

## *Solomon in All His Glory*

**Alan Millard**

[p.5]

Solomon's name lives today for two reasons, his wisdom and his magnificence. In English the man facing a difficult choice is said to need the wisdom of Solomon, echoing the story of the king who discerned which of two women was a child's mother (1 Kings 3: 16-28). His magnificence was immortalised in the saying of Jesus recorded by Matthew, 'See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these' (Matt. 6: 28, 29 NIV).

The wisdom of ancient Israel has attracted much discussion and research over recent decades. Scholars have studied the language, form, and thought of Proverbs and other parts of the Old Testament termed 'Wisdom Literature'. One important area of study has been comparison with similar writings discovered in Egypt and Babylonia.<sup>1</sup> It is instructive to learn how much the Israelite thinkers had in common with their neighbours, and also how they differed. As to the wisdom of Solomon, the greater part of the book of Proverbs claims his authorship, and it is hard to find secure reasons for doubting it. Recently Kenneth Kitchen has shown that the literary form of the book is compatible with a Solomon's date.<sup>2</sup>

Solomon's wealth has attracted far less detailed study. This is not surprising, for the Wisdom Literature is a more extensive and intellectually rewarding subject. Furthermore, Solomon's wisdom, it can be argued, survives, whereas his wealth is lost. Nevertheless, there are descriptions of the Temple at Jerusalem and other royal buildings which speak of, and even quantify Solomon's riches. The records in 1 Kings 5 to 10 clearly convey an impression of immense wealth, 'the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills' (1 Kings 10: 27). Even so, there is nothing fantastic in the phrasing of these passages, certainly nothing like the expressions in later rabbinic and Arab tales of Solomon and his powers, the portrayals made familiar to many through Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Story* 'The Butterfly that Stamped'.

Solomon's wealth is a subject that repays study. Like the Wisdom Literature, it can be approached in several ways. There are literary questions about the descriptions: are they written as factual history, or are they to some degree romanticized, a core of ancient fact wrapped in later, exaggerated tradition, or are they entirely imaginary, the product of wishful thinking by dispossessed exiles in Babylon? There are historical questions: did Solomon exist and rule as the Bible states, do extra-biblical documents mention him, or allow for his powerful kingdom? Archaeological evidence can be interrogated, too, to seek for signs of the king's constructions and an era of prosperity. All these are legitimate and precise lines of inquiry, and there are others beside. Yet there is a more general question which all of these may involve, and which will certainly affect all of them according to the way it is answered. First consideration should be given to a 'feasibility study'; if Solomon ruled in the tenth century BC, could he have amassed wealth and used it in the way the Hebrew history describes?

[p.6]

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Ruffle, *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977), 29-68.

<sup>2</sup> K. A. Kitchen, *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977), 69-114.

Frequently the answer to that question will be 'No!', for, taken as they stand, the records of 1 Kings seem fantastic. Whoever heard of plating the walls and floor of a building with gold! Equally, who would construct a throne of ivory, and cover it with gold? Is it conceivable that a king could receive over 21 tons of gold in a year (666 talents, 1 Kings 10: 14)? All these things, and more, are said of Solomon. Writing about the Temple of Solomon, the author of the standard commentary on the Book of Kings said 'The gilding of the furnishings, as of the altar, is reasonable, but not that of the whole interior.... Such extravagant description appears to be a step forward in the process of exuberant imagination....'<sup>3</sup> His position is followed by the majority of more recent writers. Yet a few have been less sceptical. C. H. V. Sutherland, in his standard study of the role of gold throughout man's history, wrote as follows: 'Biblical sources give ample evidence, however poetical in tone or even in scale, of the ancient wealth in gold of the Near East, whether in the person of Solomon, with his huge tribute-income in gold and his fantastic programme of temple-decoration and general court luxury, or of David, with his immense contributions of gold for the adornment of the House of the Lord, or in the case of Tyre, which "heaped up silver as the dust and gold as the mire of the streets". Poetry this is; but, lest exaggeration be suspected to a point at which all truth vanishes, it is well to remember the numberless instances of wealth in gold which are detailed by historians: Pythius, the subject of Xerxes of Persia, with his famous treasure of some 7000 lbs of gold; the booty of perhaps 500,000 lbs of gold, perhaps more, captured by the emperor Trajan from the Dacians; the treasure of 320,000 lbs of gold left by the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius at his death in A.D. 518; and the fabulous quantities of gold accumulated by the Inca emperors.'<sup>4</sup> In a study of the reign of Solomon as a whole, E. W. Heaton made some comparisons between the wealth of Solomon and various ancient records and archaeological discoveries, finding in them good precedents for the use made of gold by Solomon.<sup>5</sup> Before dismissing the biblical accounts out of hand, this path should be pursued, a proper attempt should be made to see them in their ancient environment. They should be read beside Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and other writings that have survived, and be evaluated in the light of archaeological discoveries of actual monuments and the clues to others that have disappeared. Any information reaching us from ancient times is likely to be incomplete, so that there may be some points at which no comparison is possible.

## I. USES OF GOLD IN ANCIENT TIMES

### 1. *Surviving Examples*

To discover how gold was used in the countries of the biblical world, and during the centuries before and after Solomon, the first step is to survey pieces of ancient gold-work that survive in modern collections. A comprehensive catalogue would be enormous, but by taking examples, the general range can be established.

