

IN SEARCH OF SOLOMON AND HIS TEMPLE

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I am not able to address you as a scholar of Freemasonry. I am a humble biblical scholar, and what I want to describe to you are recent developments in biblical research concerning the figure of Solomon and the temple he is said to have built.

On the site of the temple hill in Jerusalem three Israelite-Jewish temples once stood: the first, known as Solomon's temple, destroyed in 586 by Nebuchadnezzar, a second one, perhaps rebuilt on the foundations of the first one, attributed to Zerubbabel in the late 6th century, about 70 years afterwards; and the third, Herod's temple, started in 20 BCE and still unfinished when the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD.

Over the centuries, the role of the temple in Jerusalem evolved. Originally a royal chapel, it ended up as a national monument and the centre of Jewry worldwide, assuming the functions of not only a temple but also the palace and the national bank. During the second temple period, the Jews, apart from a century, had no king and the high priest became the representative of the people; under Herod it became one of the wonders of the Roman world and Jerusalem itself became virtually a temple city, physically and economically dominated by one huge building and the activities that went on in it. It was a place of pilgrimage, and tourism.

I shall talk about the temple first, and specifically about the one called 'Solomon's': what can we really know about it? Then I will move on to Solomon himself: was he actually the builder of this temple? The first thing to say is that the only direct source of information about Solomon and his temple is from the Bible. There is no other source independent of the Bible that mentions either. Solomon is named nowhere by any other ancient contemporary, and remains of his temple cannot be recovered. We are presented only with a story, or rather a twice-told story, given once in the first book of Kings and then in the second book of Chronicles. The story might be history or legend or a combination of both. Can we discover its likely truth?

Well, we may never achieve a certain answer, but thanks to work done in the last 35 years, perhaps we can get close. In 1968 four Israeli archaeologists took advantage of Israel's occupation of the West Bank to conduct a series of surveys of the traditional homeland of ancient Israel, in the central highlands of Palestine. This survey has since been followed up by more detailed excavations of key sites, and as a result we now know something more about the origins of the ancient Israelites that we did before. This knowledge tells us in turn something about the kingdom of David and Solomon. But I want to leave this important development for later, and concentrate first on what we are told in the Bible. Now, dealing with the Bible is in one respect at least not like dealing with any other ancient text. Most people, even nowadays, have fairly strong attitudes towards it. On the one hand, newspaper and magazine articles, media programmes and a lot of popular books about the Bible tend to concentrate on it as a history book. Many religious believers also think that the Bible must be historical because it is scripture. In fact, this way of understanding the Bible is relatively recent. Until the 15th century most people did not even know the contents of the Bible except in vague terms, because it was available in Latin only and ordinary people were not encouraged to read it.

How was it read by those who could? The Old Testament stories, at least, were interpreted religiously, which meant often allegorically, or symbolically, or morally, as having hidden meanings that were revealed fully in the New Testament or lessons to teach humans. Only since the Reformation has the literal sense of the Bible's stories become more and more dominant, and the establishment of the State of Israel has underlined this tendency, as the Bible is presented as a history of the Jews, supported by archaeological monuments revealed all over Palestine. The Bible in Israel is not a book of religion, but of history; indeed, of politics.

Of course there are also people at the other extreme who regard the Old Testament as a treasury of legends, myths and even fairy stories. Sometimes such people see hidden divine secrets in apparently realistic stories, but many people simply see a fantastic world where God and his angels were frequent visitors, where society was full of supernatural disasters, wonder-working prophets, charismatic warriors and heroic (or villainous) monarchs.

