

**THE GOLDEN AGE:**  
**DAVID عليه السلام AND SOLOMON عليه السلام**

*'You are the descendants of those We carried (in the Ark) with Noah. He was truly a thankful servant.'*

(The Qur'an, 17:3, Bani Isra'ill—The Children of Israel)

**W**e are told in a Hadith that there have been 124,000 Prophets, that they have been sent to all nations, and that they have all brought the same message of the unity of God and of our duty to worship Him. The Children of Israel, though, are unique in receiving so many Prophets and in having so many identified by name in the Qur'an. The message may have been the same—submit—but in each case, the situation was different. They were told to submit to God in slavery and flight by Moses, as well as when on the point of conquest. They were required to submit while under the leadership of Joshua when he invaded Canaan and to do the same when they had no king. They did not, but demanded a king, a request that the Bible reports as a very controversial one. Neither under Saul in a position of defeat, nor David in victory, nor Solomon in peace did they submit. By the time Jesus came, a fairly comprehensive patterned response to any situation had been established: *no submission*.

This begs the question: why were so many sent to God's chosen people? And what, dare we ask, is the meaning

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within this fact? We assume that it is enough to know that other nations have had Prophets sent as guides, and presumably not so many each, as is the case of the peoples of Ad and Thamud. These were the nations to which Hud and Salih, the only non-biblical Prophets mentioned by name in the Qur'an, were sent. We assume that these 124,000 Prophets were rejected, because, on the conventional understanding, no nations apart from the Jews were monotheistic prior to the coming of Jesus, and none of these civilisations have survived. Yet with the Jews, we possess a detailed knowledge of their story, and they have survived as witnesses to it, carriers of their cultural legacy, their historical burden, their religious vocation. And this is precisely *because* they were stubborn. They had so many Prophets *because* they were stubborn and would not submit to God, and they survived because they were stubborn and would not submit to, call it what you will, fate, history, reality. See how precious those 'stiff necks' are? And how much trouble?

If this supplies a mixed picture, much the same can be said of the stories of the heroes of the Golden Era in the Bible. When their stories are first heard, often by young audiences, the biblical David and Solomon seem to be glorious figures. On closer inspection, though, we find that the shading, the details and the colours are not so bright. In fact, the biblical David comes to be seen as a rather dark figure in the Judeo-Christian heritage. We find a similar ambiguity with Solomon.

If we compare the pictures of the biblical and Islamic Davids, they appear to have much in common, in outline at least. However, the Islamic stories have none of the Bible's darkness. What is interesting is that the portrayal is reflective of the focus of the respective faith. The David of the Bible reflects the *people* he ruled, unflatteringly it should be said, while the David of the Qur'an reflects the *message*—submission—that he brought. In Islamic belief, the Prophets who came to the Children of Israel came to enjoin this same message from God—the message of Adam,

Abraham and all—that it is our duty to please God by submitting to Him. Thus pleasing God (a spiritual goal) should be our aim, rather than seeking political power or material gain, which are worldly objectives. If either of these should come our way, they are to be considered as side-effects. Of all the Prophets of Israel none were more blessed in this way than Da'ud and his son Suleyman: David and Solomon.

Though there are many similarities between the biblical and Qur'anic stories, the balance of these two, the worldly and the spiritual, the cause and effect of God-consciousness or *Taqwa*, is completely contrary. While the Qur'an and Hadith glorify the father's and the son's humility, the Bible stresses their power and glory. Ultimately, though, it depicts them as individuals who were unable to sacrifice their egos to 'the dagger of self-discipline' and who succumbed to the temptation of their worldly power to follow their *nafs*, their egotistical desires.

Despite the flaws in the biblical David and Solomon, their reigns (a total of 73 years) are regarded by many traditional Jews as the highest point in their history. David expanded Israelite territory enormously through his generalship, to include territory from what is now Egypt to Lebanon and Syria, and most significantly he conquered the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital. Solomon, who succeeded him, inherited what had become a peaceful kingdom and built the first temple on what, tradition says, is today the Haram al-Sharif of al-Aqsa.

