

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

I Kings 10: 1-13 & 11: 1-10
Dean Feldmeyer 8/7/11

In the 1984-85 the country of Sudan was hit with a drought and famine which threatened the lives of tens of thousands of people. Late in 1984 the American Central Intelligence Agency joined resources with Israel Defense Forces, the United States Embassy in Khartoum, Sudanese state security forces and a group of mercenaries hired by the CIA, to airlift one particular group of refugees out of Sudan directly to Israel.

The effort was code named "Operation Moses" and was successful in safely bringing about 4,000 refugees to Israel before it was discovered and pressure from Arab nations forced Sudan to shut down the airlift. It was revived by the CIA a year later as Operation Joshua and a thousand more refugees were airlifted out before being shut down by the dictator of Sudan, Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The sudden disruption of these two airlifts meant that hundreds of families were separated, husbands from wives, and even children from parents. So, in 1991, when Mariam's stranglehold on the Sudanese government was weakened by Eritrean and Tigrean rebels, the Israeli defense force took advantage and launched one more effort.

This third and final effort airlifted almost twice as many people as the two other operations combined, a total of about 14,000 souls. It set a world record for single-flight passenger load on May 24, 1991, when 1,122 passengers boarded an El Al 747 and were flown successfully from Khartoum to Tel Aviv. Planners had expected to fill the plane with the usual 760 passengers but the refugees were so light they were able to increase the load by nearly 50 percent. Two babies were born on the flight.

I tell you this story for two reasons:

First, because the third airlift was called, curiously, Operation Solomon.

Second, because of the strange nature of the refugees who were airlifted to Israel. These refugees were known as Beta Israel: black, Ethiopian Jews, called Falasha in Ethiopia, a sect of Judaism that most of the world had never heard of until word of these airlifts was picked up by the news media. They had, apparently, fled to Sudan in the 1970's to escape Ethiopia's famine only to be caught up in the Sudanese/Ethiopian famine of the 1980's.

But where did they come from? How did there come to be a sect of black African Jews in north Africa?

The short answer is that no one knows. But there are lots of theories and legends that have been told to explain the phenomenon.

One theory holds that, shortly after the Exodus, a group of the tribe of Dan broke away and migrated south until they reached the then fertile lands of northern Ethiopia where they settled and were still found in about 100 small villages in what was called the lake region of the country up until the famine of the 1970's.

Another says that after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BCE, there was a mass migration of Israelites who fled the Babylonian Captivity to Egypt along with the prophet, Jeremiah. They lived there in peace for a long time until Cleopatra became queen. When Cleopatra went to war against Augustus Caesar they backed Cleopatra and were forced to flee when Augustus won the war. Some fled to Ethiopia where they settled in the Lake Region.

A third theory derives from a 9th Century book that is purported to be the writings of one Eldad the Danite, a dark skinned Israelite who fled the civil war that occurred immediately after Solomon's death and led a group of other Danites to Egypt where they lived for a while before migrating east and south to the area of Kush (Sudan) and Sheba (Ethiopia).

There is one other etymological myth concerning Beta Israel that I bring up, this morning, not because it is true or even likely, but because it concerns our scripture lesson if only in a remote way.

Most of the research that has been done on the history of Beta Israel and even the DNA tests that have been run on the members of Ethiopian Jewry – almost all of whom (some 210,000) now live in Israel – shows that the Ethiopians came to Judaism not by inheritance but by the old fashioned method known as conversion. And this conversion came through a queen of theirs who once visited Solomon, the king of Israel, on a trade and political mission to test his wisdom, his power and his ability to lead.

So impressed was she with his wisdom, power, and wealth – or so goes the story – that she brought his religion back to her country and commended it to her people, thus giving birth to Ethiopian Judaism.

Among Beta Israel she is known by the name Makeda (also Maqueda). In Islamic and Arabian tradition she is called Balkis (also Balqis). The Roman Jewish historian, Josephus, called her Nicaule.

To Solomon and, thus, in Jewish and Christian tradition, she is simply, "The Queen of Sheba" and her story is told in thirteen verses in the 10th chapter of I Kings and repeated nearly word for word in 9th chapter of 2 Chronicles. On the surface, it sounds like a simple story, but there lurks within it some ominous notes that sound a subtle warning that all is not as grand and good as it seems in Solomon's grand and glorious empire.

