Solomon, the Queen of Sheba and the Invention of Epigraphic South Arabian

John F. Hobbins
ancientthebrewpoetry.typepad.com

The title of this post is a take-off on a book by Seth Sanders entitled *The Invention of Hebrew* (reviewed [here](ancientthebrewpoetry.typepad.com)). In the latest issue of BAR, André Lemaire introduces a new inscription in epigraphic South Arabian, Sabaic (Sabaean) to be exact, which mentions a trade expedition to “Dedan, [Gaz]a, and the towns of Judah.” The text mentions a “war of Chaldea and Iawan [Ionia].” For reasons unclear, Lemaire dates the text to 600 BCE on that basis (he takes up the question in a forthcoming article; bibliography below).

The earliest Sabaic inscriptions date to the 9th – 8th cent. BCE. It is striking that the invention of Early Standard Hebrew, Early Standard Aramaic, and Early Standard Sabaic belong to the same time frame. A cultural and linguistic* continuum that stretched 2,000 miles from modern-day Yemen to northern Syria and northern Mesopotamia in the Iron Age is coming into sharper focus.

According to Lemaire, the nucleus of the story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit with Solomon reproduced in 1 Kings 10:1-13 “was probably written down toward the end of the tenth century B.C.E” (2010:55). A shocking conclusion to those who have come to think of the narratives about Saul, David, and Solomon in the Bible as on a par with historical romances we know from the Hellenistic period (Esther, Daniel, Judith, and Tobit). It cannot be said that the relatively high degree of historical verisimilitude Lemaire associates with 1 Samuel – 2 Kings (“once the few later edits are peeled away”) is an incontestable hypothesis. But it is a feasible hypothesis.

This is an exciting time to be a student of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean of the period stretching from the 12th to 6th cent. BCE. The formation of a patchwork of polities with distinctive languages and writing practices from southernmost Arabia (Sabaic, Minaic, and Qatabanic) to northwestern-most Syria (Zencirli; Ya’udi/Samal) to the headwaters of the Habur river in northern Mesopotamia (Sikkan/Tell Fekheriyeh) is coming into sharper focus. The floruit and demise of these polities belong almost without exception to the 8th to 6th cent. BCE.

In that time-frame, from the standpoint of a king or countryman for whom Zion/Jerusalem was the epicenter of existence, what did the world look like politically?

The following texts give us partial but probably trustworthy snapshots: 9th-8th cent.: Ps 60 (Philistia, Moab, and Edom); 8th cent.: Amos 1:2-2:16 (Aram Damascus, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah, and Israel); 8th-7th cent.: Ps 87 (Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Phoenicia, and Cush); 586 BCE: Ezek 25-32 (Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia; Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt). Prior to the monarchy and before the Philistine city-states pursued a policy of containment and expansion: Judges 5 (various tribes of Israel over against a coalition of Canaanite city-states).

A 6th cent. Tyrian perspective: Ezek 27 (Lebanon, northern Transjordan, Egypt, Cyprus, Sidon, Arvad, and Byblos; mercenary troops from Persia, Lydia, and Lybia; Asia Minor including Ionia and Armenia; a line in the interior inclusive of northwest Arabia (Dedan) and Aram as far as Helbon N of Damascus; Arabia as far as Kedar; cities within
the Syrian interior (Harran, Canneh, and Eden); finally, an outer perimeter: southernmost Arabia (Sheba, the Sabaean polity), Assyria, and Media (Chilmad).

The Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions (CSAI) is taking shape under the direction of Alessandra Avanzini: go here. Sabaic inscriptions are for the most part not yet included.


An André Lemaire Bibliography Relevant to the Questions at Hand


Other Relevant Bibliography


Epigraphic South Arabian Introductory Bibliography