



King Solomon's Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire

Timothy Alborn

To cite this article: Timothy Alborn (2015) King Solomon's Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire, Journal of Victorian Culture, 20:4, 491-508, DOI: [10.1080/13555502.2015.1090672](https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2015.1090672)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2015.1090672>



Published online: 09 Oct 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

[Timothy Albarn. (Dec. 01, 2015). King Solomon's Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire, Vol. 20, 2015, No. 4, pp. 491-508, Journal of Victorian Culture, Routledge. Source: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2015.1090672>]

King Solomon's Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire

Timothy Albarn

I. Introduction

The transition from a British 'trading-post empire' in Asia and Africa to an empire forged by annexation is well enough known, as is the institutional alliance between 'commerce and Christianity' that accompanied that transition, and many historians have drawn connections between the two.¹ Scholars have also observed the centrality of the Bible to British Protestantism: by identifying denominational variants in Bible-reading, connecting commercial family bibles with Victorian domesticity, and comparing British and German Old Testament criticism.² This article asks how Victorians made sense of their empire by referring to the Bible, one of their most important travelling companions. To help in this task I take the case of King Solomon, whose actions could be interpreted either as commercial or colonial, and whose exploitation of the mineral wealth of the mysterious land of Ophir appeared to Victorians both to vindicate their own imperial success and to provide a guide for rediscovering the original source of that wealth. The Victorians' quest for Ophir hence reveals strong links between their ambivalent celebration of globalization, whether via trade or conquest, and their obsession with the Bible – links which scholars have rarely addressed directly.³

1. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 6 (1953), 1–15; Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Stewart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in the United Kingdom 1815–1914* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008), pp. 139–213; Brian Stanley, 'Commerce and Christianity: Providence Theory, the Missionary Movement, and the Imperialism of Free Trade, 1842–1860', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 71–94; and Andrew Porter, "'Commerce and Christianity': The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth-Century Missionary Slogan', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), pp. 597–621.
2. Scott Mandelbrote and Michael Ledger-Lomas, *Dissent and the Bible in Britain, c.1650–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003); John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 147–291.
3. Exceptions include *Cities of God: The Bible and Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by David Gange and Michael Ledger-Lomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Carpenter briefly touches on the Family Bible's colonial context in *Imperial Bibles*, pp. 49–53.

Ophir, which provided King Solomon with vast supplies of gold, ivory, timber, and exotic animals, had propelled Columbus and his Portuguese contemporaries on their transoceanic voyages; interest in Ophir again surged after 1790, as British readers speculatively mapped their widely dispersed commercial expansion against Solomon's possible trade routes. After 1860, Victorians came closer to achieving a consensus about the location of Ophir: first in India, where the handover of power from the East India Company to the Raj sealed that region's transition from trading partner to exploited colony; then, after 1880, in southern Africa, when reports of ancient gold mines accompanied glad tidings of great mineral wealth from that part of the world.⁴ This conjunction of events accompanied a major shift in Britain's relationship to its most precious metal: instead of acquiring gold in exchange for exports, Britons increasingly invested directly in gold mines, most of which resided in or near different corners of their vast empire.⁵ British access to gold, in short, mirrored its changing relationship to the world, from an 'empire of trade' to one increasingly marked by conquest and annexation.⁶ Yet the apparent discovery of Ophir in ancient Zimbabwe, popularized in late-Victorian novels, also replicated in microcosm the multinational Scramble for Africa – mainly due to the appearance on the scene of the German explorer Carl Peters, who hoped to discover Ophir by forming an Anglo-German corporation.

This shift in colonial practice accompanied a new sort of biblical exegesis. Whereas Solomon had once stood as the ultimate merchant-king, who traded with the world in order to glorify God, he emerged in the late nineteenth century as a great colonizer, who populated and exploited the ends of the earth. With this change in economic agency came a changing set of misgivings. Earlier observers balanced their celebration of Solomon's commercial might with his unholy levels of avarice and luxury. By the end of the century, these misgivings had faded, only to be replaced by concerns that Solomon's imperial conquests needed to be 'rebooted' to wipe away the stain of slavery. In both cases, and with more than a whiff of anti-Semitism, Victorians contrasted the Old Testament figure of Solomon with New Testament teachings. Investigating Victorian interpretations of Ophir hence demonstrates not only how the Bible informed their imperial hopes and dreams, but also shows how their encounters in Asia and Africa directly shaped the way they read the Bible.

Nearly all scholarly attention to Ophir has focused on its alleged rediscovery in southern Africa after 1870. In particular, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*

4. For a good survey of discussions of Ophir from the time of Columbus to the present day see Steven Weitzman, *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 113–32.

5. Martin Lynch, *Mining in World History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), chapters 3 and 5.

6. Although this standard view has been complicated in recent years, most notably by a 'gentlemanly capitalist' perspective that stresses continuity across the nineteenth century owing to the sustained involvement of financiers, the case of gold is generally consistent with a shift from trade to annexation; since, through the 1870s, commodity exports propped up the gold standard by attracting bullion, whereas after that point 'invisible exports' from investment and insurance, combined with direct imports of gold from Australia and South Africa, rendered free trade less a concern to City financiers. See, for instance, Peter J. Cain and Anthony G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 114–28 (on the gold standard and free trade), pp. 216–27 (on Australia), and pp. 318–27 (on South Africa).

(1885) has prompted literary critics to provide both context and critique of that novel's sources and widespread impact. Laura Chrisman, for instance, usefully reads it as both a 'mythic [...] reincarnation of an ancient mining system' and 'an evolutionary progression beyond that system'; Gerald Monsman and Heidi Kaufman, among others, have developed this point with substantial context surrounding Haggard's landscapes and characters.⁷ Missing from nearly all these accounts is an appreciation of the decades of prior debate on the location and religious significance of Ophir, which Haggard and his contemporaries directly addressed in their own speculations. Nor, with rare exceptions, have literary critics treated debates over Solomon's gold as the *multinational* affair that Peters's involvement signalled.⁸ Besides introducing these layers, my account also emphasizes the gap between the wishful narratives of Haggard and other novelists, whose Solomonic treasure maps never failed to deliver the promised gold or diamonds, and the near absence of actual mineral wealth yielded by real-life hunts for Ophir. In this regard, as in Victorian efforts to find moral lessons in Solomon's career, a literal reading of the Old Testament often proved to be a double-edged enterprise.