Gold was one of the first metals man discovered; he hammered it into small pieces of jewellery as early as the sixth millennium BC. Fifty years ago, Sir Leonard Woolley startled the world by unearthing the Royal Cemetery at Ur. Its gold-plated musical instruments, its golden cups and jewels were a thousand years older than the great treasure of Tutankhamun which Egyptology had revealed a decade

---

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Montgomery, *I and II Kings* (1951), 152.

<sup>4</sup> C. H. V. Sutherland, *Gold* (1959), 22.

<sup>5</sup> E. W. Heaton, *Solomon's New Men* (1974), ch. 4.

[p.7]

earlier. Here, too, were tools and weapons of gold, a saw, chisels, an adze and an awl, spears, axes, and daggers. These were, of course, insignia, pieces for parade, to mark their owners' rank, they could never have been put to use. The treasures of Ur were buried about 2500 BC.<sup>6</sup> A thousand years later, a far greater treasure was interred with the young pharaoh Tutankhamun. Modern man has gazed with wonder at the marvellous objects from his tomb ever since November 1922 when Howard Carter shouted of the 'wonderful things' he could see through a hole in the door of the tomb chamber. Here were many articles of furniture plated with sheets of gold, beaten and engraved, a wealth of elaborate golden jewellery, a golden dagger, the king's gold mask, and, eclipsing all, his coffin of solid gold.<sup>7</sup> Its weight is 110.4 kg (243 lbs). Particularly relevant for the present study are the shrines that stood in the tomb. There is a small wooden shrine (50 cms high, 26.6 cms wide, 32 cms deep, 19¾ x 10½ x 12¾ inches) made to hold a statue. Sheets of gold cover it entirely, within and without, embossed and engraved with scenes of the king's life, magical figures, and inscriptions. The shrine stands on a wooden sledge covered with silver. Another gold-plated wooden shrine stood in the room the excavator named 'The Treasury'. This rested on a sledge, and was sheltered by a canopy. Within it were the viscera of the king in an alabaster chest. This shrine is just over 2 metres high, 1.5 wide and deep (62 x 5 feet). More impressive than these two are the four gold-plated shrines which filled the burial chamber. They were fitted one inside the other, the outermost being 5 metres long (162 feet; 3.3 m wide—10 ft 10 ins, 25.7 m high—9 ft). Each shrine had been prefabricated, brought into the tomb in pieces and hurriedly reassembled there. Inside the fourth shrine was a stone sarcophagus containing a gold-plated wooden coffin, and inside that was another gold-plated wooden coffin housing the solid gold coffin which held the king's body. To be noted is the form of the shrines: they reproduce a traditional design of great age in which the walls were originally of wood, the roof a covering of animal skins. This roofing tradition and the prefabrication may be compared with the animal skins placed on the Tabernacle, the predecessor of Solomon's Temple, which was also a prefabricated structure of wood plated with gold, according to Exodus 26: 14-30. Tutankhamun ruled Egypt at the close of a prosperous period, and a few pieces of gold-work from other noble tombs imply that his treasures were not unique.

A century after Tutankhamun, Egypt enjoyed a brief resurgence under Seti I and his famous son Ramesses II (c. 1279-1213 BC). Ramesses' tomb was looted long ago; a token of the wealth of his time is the massive armlet of gold now in Cairo Museum. After 1150 BC Egypt declined. Even so, her rulers maintained some state, and aped their predecessors by being buried in coffins of precious metal, though of silver, not of gold. Their tables were still graced by golden vessels.<sup>8</sup>

Babylonia and Egypt might be expected to yield signs of great wealth, being the homes of great imperial powers. While the cities of Syria and Palestine have disclosed nothing on the scale of the Royal Cemetery of Ur or the Tomb of Tutankhamun, there are some examples of gold-work to show what once existed in greater quantity. At Byblos on the coast of Lebanon local princes drew their revenue from a lucrative trade in timber with Egypt. They were

---

<sup>6</sup> Sir Leonard Woolley, *Ur Excavations II*, The Royal Cemetery (1934).

<sup>7</sup> C. Desroches-Noblecourt, *Tutankhamun* (1963); I. E. S. Edwards, *Tutankhamun: his Tomb and Treasures* (1979).

<sup>8</sup> C. Aldred, *Jewels of the Pharaohs* (1971), pl. 129.

buried with valuable objects in tombs hollowed from the rock beneath the city soon after 2000 BC. Amongst other items, an axe-head cast in gold, with a decorated haft,

[p.8]

is another example of a weapon made as a symbol of rank.<sup>9</sup> From later in the second millennium BC modern museums can display several pieces of gold plate. At Ugarit, the whole city—palace, temples, and houses—was sacked about 1200 BC, but two fine bowls lay hidden until 1929. Another plain gold bowl, some silver ones, and a golden dagger were unearthed more recently.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere in the Levant a group of gold dishes was found by accident, and sold in the antiquities market. They belong to the same age as the Ugarit pieces, and may have been buried in a tomb. Beside these objects, jewels of gold have also come to light in Canaan, some in small hoards, some as individual pieces, lost or buried alone.

