

CHAPTER 3

The United Monarchy (1030 or 1025 to 931 B.C.E.)

Saul: (Approx. 1025 – 1005 B.C.E.)

David: (Approx. 1005 – 970 B.C.E.)

Solomon: (Approx. 970 – 931 B.C.E.)

What were the circumstances that impelled the Israelites to put aside some of their tribal differences and consider the desirability of a monarchical form of government? The major factor in that decision was undoubtedly military necessity. The Israelites suffered significant conquest because they were fragmented. Towards the end of the period of the Judges, in approximately 1050 B.C.E., a major struggle took place, which jeopardized the hold of the Israelites on the land of Canaan. No particular judge was the leader at the time, but in the battle of Eben ha-Ezer the Philistines killed 30,000 Israelites in battle (I Samuel 4:3 and 4:17)¹ and captured the Israelites' most precious possession, the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, God's covenant with Israel. The Israelites were led by several different commanders and were apparently unable to mount a unified defense. The Philistines also decimated the Israelites living in a part of western Canaan and occupied the towns of Gibeah (in the territory of Benjamin, south of Jerusalem), Beth Shan, and Megiddo.² The struggles of the Israelites with the Philistines, a people of Aegean origin, for possession of the land of Canaan lasted several centuries, from the time of the Judges to the reign of King David, and even beyond.

The military advantage that the Philistines and Canaanites enjoyed over the Israelites seemed to derive from their centralized, monarchical governments, which gave them control over greater military resources.³ In addition, there was no help for Israel from the great powers of that day, which, if they had

¹ Numbers given in the *Tanakh* must always be read with caution.

² J.C. Greenfield, "Philistines," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 793.

³ The Philistines were a portion of the "Sea Peoples" who invaded the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, in several waves, and who were granted land in c. 1200 by one of the Pharaohs. See Bright, pp. 166-167. This made them the neighbors – and enemies – of the Israelites for many centuries afterward. Later, the Romans used their name to apply to the entire country.

been stronger, might have come to the aid of the Hebrews, since large states, acting out of self-interest, customarily make use of small neighboring states to maintain a balance of power in their own favor. But Egypt had lost its long-held control over Canaan and adjacent areas, and thus was no longer a threat to the Philistines. And in Mesopotamia, the great powers, Assyria for a time and then Babylonia, were also somnolent.⁴

The Israelites eventually learned the lesson that in unity there was strength. Three books of the Bible provide the details about the United Monarchy. I Samuel deals with the reign of Saul and the growing antagonism between him and David. II Samuel focuses on the reign of David. I Kings focuses on the reign of Solomon. The United Monarchy of Saul, David and Solomon lasted about a century all told, but no historical sources exist to confirm or amplify the Biblical narrative of this time – or to contradict it. Unfortunately, there are no sources outside the Bible for this period. The historically verifiable history of the Hebrews only begins with the Divided Monarchy, from 931 B.C.E. onward.

The central figure in the transition to monarchy was the prophet Samuel, who anointed not one Israelite king but two, and that is the reason the books are named after him. Samuel is considered to have been both a judge and a prophet. His two sons succeeded him as judges, but they were "bent on gain, they accepted bribes, and they subverted justice" (I Samuel 8:3). The Israelites' disappointment with their internal government, as represented by Samuel's sons, may have contributed to the desire for a monarchical institution. The Elders of Israel implored Samuel to appoint a king over them "like all the other nations" (I Samuel 8:5). God consoled Samuel, who believed that his leadership had been rejected by the Elders: "It is not you they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king" (I Samuel 8:8). He bade Samuel to do as the people wished, even though both Samuel and God were filled with foreboding. There follows Samuel's famous speech about the tyrannical nature of monarchy, which later events amply justified:

[The king] will take your sons and appoint them as charioteers and horsemen...He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards and olive

⁴ Ibid., p. 168.

groves, and give them to his courtiers....The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Lord will not answer you on that day. (I Samuel 8: 11-18)

The *Tanakh* presents the selection of Saul as the first king almost as a chance occurrence, which, of course, it was not. Saul had already won a reputation as a fighter against the Philistines when his father sent him out to find some asses he had lost. After a long unsuccessful search, Saul and his servant decided to consult a seer in a nearby town, to learn where the missing animals were. The seer turned out to be the prophet Samuel. What they did not know was that the Lord had spoken to Samuel the day before, saying, "At this time tomorrow, I will send a man to you from the territory of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him ruler over my people Israel" (I Samuel 9:16).

The *Tanakh* provides a full account of their meeting. Samuel invited Saul to spend the night and made a banquet at which there were thirty invited guests. Immediately before the banquet, Samuel said to Saul, "And for whom is all Israel yearning, if not for you and all your ancestral house?" (I Samuel 9:20). Saul protested, saying, "But I am only a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my clan is the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin! Why do you say such things to me?" (I Samuel 9:21). The next morning, as they were walking, Samuel asked Saul to send the servant away. He then took a flask of oil, and anointed Saul, saying, "The Lord herewith anoints you ruler over his own people" (I Samuel 10: 1).