II. King Solomon's trade: The British hunt for Ophir, 1790–1850

Conveniently for Britons before 1850 who conceived of their relations with the world as mainly commercial, the Bible described Solomon as a merchant-king. In 1 Kings 9 it is reported that Hiram, the Phoenician king in Tyre, furnished Solomon with 'gold, according to all his desire,' along with cedar and fir trees; later in the same chapter Ophir is identified as the source of the gold and the quantity is stated to be 420 talents.⁹ The amount of gold, again shipped by Hiram's navy from Ophir, increases to 666 talents in the next chapter, which states the length of the journey (three years), an additional port (Tarshish), and adds to Solomon's inventory almug trees, 'precious stones', apes, peacocks, ivory, and silver.¹⁰ Later in 1 Kings, we find Solomon's descendant Jehoshaphat also seeking gold from Ophir, but failing when his ships are 'broken at Eziongeber'. The same book also hints at a trading partnership between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which is apparently confirmed in Ezekiel.¹¹

7. Laura Chrisman, 'The Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse', *Critical Quarterly*, 32 (1990), 36–58 (p. 50); Gerald Monsman, *H. Rider Haggard on the Imperial Frontier: The Political and Literary Contexts of his African Romances* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2006), pp. 72–101; Heidi Kaufman, 'King Solomon's Mines? African Jewry, British Imperialism, and H. Rider Haggard's Diamonds', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33 (2005), 517–39. See also Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 167–68; and Lindy Stiebel, 'Creating a Landscape of Africa: Baines, Haggard and Great Zimbabwe', *English in Africa*, 28 (2001), 123–33.

8. An exception is Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 79–103.

9. 1 Kings 9. 11–14, 28. All references to the Bible are to the King James Version, the most frequently cited during the period covered in this article.

10. 1 Kings 10. 12–14, 22–25. The account in 1 Kings 9–10 is repeated with minor variations in 11 Chronicles 8. 16 (in which the initial shipment of gold is stated to be 450 talents) and 9. 10–13, 21–24.

11. 1 Kings 22. 48 and 10. 2, 11; Ezekiel 27. 22.

Grasping these slender reeds, scholars and explorers spent centuries pondering Ophir's whereabouts. Ophir routinely appeared on the earliest maps of the world, and in 1492 Columbus was convinced that he had successfully retraced the route taken by Hiram's fleet; in 1503 he placed Ophir in present-day Panama, where he hoped to rebuild Solomon's temple.¹² Ophir subsequently reappeared in Peru, Armenia, Oman, Ceylon, Indonesia, Burma, the Gold Coast, or Sofala (on the Mozambique coast), often depending on which region its discoverers were exploring, or which faith they defended. The Portuguese chronicler Thomas Lopez convinced himself that Ophir was in Mozambique after wintering there with Vasco da Gama in 1502, and a century later the Catholic theologian Thomas Bozio located it in Peru by way of sanctioning the Spanish conquest of South America.¹³

By the mid-eighteenth century, the geopolitical edge had worn off the debate over Ophir's whereabouts, although theologians continued to argue about it relentlessly. What had devolved into an arcane battle of exegetes began to reappear in decidedly non-theological colours after 1780, and kept pace with British expansion in the decades that followed. In their headlong pursuit of new markets, British explorers and merchants – Bible firmly in hand – imagined each port of call as a potential rediscovery of Ophir, which would thereby yield untold treasure and also single them out as following in Solomon's footsteps. The African explorer James Bruce set the tone in 1790 by inserting a lengthy brief on behalf of Mozambique in his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*; William Hutton, returning from a diplomatic summit with the King of Ashanti in 1820, argued that 'the Gold Coast is the Ophir of Solomon'.¹⁴ Other Ophir-hunters set their sights on India and points east. John Macdonald, who surveyed Sumatra for the East India Company in the 1790s, was sure this was where Solomon found his gold, while in 1803, seven years into Britain's occupation of Ceylon, the maritime historian James Stanier Clarke identified it as the 'celebrated and mysterious country' of Ophir.¹⁵

12. James Romm, 'Biblical History and the Americas: The Legend of Solomon's Ophir, 1492–1591', in *Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1400–1800*, ed. by Paolo Bernadini and Norman Fiering (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), pp. 27–43; Delno C. West, 'Christopher Columbus, Lost Biblical Sites, and the Last Crusade', *Catholic Historical Review*, 78 (1992), 533–36.

13. T. H. Elkiss, 'Sofala Thought Ophir: An Exploration of Historical Fact and Fantasy in Southeastern Africa', in *Studies in the African Diaspora: A Memorial to James R. Hooker (1929–1976)*, ed. by John P. Henderson and Harry A. Reed (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1989), pp. 87–97; Scott T. Carroll, 'Solomonic Legend: The Muslims and the Great Zimbabwe', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21 (1988), 233–47 (p. 241).

14. James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1790), I, 435–45; William Hutton, *A Voyage to Africa: Including a Narrative of an Embassy to One of the Interior Kingdoms, in the Year 1820* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821), p. 212. Hutton was quoting (and implicitly endorsing) the German botanist Paul Erdmann Isert, who spent three years in Accra in the 1780s.

15. John Macdonald, 'On the Gold of Limong', *Asiatic Researches*, 1 (1799), 336–39; James Stanier Clarke, *The Progress of Maritime Discovery: From the Earliest Period to the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1803), p. lxxxi.