A biblical scholar has to try and set aside these preconceptions as far as possible and ask more basic questions such as 'who wrote the books of the Old Testament, when and why did they do it?'. Since the introduction of more and more of social science into our discipline, we have been asking about the kind of society that the Bible came from. One very significant statistic, for instance, is that in ancient pre-industrial societies like Israel and Judah 95% of the population was poor and engaged in agriculture. Writing was confined to no more than 5% of the population, almost entirely urban, and comprising a distinct class. Ancient literature served an economic and political function, and the class of scribes was

always in the pay and at the service of temple or court, and wrote at the command of these institutions. Nearly all writing that was not strictly functional, that is, recording taxes, booty, writing reports and letters for administration, was propaganda. Into this category come all inscriptions, all monuments, and all records of royal achievements, liturgies, and histories. The composition of these various genres of writing followed fairly standard rules, as we now know from the wealth of writings from great libraries and archives of the ancient Middle East.

The Old Testament is no great exception to this description. It, too, is largely the product of scribes in the pay of king or temple, and it is also largely propaganda in the neutral sense of that word. A great deal of it is paralleled in the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Egypt. Two kinds of writings are distinctive, however: large collections of sayings of prophets; and long connected historical accounts. I shall not be saying anything more about the first of these. Historiography, however, is relevant. Outside the Old Testament we do not find it in the ancient world before the fifth century, and it seems to have originated in Greece.

When I say 'history', I do not mean an accurate record of facts. That sort of writing is only possible where there are reliable sources, whether written or oral, going back over generations. Even the great Herodotus could only repeat most of the time what he was told and try to assess how likely each story was. At best the ancient historian copied other historians, listened to whatever stories were being told, and/or made up what was needed. The result was a mixture of truth, half-truth and non-truth, which no reader could easily distinguish because there was no reliable knowledge of the past. Indeed, there was no interest in the past for its own sake. The past was a time where things began, when the origins and causes of the world happened. It had no measurable linear connection with the present time, and chronology, where reliably available, was confined to occasional lists of rulers, with more or less reliable years of reign. We shall see later one biblical chronology that is almost certainly fictitious.

The Old Testament explains how the Jewish people came about, justifies their occupation of the land, gives their way of life an origin in divine revelation, traces them back to a single ancestor and claims that their god created the universe and rules it. The main point of this story is not history in our sense, but more like myth in that it gives the essence of the present: who are we Jews, or Israelites, where do we come from, and how are we supposed to believe and live? The answers may not be historical, but they provided every reader or listener with a clear sense of identity.

So much for who wrote the biblical books. But who read them? Not the majority of the population who were illiterate. The Bible's stories are primarily interested in war, cities, kings and religious leaders. They are not really interested in ordinary farmers. Indeed, much of the Old Testament views agriculture with suspicion, as a source of pagan religious ideas! Perhaps rightly: from archaeological discoveries we know that little female statuettes were very popular, and we also know from a couple of amateurish inscriptions that the god of Israel once had a partner called Asherah. Bluntly, the religion of the Bible is not a religion that people actually believed at the time, but what their intellectuals thought they should believe. (It was precisely this difference that was used in the books of Kings to explain the exile of Israelites from their land). The majority of Israelites and Judeans lived in villages from which they probably moved only rarely. Were they much interested in the temple at Jerusalem? Probably not, at least not in the time of the kings. They had their local altars and perhaps their local deities, too. The vast majority neither saw nor cared for any such building.

