

The Builder

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The first historical record of the subject of today's paper occurred when he was a young boy of twelve . There are many stories of people meeting genies and spirits who promise to grant them a wish. When this boy received such a chance, he asked to better understand people . Because his wish was so modest, he was granted almost limitless wealth, power and fame as well. During the remaining 40 years of his life,(he died at 52), he wrote 3000 stories and 1005 poems. His topics included trees and nature as well as human interests such as love and relationships. People came from all over the world to hear his ideas and to witness his accomplishments. He succeeded his father as ruler of his country and accomplished what his father could not. His fame and power surpassed that of his father and he ruled over a vast area of the ancient world from the Nile River in the south to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. During his reign, his country had an unequalled period of peace. Yet today, that unfortunate land is rocked by turmoil, suffering, war, terrorism and sudden death. When he died, his kingdom split apart and much of his accomplishments were destroyed. His greatest achievement was destroyed so that nothing was left for future generations to marvel at and behold. Have you figured out to whom I am referring yet?

The time period is the tenth century B.C. The ruler's name translates as, "peaceful." God promised that Israel would have a time of peace during his reign. This condition existed mainly because Assyria was involved in a series of disputes with the Arameans. The Assyrians also were at war with the Babylonians and prevented the Chaldeans from invading. To the south, Egypt was in a state of declining power and even sought to increase their security by arranging a marriage between the Pharaoh's daughter and our mystery ruler. Such a union was very unusual and serves to emphasize the increasing power and influence of Israel. During this period, many profitable commercial alliances were formed. A major treaty with Tyre resulted in a great supply of skilled craftsmen.

This progressive ruler utilized the skills of his neighbours. He exploited foreign brains and foreign skills. In Ezion-Geber he founded an important enterprise for overseas trade. He utilized the Phoenicians' experience at sea to furnish his dockyards and provide sailors for his navy who returned from Africa and Arabia with cargoes of gold, ivory, spices, rare woods, and precious stones.

He also capitalized on Israel's strategic location and established trading ties by sending caravans to Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt.

He fortified the great cities of Israel, Hazor (which was rediscovered in the 1950's), Meggido and Gezer. He amassed an army of 1400 chariots and 12 000 horsemen which never had to fight a major war. All of these cities were found to have similar structures with strong walls and fortified gates. Meggido was discovered in 1993 and amazed the archeologists with its large palaces and smooth-faced ashlar masonry and decorative stonework. These construction

projects enabled him to amass a huge labour force of 30 000 men who cut trees for lumber in Lebanon and another 150 000 who cut stones from the quarries in the country. These conscripted labourers formed the body of workers which he subsequently used in the major project for which we remember him today, the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem.

For seven years this huge labor force of over twenty thousand artisans toiled to construct Solomon's Temple. When it was finally completed, all of Israel came to see the edifice which had been built to house the Ark of the Covenant. The autumn sun glistened off the polished limestone walls and the great bronze pillars which framed the massive gates. For eight days the cacophony of trumpets, drums, flutes and cymbals mixed with shouted prayers of praise and cries of admiration assailed the ears with a tidal wave of sound. The smell of roasting flesh permeated the air as thousands of animals were burnt to appease God and express gratitude for His blessings. So many creatures were sacrificed that the sun was almost blotted out by the rising clouds of pungent smoke.

The Ark was reverently carried through the great golden doors followed by Solomon and the leaders and elders of Israel. Solemnly it was carried into the Holy of Holies, the Sanctum Sanctorum, and deposited on the place that had been prepared for it. Winged sphinxes guarded the Ark and cherubim, mythical creatures representing omnipotence were denoted to represent the strength of a lion, the swiftness of an eagle, the virility of a bull and the wisdom of a man. All Royal Arch Masons have heard of those symbols before.

The entire interior of the Temple was paneled with cedar brought from Lebanon and was completely overlaid with pure gold plate. The floors were made of pine planks which also were covered with gold as were the great cedar timbers used for roof beams. Every golden panel was decorated with skillful engraving and elaborate gold chains ran across the front of the inner sanctuary. The walls, the ceiling and the floors glittered blindingly with their golden finishes.

