, where the American team had located an apparent set of stables that they attributed to Solomon.



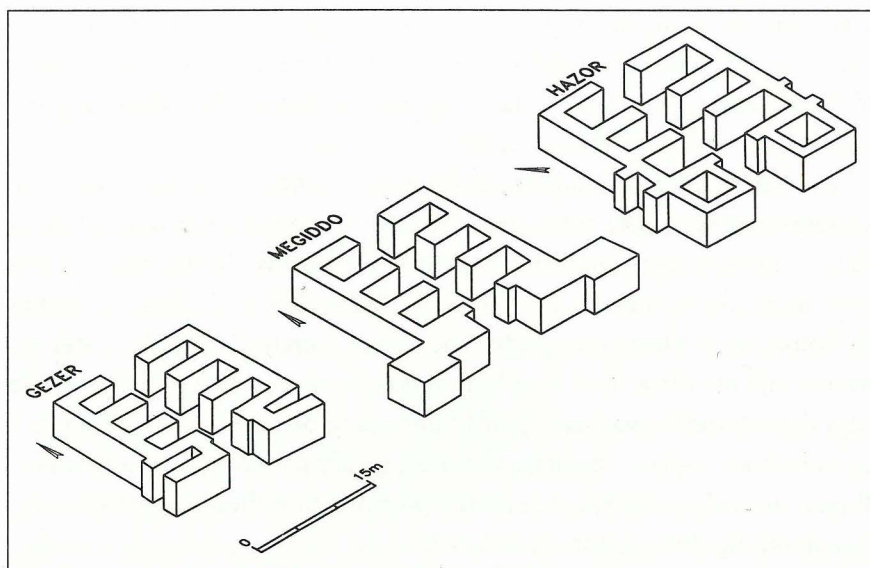


Figure 18: Six-chambered gates at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer.

What he found revolutionized biblical archaeology for a generation. Under the stables Yadin found the remains of a beautiful palace measuring about six thousand square feet and constructed of large ashlar blocks (Figure 24). It was built on the northern edge of the mound, and was connected to a row of rooms that Yadin interpreted as the missing casemate wall that was attached to the six-chamber gate. A somewhat similar palace, also built of beautiful dressed blocks, had been uncovered by the Oriental Institute team on the southern side of the mound, and it also lay under the city of the stables. The architectural style of both buildings was closely parallel to a common and distinctive type of north Syrian palace of the Iron Age, known as the *bit hilani*, consisting of a monumental entrance and rows of small chambers surrounding an official reception room. This style would therefore have been appropriate for a resident official at Megiddo, perhaps the regional governor Baana, the son of Ahilud (1 Kings 4:12). Yadin's student David Ussishkin soon clinched the connection of these buildings to Solomon by demonstrating that the biblical description of the palace that Solomon built in Jerusalem perfectly fits the Megiddo palaces.

The conclusion seemed unavoidable. The two palaces and the gate represented Solomonic Megiddo, while the stables actually belonged to a later

city, built by King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel in the early ninth century BCE. This latter conclusion was an important cornerstone in Yadin's theory, as a ninth century Assyrian inscription described the great chariot force of King Ahab of Israel.

For Yadin and many others, archaeology seemed to fit the Bible more closely than ever. The Bible described the territorial expansion of King David; indeed, late Canaanite and Philistine towns all over the country were destroyed by a terrible fire. The Bible describes the building activities of Solomon at Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer; surely the similar gates revealed that the three cities were built together, on a unified plan. The Bible says that Solomon was an ally of Hiram, king of Tyre, and that he was a great builder; indeed, the magnificent Megiddo palaces show northern influence in their architecture, and they were the most beautiful edifices discovered in the Iron Age strata in Israel.

For some years, Solomon's gates symbolized archaeology's most impressive support for the Bible. Yet basic questions of historical logic eventually undermined their significance. Nowhere else in the region—from eastern Turkey in the north through western Syria to Transjordan in the south—was there any sign of similarly developed royal institutions or monumental building in the tenth century BCE. As we have seen, David and Solomon's homeland of Judah was conspicuously undeveloped—and there is no evidence whatever of the wealth of a great empire flowing back to it. And there is an even more troubling chronological problem: the *bit hilani* palaces of Iron Age Syria—which were supposed to be the prototypes for the Solomonic palaces at Megiddo—appear for the first time in Syria in the early ninth century BCE, at least half a century *after* the time of Solomon. How would it have been possible for Solomon's architects to adopt an architectural style that did not yet exist? Finally, there is the question of the contrast between Megiddo and Jerusalem: is it possible that a king who constructed fabulous ashlar palaces in a provincial city ruled from a small, remote, and underdeveloped village? As it turned out, we now know that the archaeological evidence for the vast extent of Davidic conquests and the grandeur of the Solomonic kingdom came as the result of badly mistaken dates.