At one level, such diversity of opinion, combined with a striking correlation between alleged Ophirs and British trade, reveals an anachronistic effort to seek biblical legitimation. A reviewer of Clarke noticed this tendency when he wryly observed that George III had apparently dispatched his warships 'to protect the possessions of his good ally, King Solomon, against the machinations of Tippoo Saib, Bonaparte, and Nebuchadnezzar'.¹⁶ Although such ploys built on a distinguished tradition of Bible-aided boosterism, they often failed to withstand even cursory criticism. When a travel writer reasoned that 'Ophir, or Afer, was no other than Ava', following British incursions into that Burmese kingdom in the 1820s, a critic scoffed at the 'mere etymological inquirers and polyglot-tists' who mistook 'ocular resemblance [...] as a mark of identity'.¹⁷ James Bruce fared no better with his elaborate navigational proof that Hiram's fleets would take exactly three years to make the round trip to Mozambique: a rival Egyptologist soon retorted that all the Arab traders he knew easily made the journey in less than a year.¹⁸

Notwithstanding all the squabbling and questionable evidence, the newfound interest in Ophir reflected a sustained effort to find biblical precedence for an empire that valued Christian commerce over the imperious extraction of wealth. Isaac Taylor noted that 'Solomon saw the advantage of commerce, and employed his wealth in endeavouring to obtain a share of it' and an earlier writer emphasized that Solomon 'did not pretend to any royalty over Ophir', but rather 'obtained his gold, &c. in a mercantile manner, by exchange'.¹⁹ As the century progressed, new variants on this theme emerged. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 occasioned an interest in 'legitimate trade' to take its place in Africa, prompting abolitionists to identify Ophir with the Portuguese slave colony of Mozambique. A new focus on that region's once and future gold, they hoped, would bless it with 'the communion of civilization'.²⁰

Closely related to their celebration of Solomon's commercial wisdom, most of these Ophir theorists endorsed Hiram's merchant marine in order to draw parallels with Britain's own maritime fleet. This identification was doubly vicarious, since Hiram's Phoenician crews were merely God's chosen navigators, not His chosen people – but it was for that very reason all the more popular, since Christian Britain likewise stood at one remove from Judea. Bruce concluded that Tyre must have possessed 'the best ships and sailers [*sic*] of their age', and a Lancashire historian, considering Hiram's

16. *The Annual Review, and History of Literature for 1803*, ed. by Arthur Aikin, 3 vols (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1804), II, p. 20.

17. John Ranking, 'An Attempt to Prove that Ava was the Ophir of Solomon', *Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature, and Arts*, 26 (1828), 141–47 (p. 142); 'Ophir and Ava', *Asiatic Journal*, 26 (1828), 572–74 (p. 573).

18. Bruce, *Travels*, I, pp. 435–40; Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia: And Travels into the Interior of that Country, Executed under the Orders of the British Government, in the Years 1809 and 1810* (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1816), pp. 99–103.

19. Isaac Taylor, *Scenes of Commerce, by Land and Sea* (London: John Harris, 1830), p. 318; Charles Taylor, *Scripture Illustrated, by Means of Natural Science* (London: Charles Taylor, 1814), p. 105.

20. 'Trade of Eastern Africa', *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 2 (1847), p. 159; 'Africa', *Sharpe's London Journal*, 13 (1851), 129–33 (p. 129).

accomplishments, boasted that ‘Liverpool must become the Tyre of modern history.’²¹ Without directly referring to Ophir, the Scottish historian David Macpherson captured this generally positive perspective when he wrote that wherever they went, the Phoenicians ‘established peaceful commercial settlements, mutually beneficial to themselves and to the natives of the country.’²²

Comparisons between the commercial success of Judea and Britain accompanied ample misgivings. Solomon’s own ‘vanity and vexation’ regarding his wealth, as recorded in Ecclesiastes, reinforced these second thoughts, as did a suspicion of the corrosive effects of mercantile wealth: one minister worried that the ‘riches brought to Solomon by his Indian fleet’ yielded ‘artificial glory’ but left his people mired in ‘slavery and oppression.’²³ Similar ambivalence surfaced regarding the ultimate purpose of much of Solomon’s gold: to glorify God by constructing a temple gleaming with walls, floors, doors, candlesticks, cherubim, and altars, all ‘overlaid with gold’ from Ophir.²⁴ Although some British Protestants did call Solomon’s temple ‘the most magnificent structure ever erected upon the earth’ and noted that it ‘filled the surrounding nations with wonder’, most perceived a slippery slope from its ‘gorgeous magnificence’ to the ‘costly pageantry’ of modern-day Mughal temples and Catholic cathedrals.²⁵

The most common response to all such mixed feelings was to distinguish clearly between Solomon’s Old Testament kingdom and the Kingdom of Christ. The Evangelical Anglican minister William Goode put this contrast in no uncertain terms, arguing that Jesus ‘can clothe and enrich the poor, the blind, the naked, with gold tried in the fire [...] that shall never fail’, and that shone with more glory ‘than all the gold and silver that blazed round the walls of the temple of Solomon, and dazzled the eyes of the astonished worshippers within its courts.’²⁶ This contrast between Solomon’s earthly gold and Jesus’s never-failing variety performed the useful work of enabling British readers of the Bible to think ceaselessly about gold while simultaneously distancing themselves from its accompanying connotations of plunder and greed.

III. An Indian interregnum, 1850–1875

For the two decades between the mid-century gold rushes and the discovery of ancient South African gold fields, King Solomon’s gold mines remained a topic of occasional, if

21. Bruce, *Travels*, I, p. 441; Cyrus Redding, *An Illustrated History of the County of Lancashire* (London: How and Parsons, 1842), p. 125.

22. David Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce, Manufactures, Fisheries, and Navigation*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: Mundell and Son, 1805), I, p. 21.

23. Ecclesiastes 1. 14 (also 2. 11 and 2. 17), quoted in Joseph Reeve, *Practical Discourses upon the Perfections and Wonderful Works of God*, 2 vols (Dublin: P. Byrne, 1796), I, p. 219; Hugh Mitchell, *Strictures on the Political Condition of the Jews* (Glasgow: J. Mennons, 1794), p. 10.

