

# United Kingdom - Solomon

*The height of a united Israel.*



By Isaac Humphrey

## Summary

*Solomon was the greatest monarch of a united Israel. During his reign, Israel rose to the height of its territorial and financial prosperity. He was renowned as a great builder and trader, but all this national prosperity came at a cost. It was during his reign that Israel experienced to a full extent Samuel's warning about the oppression of kings. It was during Solomon's reign that Israel began its spiritual decline. Solomon's reign was great and glorious, but also the beginning of the end.*

## Solomon's Early Years

Solomon's accession was successful, but there were a couple of dangerous skeletons of the old regime who were guilty of major crimes. Joab had a particularly stained record (as we have noted), and had also been on the wrong side on the succession to the throne - he was promptly and swiftly executed. Shimei also showed questionable loyalty to David and he was placed under confinement. Solomon's brother was still making dangerous maneuvers and was taken out of the way. This was a relatively bloodless accession (compared to many others in ancient history!), and only a few who were dangerous to the throne had been removed.

When Israel had wanted a king in the days of Samuel, one of the important factors behind this request was the need for military leadership. Saul had been primarily occupied with fighting Israel's numerous enemies. David had spent most of his life in the same occupation but also experienced periods of peace and rest. As he grew older, he more and more entrusted the command of the army to his generals while he himself often stayed home. Solomon inherited a stable kingdom, secure borders, and peace abroad. Solomon would never be a military leader - no great wars were fought in his reign. Solomon ushered in a new era for Israel: an era of peace, prosperity, and splendor.

Solomon's role as king was judicial and administrative, and in these tasks, he took a particular interest. He viewed his role as the governor of God's people. He viewed himself as a servant charged with leading Israel <sup>1</sup>. His heart was in the right place. His chief desire was for wisdom. Wisdom that would guide him as he carried out his task. This God gave to him, along with riches and long life.

## Solomon's Construction Campaign

One of Solomon's finest achievements was the construction of the Jerusalem temple. It was his gift to God and God's people.

This magnificent piece of Architecture was the Temple. It was built with stone, cedars from Lebanon, was worked artistically, and was covered in gold. It was magnificent. Its construction took 7 years, and it was destined to last for over 300 years.

It was his crowning act - it was his gift, his offering to God. It also represented his great wealth, his commercial empire, his great wisdom. The temple was also a symbol of Israel - united Israel. A single place to worship, a symbol of national identity. Gilded and glorious.

Solomon was a man of peace, and his energies and attentions were turned to building. He did not stop at the temple - he built his own house, fortified Jerusalem, and left his architecture over the length and breadth of Israel. <sup>2</sup>

## **Solomon's Wisdom**

From early life and throughout his reign, Solomon showed wisdom, sagacity, a desire for knowledge, and deep intellect. He was the wisest man of his day.

From his early reign, he had shown his wisdom as a judge and examiner; later in his reign, he showed his wisdom as a scientist, a student of nature; and throughout his reign, he was a keen student of people. Some of his sayings were recorded in Proverbs, others in Ecclesiastes (authorship?). These works show the mind of a deep thinker, a philosopher, a practical observer of human nature.

King Solomon did much to increase the fame of himself and Israel. As we will see, his commercial enterprises brought Israel in contact with the nations beyond their neighbors and to the nations on the edge of their known world.

The Queen of Sheba, from a country in the Arabian peninsula, heard of Solomon and made a journey to test his wisdom. It was a meeting of two rich sovereigns at the heads of prosperous commercial enterprises. It was a pageant of splendor, rich gifts, and royal wits. The Queen asked hard questions, and Solomon answered with wisdom and skill. The Queen was impressed with his wisdom and his magnificent court: a court that seemed to be greater than her own. There was a genius in David's family for a certain kind of cleverness that was often used for evil purposes (Absalom, Joab, and even David all show cunning and craftiness). In the case of Solomon, it manifested itself in deep wisdom. But Solomon's wisdom was not entirely hereditary. Wisdom and knowledge were a goal - an attainment that he saw as most desirable in a king, a leader. This is what he asked God for in his youth, and this, along with riches and a long reign was what he got. <sup>3</sup>