When Israelis today speak of the eternal united capital of Israel or the Temple it is to this era they hark back. Nonetheless even in the Bible there are implicit limits to seeing the story as a *carte blanche* to Judaize Jerusalem. During the Israeli celebrations of '3000 Years of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel', Israeli scholar Daniel Gavron wrote that 'Jewish pre-eminence [in Jerusalem under David] is an oversimplification,' and he highlighted four Davidic principles regarding the city. The first was that though Jerusalem was

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the capital it was shared with others. David neither massacred nor expelled the inhabitants (1 Judges 1:21). Secondly, he expanded the city for newcomers (II Samuel 5:9) rather than displacing the existing residents. Thirdly, he respected their property rights, insisting on buying the threshing floor on which the Ark of the Covenant was to be housed (II Samuel 24:22-24). Fourthly, he co-operated with and integrated the inhabitants. His wife Bathsheba and, possibly, Zadok the High Priest were Jebusites. ('Would David have approved?', *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics & Culture*, Vol. II, No. II, 1995.)

Positive though this may seem when applied to current realities, a more significant aspect of the biblical David, and the biggest problem for Jewish and Christian interpretations of his life, is the theme of the paradoxical nature of his character. David possesses the twin streams of obedience and sin, 'the tensions between (his) opposites': the David who is 'just like everyone else only more so' and the hero. In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, David M. Gunn concludes his sketch of the king, one that mercilessly highlights these faults, by saying that it is these very unresolved tensions that 'give him life'.

The worst of these 'tensions' is the taking of Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, one of his generals. According to the Bible, David spies her, possesses her, and impregnates her. To cover his guilt, David summons Uriah from the campaign he is fighting in the south, so that he will sleep with her. However, conscious that his men are fighting, Uriah refuses to go to his wife, even when David gets him drunk, so David sends him on a particularly dangerous mission in which he is, as hoped, killed. Thus David is able to marry Bathsheba. The first son dies as divine retribution for the sin. The second son is Solomon. Henceforward, the apparently unconditional promise of Yahweh given in Samuel 7 is revealed to have limits. David's third son Absalom kills his own half-brother, David's oldest son, Amnon, for raping his sister Tamar. He

then raises an army to fight David, beginning the demise of Israel at the moment it is created.

So bothersome is all this that Jewish writers wrote, probably much later, the two Books of Chronicles. These list the whole Davidic line from Adam onwards and tell the story of David as if all he did was achieve military victories and lay the groundwork for the founding of the Temple. As we have noted before, the Bible often stresses that the only important consideration in Chosenness is blood. Yet even this is protected from too much scrutiny in Chronicles: the Children of Israel are sent plagues as punishment for the sin of trying to number the people in a census.

For Muslims, the simplest way of approaching such profane and contradictory material is to see it as proof of God's words in the Qur'an which say that although the original *Tawrah* (Torah in Hebrew) was the word of God, much of what is contained in the Bible we have today has been changed (2:140; 2:146; 2:211). We have already seen the discrepancies in the story of Abraham. With this we can see the biblical David not as a historical story but as a projection by the writers of the Bible of the soul of Israel that at once condemns and justifies its continued sinning by attributing sin to its finest. The two streams are even present here, for such storytelling has two messages. Superficially the story says that sin brings divine retribution. However, the implicit, but overriding, message is that if David can be like this, how can *we* be any better?

Such a rhetorical question seems legitimate in the context of the Bible, but if we compare the biblical David's character and story with the equivalent in the Islamic tradition, we can learn something deeper.

In the Bible, after the required period of mourning for Bathsheba's husband, David married Bathsheba. Shortly after, God sent Nathan to David and told him what seemed to be a tale of unfairness in his kingdom. A rich man had a large flock of sheep and a poor man from the same city had just one little ewe lamb that was like a daughter to him. One day

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a traveller arrived and, rather than use one of his own flock, the rich man took the poor man's sheep to feed the traveller with. David was furious when he heard this tale and declared, 'As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity' (2 Samuel 12:5-6). Nathan let him finish, and then replied, 'Thou art the man.' Despite all the things he had been given, and that yet might have been given him, he had done evil in the sight of the Lord and, 'Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house.' (2 Samuel 12:10)

David confessed that he had indeed sinned and was told that although the Lord had put away his sin, the child that would be born to Bathsheba would die. While the child was alive, David fasted and prayed, but after only seven days, once it had died, he ate again. The second child that he had by Bathsheba was Solomon, whom the Lord loved. It was from this point that disasters assailed the kingdom.