24. I Kings 6. 20–35 and 7. 48–50.

25. Joseph Benson, *A Sermon Preached at the Opening of a New Chapel, Belonging to the Methodists* (Hull: G. Prince, 1788), p. 4; Thomas Priestley, ‘Some Remarks on the Prayer of Solomon’, *The Christian’s Magazine*, 2 (1791), 314–18 (p. 317); ‘Of Ancient Works of Art’, *Director*, 2 (1807), pp. 134–35.

26. William Goode, *Essays on all the Scriptural Names and Titles of Christ*, 6 vols (London: L. B. Seeley, 1822), IV, p. 136.

somewhat waning, speculation. Owing to their distance from Judea, neither California nor Australia emerged as new contenders for the location of Ophir, although a handful of creative anachronists gave it their best shot.²⁷ South Asia, meanwhile, consolidated its position as the most likely location of Ophir, mainly owing to new arguments brought forth by German philologists and geographers. The Norwegian-German Orientalist Christian Lassen started this trend in 1844 when he announced in his *Indische Altertumskunde* that the original Hebrew words for the ivory, apes, and peacocks mentioned in 1 Kings were borrowed from Sanskrit, inferring that the goods also came from India. Max Müller quoted Lassen and added the algum tree to his list in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861), in which he assured his London audience that ‘the country in which [Sanskrit] was spoken must have been the Ophir of the Bible.’ Carl Ritter echoed this view in his *Comparative Geography of Palestine*, which was translated into English and ‘adapted to the use of Biblical students’ in 1866, placing Ophir on the coast of present-day Pakistan.²⁸

Capitalists, tourists, and missionaries in South Asia were all happy to follow the Germans down this path. Charlotte Manning cited Lassen in the course of tracing Indian exports back to ‘Jerusalem in the days of King Solomon,’ and the Anglican historian Arthur Stanley cited Ritter and Müller in order to link Solomon’s Indian trade with Britain’s parallel commercial success in the Elizabethan age.²⁹ En route to Australia in 1875, Anthony Trollope appealed to ‘they who are learned in such matters’ to identify Ceylon with Tarshish, in order to urge the government to improve the port on the south coast of the island.³⁰ And the Travancore missionary Samuel Mateer cited the Tamil origin of the word for peacocks used in the Bible, along with ‘widely distributed’ gold in western India, to conclude that ‘Solomon’s ships were the first “East Indiamen”’.³¹

A final flurry of speculation regarding an Indian Ophir surfaced in 1880, after which point most British discussions of King Solomon’s mines turned to South Africa. The source of this interest, and the reason for its brief duration, paralleled in microcosm the transition from trade to direct investment in mining that the later South African debates exemplified.³² It began with the discovery of gold in Malabar in 1874, followed five years later by the formation of dozens of mining companies. Reporting the appearance of ancient ‘shafts and addits’ near the mines, the British financial press endorsed

27. On California see John Cumming, *Expository Readings on the Books of Kings* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1859), pp. 73–74. On Australia see George F. Goble, *Australia, the Ancient Ophir, or, The Gold Mines of King Solomon; with other Australian Incidences* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1853).

28. Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), p. 190; Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1866), I, pp. 93–132.

29. Charlotte S. Manning, *Life in Ancient India* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1856), p. 156; Arthur Stanley, *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church. Part II. From Samuel to the Captivity* (London: John Murray, 1865), pp. 184–86.

30. *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 July 1875; quoted in Anthony Trollope, *The Tireless Traveler: Letters to the Liverpool Mercury, 1875* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 38.

31. Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People, with especial reference to Missionary Labour* (London: J. Snow and Co., 1871), p. 83.

32. See above, notes 5 and 6.

the company promoters' claims that these were 'the original mines of Ophir, whence King Solomon got his supplies of the precious metal' and drew the corollary that if 'such vast quantities of gold could have been extracted ages ago by the simple measures then used [...] much more now can be obtained with all the modern improvements of machinery and science'.³³ This 'pleasing association of ideas' between Ophir and Malabar appeared less pleasing when the stock-market bubble burst at the end of 1880.³⁴ The *Glasgow Herald*, remarking on a failed bank's £7 million held in South Indian mining shares, observed: 'We do not know about the peacocks and the monkeys, but we should as readily set them down as assets [...] as the gold of Wynaad or Ophir'.³⁵

This consensus in favour of an Indian Ophir, spanning as it did the transition from Company rule to the Raj, accompanied a transition away from prior readings of Solomon. In 'Unto this Last', John Ruskin appealed to Solomon's teachings from Proverbs as ammunition in his tirade against 'the spirit of modern Commerce' – in the process wilfully contradicting generations of earlier Solomon commentary that had closely identified him with British foreign trade.³⁶ Others recast Solomon as an Oriental despot, whose misdeeds needed to be acknowledged in order to be avoided. Edward Henry Palmer's *History of the Jewish Nation* praised the 'incalculable wealth' generated by Solomon's trade, but condemned his 'military displays', while the Baptist minister Philip Perfitt described Solomon as 'a sensualist in every sense of that term', who 'sought, with the greediness of the savage, after everything in the shape of glitter and colour that pleased the eye'. Perfitt concluded that Solomon had thereby failed to perform 'the mission of a king', which was 'to labour for the nation, to develope [*sic*] its resources, and to find his own happiness in the daily increasing prosperity of the subjects who bowed under his rule'.³⁷

Such readings, combined with the growing consensus that Solomon had found his gold in regions that Britain now governed directly, led many to conclude that the British Empire should not merely trade with these regions, but also fashion a less 'Oriental' version of Solomon's despotism. The appeal to modern technology as a sure means of improving on Solomon's mineral fortunes, which first surfaced in India, would recur in Africa, where signs of ancient Semitic settlement appeared to confirm his status as a colonizer and not just a merchant. If Solomon's economic activity provided British entrepreneurs with both a model and an incentive for improvement, his moral qualities

33. 'The Malabar Coast', *Friend of India*, 5 May 1880, p.397 (quoting the *Mining Journal*); 'Gold in India', *Leeds Mercury*, 21 February 1880, p.2. On the Malabar gold rush see Radhe Shyam Rungta, *The Rise of Business Corporations in India, 1851–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 136–47.