A VISIT FROM THE QUEEN

Scholars, today, place the country of Sheba in the area of what is, today, Yemen and Ethiopia, roughly 1500 miles from Israel. Now, according to the San Diego Zoo an adult camel carrying a 200 pound load can travel about 25-30 miles per day.

That would mean that a trip from Ethiopia to Israel in 1050 BCE took roughly two months if the travelers moved at top speed every single day. Some scholars suggest that there were some water routes that might have shortened or at least hastened the trip somewhat but six weeks to two months would have been about the average travel time especially if you were traveling with a retinue.

The Queen of Sheba was, in fact, traveling with a retinue so we can estimate that her trip took something like ten weeks. That's a long trip.

She undertook the journey because word of Solomon, his wisdom, his power, his wealth, had trickled down to Ethiopia and she wanted to put to him some hard questions. We used to interpret this to mean riddles, but most scholars, today, believe this referred more to questions of diplomacy, trade, and foreign policy. This would be borne out by the fact that she was, after all, a queen – either a queen regent (ruling queen) or a queen consort (one of the lesser queens in the king's harem who was both pretty and smart enough to undertake diplomatic missions on the king's behalf.) It is also quite possible that Solomon's reputation as a ladies' man had also made its way to Ethiopia.

So she arrives in Jerusalem with much pomp and ceremony, making a big show of all the riches she has bought. I have edited some of the list out of our reading, today, because it goes on and on but it includes not only the stuff that she brought -- gold and spice and precious stones – but, apparently, she had contracted with some other countries to send some stuff, too. Hiram, king of Phoenicia, we are told, brought by ship some rare wood that was later used in the foundation of the temple and some larger items that were too big to carry overland.

Solomon gives her an audience and she lays out for him her questions which could have been riddles or could have been concerns. He answers all of her questions to her satisfaction and to thank him she gives him some pretty impressive gifts, not the least of which is flattery.

“How lucky are your people to have you as a king. And how lucky are your wives to have you as a husband. And even your slaves are lucky because they get to hear your wisdom day in and day out. Why, you're richer and more powerful than I ever imagined, indeed, twice as rich and twice as powerful as they think you are back in Sheba and I will be glad to set them straight when I get back.” On and on she goes.

Then, lest she think that he is someone dependent upon the gifts and tributes that royals from other countries bring to him, Solomon gives her a bunch of stuff to take home. Not only is he wise and rich and powerful, he is also generous – or so he wants his reputation to be.

Sheba gathers up her retinue and her gifts and off she goes, never to be heard from again unless you consult the mythology of Ethiopia and Arabia where she pops up from time to time.

The authors of I Kings then proceed to spend about fifteen verses (more than the entire story of the Queen of Sheba) to tell us just how rich and powerful Solomon was. It is a continuation of a list that was begun earlier in the text and expanded somewhat from time to time up to now, and it's really quite impressive, for a while. Then, as the list goes on and on we realize that it has reached a point where it is no longer impressive. It is now excessive.

Everything looks so good from the outside, but from inside, we can begin to see cracks forming in the foundation of Solomon's empire.

THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS

Specifically, there are four cracks that will, eventually widen into fractures that will divide and, finally, destroy the empire. The authors of First Kings are wonderfully skilled writers and so they are very subtle about how they tell us of these weaknesses. But they do tell us.

We modern, twenty first century, western readers usually miss these kinds of subtle points because subtlety is not a prized asset in our culture. But the Jews for whom this was written in about 850 BCE were conversant in a form of writing and study called Midrash, wherein the text is read aloud and then the listeners discuss it and how it relates to other writings. They pick up threads of meaning and follow those threads all the way back to their source to discover the author's hidden message.

I know, as modern Americans we tend to think, “Oh, hidden message, indeed. The thing is what it is and nothing more.” And that may be true of most things written today. But watch how beautifully this worked for the ancient grandparents of our faith.

As the writers tell of Solomon's wealth and power and the breadth of his accomplishments we find four things that are tucked neatly into the list but which stand out just enough to draw a little attention to themselves. They are these:

1. We are told that Solomon's wealth included gold that equaled about three tons per year, so much that all of the drinking goblets in the palace were made of gold and the shields of his two hundred personal bodyguards were made of gold. And we are told that his stable housed the finest horses in the world, which were purchased in Egypt
2. We are told that the golden throne upon which he sat bore a calf's head at the top, above the king's head.¹

¹ The NRSV and most modern translations of the Bible render this as a “rounded top.” The oldest manuscripts, however, call it a “calf's head.” Most modern scholars believe that the description was softened in Solomon's favor by later scribes and translators.