In the Qur'an and Hadith, by contrast, as King, Da'ud was blessed and was one of the Prophets particularly favoured by God. He was a success politically and militarily: he united the twelve tribes and was given the knowledge of how to make chain mail: 'And We made iron supple for him so as to make long coats of mail and to measure the links well' (34:11). His political success was balanced by, rather than existing in opposition to, his spiritual gifts. God commanded the mountains and the birds to sing His praises with him, those praises being the *Zabur*, the Psalms (17:55). When the information contained in various Hadith is added we are given a strong sense of a man of humility. According to Abu Hurayra in al-Bukhari, the Prophet Muhammad said that recitation of the *Zabur* was easy for Da'ud, and also that he would only eat of what he had himself produced with his own hands.

In another Hadith, Ibn Umar reported that Muhammad (upon him be peace) said: 'The prayer which God loves the most is the prayer of Da'ud. The fast which God loves the

most is that of Da'ud. He used to sleep half the night, stand in prayer for a third and sleep for a sixth. He would fast every other day. He wore wool and slept on hair. He ate barley bread with salt and ashes. He mixed his drink with tears. He was never seen to laugh after his error (see below) nor to look directly at the sky because of his shyness before his Lord and he continued to weep for the rest of his life. It is said that he wept until plants sprang up from his tears and until tears formed ridges in his cheeks. It is said that he went out in disguise to learn what people thought of him, and hearing himself be praised only made him more humble' (Qadi Iyad, *Shifa*, 1:2.24).

The error, and the reason why Da'ud should be such a man of grief, is not specified, but it is not unreasonable to suggest, based on context, hints and parallels, that it refers to some form of temptation (though this is by no means certain). The Qur'an tells how one day two men climbed into Da'ud's private chamber, alarming him. They put him at his ease by telling him that they were brothers in dispute and wished to have his judgement on the matter. The one who did the speaking told Da'ud that his brother had ninety-nine ewes, while he had but one, yet his brother wished to look after it and had beaten him in argument on the matter.

Da'ud said:

'He has undoubtedly wronged thee in demanding thy ewe to be added to his flock. Truly many are the (business) partners who wrong each other. Not so do those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and how few are they?' (38:24)

As he said this, some say that he must have asked himself whether he had the right to presume that he himself was one of the righteous, for he immediately realised that this was a trial from God. Had not the men disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived? Had not their case been strange to risk such an adventure, particularly for the brother with the flocks?

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Had not he even been silent the whole time? So Da'ud fell down and asked for forgiveness and was forgiven. The Qur'an says: 'O Da'ud! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth. So judge thou between men in truth, nor follow thou the lust (of thy heart), for it will mislead thee from the Path of God.' (38:26)

So, what is the meaning of the story of David, of Da'ud? And how does the parable of the sheep fit in to this?

To those raised on the Bible, David has been seen as an archetype, a man of both spirit and action, and the frequency with which he appears in literature and modern culture in the West, not to mention the thousand-plus mentions in the Bible, shows how important a figure he has been. Most people know the story of the triumph of faith over strength in David and Goliath, and many know the hymn 'The Lord is My Shepherd,' which is an adaptation of Psalm 23, attributed to him, and that Jesus was born of David's line. Yet the Bible's depiction (or depictions) of David make him seem schizophrenic and at times even mad. He dances in an exhibitionistic manner when the Ark is brought to the citadel (2 Samuel 6), and feigns madness during his time as an outlaw enemy of Saul. For the most part, to read David's story in the Books of Samuel and Kings is to experience a distinct feeling of depression, because the tale is so dark; hence the corrective of the Book of Chronicles.

Christians and Jews have been obliged to accept this David, making a virtue of necessity at times. One commentator says:

The plain fact which is so apparent in the Bible and in particular the Old Testament, is that such men, with all their strength and their weakness, 'their highest and their lowest, (their) pulses of nobleness and aches of shame' are the men whom God empowers, forgives, trusts and uses to achieve His great designs.

(Gordon Robinson, *Historians of Israel* (Lutterworth 1962), p.49)

From the Muslim point of view, the plain fact is that these are the men that *the Bible says* God empowers. These portraits have been painted in dark colours by human hands and it is not possible to accept the story *in toto* because it differs not only in detail but also in spirit. The Qur'anic picture is similar but lighter. In the case of Da'ud, on the positive side he is credited with the slaying of Jalut (Goliath), the *Zabur* (though this is unlikely to be the same as the biblical Psalms), the wisdom, the territorial expansion (implied) and a very God-fearing nature, fasting and praying, all of which can be found in the biblical David. On the darker side, though some Islamic scholars would dispute this, there is a hint of shadow in Da'ud's story concerning the matter that, in the corresponding story in the Bible, engulfs David and his whole family.