34. 'The Glasgow Bank and its Gold', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 19 June 1881, p.12.

35. *Glasgow Herald*, 1 October 1880, p.4 (on the City of Glasgow Bank). For context on the City of Glasgow failure see Timothy L. Alborn, 'The Moral of the Failed Bank: Professional Plots in the Victorian Money Market', *Victorian Studies*, 38 (1995), 217–20.

36. John Ruskin, 'Unto this Last': *Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy* (1860; New York: John Wiley and Son, 1872), pp. 63–66.

37. Edward Henry Palmer, *A History of the Jewish Nation: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: SPCK, 1874), pp. 90–92; Philip Perfitt, 'The Life and Career of Solomon', *The Pathfinder*, 5 (1861), 238–40 (p. 239).

similarly provided mid-century British missionaries with a double-edged sword. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has shown, missionaries such as John Colenso in Natal and James Long in Bengal embraced Solomon's 'Oriental' but still sufficiently Christian proverbial wisdom as a teaching tool, but struggled to prevent would-be converts from imitating his polygamy and addiction to luxury.³⁸

IV. Colonizing Africa, finding Ophir

Starting in 1868, Indian peacocks and monkeys gradually gave way to South African ruins in British discussions of Ophir's whereabouts. That year the German explorer Karl Mauch, accompanied by the elephant hunter Henry Hartley, encountered the site of Great Zimbabwe after learning about its likely location from a missionary friend.³⁹ Speculation linking Great Zimbabwe to 'the Scriptural Ophir' soon followed, and Mauch fanned these flames after a return trip when he reported that one of the ruins was 'an imitation of the Temple of Solomon' and another 'doubtless served as the habitation of the Queen of Sheba's suite'.⁴⁰ Although not all continental geographers endorsed these claims, with at least some suggesting that the ruins could easily have been of Bantu origin, these misgivings received little play in the British media.⁴¹

Mauch's announcement directly inspired four different sorts of British culture-producers to pin their fortunes on placing King Solomon's mines in South Africa. Archaeologists, adventure novelists, company promoters, and journalists all jumped on the Ophir bandwagon and rode it into the new century.⁴² At times they worked on their own, but more often they combined forces: archaeologists accepted commissions from mining and land companies, novelists wrote prefaces for the resulting treatises, and journalists continually blurred the boundaries between scientific inquiry, romance, and capitalism in the course of amplifying these claims.⁴³ The archaeology ultimately proved to be off by two millennia and the mining speculations (in alleged Ophirs, if not in South Africa more generally) mostly failed to pay; novelists (or at least Rider Haggard) and newspaper publishers fared better.

38. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire*, pp. 98–143, 205–12.

39. Arthur Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia: The White Conquest of Zimbabwe 1884–1902* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), pp. 11–15; Carroll, 'Solomonic Legend', pp. 237–39.

40. 'The Goldfields of South Africa', *London Times*, 7 September 1868, p.4 (quoting the *Natal Mercury*); 'The Ruins of Ophir', *Morning Post*, 1 January 1873, p.3 (translation of Mauch's letter to a Bremen newspaper, the *Weserzeitung*).

41. Daniel Tangri, 'Popular Fiction and the Zimbabwe Controversy', *History in Africa*, 17 (1990), 293–304 (p. 295).

42. Another contender in the Ophir stakes, Midian (in present-day Saudi Arabia) had the powerful endorsement of the explorer Richard Burton, and generated some press interest in the late 1870s, but lacked the prospect of financial gain: see Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 125–28.

43. On the fluid boundaries between economic, scientific, and literary discourse in this period see, for example, Albarn, 'The Moral of the Failed Bank' and Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

The immediate British response to Mauch's discovery offered a foretaste of what would later unfold in the 1880s and 1890s. British geographers and geologists were quick to endorse Mauch's theories about Great Zimbabwe. St. Vincent Erskine, whose father was the Colonial Secretary in Natal, accompanied Mauch on a follow-up visit to the site in 1869 and urged further exploration and possible annexation; Roderick Murchison, who had famously predicted the Australian gold rush in the 1840s, added that the quartz beds near Great Zimbabwe were 'precisely in that position in which, as a geologist, I should have expected to find gold'.⁴⁴ An adventure novel also surfaced that bore signs of Mauch's influence: Hugh Walmsley's *Wild Sports and Savage Life in Zulu Land*, which featured a missionary who spurns 'the gold fields of Solomon' across the Limpopo in order to discover lost 'cities of the grand old Egyptians' in the heart of Zululand.⁴⁵

Mining speculators took the hint, and in 1868 they began to scramble for claims. Four different companies secured rights to dig in the Limpopo valley, all of which had folded by 1875 – but not before leaving behind a pile of promotional literature that would set the tone for gold rushes to follow.⁴⁶ Augustus Lindley, who arrived in South Africa in October 1868 with four fellow 'victims to the gold fever', captured this short-lived excitement and subsequent disappointment in his mine-and-tell romance *After Ophir*. In Chapter One, a poster broadcasting 'the new gold fields of South Africa' sets his 'over-vivid imagination' loose on 'the mythic Queen of Sheba [...] Solomon's Temple; [and] "six hundred threescore and six talents of gold"'. Nearly 300 pages later, with no gold to show for his efforts, Lindley is less sanguine:

the vast quantity of gold carried by the fleets of Tharshish never came from such wretchedly poor places [...] from where it would take the result of something like a thousand years' crushing by one of the modern quartz-crushing machines to obtain anything like the golden freight in one fleet's cargo.⁴⁷