These examples all belong to epochs before the days of Solomon. Shortly after his death, Assyria's power grew until it dominated western Asia for nearly three centuries. By frequent military campaigns and annual tribute collection, the Assyrian kings accumulated great wealth. In the ruined palaces of Nineveh, Kalakh (now Nimrud), and Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad), the miles of walls lined with stone relief carvings are clear signs of that wealth. Medes from the east and Babylonians from the south ended those splendours in 612 BC, marching home with enormous loot. All the conquerors left behind were things they did not value or could not carry, so extensive remains of the Assyrian treasure stores are unlikely to appear. Again, there are a few survivors. At Kalakh a silver bowl and a cup decorated with gold foil had been hidden in a hole in the palace floor, and were not recovered until the modern excavator dug them up. For the archaeologist and art historian the outstanding discoveries at Kalakh were pieces of carved ivory. Strips of ivory were cut as veneer or overlay for wooden furniture, while heavier pieces formed parts of composite items partly of wood, partly of ivory. No complete pieces of furniture were found in Assyria, but odd legs, and a series of chair-backs tell us what they were like. A chair completely enveloped in ivory has been reconstructed from fragments that lay in a tomb at Salamis in Cyprus. The chair was made in the eighth century BC, at the same time as the ivories of Kalakh. To the modern eye the creamy white ivory is pleasing, and the skill of the carvers arouses admiration. Tastes change, however, austere beauty satisfying some minds less than a glittering display. Certainly the ancients seem to have loved a gaudy show! Blue and red glass or gem-stones were set into some of the carved ivories—most have fallen out since—and parts of the carving were covered with gold. In some cases the artists restrained themselves, limiting the gold to appropriate areas, yet quite commonly it appears that the whole ivory surface was covered with gold sheeting, beaten to follow the modelling. So strange is this that it is not widely realised, but sufficient examples survive with their gold covering to demonstrate that it was a widely approved style. Dark stains on many ivories were made by the bituminous glue that held the gold in place. Those who sacked the palace at Kalakh ripped the gold from the furniture, leaving the wooden and ivory parts smashed on the floor.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the looters carried their spoils home to Persia. That country has probably yielded more examples of ancient goldwork than any other except Egypt. In the ruin mound called Hasanlu in western Persia a golden bowl lay crushed in a building burnt about 800 BC. It is

---

<sup>9</sup> R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Western Asiatic Jewellery c. 3000-612 BC* (1971), Fig. 75, Pl.D.

<sup>10</sup> C. F. A. Schaeffer, *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra Ugarit* (1939), pls. XVII, XVIII.

<sup>11</sup> M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* (1966).

about 20 cms (8 inches) high and the same in diameter, decorated with small figures in relief. Several gold and silver beakers deposited in tombs near the Caspian Sea have links of design with the Hasanlu Bowl. Also in western Persia, at Ziwiye near Saqqiz, a treasure of precious

[p.9]

objects came to light. In a bronze bath-tub was an assortment of golden ornaments and ivory carvings of the eighth century BC.<sup>12</sup>

The brilliant plate of the Persian Empire concludes this survey of surviving goldwork of the ancient Near East. Accidental discoveries in Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana), especially, made their finders rich. Here elaborate drinking vessels and parade swords, and bowls inscribed with the names of Persian kings had been hidden, probably in the face of Alexander's armies. Other vessels of precious metal, and pieces of jewellery in the world's museums stem from hoards or isolated finds scattered across the whole extent of the empire, from India to Egypt. The British Museum's 'Oxus Treasure' is among the most famous.<sup>13</sup>

On any reckoning, the pieces visible today form a very small proportion of the gold plate and jewellery, and the golden decoration of buildings that once existed. They demonstrate the place of gold and silver in the life of kings and princes, and in the service of the gods. Were all ancient jewellery included, it would show that some gold, though in much smaller quantities, was in the hands of the wider public, too. The bulk of the gold used in antiquity was re-cycled. Conquering kings carried it from one place to another, and had it melted for their own purposes, just as owners of old jewellery or plate handed their property to goldsmiths in return for pieces in the current fashion, and do so still.

## **2. What has been Lost**

Archaeology constantly discloses clues pointing to the former existence of things that have disappeared. Such clues are the subject of the second part of this study.

After many years of labour in Egypt, a French scholar, Pierre Lacau, wrote an essay on the meaning of certain holes and channels in various ancient Egyptian stone monuments.<sup>14</sup> Relating his observations to the statements in contemporary texts, he was able to show that pillars, doorways, and sections of walls were covered with gold sheets. The holes and channels had been cut to enable the metal to be affixed to the stone surfaces. In the Temple of the Sacred Boat at Karnak stood twelve columns erected by Tuthmosis III, about 1450 BC, each about 32 metres high, designed to represent bundles of papyrus. Each was entirely covered with gold, fastened in slits cut at suitable points in the pattern. In another hall at Karnak were fourteen columns. Their design was similar, a papyrus stem, and they, too, were plated with gold from top to bottom. These pillars were larger; an inscription states that they were 31 cubits, that is 16.25 metres high (53 feet). Such pillars supported roofing beams. Other pillars erected in Egypt commemorated royal piety. These are the obelisks exemplified in Cleopatra's Needle. Some had gold plating at the very top only, others over the upper half, and others all over their surface. One pair is recorded to have been 108 cubits high (about 56 metres, 180 feet). In a scribal exercise another obelisk is described as 2 cubits taller still, but

---

<sup>12</sup> See R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *op. cit.*, n.9.

<sup>13</sup> E. Porada, *Ancient Iran* (1965).