## **Solomon's Commercial Empire**

Solomon was not a military conqueror, but he did set about creating a large commercial empire - the fruits of which aided in his massive building campaigns. In the time of Saul, Israel had been a group of backward tribes that were not even able to sharpen their own iron tools and were probably out of the stream of trade that flowed along the sea-coast road next to Philistia. Even in the time of David, Israel was not a big player in near-eastern trade. Solomon changed this. He made alliances with Egypt, with Tyre (a

great commercial center). His alliance with Tyre and his friendship with its king (Hiram) was close and it provided him the materials to carry out his great building projects. Large scale building and war have one thing in common: they both require great levies of men. There were levies composed of free men as well as those composed of slaves - so great was the need for workmen. The freemen took shifts processing the lumber sent from Lebanon (Tyre); one month on and two months off. These levies were essential in Solomon's building of the Temple, his palaces; fortifications in Jerusalem, Hazor, Gezer, Meggido, and other works.

Solomon's trade alliance with Tyre also extended to trading voyage in search of Gold. He secured a great trade with Arabia and filled Jerusalem, with gold, silver, spices, gemstones, rare woods, ivory, and exotic animals. This trade raised the standard of living for Israel and brought an era of peace, prosperity, and magnificence. It was remembered as a golden age - it was the culmination of the United Monarchy - Israel's high point. Religious unity, national unity, peace abroad, plenty at home, magnificent architecture; could the Israelites of a few generations ago, living in the time of the judges and Saul have even dreamed of this?

Under all this grandeur, wealth, peace, and prosperity, there were hidden the seeds of discord and rebellion. There were a few smoldering fires that would break out in sudden fury in the next generation. Never again would Israel experience a time like the glory days of Solomon.

## **Solomon's Fall**

As his father David, Solomon's fall came at the height of his prosperity. Like David as well it was a moral and spiritual fall, not a material one. In Solomon's case, it was slow and gradual. Solomon's wealth and wisdom seems to have led to pride and drifting away from God.

Part of the grandeur of his court was his large harem of wives, which represented all his marriage alliances to the various nations he came into contact with.

These marriage alliances brought Solomon a harem of foreign women who, quite naturally, brought their religious customs with them. This reintroduced Israel to the gods of their neighbors (and probably a few they had not known about before). Solomon becomes responsible for subverting the Theocracy. He builds shrines for these foreign idols and paves the way for nation-wide spiritual apostasy in the next generations. He undoes the careful work of Samuel and David. He even undoes the work of his early reign. He had begun with the strong desire to serve God's people and function as God's governor in the Theocracy. He ends his reign functioning as a great oriental sovereign who makes his own decisions and is his own master.

## **Solomon's Later Years**

David had repented of the sins that led to his fall, but Solomon had not. God turned his hand of blessing from Solomon and allowed the seeds of discontent and rebellion to grow and sprout.

The first was the rebellion of Edom. Edom had been thoroughly subjected under David's

reign by the brutal Joab. A scion of Edom's royal house survived, and was harbored in Egypt. This fugitive had returned in the early part of Solomon's reign, but it took him a while to build up enough resources to pose a serious threat to Solomon. At this point, the Syrians also begin to recruit their strength.

The most serious threat was posed by an Ephraimite named Jeroboam. This tribe seems to be one of the leading tribes in Israel, and jealous of the others (examples in judges). Ephraim would become the dominant tribe in the north and eventually, the name became synonymous with Israel. Jeroboam was one of Solomon's overseers and in charge of Ephraim's labor. He had risen to prominence in the building around Jerusalem.

As Solomon's reign progressed and his building projects and forced labor continued, Israel became more and more discontent. Solomon became more tyrannical and oppressive in his later reign, and his burden became hateful to Israel. Underlying this discontent was old tribal strife and the division of Israel and Judah that had appeared in David's Hebron years, Absalom's rebellion, and Sheba's rebellion. Thus Jeroboam found himself at the head of a discontented and important tribe and rebelled against Solomon. He was not strong enough and the rebellion was broken; Jeroboam fled to Egypt.