Up to this time, tribes had been ruled by Elders who were heads of clans, or groups of related families. With the start of the United Monarchy, the tribal Elder system continued, but the tribes became subordinate to the central power, the king.

Saul spent his kingship mainly as a military chieftain, fighting against the Ammonites, the Amalekites, and, above all, the Philistines. His first battle as king was fought against the Ammonites, on the east bank of the Jordan River. The Ammonites had attacked Jabesh-Gilead, but the Israelites instead proposed peace. The Ammonites thereupon replied that they would accept peace on condition that each male Hebrew in Jabesh-Gilead gouge out his right eye. The Hebrew Elders asked for a seven-day truce

to notify all of Israel of their predicament. When Saul heard of this, he quickly organized an army comprised of recruits from all the tribes.⁵ The number of recruits whom Saul gathered was great, and he sent word to the men of Jabesh-Gilead that they would be saved on the next day. Saul won a decisive victory (I Samuel 11: 1-12). After this triumph, Samuel officially inaugurated the monarchy before an assembly of the tribes. Samuel gave an account of his own stewardship, now ending, by saying:

"If you... will not flout the Lord's command, if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, [well and good]. But if you do not obey the Lord and you flout the Lord's command, the hand of the Lord will strike you as it did your fathers." (I Samuel 12: 14-15)

The first inkling of God's displeasure with Saul apparently occurred after Saul had reigned for two years, on the eve of another battle, this one with the Philistines at Gilgal. The Philistines were poised to attack, and Saul had his army ready. The prophet Samuel, speaking for the Lord, asked Saul to wait seven days for his arrival, after which Samuel would inaugurate the sacrifices preceding the battle. Samuel, however, failed to appear in time and Saul nonetheless proceeded to make the burnt offering. After his arrival, Samuel rebuked Saul, and was not satisfied with Saul's argument that he feared that the Philistines would attack at any moment, and therefore had conducted the sacrifices in order to be able to attack first (I Samuel 13: 9-12).

Samuel answered Saul, "You have acted foolishly in not keeping the commandments that the Lord your God laid upon you! Otherwise the Lord would have established your dynasty over Israel forever. But now your dynasty will not endure. The Lord will seek a man after his own heart, and the Lord will appoint him ruler over His people, because you did not abide by what the Lord had commanded you." (I Samuel 13: 13-14)

After these battles with the Philistines, another instance arose in which Samuel rebuked Saul in God's name. In this case there was a battle against the Amalekites, who had seized a portion of Judah's territory. In their earlier period wandering in the desert, the Hebrews were supposed to have exterminated

⁵ It is of great interest here that the army of Israel is mentioned separately from the army of Judah. This presupposes a division of the Hebrews existing before the actual division of the kingdom into two in 931 B.C.E

the Amalekites, but disobeyed God and spared some. During Saul's reign, the Almighty once more commanded King Saul and the Israelites to destroy the Amalekites – men, women, children, beasts – every living thing. But once again the Israelites disobeyed Him. Saul spared the Amalekite king's life, and the Israelites, while duly killing all the Amalekite men, women and children, kept their sheep and cattle.

A battle of words ensued between Samuel and Saul. Saul told Samuel that he had fulfilled the Lord's command regarding the Amalekites. Samuel retorted by asking, if that was so, what was the meaning of the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen that he could hear? Saul said that these animals had been brought from the Amalekites as the choicest specimens for sacrifice to the Almighty. The Almighty, Samuel retorted, needed obedience, not sacrifices, and Samuel rejected Saul as King of Israel. Another, more obedient than Saul, he said, had been selected to replace him (I Samuel 15: 13-23). Saul pleaded that he and Samuel should appear before the Elders in an amicable spirit to report on the battle just ended, and the two went down together to the place at which the Elders awaited them. There Samuel asked that the king of the Amalekites, whom Saul had spared, be brought before him, and Samuel "cut him down" (I Samuel 15: 27-33). Thus did God express his regret for having chosen Saul as the Israelite king. This was the turning point in the careers of Saul and David.

The Lord instructed Samuel, now old and feeble, to go to Bethlehem, to find a successor to Saul. He was to meet a certain Jesse "...for I have decided on one of his sons to be king" (I Samuel 16:1). When Samuel appeared at the town entrance, the Elders feared him as an agent of God's power, but Samuel reassured them by saying that he had merely come to Bethlehem to make a sacrifice to God, and invited them to the sacrificial feast. Samuel met Jesse and invited him and all his sons to come to the sacrificial feast as well. Jesse presented each one of his seven sons in turn, beginning with the oldest, and at each presentation, the Lord said "No." Samuel then asked Jesse if he had any other sons, and Jesse answered that there was a younger son, David, tending the sheep. (Apparently he had not been invited to the feast.) One gets the impression that this was a young boy, possibly between the ages of ten and thirteen. David

was sent for, and Samuel anointed him (I Samuel 16: 1-12). The Bible does not make clear whether the anointing ceremony took place in Jesse's home or at the feast, but Jesse's house is the more likely place since the Bible does say that David was anointed in front of his seven brothers (I Samuel 16: 13).