## Questions of Dating

Identification of the remains from the period of David and Solomon—and indeed from the reigns of the kings that followed for the next century—was based on two classes of evidence. The end of distinctive Philistine pottery (dated c. 1000 BCE) was closely linked to David's conquests. And the construction of the monumental gates and palaces at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer were connected with the reign of Solomon. In the last few years, both supports have begun to crumble (see Appendix D for more details).

First, we can no longer be sure that the characteristic Philistine pottery styles did not continue well into the tenth century—long after the death of David—and would therefore be useless for dating (much less verifying) his supposed conquests. Second, renewed analysis of the architectural styles and pottery forms in the famous Solomonic levels at Megiddo, Gezer, and Hazor indicates that they actually date to the early ninth century BCE, decades after the death of Solomon!

A third class of evidence, the more precise laboratory techniques of carbon 14 dating, now seems to clinch the case. Until recently it was impossible to use radiocarbon dating for such relatively modern periods as the Iron Age because of its wide margin of probability, often extending over a century or more. But refinements of carbon 14 dating techniques have greatly reduced the margin of uncertainty. A number of samples from the major sites involved in the tenth century debate have been tested and seem to support the new chronology.

The site of Megiddo, in particular, has produced some stunning contradictions to the accepted interpretations. Fifteen wood samples were taken from large roof beams that had collapsed in the terrible fire and destruction attributed to David. Since some of the beams could have been used in earlier buildings, only the latest dates in the series can safely indicate when the structures were built. Indeed most of the samples fall well into the tenth century—long after the time of David. The palaces ascribed to Solomon, built two layers above this destruction, would have been much later.

These dates have been confirmed by tests of parallel strata at such prominent sites as Tel Dor on the Mediterranean coast and Tel Hadar on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Sporadic readings from several other, less

well known sites, such as Ein Hagit near Megiddo and Tel Kinneret on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee, also support this dating. Finally, a series of samples from the destruction of a stratum at Tel Rehov near Bethshean, which is contemporary with Megiddo's supposed Solomonic city, gave mid-ninth century dates—long after its reported destruction by Pharaoh Shishak in 926 BCE.

Essentially, archaeology misdated both “Davidic” and “Solomonic” remains by a full century. The finds dated to the time just before David in the late eleventh century belonged in the mid-tenth century and those dated to the time of Solomon belonged in the early ninth century BCE. The new dates place the appearance of monumental structures, fortifications, and other signs of full statehood precisely at the time of their first appearance in the rest of the Levant. They rectify the disparity in dates between the *bit hillani* palace structures in Megiddo and their parallels in Syria. And they allow us finally to understand why Jerusalem and Judah are so poor in finds in the tenth century. The reason is that Judah was still a remote and undeveloped region at that time.

There is hardly a reason to doubt the historicity of David and Solomon. Yet there are plenty of reasons to question the extent and splendor of their realm. If there was no big empire, if there were no monuments, if there was no magnificent capital, what *was* the nature of David's realm?

### The Davidic Legacy: From Iron Age Chieftdom to Dynastic Myth

The material culture of the highlands in the time of David remained simple. The land was overwhelmingly rural—with no trace of written documents, inscriptions, or even signs of the kind of widespread literacy that would be necessary for the functioning of a proper monarchy. From a demographic point of view, the area of the Israelite settlement was hardly homogeneous. It is hard to see any evidence of a unified culture or centrally administered state. The area from Jerusalem to the north was quite densely settled, while the area from Jerusalem to the south—the hub of the future kingdom of Judah—was still very sparsely settled. Jerusalem itself was, at best, no more than a typical highland village. We can say no more than that.

The population estimates for the later phases of the Israelite settlement

period apply also to the tenth century BCE. They give an idea of the scale of historical possibilities. Out of a total of approximately forty-five thousand people living in the hill country, a full 90 percent would have inhabited the villages of the north. That would have left about five thousand people scattered among Jerusalem, Hebron, and about twenty small villages in Judah, with additional groups probably continuing as pastoralists. Such a small and isolated society like this would have been likely to cherish the memory of an extraordinary leader like David as his descendants continued to rule in Jerusalem over the next four hundred years. At first, in the tenth century, their rule extended over no empire, no palatial cities, no spectacular capital. Archeologically we can say no more about David and Solomon except that they existed—and that their legend endured.