Solomon's temple

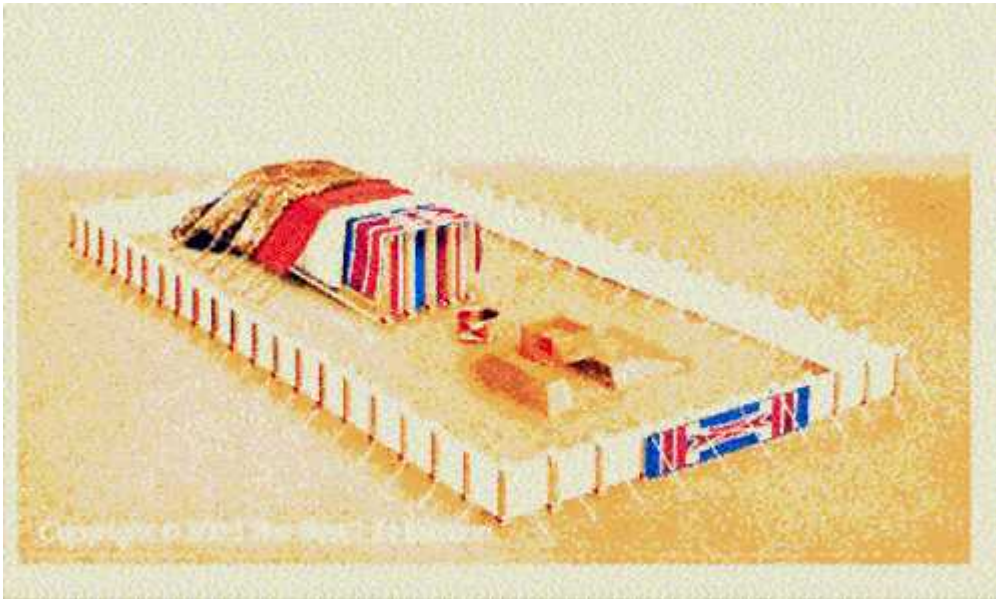
Jerusalem undoubtedly had a temple during the period of the kings of Judah, and perhaps more than one. All cities had temples, just as all houses probably had shrines or altars. And at least by the 8th century, the time of Hezekiah, Jerusalem was quite a large city, not only the capital of Judah but indeed, after the Assyrian king Sennacherib had finished with it in 701 BC, Jerusalem was about all that was left of Judah. Whether by then the temple was already known as Solomon's temple we have no idea. But there was certainly a temple in Jerusalem, one destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

We shall not find this temple archaeologically. Traces of the temple built under the kings of Judah are no longer accessible. This is not just because of the building of the Dome of the Rock by the caliph Abdulmalik in 692 AD, nor even because of Herod's massive new project centuries later, in the time of Jesus. Indeed, the second temple assigned to Zerubbabel may have been built on the foundations and using many of the stones from the first one.

Had we been considering Herod's temple, we would have had a much easier task, since we do possess two detailed and probably accurate descriptions of this temple, one by the first century AD historian Josephus, who saw it, and the other in the Talmud, which though written centuries later was probably based on contemporary accounts. But no such accounts exist for Solomon's. We have instead several descriptions of a temple that might be the First Temple, but equally might not. The primary account is in I Kings 6–7 (I have already mentioned the other version in 2 Chronicles 2–5, which is derived from it); but there is also a much more detailed one in Ezekiel 40–42. There is furthermore the Tabernacle built

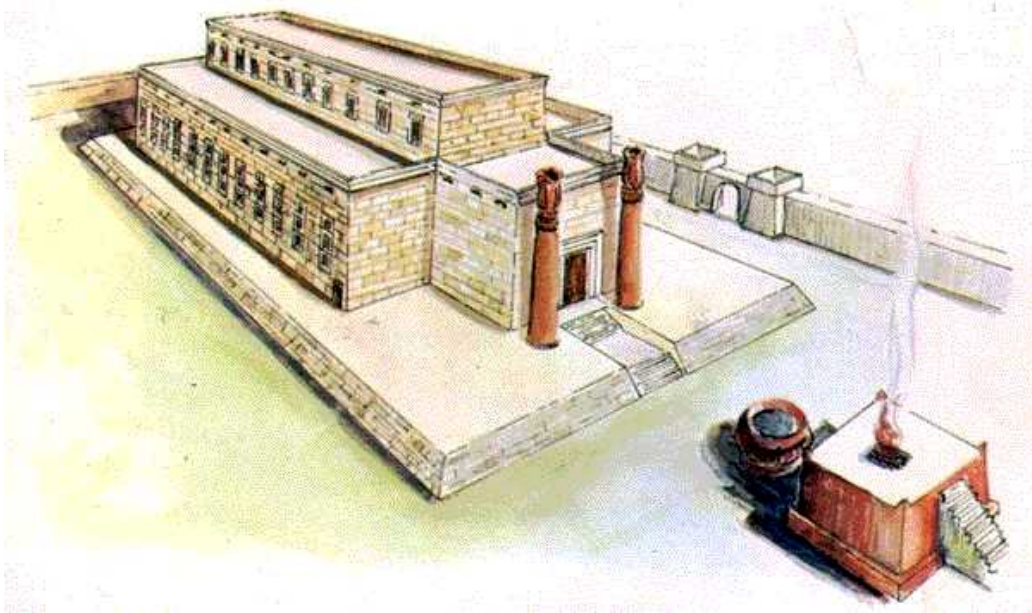
by Moses in Exodus 35–40, which many biblical scholars believe was intended to represent a blueprint for the temple. Now the description of Solomon's temple in 1 Kings is not very precise, and in any case it disagrees with Ezekiel's.

