

Solomon's Empire

Commentary for September 21, 2003 — Did It Exist?

On June 1st of this year I drove up from San Diego and attended a debate by two archeologists who disputed the nature of Solomon's empire. "The Archaeology and History of David and Solomon: The Great Debate" that featured Professors Israel Finkelstein (University of Tel Aviv) and Lawrence Stager (Harvard). The event was sponsored at UCLA by the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, the Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Culture, and the Center for Jewish Studies, and by ASOR.

Finkelstein believes that Solomon was a petty king ruling a small area while Stager tends more toward the biblical account. See an article about Finkelstein's ideas titled "[Grounds for Disbelief](#)," originally in an article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. Both men stated that the archeological evidence for the time period did not indicate great prosperity for that period — if one uses the accepted chronological scenario.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible is precise as to the nature of Solomon's empire. It was not an empire of direct rule over foreign nations as is done today. The situation was more like what the Germans did with Vichy France during World War II between 1940 and the summer of 1944. Vichy France ruled a portion of southern France. It was semi-independent. It had its own small army and foreign policy, including its own administration of overseas French colonies. The Germans were the overlords who left administration and governance to the French.

Solomon's rule over foreign rulers was even less autocratic, although he was still powerfully in charge. He made alliances with foreign nations for mutual benefit. However, these alliances had conditions, requirements and punishments. Israel had the superior position. From the biblical chronicler's point of view, Solomon "reigned over" the kings with whom he had alliances, covenants and treaties. The boundaries of Solomon's reign of power and influence are clearly indicated.

"And he reigned over all the kings from the river [the Euphrates] even unto the land of the Philistines, and to the border of Egypt."

• *2 Chronicles 9:26*

This likely means all the kingdoms and major cities that were *on* the Euphrates such as Mari, Sippar, and Babylon. Assyria would have been outside that sphere of influence. The book of Kings gives more information,

"Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry. And Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river [again, the Euphrates] unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt: they brought presents [tribute], and served Solomon all the days of his life."

• **1 Kings 4:20–21**

Solomon had peace brought about by his wise dominion of the empire created by David over 40 years and continued by Solomon for another 40 years.

“For he had dominion over all the region on this side the river, from Tiphseh [near the Euphrates] even to Azzah [near Gaza], over all the kings on this side the river: and he had peace on all sides round about him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.”

• **1 Kings 4:24–25**

The phrase “the river” (with definite article in Hebrew) is usually considered to be the River Euphrates. This was not the boundary of the land lived in by the people of Israel, but rather it was the boundary of Israel’s rule in the time of Solomon. This is clearly stated by the phrase **“they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life.”** The actions of presents and *service* toward Solomon indicate tribute and subservience by the non-Israelite peoples who lived within the specified areas. When the conditions of presents and service were met, the subject peoples were left to rule their own lands.

Israel’s economic and military power, its influence and Solomon’s wisdom made him famous not only around the world, but also famous with other rulers. Peaceful conditions were such that rulers felt safe to travel to meet him. Rulers who feel threatened by enemies or internal strife do not leave their kingdoms.

“And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.”

• **1 Kings 4:34**

In other words the peoples of that area were vassals of Solomon, the suzerain. This was the nature of international politics from ancient times through the medieval period until the rise of nation-states.

The Political System of Creation

The concept of suzerain and vassal still exists, but it is in the background in international politics. The dynamics of supremacy between and among powers always fluctuates.

Many governments today have a gloss of democracy while the suzerain-vassal system continues to operate in reality. For evidence of this, look at your own local politics. It is based on who has power, and who serves that power. In ancient and medieval times, those power relationships were recognized by rituals, ceremonies, compacts, contracts or covenants.

The suzerain-vassal system also exists in the heavenly realms. Heaven is not a democracy or a republic. The principalities and powers do not rule by acclamation or popularity, but by force and power. God has spiritual beings who carry out His commands, and are His servants and vassals who somehow rule principalities such as Grecia and Persia (Daniel 10:13–21). Some are subservient to God like the angels Gabriel and Michael, and some are rebellious like the King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:19).