<sup>14</sup> P. Lacau, 'L'or dans l'architecture égyptienne', *Annales du Service* 53 (1956) 221-250.

the other dimensions given for it suggest it may have existed only on paper, as a mathematical problem. Existing obelisks reach a height of 32 metres (105.5 feet), the famous unfinished one lying in a quarry at Assuan being larger still, 42 metres long (137 feet). None are so much as the 108 cubit pair, and it has been suggested that such a height is impractical, and that either the figure is a mistake of the scribe, or that each obelisk was 54 cubits high but when laid end to end for transport on a boat their overall length was 108 cubits.<sup>15</sup>

[p.10]

Like the columns, the stone blocks of doorways show how metal sheets were fastened to them, as do carved slabs in temple walls. Plating was apparently the richest form of decoration. Evidence exists that the Egyptians were also in the habit of plastering stone surfaces, then applying a thin gold foil to the plaster. The inscriptions do not make clear which method was used when they catalogue the royal achievements. They use a term that means literally 'worked' but which Lacau argues can be rendered 'plated' in these contexts.

The prosperous centuries of the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1070 BC) provide most of these records. Here are a few of them. Tuthmosis III (c. 1490-1436 BC) recorded his building of a shrine 'plated with gold and silver', and of a floor similarly made. Amenophis III in the next century decorated several structures in this way. Of one temple in honour of Amun at Thebes he claimed it was 'plated with gold throughout, its floor is adorned with silver, all its portals with electrum', while the temple at Soleb had the same treatment, except that 'all its portals are of gold'. Ramesses II (c. 1297-1213 BC) provided his mortuary temple at Abydos with doors 'mounted with copper and gilded with electrum'. Later in this period, Ramesses III (c. 1183-1152 BC) ornamented temples in exactly the same way. At Medinet Habu he constructed a shrine of gold with a pavement of silver, and doorposts of fine gold. His Karnak temple was supplied with 'great doors of fine gold'. Another of his works may be noted here: Ramesses III made a sacred barge for the god to travel along the Nile. It was 130 cubits long (68 metres, 224 feet)—long enough to carry two obelisks 30 metres or 100 feet high—its timbers were cedar, and it was overlaid with gold to the water-line.

In presenting his material, the Egyptologist Lacau spoke of the 'astonishing way the Egyptians were prepared. to make use of gold' to decorate their monuments, and added that the majority of Egyptian statues of deities in stone and bronze to be seen in our museums were originally enhanced in the same way, with a golden overlay.

Turning from Egypt to Assyria and Babylonia, there is also evidence for plating buildings with gold, although the structural remains are less informative. The kings' inscriptions are the main sources. Esharhaddon of Assyria (680-669 BC) told how he restored the shrine of his national god, Assur, and 'coated the walls with gold as if with plaster'. His son Ashurbanipal claimed much the same, 'I clad its walls with gold and silver'. In Babylon a century later Nebuchadnezzar recorded his enrichment of the shrines of his gods, 'I clad (them) in gold, and made them bright as day', and Nabonidus (555-539 BC) followed him, 'I clad its walls with gold and silver, and made them shine like the sun'. The tradition stemmed from much earlier times in Babylonia, for Entemena of Lagash built a temple for his god 'and covered it with gold and silver' about 2400 BC.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> R. Engelbach, *The Problem of the Obelisks* (1923).

<sup>16</sup> Assyrian texts in D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria* (1926-27); Babylonian in S. Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften* (1912); Entemena in E. Sollberger, J.-R. Kupper, *Inscriptions royales sumériennes et akkadiennes* (1971).

Temple doors were made of cedar or other woods, and decorated with precious metal. Their bolts and keys, too, might be made of gold. Esarhaddon of Assyria presented the temple of Ashur with 'doors of sweet-smelling cypress wood' plated 'with bands of gold'. In this context some meagre remnants can be introduced. The great kings of Ur who ruled in the twenty-first century BC were laid to rest in fine brick mausolea in the centre of the city. In excavating them, Sir Leonard Woolley found the tombs had been looted and burnt. In the ruins of three doorways 'there were found among the ashes fragments of gold leaf, showing that the panels had been overlaid with precious metal'.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in 1851-55, the

[p.11]

French excavator Victor Place recovered a fragment of gold that he thought had overlain a bronze plaque adorning a door in the Assyrian palace at Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad).<sup>18</sup>

Visitors to the British Museum can hardly avoid noticing the gigantic winged bulls that once guarded the doorways of Assyrian palaces. They were cut from limestone ('Mosul marble') quarried from the hills. They weigh up to 15,000 kg (15 tons), and stand up to 5 metres (162 feet) high. Smaller figures that do not survive were cast in bronze and covered with precious metal. Sennacherib, who ruled Assyria from 704 to 681 BC, praised the skilled design and workmanship of forty-four bronze figures with which he decorated the entries to one of his palaces. In Babylon, the temple of Marduk, the chief god, was guarded by bronze creatures installed by Nebuchadnezzar, and later by others covered with silver. Nebuchadnezzar also cast figures of wild bulls in bronze and plated them with a layer of gold. Providing metal figures for temples in this way was a well-established sign of devotion. Kings of Babylonian cities in the early second millennium BC named some of the years of their reigns after their donations to the temples. They gave golden statues of the gods, their ancestors, and of themselves, as well as golden thrones, tables, and cultic equipment. Two small examples of such statues were discovered in the Elamite city of Susa, one in silver and one in gold. They were made about 1250 BC, and stand about 6 cms (2.3 inches) high.<sup>19</sup> A kneeling figure in copper honoured the famous king Hammurabi of Babylon (c. 1792-1750 BC). One of his subjects dedicated it to a god to pray for the king's life. Over the face and hands of the figure are sheets of gold plate. On the base is an inscription which carefully designates the piece 'a copper statue of a worshipper, its face plated with gold'.<sup>20</sup> This is significant, for it leads us to suppose that other descriptions of statues known only from texts are accurate. While words like 'a gold statue' or 'a gold bed' in ancient documents should not be pressed to mean 'made of solid gold throughout' or 'the purest gold', they can be understood to mean 'gold all over', that is to say, nothing else could be seen.