Renewed attention to Ophir came in 1885 from Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, which creatively combined various elements of Mauch's story. Besides locating Ophir squarely in southern Africa, both that novel and *Allan Quatermain*, a sequel published two years later, contributed to the growing consensus that Solomon had directly supervised the extraction of precious metals and gems from his mines, as opposed to trading for them from a distance. *King Solomon's Mines* opens with Quatermain describing Ophir as 'a country long since lapsed into the darkest barbarism' containing ores once mined by 'old Jewish or Phoenician adventurers', and concludes with his discovery, next to the diamonds that comprise the primary treasure in the tale, of gold pieces

44. St. Vincent W. Erskine, 'Journey of Exploration to the Mouth of the River Limpopo', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 39 (1869), 233–76 (pp. 265–66); Roderick Murchison, 'Address to the Royal Geographical Society', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 38 (1868), cxxxiii–cxcviii (p. clxxxiv). On Erskine's connection to Mauch see Jane Carruthers, 'Friedrich Jeppé: Mapping the Transvaal c. 1850–1899', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29 (2003), 955–76 (p. 967).

45. Hugh Mulleneux Walmsley, *Wild Sports and Savage Life in Zulu Land* (1869; London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1872), p. 36.

46. Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*, pp. 16–17.

47. Augustus Lindley, *After Ophir, or, A Search for the South African Gold Fields* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1870), p. 288.

‘with what looked like Hebrew characters stamped upon them’.⁴⁸ The sequel relocates Quatermain to the kingdom of Zu-Vendis, ‘a veritable El Dorado’ with ‘great veins of gold-bearing quartz’, populated by a race of white Africans whose ‘appearance and [...] habits are rather Jewish’.⁴⁹

Haggard’s location of Solomon and a crew of Phoenicians in southern Africa has invited interpretation from a number of different literary critics. For Laura Chrisman, the Phoenicians provide Haggard with ‘a flexible Oriental signifier’, serving as ‘a slippery third term mediating imperialism’s relation to black Africa’.⁵⁰ Heidi Kaufman similarly suggests that Haggard’s depiction of Solomon as ‘sexually degenerate and greedy’ justifies Quatermain’s plunder of his diamonds at the end of *King Solomon’s Mines* – and, by extension, British exploitation of African resources.⁵¹ Gerald Monsman, finally, supplements these readings by focusing on the Victorian fascination with comparative mythology, which Haggard absorbed through Max Müller’s linguistic studies and John Colenso’s biblical scholarship.⁵² All of these intermingled allusions – to ‘Oriental’ Phoenicians, to Solomon’s moral failings, and to Colenso and Müller – were part of the new imperial framework for interpreting Ophir that I have discussed above. They also contributed to Haggard’s reputation as a novelist, while his ability to package them in what his publisher called ‘The Most Amazing Book Ever Written’ did more than any other single volume to spread awareness of the new consensus on Solomon to a much wider audience.⁵³

If *King Solomon’s Mines* was a cultural force to be reckoned with, the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand region of the Transvaal in 1886 was an economic thunderbolt. Between 1886 and 1913, European investors poured more than £110 million into Witwatersrand, and company promoters were quick to try their luck in neighbouring regions.⁵⁴ In this context Mozambique, which had receded as a potential location of Ophir following Mauch’s discoveries further west, suddenly re-emerged as a potential bonanza. By 1890 six British firms had secured subcontracts with the Lisbon-based Mozambique Company – four of which pointedly featured ‘Ophir’ in their names – but none made much progress at sinking shafts.⁵⁵ One concession holder, John Stuart, rushed

48. H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885; London: Penguin Classics, 2008), pp. 20, 194.

49. H. Rider Haggard, *Allan Quatermain: Being an Account of his Further Adventures and Discoveries* (1887; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918), pp. 148, 150. For context and commentary see Norman A. Etherington, ‘Rider Haggard, Imperialism, and the Layered Personality’, *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1978), 71–87 (pp. 77–81).

50. Chrisman, ‘The Imperial Unconscious?’, p. 51.

51. Kaufman, ‘*King Solomon’s Mines*?’, pp. 535–36. Following Anne McClintock, Kaufman also suggests that Haggard’s ambiguous depiction of Solomon reflected ambivalence about his own Jewish ancestry; see pp. 528–29.

52. Monsman, *H. Rider Haggard*, pp. 86–87.

53. Poster by Cassell and Company, quoted in Monsman, *H. Rider Haggard*, p. 79.

54. Shula Marks, ‘Southern and Central Africa, 1886–1910’, in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. by John D. Fage and Roland A. Oliver, 8 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vi, 434.

55. Richard J. Hammond, *Portugal and Africa, 1815–1910: A Study in Uneconomic Imperialism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 148–49; John S. Galbraith, *Crown and Charter: The Early Years of the British South Africa Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 183–85; *Statist*, 17 August 1889, p. 180; Eric Allina, *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Mozambique* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), pp. 23–24.

into print a pamphlet on the region, predicting that it would only take ‘mechanical science and engineering skill to yield an amount of treasure which will sink into insignificance the vast quantities of gold which [...] the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon derived from this land of Ophir’.⁵⁶

In the wake of Witwatersrand, adventure stories returned to Haggard’s theme with newfound vigour. In *A Romance of N’Shabé* (1891), co-authored by the veteran Natal hunter Andrew Anderson, British and French explorers encounter ‘the handiwork of officers sent from Judea to develop [...] gold mines and build forts’; these are presided over by light-skinned N’Shabé, suspected of being ‘the lineal descendants of Solomon by his union with the Queen of Sheba’. These ‘Phoenician warriors [...] clad in short white tunics’ recount to the explorers how their forefathers had flocked to Africa to ‘intermarry with the natives’, while a smaller contingent of Jews arrived ‘to manage the gold mines bestowed on Solomon by his amorous Saabeian spouse’.⁵⁷ The penny dreadfuls followed suit. In ‘Three Chums [...] for Gold; for Wild Adventure’, published in the *Halfpenny Marvel* in 1896, a father assures his son that a sufficiently diligent search in South Africa would recover ‘rich gold and diamond mines [...] worked by the treasure-finders of two thousand years ago’.⁵⁸ The following year, *Pluck* imagined Leander Jameson, fresh from his unsuccessful raid on Transvaal, doubting the ‘many wild stories connecting South Africa with King Solomon’s Mines’, but concluding that ‘South Africa is the Ophir of to-day, so we cry quits’.⁵⁹