Within this suzerain-vassal system, a vassal who is compliant and submissive will get along very well with the master, and even receive rewards for service and loyalty. If the suzerain overtaxes his subjects, whether by excessive military requirements or taxes or oppression, and suppresses the vassals, then there can be rebellion and war. Those opposed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Jews returning from Babylon claimed that very thing to the king of Persia,

“This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king; Your servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time.

Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from you to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations.

Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings.”

• **Ezra 4:13**

In ancient times it was rare for one country to occupy another country with troops for more than a short period. Large standing armies did not exist other than having troops as palace guards and a type of border police. A conquering country would leave administrative officials and some troops to “show the flag” and address the subject ruler and coordinate payments of the presents and services that the ruling king desired. When payments of presents and service ended that was an indication that a vassal had rebelled.

The wars of David made Israel the dominant power in the region. Bear in mind that David never lost a foreign war over some 40 years of rule. One imagines that word got around that Israel and David were not to be challenged, because the punishment was severe and no one ever won against him. It also became clear that the rule by David and later Solomon was a light burden, even profitable, so why fight the bridle? And, the rulers of foreign nations benefitted from the long period of general peace, prosperity and trade that God allowed when Israel had a king faithful to God. Especially under Solomon (as presented in 1 Kings 4:22–28) prosperity was the rule for foreign nations.

The people of Israel on the other hand, although they benefitted from the general peace and prosperity, were heavily taxed and had other burdens imposed upon them. They so strongly sought relief that they asked for respite from taxes after Solomon died (1 Kings 4:4–11).

Israel's Treaties, the Problems

God never had a problem with Israel making treaties with nations who were on an equal or subservient basis with Israel, so long as Israel was not corrupted by the foreign nations (which unfortunately was inevitable).

Only when Israel or later Judah voluntarily *submitted* to any master other than God Almighty as the suzerain King such as Egypt, Syria, Assyria or Babylon, only then did they get into serious trouble with God. When Israel or Judah submitted as vassals to the suzerain power of other nations (which the Bible considered “whoring” with those nations), God took great offense. He was to be Israel and Judah's sole suzerain King.

God allowed other nations to punish Israel and Judah, such as when He brought nations like Assyria or Babylon to punish Israel or Judah step by step, giving them the opportunity to repent with each step. At those times God allowed them to serve other nations. There were also times when God *told* Israel to submit to foreign powers for punishment, as He told Judah to submit to Nebuchednezzar. Then it was permissible for Judah to be in a vassal agreement with a superior foreign nation. Unfortunately the last kings of Judah even then rebelled against God and Nebuchednezzar; and the Babylonian king eliminated Judah as a sovereign government.

Becoming a vassal to another nation meant that the subject nation must acknowledge and allow worship of the gods of that superior nation over and above the God of Israel and Judah. Unfortunately, the people and rulers of Israel and Judah were often all too willing to do so, both as a political expedient and for gain.

God as King Over Israel

God was Israel's King as specifically stated by Samuel in his farewell address. Samuel objected when Israel desired another king than God.

“And when you saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, you said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the Lord your God was your king.”

• 1 Samuel 12:12

The Psalms often state that God is a King. See Psalms 10:16, 29:10, 47:2, 84:3, 89:18, 95:3, 98:6, primarily of Israel. Near the end of his life David said,

“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you reign over all; and in your hand is power and might; and in your hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all.”

• 1 Chronicles 29:11–12

It is not merely for poetic purposes that God is referred to as King of kings (1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 17:14 and 19:16).

The Old Covenant that was made between God and the children of Israel was a suzerain-vassal treaty between a King and a subject nation. The Old Covenant has close parallels to treaties between rulers of a superior nation and an inferior nation. This will be the subject for another time.

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com