And the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day on.
(I Samuel 16: 13)

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit
from the Lord began to terrify him. (I Samuel 16: 14)

The ceremony of David's anointing raises many questions. Is David aware of this divine force within him as he matures? Does this help explain the almost superhuman courage he displays in the battles he fights? Does the knowledge of this divine force explain David's dogged determination to attain the kingship? Is the presence of the spirit of God within David the source of the charisma that brings people under his spell? Most important, does Saul unconsciously sense the spirit of God in David? David's possession by the divine spirit may have been a source of his power to heal Saul's demons through music, but also a reason for the competitive rage that Saul subsequently harbored toward him.

After he was demoted, Saul still fought many battles against the Philistines. "There was bitter war against the Philistines all the days of Saul; and wherever Saul noticed any stalwart man or warrior, he would take him into his service" (I Samuel 14:52).⁶ In these conflicts, he weakened, but did not totally defeat the Philistines, an achievement reserved for his successor, David.

Throughout his reign, Saul was involved in another series of campaigns as fierce as any he fought against the Philistines – the struggle for succession between his house and the House of David. There are two accounts of how Saul and David met. In one of them, David was introduced into King Saul's court as a skillful player of the lyre. The Bible presents Saul as suffering from a kind of depression due to "an evil spirit from the Lord" (I Samuel 16:14). In the ancient world, music was considered therapeutic.⁷

⁶ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 229. This is also cited in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 280.

⁷ P. Kyle McCarter Jr., translation, introduction and commentary, "I Samuel," *Anchor Bible Series* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 281, cited in Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Story of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), p. 48.

Saul's courtiers went looking throughout the land for a fine musician. In this account, they came upon David and brought him before the king.

Another account in a later chapter of I Samuel has Saul meeting David on the battlefield, where Goliath, champion of the Philistines, was strutting about, challenging the Hebrews to send a fighter against him. There is a touching scene in which Saul, a huge man, clothed the young David in his own armor in order to protect him from Goliath. David, who was about sixteen, removed the armor, which was so heavy that he could not move, and made use of what was to become his famous slingshot (I Samuel 17: 38-40).

In either case, Saul made David his weapons bearer, which brought him into intimate contact with the royal household. Saul was so delighted with David's services that he sent word to Jesse, David's father, expressing his gratification. David advanced rapidly, was put in charge of the army, and performed brilliantly.

After the victory over Goliath, as the Hebrew soldiers returned home, the women of Israel sang the song I quote in the preface:

Saul has slain his thousands;
David his tens of thousands. (I Samuel 18:7)

Saul heard this and became bitter:

Saul was much distressed and greatly vexed about the matter. For he said, "To David they have given tens of thousands, and to me they have given thousands. All that he lacks is kingship!" (I Samuel 18:8)

This seems to have been the beginning of the feud between Saul and David.

Michal, the king's second daughter, fell in love with David and expressed her love. Jonathan Kirsch comments on how exceptional this is by pointing out that it is the only known reference in the *Tanakh* to a woman's expressing her love for a man.⁸ When David heard that Michal loved him, he told Saul that he would happily marry the young woman, but he lacked the bride price. Saul replied that there was no need for a bride price. All that David had to do was to

⁸ Kirsch, p. 59.

bring the King a hundred Philistine foreskins within a stipulated time. The historian Josephus, writing *The Jewish Antiquities* a thousand years later for a sophisticated Greco-Roman audience that disdained circumcision as barbaric, modified this to say that David was requested to bring back 600 Philistine human heads.⁹ Before the allotted period was up, David returned with the foreskins of 200 Philistines, twice the number asked for by King Saul (I Samuel 18: 20-27).¹⁰ Michal became his bride.

Saul now entered into a series of schemes to get rid of his new son-in-law. He sent David off to fight the Philistines, hoping that he would be killed. Instead of being killed, David won additional victories and gained even greater fame, and "Saul lived in fear of him" (I Samuel 18:14).

Another time, while David was playing his lyre before Saul, a fit of madness seized the king, and he tried to pin David to the wall with his spear. David rushed to his own house and locked the door. Saul sent a detachment of soldiers to kill David when he emerged from his house the following morning. Michal noticed the would-be assassins and urged David to flee. She then prepared a ruse, placing the household idol in the bed, covering it, and topping it with a net of goat's hair to resemble a human head.¹¹ The king, her father, discovered the ruse and accused her of assisting his enemy. She defended herself by saying that David had threatened her: "Help me get away or I'll kill you." (I Samuel 19: 11-17) Of course the real reason she saved David was because she loved him. King Saul rewarded his daughter's love for David by giving her to another man.

