Southern Arabia is 1,200 miles south of Israel. Naturally, skepticism about the reality of trade between South Arabia and Israel in ancient times seems justified. Yet the Bible documents this trade quite extensively—most famously in the supposed affair between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. And the land of Sheba is referred to two dozen times in the Hebrew Bible. Without addressing the historicity of the personal relations between Solomon and the queen of this South Arabian kingdom (or queendom?), I think it can be shown that the international trade between Judah and southern Arabia very probably existed as early as the latter half of the tenth century B.C.E.—the time of King Solomon.

Well-known neo-Assyrian texts document South Arabian trade with the Middle Euphrates region as early as the beginning of the ninth century B.C.E.¹ and archaeologists have persuasively argued that international trade between the southern Levant and South Arabia began at the end of the second millennium B.C.E.²

Moreover, a critical study of 1 Kings 10:1–10:13, the story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon, reveals that once the few later redactions (edits) of the text are peeled away, the core text was probably written toward the end of the tenth century B.C.E.³ This core text—the
A RECORD OF SHEBA’S TRADE WITH JUDAH. This fragmented and broken but well-preserved 25-line South Arabian inscription mentions, among other things, a trading expedition of the kingdom of Sabaea (Biblical Sheba) to ‘HGR YHD, the “towns of Judah” (see detail below). Believed to date to around 600 B.C.E., the inscription confirms Judah’s role in a lucrative Arabian trade that is alluded to several times in the Bible.

Likely a memorial inscription that originally hung on the wall of a temple, the bronze plaque inscription was written in the distinctive South Arabian script by Sabahhumu, an official messenger of the Sabaean king. The inscription is broken, and only three large pieces from the top of the inscription have been preserved. Although the lower part is missing, parts of at least 25 lines of the inscription are extant. The inscription is written in Sabean, the language of the South Arabian kingdom of Sabaea (Sheba) and adjacent areas. It is written in the South Arabian alphabet.

The inscription is surrounded by a typical South Arabian frieze: The top part originally contained six ibex heads, five of which have fully or partially survived (for more about the ibex in South Arabian art, see p. 88 of this issue). The two lateral friezes each depict several men in Assyrian dress. The author of the text is a man named Sabahhumu from the South Arabian city of Nashq, an ancient and long-known site now called Al-Bayda. Sabahhumu thanks the main Sabaean god Almaqah for having saved him from many dangers, especially in wars, and he dedicates all of the inscription to the god.
Arabian letters have been recovered from Iron Age sites in Israel. In the City of David, three pottery sherds, including this jar fragment inscribed with a monogram character spelling the name khn (above left), were found in levels dating to the early sixth century B.C.E. At the major trading center of Beer-sheba in southern Israel, one end of a small rectangular limestone block—possibly an unfinished stamp seal—was carved with three letters (Ah, or “priest”) surrounded by an incised frame (above center). At the nearby Iron Age caravanserai of Aroer in the Negev, excavators found a sherd inscribed with the South Arabian letter h (above right). Could these brief inscriptions have been left by the Sabanean merchants who were responsible for leading the trade caravans to the “towns of Judah”?

Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple in 587/6 B.C.E. Lily Singer-Avitz has already argued that the archaeological excavations at Beer-sheba reveal traces of the South Arabian trade from at least as early as the eighth century B.C.E., especially as evidenced by a probable South Arabian graffito. And a chiselled Sabanean letter has also been discovered in Aroer, a site located at a major crossroads in the Negev. In addition, excavations in Jerusalem uncovered at least one clear fragmentary South Arabian inscription and two probable ones dating to the city’s 587/6 B.C.E. destruction. Ezziel describes this international trade at some length (Ezekiel 27). In a prophecy against the Phoenician city of Tyre, he refers to merchants of “Judah and the land of Israel” (Ezekiel 27:17). The prophet then mentions Dedan, a city in northern Arabia that was known as a source of coarse woolens for saddlecloths (Ezekiel 27:20). In the new bronze inscription, “Dedan” is again identified as a destination in this international trade. This oasis was on the caravan route from South Arabia to Gaza and Judah, as explicitly mentioned in the new inscription. And Ezziel also mentions merchants of Sheba (Ezekiel 27:22).

If the past is any guide, we can expect more inscriptions documenting trade between South Arabia and Judah. Perhaps this new inscription is only the beginning. But even at this point, it seems clear that the Bible’s reference to trade between southern Arabia, the kingdom of Judah and the southern Levant is no myth.

Belles-Lettres (Paris).

7 Gaza is also mentioned later in Minaean inscriptions, in similar contexts, thereby making the reconstruction here quite certain.


10 Bron, ibidem, p. 51.