The central disaster of David's reign, according to the Bible, is the taking of another man's wife. This event does not appear in the Qur'an or in any reliable Hadith, which may mean that it simply did not happen. But 'the error' referred to in the above Hadith and the grief that followed it, and the parallel tales of the unjust men and their greed for sheep cannot, to my mind, be dismissed out of hand. With just a small, sardonic hint, one Christian writer summarised what another Muslim response could be:

However much these incidents [38:21-26 concerning Da'ud and 20:92-94 concerning Musa] may remind the reader of the episode of David and Bathsheba [...] the Muslim relies on the terseness and silences of the Qur'an and rejects any exegesis that would impute grave offences to the sinless, infallible prophets. When David asks for and receives divine forgiveness in the Qur'an, it is to pause very briefly, without dismissing it immediately, over the mere idea of such a sin.

(Jacques Jomier, *The Great Themes of the Qur'an* (SCM Press), p.82)

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If we pause slightly longer we notice subtle differences in the stories that may suggest significant differences in their interpretations. In the Bible it is clearly stated that David sinned in deed, and in the sheep story, the rich man had actually taken and slaughtered the poor man's ewe. In the Qur'an and Hadith, we are told that Da'ud committed an error and grieved and repented of it, and in the story, that the one brother had won the argument about the sheep. Whether he also received the sheep we are not told, though it is implied that he didn't. In the same way, we do not know at what point in the process of the error Da'ud repented, and in the same way we can assume that *that* is what the message is. We are not meant to know, and we do not need to know. As various Hadiths say, we should neither gossip nor speculate about someone's inner life, nor bear false witness. God alone knows what is in our hearts. Such an answerless question should make us reflect on the answer within ourselves, as Da'ud did finally, rather than project sin onto others, as he did when first told the story of the sheep.

The question that remains at the end of a comparison of the lives of David and Da'ud is: what purpose does it serve to hold on to versions of a life of a king, albeit one of the greatest, when they were written some four hundred years after his death and when they are so detailed in describing the sins of their subject? To believe them requires a leap of faith into believing that this hero was driven solely by base desires and the confidence of perpetual forgiveness, a credo that can hardly ennoble. By contrast, accepting the Qur'anic Da'ud means losing nothing of the essential glory of this first king of Israel, neither does it mean dismissing what may have been the weakest moment of his life. It merely means dismissing it from the central position it occupies in the biblical story. In terms of the current secular credo that holds that what you focus on expands, it allows the shadow to take on a manageable size, and to be seen as, ultimately, controllable, and certainly not amounting to 'sin'. The

alternative, of celebrating, as Israel did in 1996, three thousand years of Jerusalem as the 'capital of Israel' through the biblical story of David, is to enshrine this internal chaos as a source of national pride and identity, and to renounce both the wish and the possibility of moving on.

We find a similar disparity between their 'sons'. If the most striking difference between David in the Bible and Da'ud in the Qur'an is the intensity of the former's shadow, the most striking difference between Solomon and Suleyman is the intensity of the light of the latter. In the light of this, the Golden Era of the biblical Solomon becomes an untenable notion, and certainly not a basis for current Israeli policy. This, however, is not the case with the Golden Era of Suleyman. The implications of this are profound.

Most of the components of the stories of Solomon and Suleyman are shared: the wives, the wisdom, the Temple, the visit of the Queen of Sheba or Saba. However, what we find when we read the Bible story of Solomon is that it seems to miss the magic and majesty of Suleyman in the Qur'an, a splendour befitting a man who combined both prophecy and political power. To take just one example, in the almost universally known story of the two women and the baby, the biblical version names them as prostitutes.

In Jewish and Christian tradition these magical qualities only seem to exist in the Talmud and in Jewish legends of Solomon and to have survived in an underground form in Masonic ritual. One Jewish legend interestingly seems to contain expanded details of the Qur'anic story.