Yet the fascination of the Deuteronomistic historian of the seventh century BCE with the memories of David and Solomon—and indeed the Judahites' apparent continuing veneration of these characters—may be the best if not the only evidence for the existence of some sort of an early Israelite unified state. The fact that the Deuteronomist employs the united monarchy as a powerful tool of political propaganda suggests that in his time the episode of David and Solomon as rulers over a relatively large territory in the central highlands was still vivid and widely believed.

Of course, by the seventh century BCE conditions in Judah had changed almost beyond reckoning. Jerusalem was now a relatively large city, dominated by a Temple to the God of Israel that served as the single national shrine. The institutions of monarchy, a professional army, and administration had reached a level of sophistication that met and even exceeded the complexity of the royal institutions of the neighboring states. And once again we can see the landscapes and costumes of seventh century Judah as the setting for an unforgettable biblical tale, this time of a mythical golden age. The lavish visit of Solomon's trading partner the queen of Sheba to Jerusalem (1 Kings 10:1–10) and the trade in rare commodities with distant markets such as the land of Ophir in the south (1 Kings 9:28; 10:11) no doubt reflect the participation of seventh century Judah in the lucrative Arabian trade. The same holds true for the description of the building of Tamar in the wilderness (1 Kings 9:18) and the trade expeditions to faraway lands setting out from Ezion-geber in the Gulf of Aqaba (1 Kings 9:26)—two sites that have been securely identified and that were not inhabited be-

fore late monarchic times. And David's royal guard of Cherethites and Pelethites (2 Samuel 8:18), long assumed by scholars to have been Aegean in origin, should be understood on the background of the service of Greek mercenaries, the most advanced fighting force of the day, in the Egyptian and possibly Judahite armies of the seventh century.

In late monarchic times, an elaborate theology had been developed in Judah and Jerusalem to validate the connection between the heir of David and the destiny of the entire people of Israel. According to the Deuteronomistic History, the pious David was the first to stop the cycle of idolatry (by the people of Israel) and divine retribution (by YHWH). Thanks to his devotion, faithfulness, and righteousness, YHWH helped him to complete the unfinished job of Joshua—namely to conquer the rest of the promised land and establish a glorious empire over all the vast territories that had been promised to Abraham. These were theological hopes, not accurate historical portraits. They were a central element in a powerful seventh century vision of national renaissance that sought to bring scattered, war-weary people together, to prove to them that they had experienced a stirring history under the direct intervention of God. The glorious epic of the united monarchy was—like the stories of the patriarchs and the sagas of the Exodus and conquest—a brilliant composition that wove together ancient heroic tales and legends into a coherent and persuasive prophecy for the people of Israel in the seventh century BCE.

To the people of Judah at the time when the biblical epic was first crafted, a new David had come to the throne, intent on restoring the glory of his distant ancestors. This was Josiah, described as the most devoted of all Judahite kings. And Josiah was able to roll history back from his own days to the time of the legendary united monarchy. By cleansing Judah of the abomination of idolatry—first introduced into Jerusalem by Solomon with his harem of foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1–8)—Josiah could nullify the transgressions that led to the breakdown of the Davidic “empire.” What the Deuteronomistic historian wanted to say is simple and powerful: there is still a way to regain the glory of the past.

So Josiah embarked on establishing a united monarchy that would link Judah with the territories of the former northern kingdom through the royal institutions, military forces, and single-minded devotion to Jerusalem that are so central to the biblical narrative of David. As the monarch

sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem, Josiah was the only legitimate heir to the Davidic empire, that is, to the Davidic territories. He was about to “regain” the territories of the now destroyed northern kingdom, the kingdom that was born from the sins of Solomon. And the words of 1 Kings 4:25, that “Judah and Israel dwelt in safety from Dan even to Beer-sheba,” summarize those hopes of territorial expansion and quest for peaceful, prosperous times, similar to the mythical past, when a king ruled from Jerusalem over the territories of Judah and Israel combined.

As we have seen, the historical reality of the kingdom of David and Solomon was quite different from the tale. It was part of a great demographic transformation that would lead to the emergence of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel—in a dramatically different historical sequence than the one the Bible describes. So far we have examined the biblical version of Israel’s formative history written in the seventh century BCE, and we have provided glimpses at the archaeological reality that underlies it. Now it is time to tell a new story. In the chapters that follow, we will present the main outlines of the rise, fall, and rebirth of a very different Israel.