Another member of Saul's family, Jonathan, his eldest son and heir to the throne, was charmed by David when he saw the slender young warrior standing over the conquered giant Goliath. At that moment, the two began a close friendship, a relationship of mutual devotion such as can be found among men in all ages and in all places. The *Tanakh* uses the words "love" and "soul" to describe the intensity of the friendship.

⁹ Josephus, Book VI: 196-197, p. 425.

¹⁰ The Philistines were among the neighbors of the Israelites who did not practice circumcision, and the Bible frequently refers to them as "the uncircumcised."

¹¹ Monotheism was apparently not yet so firmly established in Israel that idols were unacceptable.

As the antagonism between Saul and David unfolded, Jonathan supported his friend even when his action was detrimental to the House of Saul and to his own succession. On one occasion, when Saul urged Jonathan and all his courtiers to kill David, Jonathan approached his friend and warned him of the danger (I Samuel 19: 1-3). Jonathan rebuked his father gently, reminding him that Saul too had rejoiced when David killed Goliath and the Israelites won a great victory over the Philistines (I Samuel 19:4-6). "Let not your Majesty wrong his servant David, for he has not wronged you." (I Samuel 19:4) Saul was apparently persuaded, and decided to spare David at that time (I Samuel 19:6-7). However, Saul's promise did not outlast the season, for shortly thereafter, he attempted to kill David by impaling him with his spear.

Jonathan ultimately was responsible for saving David's life. David was fearful of attending the approaching Feast of the New Moon, an important holiday at the start of each month. After conferring, Jonathan and David agreed that if, on the second day of the Feast, Saul commented on David's absence with either favorable or disparaging remarks, Jonathan would return to David's hiding place and notify him under the guise of a hunting expedition, so that David could react appropriately. The signal was if Jonathan shot arrows that landed close to his attendant, that meant it was safe for David to come to the festival. If, however, Jonathan's arrows overshot his attendant, that would be a signal of danger for David. On the appointed day, Saul engaged in a fearful outburst against his son-in-law, and Jonathan loyally notified David of the imminent danger (I Samuel 20:5-41). David went into self-exile and never again saw Jonathan, who was eventually killed, with his father and two brothers, in a battle against the Philistines.

When David went into self-exile to escape the reach of Saul, where did he go? To the Philistine territories, where he was warmly received by one of the Philistine rulers. He gathered around him a band of outlaws – guerillas, really – and offered his military services to that ruler in return for protection against Saul, who was searching for him. There were even several instances in which David was ready to fight against Saul and Israel, but did not do so because the other Philistine chieftains were fearful he would turn on them in the course of battle. The chieftains had good reason to be fearful, since the Bible

tells us that even when David had had an opportunity to kill Saul, he did not do so. In an emotionally resonant scene, he sneaked back to spy on Saul when he was sleeping, but only cut off a piece of the king's garment, and left (I Samuel 24:12). On another occasion too, David had visited the sleeping Saul but done no more than take his spear and his water jar, thus alerting Saul of his visit (I Samuel 26:12).

Saul met his death in a battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa, a mountain ridge in north central Israel. He and three of his sons (including Jonathan), who were leading the charge, quickly fell into enemy hands. Jonathan was the first to die, followed by the other two sons. Saul himself was wounded with an arrow in the belly, and asked his sword-bearer to dispatch him. When the sword-bearer refused, Saul fell on his own sword. But he still did not die (I Samuel 21: 2-4). A stray Amalekite soldier finished Saul off at the king's own bidding (II Samuel 1:6-10). The Amalekite soldier went to David, bearing the news of Saul's death, and offering to David Saul's crown and armlet. When David learned that this Amalekite soldier had killed Saul, he ordered the soldier executed for dispatching "the Lord's anointed" (II Samuel 1: 8-10 and 1:15-16), a perhaps natural reaction in light of the fact that, after all, he must have felt some love towards Saul.

The death of Saul and three of his sons did not end the struggle between the House of David and the House of Saul for the throne. Initially, David had been anointed king of Judah only. When the people of Jabesh-Gilead heard that Saul and three of his sons had been killed and mutilated after death by the Philistines, they recovered the bodies and buried them at Jabesh. They obviously remembered that Saul's first battle as king had been in their defense. In a message which David sent to the people of Jabesh-Gilead, he said, "...the House of Judah has already anointed me king..." (II Samuel 2 :7). He requested, in effect, that the people of Jabesh-Gilead now recognize him as king. This is the first time that David referred to his anointing as king when he was a mere lad or demanded the prerogatives of kingship.