The Witwatersrand gold rush also prompted Cecil Rhodes to wonder if Solomon’s mines might hold the key to additional gold elsewhere in South Africa. This was his primary motivation for forming the British South Africa Company in 1889, which after winning a charter late that year proceeded to populate what would soon become Rhodesia.⁶⁰ As his self-styled ‘pioneers’ made their way north, Rhodes filled British newspapers with stories linking King Solomon with the fate of the new colony. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reported from Mashonaland in March 1890 that ‘gold peeps out from every hill-side’, and observed ‘strange broken relics’ of ancient mines along the pioneers’ path. Under the subheading ‘RIDER HAGGARD COME TRUE’, the writer wondered: ‘Who were they, these soldier-workmen of a vanished civilization, and at whose bidding did they force their way into this barbarous place to dig for gold?’ – quoting the Book of Kings in response to this question. The article concluded by predicting that before long

56. John M. Stuart, *The Ancient Gold Fields of Africa: From the Gold Coast to Mashonaland* (London: Express Printing Company, 1891), p. 104. See also Joseph Ingram, *The Land of Gold, Diamonds, and Ivory: Being a Comprehensive Handbook and Guide to the Colonies and Republics of South and East Africa*, 3rd edn (London: W. B. Whittingham, 1893), pp. 98–143.

57. Andrew A. Anderson and Alfred H. Wall, *A Romance of N’Shabé, being a Record of Startling Adventures in South Central Africa* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), pp. 10, 162, 295–96.

58. Paul Herring, ‘Three Chums or For Sport; For Gold; For Wild Adventure’, *Halfpenny Marvel*, 24 November 1896, p.1.

59. ‘For His Queen; Or, A Trooper of Dr. Jim’, *Pluck*, 162 (1897), 4–5.

60. Martin Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold, and War: The British, the Boers, and the Making of South Africa* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2007), pp. 229–37, 270–71.

'the image of Queen Victoria' would be 'stamped on the gold with which King Solomon overlaid his ivory throne and wreathed the cedar pillars of his Temple'.⁶¹

Although Rhodes did succeed in turning his namesake into a new British colony, a second Witwatersrand never materialized there. By 1893 he had spent all his start-up capital and was scrambling to pay his shareholders; critics in the British Parliament openly wondered if Rhodes would ever stop inventing new Ophirs to tempt investors.⁶² Over the course of the 1890s, he borrowed ample time from his duties as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony to shift his focus, and divert his shareholders' attention, from prospecting gold in Rhodesia to solving the mystery of Ophir once and for all. To this end, he commissioned two book-length reports on Great Zimbabwe, one by the respected archaeologist Theodore Bent and the other by a South African textbook writer named Alexander Wilmot.⁶³ At the same time, and belying his professed desire to learn the truth about Ophir, he farmed out the right to ransack all archaeological sites south of the Zambezi to W.C. Neal's Ancient Ruins Company, which between 1895 and 1900 melted down or sold off whatever precious artefacts it could find.⁶⁴

Bent, who Rhodes had asked to prove 'that Great Zimbabwe was foreign in origin', produced a book that disappointed readers who had grown accustomed to Haggard-inspired romance. An expert on Middle Eastern antiquity, he made the strongest case he could that Great Zimbabwe had been constructed by Arab traders; but Solomon was absent from his interpretation. He recalled his annoyance at the constant stream of Ophir tourists at the digs, noting that invocations of Solomon and Sheba had consequently become 'so distasteful to us that we never expect to hear them again without an involuntary shudder'. Although he did admit that Zimbabwe mining implements corresponded closely to ancient Egyptian models, and hence might be connected to Solomon, he refused to weigh in on the Ophir question:

Mashonaland may have been the land of Ophir or it may not [...] There is not enough evidence, as far as I can see, to build up any theory on these points which will satisfy the more critical investigation to which subjects of this kind are submitted in the present day.⁶⁵

Wilmot's *Monomotapa* (1896) was more in keeping with what readers had come to expect in a book about Ophir. As a bonus, it came with an extended Preface by Rider Haggard, whom Rhodes had befriended in 1888. Unsurprisingly, most of the best lines

61. 'The Englishman in the Land of Ophir', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 March 1890, pp. 1–2. For context see Anthony Chennells, 'Great Zimbabwe in Rhodesian Fiction', in *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. by Mbongeni Z. Malaba (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 7.

62. *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 11 November 1893, p.5.

63. Henrika Kuklick, 'Contested Monuments: The Politics of Archaeology in Southern Africa', in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, ed. by George Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 139–40.

64. William H. Stiebing, *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 222–23.

65. James Theodore Bent, *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland: Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), pp. 60, 192, 194; on Bent see Innocent Pikirayi, *The Zimbabwe Culture: Origins and Decline of Southern Zambezi States* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), pp. 11–12.

from the book came from its Preface, as when Haggard bracingly concluded that ‘the bold enterprise of the British South Africa Company’ had recovered ‘the crumbling temple of Zimbabwe, the scene of so much forgotten history and of so many unwritten tragedies’. Wilmot’s own contribution consisted of slapdash speculations linking the stone phalluses that Bent had turned up with ‘the nature worship of Phoenicia.’⁶⁶ *Monomotapa*’s reception was the inverse of that which greeted Bent four years earlier: reviewers praised Wilmot for colourfully imagining how ‘the far-off Phoenician fill[ed] in the antique world the role of the colonizer and trader filled by the Briton to-day’, but generally smirked at his ‘elaborate [...] speculations.’⁶⁷