3. We are told that he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and that he loved them all and one was the daughter of Pharaoh, for whom Solomon built a private palace of her own.
4. We are told that of the 80,000 men who were used to build the temple and the palace, not one was a freeborn Israelite; all were slaves taken in war from the surrounding countries.

Do you have all that? Tons of gold, horses from Egypt, foreign wives and concubines, the head of a calf on the throne and slaves to build his palace. Now, how are we to interpret this list? Are they simply what they seem, a list of possessions of an extravagantly wealthy king? Or is there something more here?

Because we are students of the Bible we hear something in this list that sounds familiar and sounds a warning note in our minds. What was it? Ah, here we go. It's in Deuteronomy, chapter 17, the second book of laws where it is describing the proper and appropriate behavior of a king. This is what it says:

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me',¹⁵ you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community.¹⁶ Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You must never return that way again.'¹⁷ And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. (Deuteronomy 17: 14-17)

Solomon, in his bid to become the most successful, powerful, and wealthiest king in the known world, has violated the law which God gave to Moses. He has violated both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law.

He has sent his people back to Egypt to buy horses in direct violation of God's law. He has accumulated many wives and much gold and silver, in direct violation of God's law. He has not just sent his people back to Egypt he has, himself, become like the Egyptians. He is the Hebrew Pharaoh, enslaving foreign people in order to build monuments to his own grandeur and setting slave masters, overseers in positions of authority to keep them in line.

He has married foreign women, in direct violation of God's law, and they have, as predicted, turned his head away from the God of Israel. How do we know this? Look above his head at the top of his throne. Remember? The head of a calf. Spend a few minutes in research and we discover that the bull was the most popular depiction of the pagan gods of the Ancient Near East. In particular, the Egyptian god Apis was always depicted as a bull and the king was considered to be the Son of Apis, his symbol a male calf.

Solomon, it would seem, in order to appease one of his wives, the daughter of Pharaoh, has made a bow to Apis, one of the gods of the Egyptian pantheon.

1. The accumulation of much wealth and many wives.
2. The acknowledgement and/or worship of false gods.
3. The marriage to foreign wives.
4. The return of his people to Egypt, in fact, to buy horses, and in spirit, to enslave other nations.

Cracks aren't necessarily dangerous in and of themselves. It's just that something always gets in the crack and manages to expand it. Water leaks in, freezes and expands. Seeds fall in and grow into trees which break up the pavement. Grit and dirt accumulate and slowly work like sand paper to erode the mortar.

In Solomon's cases it was not water or seeds or grit or dirt.

It was men. **Three men** in particular managed to work their way into the cracks, the weaknesses in Solomon's empire and undermine its foundation.

One was named Hadad the Edomite. The Edomites had been utterly destroyed by David's army and David had sent his general, Joab, to go up to Edom and bury the dead from the battle. Joab took it upon himself to stay awhile and kill every male Edomite to make sure there would be no one to exact revenge at some later time.

But he missed one. The youngest son of the king, a boy named Hadad, who escaped with some of the palace servants, fled to Egypt and received safe sanctuary from Pharaoh. And now, in Solomon's old age, Hadad the Edomite was ready to take his revenge and began making sorties into Israel from the south.

The second was a Syrian man named Rezen whose rise to power had gone much as David's had, rebelling against his king, leading a band of marauders, eventually seizing the throne and making Damascus his capitol city. We are told that he hated Israel and waged a guerilla war from the north.

The third man was, perhaps, the cruelest cut of all. He was a Hebrew, and Israelite of the tribe of Ephraim, one of the overseers of slaves, a man so capable that he was put in charge of all of the slaves and all of the king's construction in northern Israel. God sent a prophet to him who told him that he, not Solomon's eldest son, would reign over ten twelfths of the Israel after Solomon's death.

When word of this reached Solomon, he sent soldiers out to find the man and kill him but he fled to Egypt until after Solomon died. His name was Jeroboam and, immediately after the king's death, he and the king's son, Rehoboam would clash in a terrible civil war.

The 100 year era known as The United Kingdom, was over. The age of the prophets and kings was beginning.

AMEN