Abner, however, one of Saul's generals, had made Ish-Bosheth, another of Saul's sons, king over all Israel despite David's claims. He was the power behind Ish-Bosheth's throne. There followed a bitter war of two years, and it was only after the murder of Ish-Bosheth (II Samuel 4: 5-7) that hostilities ceased, and all of Israel recognized David as king. The fact that David claimed to have been anointed

king of Judah, and not of all the Hebrew tribes, suggests that even as early as the beginning of David's reign, Judah may have been separate in some way from the other Hebrew tribes. It seems probable that the two Books of Samuel were written during the time of the Divided Monarchy (931-586 B.C.E.) to indicate that the United Monarchy was not totally unified, but seems to have consisted of two Hebrew political entities. It may be that the commentators of the Divided Monarchy were engaging in a bit of self-justification by suggesting that division existed even before the Monarchy was formally divided.

In examining Books I and II of Samuel, readers cannot help but notice that many contradictions, incongruities, and disparities abound. For example, in one version, Saul is anointed king by Samuel in a private ceremony. The two were walking and Samuel took a flask of oil and anointed Saul, saying, "The Lord herewith anoints you ruler over His own people." (I Samuel 10:1) In a second version, Samuel presented Saul to the assembled tribes of Israel, proclaimed him the Lord's anointed, and the assembled people shouted, "Long live the king!" (I Samuel 10: 15-24). The third coronation took place when the Hebrews of Jabesh-Gilead were threatened by the Ammonites and Saul aroused the fighting spirit of all Israel to come to the aid of their kinsmen. Samuel crowned Saul publicly immediately after the victory. (I Samuel 11: 5-15). Here, too, it should be noted, there are references to the two Hebrew entities of Judah and Israel, a century before the Monarchy actually split apart (I Samuel 11:8). Yet the prophet Samuel subsequently rejected the kingship of Saul (I Samuel 13:14 and 15:23).

As we have seen, there are two separate narratives covering David's introduction to King Saul (I Samuel 16:21 and 17:58). Also noted are the two versions of David's escape from Saul –the first involving the aid of Michal, Saul's daughter and the second involving the assistance of the king's son and heir, Jonathan (I Samuel 19:12 and 20: 42). There are also as two versions of Saul's awareness of David's absences from court (I Samuel 19:17 and 20:27). Most intriguingly, two accounts of the slaying of Goliath are presented: the familiar one, known to every Sunday school child in which David stuns and

beheads Goliath (I Samuel 17), and a second, in which Goliath is dispatched not by David, but by one of David's heroes, Elhanan of Bethlehem (II Samuel 21:19).¹²

My purpose in citing the discrepancies in I and II Samuel is twofold. First, I want to make the reader aware that the Bible is a compilation – different scribes writing in what is thought to have been the reign of King Josiah (639-609 B.C.E.) stitched together different versions of the same stories. In some cases, the patchwork shows. For example, some scholars have found that two parts of I Samuel are favorably disposed towards the institution of a monarchy, while another part of I Samuel is vehemently opposed. From this contemporary scholars concluded that there were at least three sources for the passages involved, and therefore, multiple authorship.¹³ My second reason for emphasizing the discrepancies between some versions of well-known Biblical stories is to highlight the difficulty of presenting an understandable narrative of Saul's reign. In writing this chapter, I have selected those passages from the *Tanakh* that illuminate chief motifs of my study. Above all, I have attempted to provide continuity of narrative.

Early in his reign, David conquered Jerusalem, the Jebusite stronghold, and made it the capital of Israel. The nucleus of the city is traditionally known as the "City of David." In the years that followed, the *Tanakh* has it that David attacked one neighbor after another, securing the boundaries and pushing back the Israelites' most threatening opponents, especially the Philistines. During the course of this war with the Philistines, he took Gath and its dependencies from them (I Chronicles 18:1). He then defeated the Moabites, making them tributary vassals (I Chronicles 18:2). Another foe, King Hadadezer of Zobah-hamath (present-day Syria), was on his way to the Euphrates to put up a statue of himself, when David met and defeated him (I Chronicles 18:3). The *Tanakh* declares that in this struggle, "David captured 1,000 chariots and 7,000 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers of his force, and David hamstringed all the chariot horses except for 100, which he retained. (I Chronicles 18: 4)" When the Arameans sought to assist King Hadadezer, David struck a them, killing 22,000 of them. He then stationed garrisons in Aram

¹² S. Szikszai, "Samuel I and II," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 204. Biblical citations were provided by the author of this article.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 204 and 205.