All the royal donations to temples and the decoration of palaces were recorded by accountants for the exchequer. Occasionally the records survive, giving further evidence of objects long destroyed. At Uruk in Babylonia during the nineteenth century BC kings gave gold to the temples of the city, and some of the accounts survive. The throne of the goddess Inanna received 89 5/6 shekels (about 720 gm; 25 ozs), while Nana, the principal deity, had 6 mana of refined gold (about 2.8 kg; 6.35 lbs) to overlay her seat.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> C. L. Woolley, *Antiquaries Journal* 11 (1931), 347.

<sup>18</sup> V. Place, *Ninive et l'Assyrie* (1867), 1, 120-2.

<sup>19</sup> E. Porada, *op. cit.*, p. 62, pl. 12.

<sup>20</sup> E. Sollberger, *Iraq* 31 (1969), 90-93.

<sup>21</sup> A. Falkenstein, *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 2 (1963), 46f.

From the mundane figures of clerks and the self-conscious narratives of kings much valuable information can be gleaned about golden objects and decorations that cannot be seen today. Literature, too, can add its own witness. One example can be cited from the Canaanite myths written upon clay tablets late in the second millennium BC which have been unearthed at Ugarit. In one tale the god Baal orders a present to gain the favour of the head goddess. The craftsman went to work: 'Hayan went to the bellows, Khasis took the handles. He cast silver and melted gold; he cast silver by the thousands of shekels, he cast gold by tens of thousands of shekels. He cast a shelter and a couch, a divine dais of twenty thousand shekels, a divine dais plated with silver and drops of gold; a divine chair, a couch of fine gold, a foot-stool covered with electrum; a lovely bed with golden knobs, a divine table with figures of all sorts, rearing creatures of the earth; a

[p.12]

divine cup with handles like lambs, decorated in the style of Yman, with myriads of wild bulls'.<sup>22</sup>

It is very evident from all these sources that a very great amount of gold was circulating in the kingdoms of the Old Testament world, and that it was used in a wide variety of ways, some of them unusual and surprising to the modern western mind, the very ways the Old Testament tells us Solomon used it.

## II. SOLOMON'S TEMPLE AND PALACE

Having surveyed the uses of gold in the ancient Near East, it is possible to set the accounts of Solomon's use of it against their ancient context. At this juncture questions of the age and sources of the reports in 1 Kings can be postponed, the feasibility of Solomon's works remains the primary concern.

The Hebrew text of 1 Kings describes Solomon's Temple in detail, and gives some information about the palaces. As so often happens, the details are not always intelligible now, and a modern architect would not obtain all the specifications he might require from them. As a result, every reconstruction is different.

In plan the Temple was simple: an entrance porch with the flanking pillars Jachin and Boaz, a main hall, and an inner shrine. This plan is found at sites scattered through Syria-Palestine from late in the third millennium BC onwards. An impressive example at Ebla (Tell Mardikh) was furnished with stone lions to guard the doorway, and a stone basin carved in relief for ritual purposes. That was built about 1900 BC.<sup>23</sup> A thousand years later the same basic plan was employed for a small temple beside a ruler's palace at a site now called Tell Tainat in the Plain of Antioch. Here, too, carved lions guarded the entrance.<sup>24</sup> Enclosing Solomon's building on three sides were three storeys of rooms which, it is assumed, were store-rooms for offerings, the priests' robes, and other equipment. Apparently the walls of the main building rose above these rooms, for they were provided with windows.

---

<sup>22</sup> M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 10 (1978), 57-64; the passage is II AB i 23-43 in the various translations.

<sup>23</sup> P. Matthiae, *Orientalia* 44 (1975), 347.

<sup>24</sup> Often reproduced, e.g. Heaton, *op. cit.*, fig. 17.

The walls were built of dressed stones, cut by Phoenician craftsmen whose ashlar masonry is well-known from the palaces of Ugarit, three centuries before king Solomon, and Samaria, a century or two later. In the courtyard walls, at least, the courses of stone were interlaced with timbers (1 Kings 6: 36; 7: 12), probably to help the structure withstand earthquake shocks. As in any major ancient building, the roofing consisted of cedar beams. Inside, cedar supplied the panelling for the walls, while the floor was covered with cypress wood. All the panelling had carved decoration of cherubim and floral motifs.