Now, in assessing these descriptions, we have to remember that the first ('Solomon's') temple of Jerusalem was almost certainly rebuilt from time to time. Temple building and rebuilding was something that kings often did to demonstrate their piety, and many Judean kings are credited with this. The three biblical accounts of the temple might therefore reflect different stages in the evolution of the same structure, which we could track—if we knew when these various descriptions were in fact written! The other variable is idealism. Ezekiel's temple might reflect the temple as it was when Nebuchadnezzar dismantled it. But it was seen in a vision and thus depicts a temple not actually in existence. Did this 'new' visionary temple have to look like the one recently destroyed? Despite these qualifications, we can usefully compare the three for any common features. Let's start with the tabernacle.



The measurements given in the Bible are in cubits. Bearing in mind that we don't exactly agree on how long a biblical cubit was, I am calculating, with most scholars, about 18-19 inches, or 45 cm. The Tabernacle was divided into a court and the Tabernacle itself, the 'house of God'. In this 'house of God' there was a small structure called the Sanctuary. The fence of the rectangular court of the Tabernacle measured 100 cubits (45m) in length, and its width was 50 cubits or 22.5 m. It was built with 60 pillars and hangings of fine white linen.

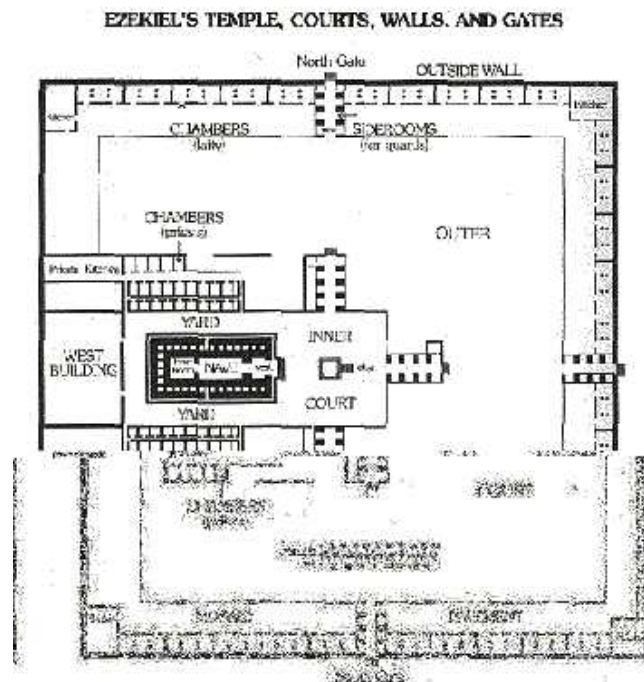
At the east side of the court of the Tabernacle was its gate. Between this gate and the Tabernacle was the altar of burnt offering and the laver. The Tabernacle itself was built of 48 boards and 9 pillars and divided into the Holy place and the Most Holy place, where the ark of the covenant/testimony was. Now, we find the same three-part structure in 1 Kings: the court, the porch/vestibule and the sanctuary, which is itself divided into temple and holy of holies. It follows, like the Tabernacle, a 'longroom' design (with the door on the short wall). Unfortunately, the description in 1 Kings 6–8 is not very precise in all details. Here is a reconstruction, not one that every scholar would agree with in detail, but quite faithful in overall design.