of Damascus, making the Arameans vassals as well (I Chronicles 18: 5-6). One of King Hadadezer's foes, King Tau of Hamath, to the north of King Hadadezer's realm, congratulated David upon Hadadezer's defeat, presenting him with gifts of gold, silver, and copper objects (I Chronicles 18: 9-10). In the meantime, one of David's generals, Abshai son of Zeruiah, defeated the Edomites in the Valley of Salt, in present-day Jordan, killing 18,000 of them and stationing garrisons in their land. Edom became another of David's vassal states (I Chronicles 18: 12-13). Joab, another of David's generals, together with his brother Abishai, led a final battle against the Ammonites and their Aramean allies (I Chronicles 19). Joab, who was later to face execution at the hands of David's son Solomon, defeated the Ammonites. David then took the crown of the Ammonite king, placing it upon his own head (I Chronicles 20: 1-2). In the course of these conquests, David seized silver and gold from Edom, Moab and Ammon, as well as from the Philistines and the Amalekites (I Chronicles 18: 11). David's seizure of Edom gave his realm access to ports on the Red Sea. His reign is covered in greater detail in I Chronicles 10-29.

In addition to breaking Philistine power, David conquered the Ammonites to the east of Judah and the Moabites to the southeast, taking extensive territory. The Arameans (nowadays, the Syrians) to the northeast feared David's growing power and put together a coalition to halt his conquests. But he won the day and took the city of Damascus. His seizure of the Edomite kingdom gave his realm access to the ports of the Red Sea. According to the Biblical account David was so successful in laying the foundations for an empire that the boundaries of the Israelite state extended from North Syria and the Euphrates to the Philistines and Egypt. It should be noted that the historic validity of those boundaries has not been established. It is surprising that in Eli Barnavi's *Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*, David's empire is mapped out, when the evidence for its existence is so nebulous. The vassal kings within these areas are said to have paid tribute to Solomon, David's successor, throughout his reign.

King David is a kind of Jewish King Arthur, whose Biblical life was the stuff of many legends that inflated his greatness.¹⁴ He is one of the most dramatic figures in the Hebrew Bible. His reign as king

¹⁴ See Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitsky (eds.), *The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah; Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), William G. Braude, tr.

was so remarkable that God promised him that his dynasty would last forever. He was a charismatic leader, a great warrior, and a skillful ruler. He was a poet of great creative ability; said to have written many of the Biblical psalms, and as we know he also played the lyre.

David's kingship was marked by other incidents of ambivalence towards those he loved in addition to his ambivalence towards the death of Saul. David was forced into a rivalry with his own son and heir apparent Absalom and did not have the courage to order Absalom's death. Absalom led a rebellion against his father and proclaimed himself king. In the Bible, the defeated Absalom escapes into the forest and gets his long hair entangled in the branches of a tree. Joab, David's general, overtakes him and cuts off his head. Despite Absalom's treason, David never forgave Joab for executing his son. As David lay dying, he hinted broadly to Solomon, now his heir, that Joab must die despite his lifelong service to the monarchy. After David's death, Joab, aware of his peril, sought the sanctuary to which he was lawfully entitled by entering the area of the Ark of the Covenant and grasping a horn of the altar. The assassin whom King Solomon sent killed Joab nonetheless [II Samuel 2: 5-6].¹⁵ Thus David's ambivalence resulted in a despicable outcome.

David's shortcomings played out in the realm of his relationships with women as well. As discussed, Saul took Michal back from David when he made war against his son-in-law. He ignored his daughter's feelings and gave her to another man, Paltiel. This man lived with Michal for several years. But David compounded this mistreatment. When he was king, he forced Michal to return to him, but then seemingly neglected her for the rest of her life, for she remained childless. In forcing Michal to return to him, he destroyed a happy marriage and left her mate a grieving partner (II Samuel 3: 12-16). Then there is the well-known story of Bathsheba, whom David shamelessly appropriated from Uriah, one of his military captains, after arranging for Uriah's death in battle. In another episode, one of David's daughters, Tamar, was raped by her half-brother, Amnon. Amnon kept her in his house for some time and then

¹⁵ These details and more can be found in Jonathan Kirsch's *King David*.

drove her out. She begged Amnon not to send her away, because she would now have no status among the women of the court, but he was unyielding. Absalom, her full brother, and now David's heir apparent, took her in. He waited two years for his father to punish the rapist, his half brother, but David did nothing. Eventually, Absalom ordered his servants to kill Amnon. Sadly, the mistreatment of women evident in these stories is typical of the attitude towards women in the Bible more generally. This treatment of women as chattel among the Israelites was, moreover, not dissimilar from the low status of women in other neighboring societies of that era.

David was an impressive figure in the eyes of the Lord, so much so that He later promised David that his House would rule forever. Notwithstanding God's assessment, however, and the legends about him over the centuries, I do not find in David many heroic characteristics. Apparently he never expressed appreciation directly to Jonathan for the risks that Jonathan repeatedly took on his behalf, although he did make Jonathan's crippled son a favorite in his court and restored to him the lands seized from Saul's family after Saul's death. But his verdict against Joab for killing Absalom was particularly reprehensible, because Joab had saved his throne for him.

Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba, unlike his father, ruled over his kingdom in prosperity and peace. The most significant event of his reign was the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, completed in approximately the decade of the 960s B.C.E. and said to be a magnificent structure. It lasted until its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.. The peace of Solomon's era was reinforced by the size of his army, which according to the Bible was equipped with 40,000 stalls of horses to accommodate his chariots and 12,000 cavalymen (I Kings 5:6). Passages in the *Tanakh* describe the wealth of Solomon's kingdom:

The weight of the gold which Solomon received every year was 666 talents of gold,¹⁶ besides what came from tradesmen, from the traffic of the merchants, and from all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the regions. (I Kings 10: 15-16)

The king also made a large throne of ivory, and he overlaid it with refined gold. (I Kings 10: 19)

¹⁶ A talent, in weight, amounted to 3,000 shekels. A horse could be purchased for 125 shekels.

All King Solomon's drinking cups were of pure gold: silver did not count for anything in Solomon's days. (I Kings 10: 21)

King Solomon excelled all the kings on earth in wealth and in wisdom. (I Kings 10: 23)

The *Tanakh* also relates that Solomon cemented his international alliances by taking as wives many princesses of the royal houses of allied states, and that he had 700 wives (including a daughter of Pharaoh), as well as 300 concubines.

But were David and Solomon really the masters of the splendid royal city and empire delineated in the Bible? For one thing, their capital, Jerusalem, would have had to have been a bustling city. Instead, archaeologists have found that as late as the eighth century B.C.E, almost two hundred years later, Jerusalem had not more than 15,000 inhabitants, a medium-sized town in those days. Also, Judah was mainly hill country, sparsely populated, and inhabited largely by farmers and herdsman. It could not have served as the basis for a large empire with a comparable bureaucracy and army.¹⁷

The *Tanakh* itself raises questions as to whether King David left an empire of his conquests to his son, Solomon. In chapters 23 through 27, King David, near the end of his reign, doled out to all of the sons of the tribes of Israel the various tasks pertaining to administration and maintenance of the Kingdom. Nowhere, however, is there any record of assignments as to the administration of conquered territories.

Archaeological digs in the City of David (the area south of the Temple Mount) have uncovered artifacts from before and after the Davidic-Solomonic era (the 900s B.C.E.), but not, strangely enough, from that era itself.¹⁸ Additional excavations have revealed no trace of the great buildings traditionally ascribed to Solomon's reign. Archaeologists have uncovered neither evidence of the legendary oriental splendor of his court, nor confirmation of living quarters for his 700 wives and 300 concubines. The two palaces in Megiddo attributed to Solomon were actually built after his reign.¹⁹ Modern excavations around the Temple Mount in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have failed to identify a single trace

¹⁷ Finkelstein and Silberman, p. 132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-137.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-142.

of King Solomon's magnificent temple and palace,²⁰ although some structure obviously stood there.

Josephus does cite a work by Menander, now lost, which refers to correspondence between Hiram of Tyre and Solomon in which the Hebrew king discusses the importation of building materials.²¹ Solomon is also said to have been the trading partner of King Hiram of Tyre (Phoenicia) in overseas ventures.²² But this is the only reference to King Solomon outside the *Tanakh*, and the only indication of a building program.

Likewise, there is no evidence outside the bible that King David himself actually existed.

Conceivably, David was a mythical ancestor, and those who occupied the throne after the middle of the tenth century B.C.E. simply claimed to be descended from the House of David. (In the same way, the Greeks also claimed to be descended from a mythical ancestor, Hellas, who gave his name to their culture – Hellenic.) Although it is difficult to imagine Jewish history without a King David, neither David nor Solomon is mentioned in the known Egyptian and Mesopotamian records of their day. However, it should be pointed out that the empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia were in decline in this era (c.1005-930 B.C.E.), and their records are meager. The best that can be said, however, is that archaeologists have uncovered evidence outside the Bible that a House of David did exist. Their evidence consists of an inscription on part of a black basalt monument found at the Biblical site of Tel-Dan in northern Israel. This Aramaic inscription of 835 B.C.E., one hundred years after the supposed death of Solomon and attributed to the Aramean (Syrian) King Hazael of Damascus, describes an assault on the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in which King Hazael had

...[killed Jeho]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel, and [I] killed [Ahaz]iah son of [Jehoram kin]g of the House of David, and I set [their towns into ruins and turned] their land into [desolation].²³

In 1994, the French scholar Andre Lemaire concluded that he had found a reference to the "House of David" on the well-known Mesha Stone, a ninth century B.C.E. inscription attributed to King Mesha of Moab, discovered in 1868, and currently in the Louvre Museum. (Moabite is a Northwest Semitic

²⁰ Ibid., p. 128

²¹ Josephus, Book VIII, 144-146, and 324; and Book IX, 283-287.