In fact, by the end of the Bible version, the Solomon we read about is seen as vain, greedy and foolish, and it is he who is seen as the chief reason why the united kingdom of Judea and Samaria splits apart. This is one of the problems Jews, and particularly Jewish Israelis, face in the rancorous 'Is the Bible true?' debate: 'Damned if it is, damned if it ain't'; and it has moved Paul Johnson, a Christian writer sympathetic to Jews, to say: 'Solomon was a secular person: a

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man of his world and age to the bottom of his heart, if he had a heart.' (Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*.)

Nonetheless, there are moments of majesty. Early on, the biblical Solomon has a dream in the course of which we realise that he is still a child. In the dream God asks what He shall give Solomon. Solomon replies:

'I am but a little child [...] And thy servant is in the midst of thy people whom thou hast chosen [...] Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this thy great people?' (1 Kings 3: 7-10)

God was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom rather than riches or the lives of his enemies, and said:

'Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I also give what you have not asked, both riches and honour.' (1 Kings 3: 12-13)

Though in the biblical story Solomon emerges very much without the latter, the spirit of the promise compares with Suleyman's prayer in the Qur'an: 'give me a kingdom the like of which no one else after me will ever have.' (38:35)

This is the same spirit we see in the two stories that show Suleyman improving on the judgement of his father. If Da'ud's reign was a glorious one, it was perhaps less so than that of his son, Suleyman. Da'ud was surely a wise king but there are two recorded instances in the Qur'an and Hadith of Da'ud giving a judgement that was improved upon by his young son. Once a man came to Da'ud complaining that the sheep of a neighbour had strayed in the night and grazed in his field. Da'ud initially decided that the sheep should be given to the wronged owner as compensation. However, the eleven-year old Suleyman decided that the owner should

only keep the sheep until he had received full compensation in the form of lambs, milk and wool, whereupon the sheep should be returned to their original owner. (21:78)

On another occasion, according to the Prophet Muhammad in a tradition transmitted by Abu Hurayra, there were two women who each had a child, but one of them was stolen by a wolf. They presented their case to Da'ud who found in favour of the older woman. When they went to Suleyman for his judgement he asked to be brought a knife that he might cut the remaining child in half so that they might share it. The younger woman immediately said: 'Don't do it! May God have mercy on you. It is her child!' Her instinctive selflessness showed her to be the real mother; so Suleyman found in favour of her.

The former story does not appear in the Bible, but the latter does in almost exactly the same form, except that the child is killed by one of the mothers rolling on to it; and, as mentioned above, there is the detail of the women being prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16). In a holy book it is surprising to find such a detail, but this is by no means the only appearance of prostitutes in the Bible. They appear, as here, as an incidental detail, and elsewhere as figures whose licentiousness is central to the story. It is as a metaphor, though, that harlotry appears most often, a metaphor that is used to describe the relationship of the Children of Israel and God, particularly in their worship of other gods (see Hosea 1:2; Leviticus 20:5; Judges 2:17; Jeremiah 3:1). Because of this, each narrative appearance serves as a reminder of this metaphor, and here is one at the heart of the most famous story of the most famous king, who was most famous for two things: his wisdom and his relationships with women.

In the latter of these two themes, both Bible and Hadith sources credit Suleyman with a large number of wives. Both traditions point to the wrongs that occurred as a result of this, but the wrongs are utterly different. For the Bible, the distinctive Israelite quality of Solomon's society was weakened by the number of non-Israelite wives Solomon

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married, including a Pharaoh's daughter and princesses of Moab, Ammon and Edom. According to the Bible, this was destined to bring about Solomon's fall from grace because, in his old age, he was sufficiently influenced by these wives to begin to worship other gods, so that he 'did evil in the sight of the Lord' (1 Kings 11:6), even building temples for many of them. Despite divine warnings, Solomon persisted, until God told him that after his death, the kingdom would be rent in two, although Jerusalem would be saved.