The measurements for the building, which follows the same pattern as the Tabernacle, are 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide and 30 high, i.e. 27m x 9m x 13.5m, though we are not told if the length includes the porch. The most holy place was 20 x 20 x 20 cubits, a 9m cube. There is also a lower structure running round the outside, containing small chambers, as you can see in the picture, with a staircase to the south.

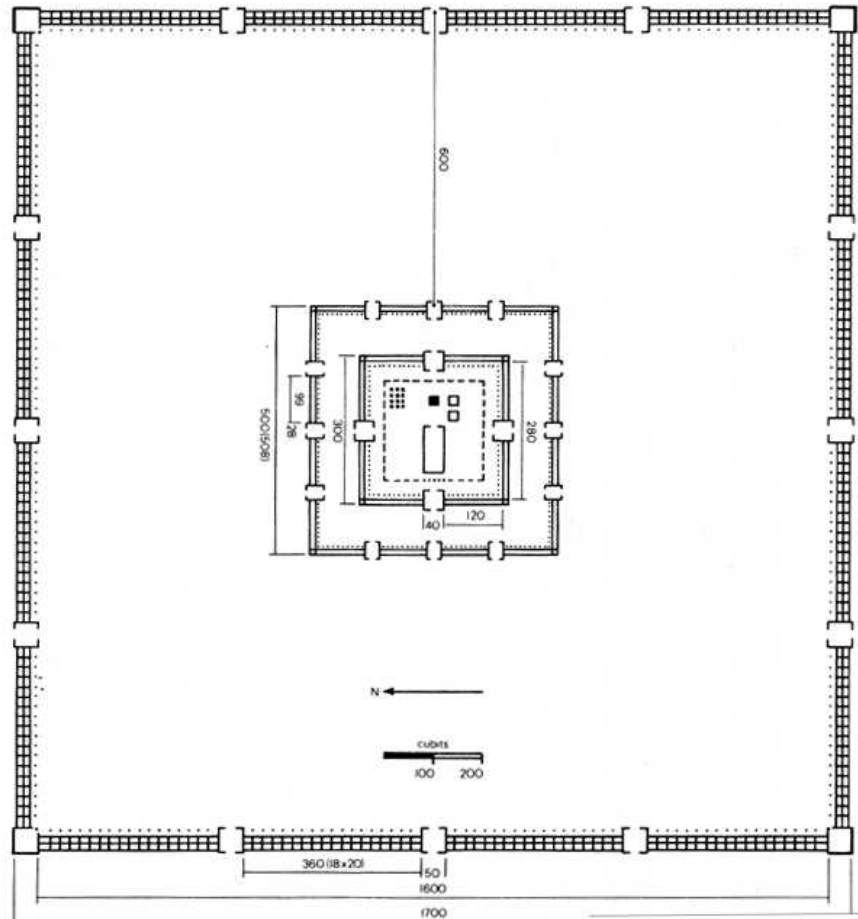
The outer courtyard contained a large tank or pool, called a 'sea', ten 'lavens' or stands, and two huge pillars, Jachin and Boaz. The pillars are 18 cubits 8 metres high, the 'sea' 4.5 metres in diameter, while each of 10 lavens was 1.8m long and 1.3m high 2metres square and 3.7 metres high, with the basin on each of the stands having a capacity of almost 1000 litres. This is more elaborate than the simply altar and laver in the Tabernacle. We don't have any mention of the courtyard or the gates.