²² Finkelstein and Silberman, p. 127.

²³ Ibid., p. 129. This stele was discovered in 1993, and its translation is provided in Avraham Biran and Joseph Navah, "An Aramaic Stele from Tel-Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal*, No. 43, pp. 81-98

language very similar to Hebrew.) Lemaire's interpretation was based on his insertion of the missing initial letter "d", for the Semitic "daled" in "David," into a space in line 31 of the inscription, which had been worn away by time. Lemaire's conclusion remains controversial. An earlier translations of the Mesha Stone, provided by W.F. Albright, the father of Bible archaeology, leaves blank the spaces in the Mesha Stone wrought by time's destruction. Thus, in the Albright translation, there is no reference to the House of David.²⁴ In 1995 and 2001 respectively, two other scholars, Baruch Margalit and Pierre Bordreuil, cast doubt upon the conclusion that Lemaire drew by inserting what he thought was the missing letter into the inscription.²⁵ References to the House of David have, however, been verified in later centuries, as we shall see in the next two chapters. What we must note is that the House of David was a unifying force for the Southern Kingdom, Judah, while the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was wracked by coups because it had no unifying figure.

The next two chapters show the legacy of Solomon's abandonment of the divine instructions about monotheism and the disruptive effect on the United Monarchy. It seems that David never strayed from his worship of the God of Israel. Solomon was of a different stripe. His conjugal loves included Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women, "from the nations of which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'None of you shall join them and none of them shall join you'"(I Kings 11:2). Along with these marriages to foreign women, Solomon built temples in Jerusalem to their gods and actually worshiped the Phoenician goddess Ashtereh and the Ammonite God Milcom (I Kings 11:18.). Josephus apologizes for Solomon, saying that he was beguiled into performing these unlawful acts by his wives, when he was already a very old man.²⁶

The Lord, angered at Solomon's transgressions, appeared before him declaring:

²⁴ See W. F. Albright, tr., "Palestinian Inscriptions," in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Third Edition with Supplement, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 320.

²⁵ See Baruch Margalit, "Studies in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions," *Ugarit-Forschungen*, No. 26, p. 275; and Pierre Bordreuil, "A propos de l'inscription de Mesha: Deux Notes," in P.M. Michele Daviau, John W. Wevers, and Michael Weigl, *The World of the Arameans*, Vol. III, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 162-163

²⁶ Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquities*, Books VII-VIII, (Tr. Ralph Marcus), (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), VIII, vii (8).

Because...you have not kept my Covenant and the laws which I enjoined upon you, I will tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants. But, for the sake of your father David, I will not do it in your lifetime, I will tear it away from your son [Rehoboam]...I will give your son one tribe, for the sake of My servant, David, and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen. (I Kings 11: 11-13)

The United Monarchy thus ended with the death of Solomon.²⁷

²⁷ Many Biblical scholars assert that the two Books of Kings, like the two Books of Samuel, are a product of multiple authorship. See S. Szikzai, "Kings, I and II," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, pp. 29-30. The Solomon narrative in I Kings 3-11 is, moreover, tantalizing because it refers the reader, for further details about Solomon's reign to the "Book of the Acts of Solomon," one of the twenty-four lost sources mentioned in the Tanakh.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS *

Early Bronze Age	3500-2200 BCE
Intermediate Bronze Age	2200-2000 BCE
Middle Bronze Age	2000-1550 BCE
Late Bronze Age	1550-1150 BCE
Iron Age I	1150-900 BCE
Iron Age II	900-586 BCE
Babylonian Period	586-538 BCE

* The dates follow the system in this book. Dates for the Early Bronze through the Middle Bronze Ages are approximate and depend mainly on cultural considerations. Dates for the Late Bronze Age through the Persian Period depend in the main on historical events.

KINGS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH*

Judah		Israel
	Saul ca. 1025-1005 BCE	
	David ca. 1005-970	
	Solomon ca. 970-931	
Rehoboam	931-914	Jeroboam I
Abijam	914-911	Nadab
Asa	911-870	Baasha
Jehoshaphat	870-846**	Elah
JehoJam	851-843**	Zimri
Ahaziah	843-842	Tibni
Athaliah	842-836	Omri
Jehoash	836-798	Ahab
Amaziah	798-769	Ahaziah
Azariah	785-733**	Joram
Jotham	729-743**	Jehu
Ahaz	743-727**	Jehoahaz
Hezekiah	727-698	Joash
Manasseh	698-642	Jeroboam II
Amon	641-640	Zechariah
Josiah	639-609	Shallum
Jehoahaz	609	Menahem
Jehoiakim	608-598	Pekahiah
Jehoiachin	597	Pekah
Zedekiah	596-586	Hoshea

* According to the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume I, Page 1010, and Galil's *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah*.

** Including co-regencies.

*** Rival rule