In the Islamic sources, it seems that like many of the Prophets, Suleyman is tested at his weakest point. How was this sovereign, perhaps the most blessed of all kings, to avoid imagining that all this power and splendour was a reward for his own merit? One night he proudly declared that he would sleep with seventy of his wives and that each of them would bear a son who would fight for God. A companion said to him, '*Insha'Allah*' ('God willing') but Suleyman did not say it; and—according to one Hadith—he forgot. No wife became pregnant that night except one who delivered 'half a child' (perhaps one that was stillborn), and this has been associated by some with an *aya* from the Qur'an: 'And We placed on his throne a body' (38:34). Another interpretation of this 'body' on the throne holds that Suleyman became very ill while at the height of his power, only to realise how weak he was and how dependant he was on the power of God. Whichever is true (and God knows best) it is when Suleyman realises his fault that he prays: 'My Lord, forgive me and give me a kingdom the like of which no one else after me will ever have. Verily art Thou the one who giveth.' (38:35) Thus, at the heart of the Islamic Suleyman's power is a humility that the biblical Solomon only shows in childhood.

Through his repentance, Suleyman found favour with God, and his wish was granted. If indeed some of these gifts became manifest after this incident, we can imagine that Suleyman had indeed passed the test. A further sign of this humility is to be found in the story of the ant. All Suleyman's

forces are on the march, men, *jinn*, birds, ‘all kept in order and ranks’ (27:17), and they arrive at a valley where there are many ants. One of the ants tells the rest to make haste to their habitations in case Solomon and his forces crush them by mistake. Suleyman, the greatest of kings, smiles at the speech and the respect of the ants, not because it is ridiculous or amusing, but because the greatest king on earth can also understand, and therefore see himself from the point of view of, one of the smallest creatures on earth. To the ants, he is a king who may heedlessly crush them, so his response is to pray for guidance, to pray that ‘I may work the righteousness that will please Thee’ (27:19) rather than do what might merely please great men.

It is through his relationship with animals, namely the hoopoe or *hudhud* bird, that Suleyman hears of the land of Saba, or Sheba, and of that country’s queen, Balqis. The bird tells him of the country’s riches and the queen’s glorious throne, but also of the queen and her people’s worship of the sun, so Suleyman sends the bird back to the queen with a letter calling her to God.

The queen, who rules over what is in many ways an enlightened kingdom, responds in her accustomed way by asking her council for guidance. They in turn defer to her judgement after saying that their country’s usual response is to wage ‘vehement war’. (27:33) She decides to send gifts to see what Suleyman sends in return; and what he sends is the gifts together with a Prophetic message:

‘Will ye give me abundance in wealth? That which God has given me is better than what He has given you! It is only you who rejoice in this gift. Go back to them, and be sure we shall come to them with such hosts as they shall never be able to meet.’ (27:36-37)

Because of this, the queen decides to take Suleyman at his word and comes to him in peace. To test her using a symbol of her own monarchical dignity and power, Suleyman

decides to have the queen's throne brought to his court. He would then disguise it to see if she recognised it. He asks his court for a volunteer able to bring the throne and was given two affirmatives, one from Ifrit, a large and powerful *jinn*, and one from an individual who had 'knowledge of the Book', both of whom said that they could bring the throne almost instantaneously. Even in this small detail, faced with the choice of the physical magic of the *jinn* and the spiritual 'magic' of the holy man, Suleyman chose the latter, thus confirming his intention to glorify God rather than himself.

When the Queen of Sheba arrived, she did indeed recognise the similarity of the throne, but she did so because she had been given knowledge in advance and had submitted to God. Many things had happened—she had recognised that Suleyman was a Prophet and that *his* gifts were God-given. She had consequently submitted to God, and now saw differently, with inner sight. Thus the throne looked, it is suggested, better.

Suleyman also tests the quality of her sight by commanding his builders to construct a lofty palace which has water flowing beneath a glass floor. When Balqis sees this, she instinctively raises the hem of her dress to avoid getting wet. When Suleyman tells her that the floor is paved with crystal, she thanks him instead of growing angry. Her words show that she is thinking beyond the mere outer appearance of the thing: 'O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul. I do submit, with Suleyman, to the Lord of the Worlds.' (27:44) The sincerity of her submission is tested and she too passes the test. As is the case with her erroneous worship of the sun, there is often more to matters than we first assume.

This story in the Bible has, unusually, fewer details but appears essentially the same. The Queen of Sheba had heard of Solomon's wisdom and of his name 'concerning the Lord' (1 Kings 10:1) so she came to test him with many hard questions. She also came with a huge retinue and gifts of gold, stones and spices. He answered all her questions and

when she had seen all the glory of his court and his worship of the Lord ‘there was no more spirit in her.’ (1 Kings 10:5) She had lost the battle of wills. Everything had surpassed her expectations, and she exclaimed: ‘Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel for ever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.’ (1 Kings 10:9) In return, she was given many gifts and returned home with them. Significantly, gifts play a significant part—they are not sent back—and the story ultimately merely confirms the ethnic specificity of ‘Solomon’s God,’ and does not lead to conversion.