Now for Ezekiel's temple. No reconstruction this time, but a plan:



Just to make things more difficult, this temple is measured in a 'long cubit', which is defined as 'a cubit and a handbreadth, perhaps 55cm. The description begins with a wall 3m x3m around an outer courtyard. And you can see immediately that this temple is square, not rectangular, and has three gates

into the court and two courtyards. The building itself still has three sections: the porch or vestibule, the holy place and the holy of holies. But it measures, externally, 100 x 50 (long) cubits, a lot bigger than the temple of 1 Kings, and in keeping with Ezekiel's liking for the numbers 25, 50 and 100. In connection with Ezekiel's temple, I'd like also to mention the temple described in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (called the Temple Scroll) which is also square but much bigger. Here is a diagram, where you will see a concentric structure of a huge size.



The outer court measures 1600 cubits across, or 720m. if the shorter cubit is being used. There are three courts in all. The central part, the temple itself, is nevertheless quite like the others in shape. I could also show you Herod's temple, which has huge courtyards too, but is not concentric. It combined elements of all the other designs. But we have to move on.

Now, Herod's temple was real, the one from the dead sea Scrolls idealized. What of the rest? Do we have any clues? Ezekiel's cannot be earlier than the 6th century. The tabernacle description is impossible to date, as is the description in 1 Kings. If 1 Kings and Ezekiel are both historically reliable, then the Temple was considerably enlarged between the 10th and 6th centuries. However, 2 Kings 25 suggests that the Babylonians found the temple exactly as Solomon had built it, including the 'sea' and the huge lavers, and therefore not as Ezekiel described it.

Nevertheless, we can see that the basic structure conforms to a number of ancient parallels. It surely followed existing models both in shape and function, and in fact there is no great mystery to it, except that we cannot be sure that Solomon actually built it. And the figure(s) of Hiram!

Solomon Hiram (and Hiram)

Biblical scholars believe that the author of the books of Chronicles copied the books of Kings, because the wording is in most parts identical. But he added and embellished to suit his presentation, as for example, making David the real architect of the temple and its worship. Perhaps the Chronicler, as we call him, had some other information, perhaps not. Either way he causes us trouble by referring to the king known in Kings as Hiram by the name Hiram. And in fact if you look at 1 Kings 5:10 and 18, you will find the name Hiram—the version used by the Jewish historian Josephus in the first century AD. Josephus is quite important here, because he claims to have access to ancient records from Tyre,

including information about king Hiram. But unfortunately although he is the only other source of information about Hiram we can't really be sure how reliable Josephus or his sources are on this. Josephus is sometimes reliable and sometimes not; but always prone to exaggeration. Now, among other things, Josephus says that Hiram reigned for 34 years. But in 2 Samuel 5:11 Hiram is said to have supplied material for David's palace in Jerusalem when David moved his capital there. But on the biblical chronology, Hiram must have reigned 54 years if he also assisted Solomon in building the temple. There are other contradictions, too, between Kings and Chronicles. According to 1 Kings Hiram made the first approach and then fulfilled Solomon's request for materials. According to 1 Chronicles, it was Solomon who initiated the approach. Then there is the question of payment. According to 1 Kings 5 Solomon proposes a joint effort between Sidonian and Judean workers, for which he will pay all the wages. Hiram agrees, in return for 'food for my household', which Solomon sent every year. According to 2 Chronicles 2, Solomon sent food only for Hiram's workers. And incidentally, while in Kings Solomon conscripts Israelites, in Chronicles he only conscripts aliens! This example shows that one ancient Jewish writer is quite happy to contradict another one, whether or not he has any knowledge to justify this. The Chronicler, of course, also has David as the real architect of the temple, including its personnel and its worship.

But let's get back to Hiram. In 1 Kings 7:1 we meet a second Hiram, also from Tyre, but 'the son of a widow of the tribe of Naphtali and a Tyrian father. He 'came to Solomon and did all his work'—in fact, all the bronze work, not the masonry, which was already done. This figure, of course, is the Hiram Abif of Freemasonry. However, in Chronicles, this figure comes from a different tribe, Dan. The name, Abif, as you probably know, means 'his father' in Hebrew. In 2 Chron 2:13 Hiram says to Solomon 'I have sent Hiram abi a skilled artisan, endowed with understanding'. This would normally be translated 'Hiram my father' by anyone knowing Hebrew. But we find in 2 Chron 4:16 'all these Hiram abiv made for Solomon', which should mean 'Hiram his father'. But Solomon's father was David! So in neither place does the text make sense. It is no real solution to suggest we have here a proper name (as the New Revised Standard Version does) because in one place it is Abi and in the other Abiv! In cases like this we usually resort to saying that the text has not been copied correctly at some point. But I am not satisfied that we have the answer.