The interior was decorated with free standing golden art work among which were a pair of angels whose wing tips extended the entire width of the sanctuary, thirty feet. Flowers and palm trees carved of pure gold decorated the walls and ceiling, and an altar of gold stood in the sanctuary while all around were gold lamp stands and golden bowls.

Anyone entering this wonderful building would be assailed by images of himself reflecting back at him from the polished surfaces of gold with which he was surrounded.

Hiram Abiff blended both Asian, Phoenician and Egyptian styles. The lighting came from windows under the roof, an Egyptian concept. A huge copper basin, The Molten Sea, weighing thirty tons and containing 10 000 gallons of water was probably inspired by the Babylonian reverence for the sea.

The material used to decorate the Temple included: 270 tons of gold, 580 tons of silver, 1000 tons of bronze and 3450 tons of iron. The splendour of the building was intended to not only gain favour from God; but also to impress the world with Israel's new power.

Among the many people who came to view Solomon's Temple was The Queen of Sheba. She is reported to have journeyed to Israel out of a desire for knowledge and wisdom and

Solomon was only too happy to teach her a thing or two. Queen Magda loaded seven hundred and ninety boats with treasures and gifts to dazzle Solomon. She remained for six months and during that time Solomon showed her how his government worked, how to receive visiting dignitaries, how his soldiers trained for battle.

Solomon held a magnificent banquet for Queen Magda. All of his dignitaries attended in their finery. Solomon entered followed by the queen. He had prepared a throne for her covered with gold, silver, pearls and precious stones. The room was perfumed with the most opulent scents available.

Solomon lusted for the beautiful Magda but she had made him promise not to force himself onto her. In return, he made her promise not to touch anything in her room that night. He made sure that the food at the banquet was very salty. In the center of her room he put a large pitcher of clear cold water. When she awoke with a raging thirst and poured herself a drink of water Solomon appeared and accused her of breaking her vow to him. Consequently, he claimed that he was no longer bound by his promise. In this way Solomon once again proved his cleverness and lured Sheba into his bed.

They enjoyed each other for half a year then the queen reluctantly had to return home to Ethiopia. Solomon showered her with gifts: gold, jewels, clothing. All together he loaded 6000 chariots with gifts. He also gave her, as a sign of his love, a gold ring to be passed on to any son she should have as a signet of royalty.

On Sheba's return to Ethiopia, she was pregnant and gave birth to a daughter.

This daughter in turn had a son named Nebuchadnezzar. It is ironic that Solomon's grandson was the destroyer of the Temple of Solomon. Solomon's signet was supposedly still in the possession of Haile Selassie the last emperor of Ethiopia.

It should be pointed out that there is also a body of historians who doubt that Sheba was Ethiopian. They place this land of spices in what is now the Arabian country of Yemen. In those days the land was fertile because of a huge dam over 60 feet high which collected water from the river Adhanat. The remnants of that dam still tower over the desert today. In 542 B. C. the dam burst and the desert reclaimed the land. Whether Sheba was Ethiopian or Yemenese, the visit of this beautiful woman to Solomon is chronicled by many writers.

The Queen of Sheba was not the only woman to share Solomon's bed. He is reported to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. That seems to me like overkill. How do you keep a thousand women happy ? Most of us have a tough time with one.

Solomon was very aggressive in his foreign policy. In those days it was customary for the weaker king in a treaty to give one of his daughters to the stronger. Every time he made a new treaty, Solomon ended up with another wife. Solomon had wives from all the surrounding nations. Many of these were nations which worshiped other gods. God had forbidden Israelites to marry these other nationalities because of the danger of weakening the established religion of Israel. Because of his desire for wealth and power as well as his weakness for pleasures of the flesh, Solomon disobeyed God's commands. He built temples for the pagan gods of his wives: Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh and Ammon and for the other

gods of his foreign wives. He even worshiped some of these gods himself. The resulting diversity of religion within his kingdom created animosity within his court. Many felt the loss of the uniform faith which had been the source of strength and direction in the past.