From the porch a doorway led into the main hall, its two doors of cypress being carved with cherubim, palms, and flowers. A second doorway led to the shrine itself, its doors of olive wood being similarly carved. (The doorways are described with obscure phrases which RSV renders 'doorposts... in the form of a square' and 'the lintel and doorposts formed a pentagon' [1 Kings 6: 33, 31]. These words are probably better explained as meaning the doorways occupied one quarter and one fifth of the width of the building respectively.) The whole of the interior was plated with gold--walls, ceiling, floor, and doors. Within the shrine were a gold-plated wooden altar and two carved olive wood figures of cherubim, gold-plated. The utensils for the rituals of the Temple were partly of gold and partly of bronze.

Solomon's royal palace was larger, having three major halls and private quarters.

[p.13]

Within the pillared hall of the Forest of Lebanon, the king placed two hundred large shields of beaten gold, and three hundred smaller ones. These seem to have been entirely for show! His royal throne also stood there, and is described in detail. It was made of ivory, overlaid with gold. Beside each arm of the throne stood a lion, presumably of ivory, while a pair of lions guarded each of the six steps leading up to the throne. Gold alone was the material for all of Solomon's drinking vessels and all the furnishings of the House of the Forest of Lebanon.

Gold everywhere seems grossly extravagant and ostentatious. Not surprisingly, some commentators have tried to minimize its application. One current work suggests the gold was painted or sprayed on to the walls, rather than fastened in sheets. Overlaying the floor with gold is unlikely according to several writers. Such details are thought to be the exaggerations of later tradition about a remote figure of history.

The overlaying of stone reliefs in Egypt and of carved ivories in Assyria illustrates the way gold was applied to the carved panelling in the Temple. Meagre fragments of gold foil, and royal building records similarly illustrate the treatment of the doors.

### **III. AMOUNTS OF GOLD**

If Solomon's use of gold can be given credence in the light of practices known from antiquity, the amounts of gold ascribed to him may still seem incredible. The King of Tyre and the Queen of Sheba each brought to him 120 talents, while from Ophir, Solomon and Hiram fetched 420 talents. 'In one year the weight of gold which came to Solomon was 666 talents' (1 Kings 10: 14).

In discussing these sums, and others, some allowance has to be made for uncertainty about the values of the weights, and the fact that they varied according to time and place. The system current in Israel during the Monarchy appears to have been:

1 shekel=about 11.4 gms or 0.4 ozs.

50 shekels=1 mana about 550 gms or 1 lb 3.4 ozs.

60 mana=1 talent about 33 kgs or 72.7 lbs.

In Babylonia the shekel weighed only about 8.4 gms (0.27 ozs), the mana contained 60 shekels (about 500 gms, 1 lb 1.5 ozs), and the talent 60 mana or about 30 kgs, 66 lbs. The Egyptians used weights of their own, the deben of 90.97 gms, 3.2 ozs, divided into 10 kedet.

On the basis of these figures, Solomon's gold can be computed as:

120 talents=3,960 kg =3.9 tons from Tyre, and the same from Sheba;

420 talents=13,860 kg=13.6 tons from Ophir;

666 talents=21,978 kg=21.6 tons in one year.

These enormous figures are hard to comprehend, and a comparison of values is impossible. Beside them may be placed the gold reserves of Great Britain, currently 22 million ozs, about 684,275 kg, or 673 tons.

It is comparison with other ancient figures that is more relevant to this study, and this can be done by comparing weight only. Occasionally the gold is qualified by words which may indicate its purity or state of refinement; it would be wrong to assume that every amount was of 24 carat quality.

The majority of ancient records of gold deal with small quantities, measured in

[p.14]

shekels, for jewellery and individual pieces of plate. In Assyria and Babylonia gold was rare, a commodity imported from the coastal regions of the Persian Gulf and possibly Pakistan and India, and from the hills to the east and north. For the people of Mesopotamia and for many of their neighbours, a major source of gold was Egypt which was able to draw supplies from the Eastern Desert (between the Nile and the Red Sea) and from the Nubian territory (the Sudan). Egypt may have received some gold from places further south as well. So a king of Assyria wrote to the Pharaoh about 1350 BC, 'Gold is like dust in your land, one simply gathers it up.' A contemporary king repeated this statement six times in letters to the Pharaoh! The Assyrian went on 'Why do you think it is so valuable? I am building a new palace, send me enough gold to decorate it properly! When my ancestor wrote to Egypt, he was sent twenty talents of gold.... When (another king) wrote to Egypt to your father, he sent him twenty talents of gold... send me much gold!' (Twenty talents by Babylonian standards was 600 kg or 11.7 cwts.) A king of Babylon at the same time wrote to Egypt complaining that when twenty mana of gold he had received from Egypt was refined, hardly a quarter of the weight proved to be gold! In this period the pharaohs often sent gifts of gold to their fellow kings, and received other valuables in exchange. That same Babylonian king was sent a gift that was made up of precious articles containing at least 1200 mana of gold, about twenty talents. The exact total is unknown because the tablet on which the individual items are listed is broken. Several other examples of such lists have survived, with details of the amounts of gold and

silver in the furniture and jewellery and plate sent by one king to another as gifts, or as the trousseaux of daughters whose marriages forged diplomatic ties.<sup>25</sup>