I will point out simply that to the biblical scholar, the existence of two Hiram/Hurams, both connected with Tyre, one of whom has two tribal affiliations and the other a surprisingly long reign makes it look as if we have in this account the result of some process of legendary storytelling, though of course such a conclusion does not tell us exactly what is true and what is not.

Solomon and his kingdom

I now come back to the main question and to the most important aspect of my account. Did Solomon build a temple in Jerusalem?

Until the middle of the last century – let us say more precisely in the 1970s, just when, as a matter of fact, I first came to Sheffield, a standard History of Ancient Israel such as that of the American John Bright, could begin with Abraham, survey a patriarchal age dated somewhere between 1900 and 1500 BC, try and follow the route of the Exodus from Egypt, discover where the real Mt Sinai might have been, and note how the Israelites, if not so completely as the book of Joshua describes it, nevertheless overcame the Canaanites and took over the land. After some years of being ruled by judges, the twelve tribes of Israel chose a king, Saul, who was succeeded by David. David chose Jerusalem as his capital and ruled his empire from there.

But in the 1970s, as I indicated earlier, two important things happened. For some years, scholars in Germany had been suggesting that the stories of Genesis to Joshua were traditions of the Israelites but not necessarily accurate history. In the United States, much of this was challenged on the grounds that archaeology showed otherwise. But two scholars—both from North America—independently showed that the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had no counterpart in the history of Palestine or the Middle East: there lives did not clearly reflect any precise period, but mixed up allusions from many different times, including much later (such as camels, Philistines, even the name 'Ur of the Chaldees'). Archaeology did not testify to their existence at all.

A similar dispute between German and American scholars had been going on about the military conquest of Canaan by Joshua. Both sides appealed to archaeology. A decisive step in our understanding of the origins of Israel came after the 1967 war between Israel and its neighbours: Israeli archaeologists conducted a survey of ancient settlements in the West Bank, ancient Israel's homeland, and as a result were able to conclude that they had identified the beginnings of Israel in a small network of villages beginning in the 12th century BC in the northern part of the highlands – around modern Nablus and Ramallah. The culture of the inhabitants was indigenous, and settlement in the area around Jerusalem began later and developed more slowly. In short, Israel came from Palestine or from very close by, and in fact probably represented an example of a cyclic process in which, as the economy

waxed and waned, the ability of the cities and the countryside in the lowlands and the plains of Palestine to sustain its population fluctuated and more marginal land had to be exploited.

The same survey, however, showed that the northern highlands were settled earlier than the southern ones. The occupation of Judah came about more gradually. At the time when David is supposed to have ruled over his great empire, there were only a few villages in Judah. And what of Jerusalem? Well, although there are remains of the city in the time before David, and also for the time after him, there is nothing of any significance from his time. If there was a settlement there, it was a tiny village. The stories of the patriarchs, of Abraham's family trekking from Ur via Harran to Hebron are, then, apparently not history; the Exodus and wandering in the desert is also no part of the experience of all or most ancient Israelites. The exploits of Joshua are fiction. All this had actually been anticipated by the German tradition on the basis of analysis of the Bible itself and of archaeological evidence. Now it is orthodoxy, except among certain evangelical scholars who on defend the historicity of the bible on grounds of principle.