As well as building these magnificent temples for foreign gods, Solomon enlarged Jerusalem - building magnificent and costly palaces for his many wives. This was in addition to the magnificent Temple already described. His royal palace in stone and cedar was breathtaking. He built the House of the Forest of Lebanon, a council chamber with cedar pillars like a grove of trees. Beside this he erected the Hall of Judgement where he sat on a golden throne to receive visitors.

The consequence of this lavish lifestyle put a tremendous strain on the treasury. His Phoenician artisans became wealthy but Israel approached bankruptcy. His payments to Hiram of Tyre amounted to 125 000 bushels of wheat and 1 200 000 gallons of oil. Twenty years later, Hiram was still owed vast amounts so Solomon ceded twenty coastal towns in Western Galilee to him.

To pay for his extravagances, Solomon had to impose new taxes on his subjects. He established a centralized government with twelve administrative districts to levy for supplies. These levies were channeled to “store cities” in each district as his officials raised taxes, usually in the form of grain. In addition, to accommodate his building needs he conscripted forced labour from his own people.

Under Solomon, equipment improved. The flint sickles of the farmers were upgraded to strong, sharp instruments of iron because his father David had conquered the Philistines and learned how to mine iron and smelt it. Solomon exploited the minerals of Israel, iron and copper. His Phoenicians sailed to and mined silver in Spain and tin in Britain. The gold for his temple was mined in Africa.

According to legend, Solomon stockpiled a great quantity of gold and other African treasures in the mines of Africa before they were to be shipped back to Israel. When he sensed his rising unpopularity, Solomon stopped the shipments back to Israel, but continued storing these treasures in the chambers of his mine. This fabulous fortune is said to still reside somewhere within the depths of Africa. This legend was depicted in the movie, King Solomon's Mines based on the book by Henry Rider Haggard.

As he aged, Israel grew weaker. Angered at the high taxes, many of the bordering nations revolted. Because God had loved David he decided not to strip Solomon of his kingdom, but on his death, in 922 B.C. the northern part of the country split away to form a nation rivaling Judah.

While he was arranging the construction of so many marvelous buildings and reorganizing the governmental structure of his kingdom as well as sitting in on judgement on many appellants and tending to his many wives and concubines, he was also exercising his considerable literary talent. He is credited with writing the Biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and The Song Of Songs, some of the most beautiful writing in the Bible.

Although it is accepted by most adherents of the Judeo-Christian religions and the Islamic faith, that Solomon was the person we read about in the Bible, there are others who are more skeptical. When the cities of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer, attributed to Solomon, were excavated recently; no works of art or coins were found which mentioned Solomon. What was found was a cartouche of the Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaoh Amenhotep III. This Pharaoh preceded Solomon by about three hundred years. He also inherited a wealthy kingdom stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

His rule was marked by the construction of magnificent buildings throughout Egypt, Canaan and Syria. It is recorded that Amenhotep III, to secure his throne, married the daughter of his father Thutmose IV. The doubters suggest that this was one of the women who was reportedly married to Solomon.

Because Amenhotep III also decorated his magnificent buildings with gold and jewels, it is suggested that the Temple might have been one of his accomplishments and not Solomon's. The administration system with twelve districts set up by Amenhotep III was identical to that attributed to Solomon. In addition, the Pharaoh dedicated himself to accumulating wisdom and knowledge from his predecessors just as Solomon did. Both monarchs are credited with amassing huge harems of wives.

The conclusion drawn by the detractors of the Biblical story is that it is a story based on the life of Amenhotep III and set in Israel about three hundred years later.

I have included this dissenting information in an attempt to provide a balanced picture of the man on whom our order is founded.

In my opinion, there have been too many discoveries which corroborate the version with which we are familiar for Solomon not to have existed. The ancient cities which have been discovered were found by scholars relying on information gleaned from the Bible. Many other discoveries are being regularly made which lend credence to Biblical references.

In any case, the familiar tenets and principals of our order are not compromised by this contention. The fabled wisdom of Solomon, the magnificent Temple of Jerusalem and the manifestation of God in it simply compound the benefits which we realize by practicing brotherly love, relief and truth.

Let us as Masons never forget our basic tenets and never abandon the teachings which we attribute to Solomon, King of Israel.

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06/09/2001