Solomon’s greatest physical achievement was the building of the Temple for the Ark of the Covenant. This was most symbolic of, and in some ways the reason for, his glory. In the Bible, the Ark is sometimes described as containing the Ten Commandments (1 Kings 8:5), sometimes as containing the Commandments along with other relics of the Exodus (Hebrews 9:4), and sometimes as containing the presence of God himself (Numbers 10:35–36). 1 Kings 6 and 7 describe the building in great detail: its size; its style; how the stone was prepared at the quarry so that no sound of metal should be heard (1 Kings 6:7); its golden opulence; the two cherubim made of olive wood, ten cubits high, in the inner sanctuary and the carvings of cherubim that covered the woodwork; where and how the bronze basins and pots were made, and by whom (King Hiram of Tyre).

In the Qur’an there are echoes of these details as well as of the supernatural nature of the construction:

We caused a fount of copper to gush forth for him by permission of his Lord, and (We gave him) certain of the *jinn* who worked before him by permission of his Lord. And such of them as deviated from Our command, them We caused to taste the punishment of the flaming fire. They made for him what he willed: temples and statues,

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basins like wells and cauldrons built into the ground.  
(34:12-13)

Near the Dome of the Rock in the Haram al-Sharif stands a somewhat unprepossessing building named Suleyman's Throne. This commemorates the next verse, for it is said that it was here that Suleyman was sitting, leaning on his staff and watching the work of the temple nearing its completion, when he died:

And when We decreed death for him, nothing showed his death to them save a creeping creature of the earth which gnawed away his staff. And when he fell, the *jinn* saw clearly how, if they had known the unseen, they would not have continued in despised toil. (34:14)

And they would not have completed the Temple.

The Lord said: 'Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my ordinances and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.'  
(1 Kings 6:12-13)

Finally, when the Temple was completed, the Ark of the Covenant was carried up to the place and placed beneath the wings of the cherubim with great ceremony, with Solomon and the priests 'sacrificing (so many) sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered' (1 Kings 8:5). When it was in place, Solomon stood before the altar and, spreading forth his hands to heaven, he said: 'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above or earth beneath [...] keep with thy servant David what thou hast promised him.' Then, quoting David's last words to him, he said: 'There shall never fail you a man before me to sit upon

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the throne of Israel, if only your sons take heed to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.’ (1 Kings 8:23 & 25)

The temple was to be a special place for oath-taking and prayers, and would even have a universal mission. Solomon prayed:

‘When a foreigner, who is not of thy people Israel, comes from a far country for thy name’s sake (for they shall hear of thy great name, and thy mighty hand, and thy outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to thee, as do thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by thy name.’ (1 Kings 8:41-43)

This prayer about a single foreigner could be seen to refer to none other than the Prophet Muhammad, though this is hardly the current Jewish interpretation.

It is not, however, the spiritual aspect of the Temple that the Bible stresses so much as the physical and political. It describes how, as well as building the House of the Lord, which took seven years, Solomon spent thirteen years in constructing five other buildings as part of the complex: the House of the Forest of Lebanon, the Hall of Pillars, the Throne Room or Judgement Hall, his own palace, and a palace for his Egyptian wife. The Temple in the context of these was ‘more of a royal chapel, an adjunct to the palace, simply one of the buildings of state. The architectural symbolism which our text appears to allude to almost presents Solomon as Yahweh’s landlord than his tenant.’ (A. Graeme Auld, ‘Kings’, in *The Daily Study Bible*.)

Sometimes the religious and the political were reflections of each other. According to the Bible, the Ark of the Covenant was removed from the (lower) city of David to this higher place which marked the change of status of

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Jerusalem from local to central religious centre. The building of the Temple led to a centralisation of worship that was paralleled by a centralisation of political power. The army expanded enormously, with huge chariot and cavalry regiments being stationed in the chariot cities of the kingdom, as well as in Jerusalem (1 Kings 10:26). Local tribal ties weakened as people looked towards, and paid increased taxes to, the centre, a phenomenon that affected both Israelites and the old Canaanite population. As the latter assimilated themselves into Israelite society so too did Israelite society absorb some of their ways. Foreign trade also brought foreign customs. All this, and the foreign wives and their foreign gods mentioned above, the increase in taxes, the involvement of Israelites in forced labour, the creation of a new rich Jerusalem elite at the expense of the old local upper class and a growing gap between rich and poor are the reasons the Bible gives for the kingdom's decline after Solomon's death.