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Jeroboam received prophetic encouragement either before his first rebellion or afterward. His first rebellion may not have succeeded, but Israel remembered him and seemed to have looked to him as a deliverer - their 'Moses' who would deliver them from bondage.

Israel behaved for the rest of Solomon's reign. His power was too strong, and he was the king that ushered in the golden age, so rebellions under his rule could not be very strong. By the time of his death, however, Solomon had all but lost his hold on the nation. The king who had once asked for wisdom to serve the people of the Lord had now become a hated old taskmaster. The new upcoming generation did not know about Solomon's early years, his wisdom, the 'good old days.'

Judah and Benjamin had been the royal tribes; Benjamin had fallen under the control of Judah and became integrated with them. Judah-Benjamin was looked on with jealousy by the rest of Israel and especially 'left out' Ephraim. Three times in David's reign there had been a split along tribal lines (though Benjamin was not always with Judah).

When Solomon died, the split which had been threatening had an opportunity to widen and rupture.

But before the drastic step of separation took place, Israel wanted to see how the new king, Solomon's son and successor Rehoboam, would handle the nation. Jeroboam came back from exile and became Israel's spokesman. The grievance: Solomon's royal burden; his massive work levies, and the grinding toll of national magnificence. The great question was - would it continue? Rehoboam was the last person one would want to hold a kingdom together (because of his lack of training and bad attitude); but could even a stronger, wiser man have kept Israel united?

## **Conclusion**

The period of the united monarchy was a great experiment - could the disunited semi-autonomous tribes of Israel be welded together into a solid nation. <sup>5</sup> They were united

by heritage and religion but divided by politics. The days of the Judges had given them autonomy - they valued their freedom and independence. They had been warned about the oppressive habits of a king by Samuel, but they had insisted on trying the experiment. It had begun with deliverance, grew and brought greatness and prosperity, but had ended with oppression and discontent.

It was also an experiment with Israel's constitution: how would a hereditary king fit into a Theocracy?

All three kings had had spiritual and moral failings. Saul was weak; he failed to lead the nation in accordance with God's will. David had been a 'man after God's heart' but this did not prevent him from committing failures of his own and ultimately plunging the nation into a civil war. Solomon had begun with an attitude in alignment with God's will, but this attitude changed over the course of his reign and ended with introducing spiritual apostasy.

Israel's first three kings had succeeded in their short term goals but failed in the long run. It was not entirely each of their faults, but each of their failings contributed to problems in the next generation. Tribal jealousies had reasserted themselves multiple times: a long line of strong and successful kings was necessary to hold Israel together and form it into a new nation. A line of strong men of faith was also required to keep Israel in their covenant with God and prevent them from falling for the alluring idols of their neighbors. Samuel had labored valiantly to restore Israel to the LORD. Saul, with all his other faults, did not lead Israel into idolatry. David's shortcomings did not include foreign idols either. But Solomon did. He is the man responsible for starting the chain that led to over three long centuries of a divided kingdom and spiritual apostasy.

## Footnotes

1. See 1 Kings 3:7-9
2. See ESV study bible on 1 Kings 9:15-19
3. Solomon's family all exhibited subtlety, cunning, scheming, planning, deep thinking, crafty, insightful, patient, calculating, cool, forethought, shrewd, and ingenious traits. Solomon's wisdom was and on top of this. Joab thought of elaborate schemes. During David's stays in Philistia he came up with imaginative tricks to keep him alive. David's murder of Uriah as well as Joab's murders were all shrewdly planned. Joab's trick to recall of Absalom, Jonadab and his evil advice to Amnon, Absalom and his patient planning, all show that David's family shared brains. Solomon shows some of this in one of his first cases in 1 Kings 3:16-28, but has wisdom from God to enhance this.
4. See Pulpit commentary on 1 Kings 11:40. It appears that Egypt's relations with Solomon were now strained. Note: Solomon's most notable foreign wife came from Egypt and so did two of his troubles!
5. Some parallels might be drawn with the 13 American colonies and their different characters and rivalries. It took a lot of work to unite them, and weld them together. Even with this, there was a north-south split for a brief period.

## References

Crossway ESV Study Bible (2008)

The Pulpit Commentary, Edited by Exell and Spence-Jones