But what matters here are the further implications of the new orthodoxy for Solomon. If Israel began as a network of highland villages in the 12th century, and not as a ready-made nation with a long history, when did they occupy the cities of Palestine and become a territorial state? And when did the more recent farming settlements in Judah form their own kingdom? When did Jerusalem become a city that might be the capital of a kingdom? These questions are forcing archaeologists to write new histories, quite different from the biblical story. As yet only one book-length publication has emerged, but it is from the eminent Tel Aviv archaeologist Israel Finkelstein. In his history the emergence of Israel in Palestine followed the collapse of the economic and political system in the 13th century, after Egyptian control of Palestine ended. This collapse led to war between these cities over a century or two, resulting in the destructions that had once been attributed to Joshua. It was at this time of economic crisis that the relatively less fertile highlands became attractive, because they could sustain a population that the rest of the country now could not. Over time, through collaboration and intermarriage, these villages formed a new society which perhaps took the name 'Israel', either alone or in combination with other groups. Before Israel formed itself into a political state, however, the old Canaanite cities began to revive. Some of the building, such as at Megiddo, Gezer and Hazor, once attributed to Solomon, is due to this revival. But then another blow struck: from around 950 BC an Egyptian king Sheshonq (mentioned in the Bible as Shishak) campaigned against the major cities of Palestine and destroyed many of them. The power vacuum thus left enabled the now strong and extensive rural society of the highlands, left alone by Sheshonq, to form a territorial state in the northern part of Palestine. According to Israel Finkelstein, the first king was Omir. In the Bible he comes after several earlier kings. The kingdom of Judah emerged a century or so later, though it was never fully independent of its northern neighbour.

Now, this reconstruction leaves no room for David or Solomon, no room for what we call the 'United Monarchy', the time when Israel and Judah were ruled by a single king: David, Solomon and Rehoboam. No place for Jerusalem as capital city. In short, no Solomon, no Solomon's temple. There are, and no doubt will continue to be, protests against this reconstruction. But it is hard to find either the David or Solomon of the Bible in the archaeological remains. It is perhaps significant that by comparison with the apparently exact figures and formulas on the reigns of later kings, for David and Solomon we do not. But there is some interesting chronology nonetheless. According to 1 Kings 6:1 the first temple in Jerusalem was built 480 years after the Exodus. The biblical chronology, if we add up the reigns of the following kings, also gives us 430 years for the kingdom of Judah until the destruction of that temple in 586 BC. If we allow 50 years (a jubilee) for the exile, we get 480. But we can redefine those dates. The Exodus was also the year of the building of the tabernacle, and the end of the exile coincides with the decree of Cyrus (whether this is historical or not does not matter) to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. So epochs of 480 years separate critical episodes in the life of the temple. Actually, we can go a little further if we want and construct a 4000 year period from creation until the restoration of the temple cult by Judas Maccabeus in 163 BCE. In this we get 430 years for both the stay in Egypt and the monarchy from the temple onwards, and the exodus occurs 2666 years after creation, which is two-thirds of 4000. But perhaps this takes us too far afield. From this, however, we may learn two things: one that Old Testament chronology is at least in parts artificial; the other that the temple was of central importance to the chronology of Jewish history.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that for those who hold Solomon's temple dear there is good news and bad news. The good news is that there was a temple, and that we can form a pretty good idea of its general plan and function. The bad news is that Solomon probably did not build it because he probably did not even exist, nor David—at least not as grand royal figures ruling a large kingdom. Perhaps local sheikhs, with an altar or small hut for their worship?

Yet we can all expect that these conclusion, however well based they are on the evidence, will continue to be challenged, especially in Israel and America, even though it is from Israel that the archaeology

comes. There is a great rivalry between Tel Aviv, the former capital and largest city of the State of Israel, and Jerusalem, now capital and also the largest city. Israel Finkelstein comes from Tel Aviv, and would not mind removing David and Solomon from history. In Jerusalem they think otherwise. The rest of us will continue to argue. My own view is that if we forget about the historical circumstances of the first Jerusalem temple (or rather, the first in the Iron age), and focus instead on the remarkable symbolism that developed around it, we may better understand what it is that we are really being told. But the symbolism of the temple is another fascinating and controversial topic which I am happy to avoid on this occasion!