Powerful kings expected their vassals to pay tribute annually, offering their protection in return. The practice was as old as history, and conveniently enriched the stronger kings. How much a vassal should pay depended upon his resources, and they dictated the form of his tribute, also. (So the sheep-farming king of Moab paid Ahab of Israel with lambs and wool, 2 Kings 3: 4.) Occasionally the sum is stated in gold or silver. Hittite kings demanded 300 shekels of gold from some vassals in the fifteenth century BC, that is about 2.5 kgs, 5.5 lbs, by the Babylonian standard.<sup>26</sup> Wealthy rulers had to pay more. A treaty with the ruler of Ugarit required 500 shekels by the heavy standard, which may have had the equivalent of 11.75 gms per shekel, 500 shekels being 5.8 kg, 12.78 lbs.<sup>27</sup> An emperor who ruled for many years successfully could expect to accumulate a large treasure in this way. Half a millennium after Solomon, the Persian kings did that, and Greek writers have left some accounts of the income from their vast empire. The Indians, Herodotus relates (III 95), sent 360 talents of gold dust, which is about 10,800 kg, over 10.5 tons by the Greek, Attic, talent of 25.86 kg. When Alexander the Great conquered Persia, he is said to have captured 40,000 talents of gold at Susa, and 235,630 talents in all. In modern terms, that is 1,200,000 kg, 1,178.5 tons from Susa, and 7,068,900 kg, 6,942.6 tons overall. These figures are far greater than Solomon's, but they come from an enormous empire that lasted for two hundred years.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time as the Persian Empire existed, the Athenians ruled their shortlived empire. From it they drew an annual tribute, paid by the cities and states of Greeks under their control, cities and states which are never considered particularly wealthy. Assessments were drawn up on several occasions, and some have been

[p.15]

recovered, engraved on stone. The annual total was approximately 400 talents of silver, which is equivalent to 30 talents of gold at the ratio of 13:1 current then. Thus Athens was able to afford to build the Parthenon which has made her famous.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to the ancient Near East, we find frequent references to tribute obtained by conquering kings. Shalmaneser III of Assyria (858-824 BC) left typical examples in his Annals. On a campaign to Syria kings submitted to him, bringing presents to avoid attack, and accepting the imposition of a yearly tribute. The king of Carchemish brought 3 talents of gold (90 kg; 198 lbs), 70 talents of silver, and many other goods, and was required to pay annually 1 mana of gold (500 gms; 1 lb), 1 talent of silver, 2 talents of purple wool. Other kings paid comparable sums. When Damascus surrendered to Adadnirari III, probably in 796 BC, the Assyrian received 2,300 talents of silver (69,000 kg; 67.76 tons), 20 talents of gold (600 kg; 1,320 lbs), and much else. Some sixty years later Tiglath-pileser III subjugated Samaria, placing Hoshea on the throne as his nominee. Samaria paid 10 talents of gold (300 kg; 660 lbs) as tribute (and an unknown amount of silver). The same emperor received the submission of Tyre, and with it the large sum of 150 talents of gold (4,500 kg; 4.4 tons). From Hezekiah of Jerusalem Sennacherib extorted a varied tribute, including ivory-decorated couches, all

---

<sup>25</sup> Information given by the Amarna Letters.

<sup>26</sup> A. Goetze in J. B. Pritchard ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1969), 203.

<sup>27</sup> For tribute from Ugarit see J. Nougayrol, *Palais royale d' Ugarit* IV (1956), 37ff.

<sup>28</sup> See C. H. V. Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> See R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (1972), 234ff.

kinds of valuables, 800 talents of silver (24t. kg; 52,800) and 30 talents of gold (900 kg; 1,980 lbs).<sup>30</sup>

One of the most interesting narratives of any Assyrian military expedition was written as a letter to his patron god by Sargon II after he had attacked a district of Urartu (Ararat, modern Armenia) and captured its capital city, Musasir, southwest of Lake Urmia. After a long description of marches and battles, the booty of Musasir is presented. From the king's palace the soldiers took 34 talents 18 mana of gold (1,029 kg; about 1 ton), 167 talents of silver (5,010 kg; almost 5 tons), 6 gold swords, and other implements of gold, gold and silver plate, and furniture encrusted with ivory, silver and gold. In the temple of the chief god the victors found similar amounts of gold and silver and much valuable equipment. Either side of the shrine were hung shields of gold with central bosses formed as dogs' heads. These six shields weighed in all 5 talents 12 mana of red gold (156 kg; 335 lbs), that is about 26 kg, 55 lbs each. Among other items were gold fittings for doors, such as locks, keys, and bolts, and a large golden sword of 26 mana (13 kg; 28.51bs).<sup>31</sup> The shields amongst this booty are notable for the comparison they offer with the shields Solomon hung in his Hall of the Forest of Lebanon. He made 200 large shields of 600 shekels each, and 300 small ones of 180 shekels each (1 Kings 10:16). Solomon's larger shields were 6.8 kg, 15 lbs each, the smaller ones 2 kg, 4.5 lbs each, much lighter than the Urartian ones, but more numerous, consuming altogether 1,960 kg, 1.9 tons of gold.

Egyptian documents give amounts of gold in various contexts. During the reign of Tuthmosis III the yield of the gold fields at Wawat in Nubia (the Sudan) for three years was 232.4 kg (512 lbs), 258.8 kg (570 lbs), and 286.1 kg (630 lbs). These may be exceptional figures, yet they show what sort of income was available from a single source. In the Annals of the same pharaoh, the booty taken between his twenty-second and his forty-second years amounted to over 11,500 kg (11.3 tons) of gold. His successor, Amenophis II (c. 1427-1401 BC) claimed the weight of gold vessels he took from the Levant was 6,800 deben (618.5 kg; 1,360 lbs). Beside these records of income, the palace stewards carefully noted its expenditure. In the British Museum is a famous papyrus scroll, called the Great Harris Papyrus.