However, surprisingly, these are not ultimately what he is remembered for, because the biblical Solomon is most famous for the wealth and extent of his kingdom, and for his wisdom. Though the Bible does not say anything about any magical qualities, Solomon is also often credited with supernatural powers. (The Talmud evolves a whole literature on this, but that is another story.)

For all this, though, by the end of the biblical account it really becomes necessary to remind ourselves that this is a golden era, because the glory of Solomon has been irredeemably tarnished by his chroniclers in the Bible. His image there is one of a man whose spirit was prostituted to idols, given to overweening power and lust, weaknesses that created a kingdom whose structure simply collapsed when the king died.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> However, it is on these foundations, literally and metaphorically, that many religious Israeli Jews wish to have their third Temple built. They await the finding of a pure red heifer whose sacrifice will restore the ritual

Like his father David, the biblical Solomon is an archetype who conforms to the twin streams of human possibilities, a meeting of saint and sinner, monotheist and pagan, servant and overblown triumphalist.

Solomon is all too human. His magical qualities, missing in the Bible, appear in the Talmud and in Jewish legend and play a symbolic role in freemasonry. In the latter we meet a familiar idea: 'Whenever anything is perceived in such a way that it appears to exist separate from its divine source, its complement also appears to exist to provide a balance for it.' (W. Kirk MacNulty, *Freemasonry: A Journey Through Ritual and Symbol*.)

In all these ways, a tolerance of evil has pervaded Judeo-Christian culture—even black magic draws on Solomonic images and rituals—and somewhere at its heart lies this debased Solomonic Jerusalem. (Was it by coincidence that the identifying number on Israeli Jerusalem car number plates used to be 666?) If the finest can breed such a legacy, what hope is there for the rest?

Logically, but ironically enough, Jews and Christians can only glorify Solomon by letting go of Solomon and embracing Suleyman. Both the Bible and the Qur'an agree on this main point: Solomon's reign was the highest point in Jewish history. 'None like you shall arise after you' (1 Kings 3: 13) as God told him, and 'Give me a kingdom the like of which no one else after me will ever have' (Qur'an 38:35), as Suleyman asked. It was an unrepeatable time. What Jews

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purity of the site where the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa prayer hall now stand. In the end (and this phrase could be taken quite literally), there is a paradox confronting those who would rebuild the Temple and reinstate the glory of Solomon through the blood of animal sacrifice. It seems profoundly undignified to countenance the destruction of the Muslim building, which is at once 'Israel's' most unmistakable landmark and a building which is unique in being a monument to transcendent monotheism (Israel's Millennium Dome indeed!), to erect a holy slaughterhouse.

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have been Chosen for, what they have been brought back to Palestine for, cannot be its repetition.

Rather, it is Solomon's prayer concerning 'a foreigner, who is not of thy people Israel (who) comes from a far country for thy name's sake [...] and prays toward this house,' (1 Kings 8:41) that we should heed. There were to be no more like Solomon, not from the House of Israel anyway. By the time one came, may peace and blessings be on him, the House of Israel would have run its course in establishing the worship of the One God in the Holy Land. That legacy would now be carried by one from the House of Ishmael. The Prophet Muhammad's successor, 'Umar, would actually take Jerusalem, and it was under him that a simple wooden mosque was built on the place of the Prophet's Night Journey and ascension to the heavens. (The Dome of the Rock was built sixty years later.) Coincidentally perhaps, this is the third holiest place of worship in Islam; so there are, in fact, two reasons that we, as Muslims, believe that the third Temple has already been built.

This is not to say that the role of the Jews as Chosen People has ended. What it does mean is that the term 'Chosen' needs a different spin. Their role is exemplary, their covenant conditional. The rest of us can see what happens in any situation when we do not submit, when we give too much to our egos. The Jews may yet bring more blessings to humanity, God willing, but the fact that this will fail to happen in the way that has been traditionally expected does not ensure that the new way will not be right. Or good.