[p.16]

It is 13.5 feet, 41 metres, long, the longest known, and was written to glorify Ramesses III shortly after his death (c. 1150 BC). It does that by listing his gifts to the temples of Egypt throughout his thirty-one years. To Amun's temple in Thebes he gave 51.7 kg; 113 lbs, and to all the temples together the amount of gold the king presented was 3,648 deben, that is 331 kg or 729 lbs. In addition there were 2,756 statues and figures containing 7,205 deben of gold (655 kg; 1,440 lbs) and 11,047 deben of silver (1005 kg, almost 1 ton).<sup>32</sup>

None of these figures approach the amounts recorded for Solomon except for the booty gathered by Tuthmosis III (11,500 kg; 11.3 tons). Yet there was one Egyptian king whose gifts to the temples far outstrip all others known to us. During the first four years of his reign, Osorkon I (c. 924-889 BC) gave 20,538 deben of gold and 72,870 deben of silver in furnishings and equipment to various shrines (with more for which no weight was noted), 594,300 deben of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli to the gods of Heliopolis, and 2,000,000 deben

---

<sup>30</sup> For these Assyrian records see D. D. Luckenbill, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 95ff.

<sup>32</sup> For Egyptian records see J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (1906-7).

of silver at least, 2,300,000 deben of silver and gold for unknown purposes (it is not clear whether the last two figures are separate, or whether one includes the other).<sup>33</sup> In modern terms these amounts are:

20,538 deben gold	1,868 kg; 1.8 tons
72,870 deben silver	6,629 kg; 6.5 tons
594,300 deben varia	54,063 kg; 53 tons
2,000,000 deben silver	181,940 kg; 178.5 tons
2,300,000 deben silver and gold	209,231 kg; 205 tons.

The first three of these figures are very large when set beside other amounts Egyptian kings were pleased to record, the last two are amazing. They are engraved on disjointed fragments of the monument, so their significance is uncertain. If they are counted as parts or as totals of Osorkon's gifts, his generosity was prodigious! The biggest figure is for silver and gold, but silver was usually scarce in Egypt. At a ratio of 10:1, 2,000,000 deben of silver still represents 18,000 kg (17.8 tons) of gold. If, on the other hand, the enormous figures are left out of consideration as incomprehensible, Osorkon remains the most munificent donor of the pharaohs, giving in the first four years of his reign more than five times as much gold as Ramesses III presented in thirty-one years, and presumably what he gave to the gods was only a portion of the funds at his disposal.

Whence came Osorkon's wealth? His reign is poorly documented, nothing hints at a far-reaching military adventure, bringing home rich booty. Now Osorkon's father had inaugurated large building works at Thebes and Memphis in his twenty-first year, but they were far from completed when he died in that same year, and were never finished. Osorkon's father was Sheshonq I (c. 945-924 BC), the Shishak who took the gold from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and from the Judaeen treasury. That victory was recorded on the wall of a temple at Karnak, Thebes, in the form of a list of places in Israel and Judah that the Egyptian troops overcame. Even the carving of this record may not have been achieved before Sheshonq died. Surely Kenneth Kitchen is justified in proposing to see in the vast donations of Osorkon, and the extensive building works of his father, evidence for a tremendous source of wealth suddenly made available to these kings, and in supposing that that wealth was the plunder of Jerusalem, the treasure that the Bible attributes to Solomon.<sup>34</sup>

[p.17]

None of the points made in the previous sections prove the accuracy of the Hebrew historian, none of them can be used against those who assume the account of Solomon's reign is largely or entirely wishful thinking by dejected Jews exiled among the buildings of Nebuchadnezzar's 'great Babylon' four centuries after Solomon's supposed reign. The aim has been to demonstrate that there is nothing unlikely in the biblical account of Solomon's riches and their disposal. Changed practices and prejudices may arouse scepticism about the reports, and lead to their rejection, but when they are investigated within the context of the ancient world, they can only be adjudged entirely plausible. There are no grounds for dismissing Solomon's glory as exaggeration or legend in the history and culture of the ancient world. Solomon could well have ruled in Jerusalem exactly as 1 Kings describes him, seated on his ivory throne, worshipping at the golden Temple.

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 729-737.

<sup>34</sup> *The Bible in its World* (1977), 102.

### AMOUNTS OF GOLD

<i>Solomon</i>	
From Sheba	3.9 tons
From Tyre	3.9 tons
From Ophir	13.6 tons
In one year	21.6 tons

<i>Osorkon</i>	
Gifts to the gods:	
gold	1.8 tons
silver	6.5 tons
gold, silver and lapis lazuli	53 tons
silver	178 tons
gold and silver	205 tons

<i>Persia</i>	
From India	10.5 tons
In Susa	1,178 tons
In Persia	6,942 tons

<i>Tyre</i>	
Paid to Tiglath-pileser	4.4 tons

<i>Musasir</i>	
In palace	1 ton

<i>Tuthmosis III</i>	
Booty of 20 years	11.3 tons

---

© 1981 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in September 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---