The confluence of archaeology, financial speculation, and adventure fiction surrounding King Solomon’s mines reached absurd heights in 1895, when the German explorer Carl Peters made Ophir the unlikely object of his ambition. His impulsive turn toward Ophir came at the heels of his scandalous dismissal from the German colonial service, following revelations of brutal behaviour in Tanganyika. By 1896 he had resettled in London and formed the Dr Carl Peters’ Estates and Exploration Company, attracting capital from English and German investors.⁶⁸ After priming the pump in 1898 with a pamphlet entitled *King Solomon’s Ophir*, in which he tested his exegetical wits against Carl Ritter and a host of other Ophir experts, Peters embarked on a much-publicized expedition to Mashonaland in January 1899.⁶⁹ Following regular wire-service updates on his progress that promised ‘coming revelations of vast interest’, he returned to London that December with ‘ample proof’ that he had discovered ‘the Ophir of the Old Testament’. His detailed account of the expedition appeared in 1902 under the title *The Eldorado of the Ancients*.⁷⁰

From beginning to end, Peters closely fashioned his narrative on Allan Quatermain’s first-person account in Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*. He opens *The Eldorado of the Ancients* by recounting his discovery, in a friend’s library in Bremen, of an historical atlas that contained a tally of Portuguese gold mines in Mozambique and that singled out ‘the great mountain of Fura’ as ‘a corruption of the word Ofir.’⁷¹ Skipping ahead to his expedition, Peters sets the reader down at the mouth of the Zambezi River in Mozambique, wondering out loud if his team could ‘succeed in acquiring [...] some of its half-legendary treasures!’. When he encounters the twin peaks of Mt. Fura, he

66. Alexander Wilmot, *Monomotapa (Rhodesia): Its Monuments, and its History from the Most Ancient Times to the Present Century* (London: T. Fisher, 1896), pp. xxiii, 5. On Haggard’s Preface see Chrisman, ‘The Imperial Unconscious?’, pp. 50–51 and Stiebel, ‘Creating a Landscape’, pp. 127–28.

67. *Saturday Review*, 26 September 1896, p.349; *Leeds Mercury*, 16 September 1896, p.3.; see also Chennells, ‘Great Zimbabwe in Rhodesian Fiction’, p. 6.

68. Arne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism, 1856–1918: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 231.

69. Carl Peters, *King Solomon’s Golden Ophir: A Research into the Most Ancient Gold Production in History* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1899).

70. ‘King Solomon’s Mines’, *Dundee Courier*, 1 September 1899, p.4; ‘The Gold of Ophir’, *Daily News*, 22 December 1899, p.6. See also ‘Doctor Peters’s Expedition’, *London Times*, 21 September 1899, p.9 and ‘Dr. Peters’ Expedition’, *Yorkshire Herald*, 20 November 1899, p.4.

71. Carl Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients* (London: C. Pearson, 1902), pp. 9–10, 14–17. By comparison, Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* opens with Quatermain consulting an historical map handed down by ‘one of the first Portuguese who landed on these shores’ (p. 15).

rhapsodizes that 'even the fancy of a Rider Haggard could not have depicted' a sight 'more mysterious [...] than the entrance into this ancient and fabulous Eldorado'.⁷² To prove his point that Mt. Fura was the original Ophir, Peters supplemented tedious biblical exegesis with linguistic, ethnographic, and geological evidence. Besides the similarity between Fura and Ofir, the indigenous inhabitants had 'a distinct Jewish type of face'; the women reminded him of 'European ladies' in that they were less bashful than 'submissive [...] nigger girls'; and his team spotted 'all the goods which are mentioned in the Bible as freight of the Ophir ships'.⁷³

Throughout his moment in the spotlight Peters assured his readers, as well as his investors, that 'the oldest gold country on earth would prove at the same time one of the most valuable of the present age'.⁷⁴ But he was no more successful as a prospector than the Limpopo Valley companies, Mozambique concession holders, or Rhodesian pioneers. Few of the 80 claims he registered in the Zambezi gorge turned a profit, and he lost 170,000 marks when he sold his interest in 1910.⁷⁵ Nor, after the fanfare had died down, were British readers as receptive to his theories about Ophir as he might have wished. Reviews of *The Eldorado of the Ancients* dismissively called it an 'ordinary travel or adventure book', although they did praise his success at opening up yet another patch of darkest Africa to the tender mercies of Western exploitation.⁷⁶

This commonly held celebration of imperialism united British commentators on King Solomon's mines after 1870 – most of whom saw versions of themselves in the biblical exploiters of Ophir. From the moment Mauch first reported on the Zimbabwe ruins, the media embraced the idea that they 'could not possibly have been made by the natives, but might well have been left there by Phoenicians'.⁷⁷ That premise coloured all later visions of a South African Ophir, which shifted over time to include Jews as, at the very least, joint-colonizers with the Phoenicians. It informed both the common attribution of Semitic tendencies among indigenous South Africans and an overlay of late-Victorian geopolitics onto the biblical map. One journalist suggested that 'the partition of the Dark Continent [...] date[d] back to the days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba', and Peters affirmed that Sheba had granted both Jews and Phoenicians 'what we would describe to-day as a comprehensive mining concession' – since 'as in our modern South Africa, there was then also elbow-room for the gold-seekers of various nations'.⁷⁸ An alleged proof of Solomon's colonization of South Africa concerned the apparent signs of slavery amid the ancient mines. When Haggard revisited the 'Real King Solomon's Mine' in 1907, he claimed that the 'people of Semitic race' who built

72. Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, pp. 24, 38.

73. Carl Peters, 'Macombe's Country, its Ancient Gold Fields and Industrial Resources', *Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society*, 16 (1900), 48–56 (pp. 52–54).

74. 'Dr. Carl Peters's New Expedition', *London Times*, 17 January 1899, p.10.

75. *Investors' Review*, 14 January 1911, p.61; Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism*, p. 231.

76. *Saturday Review*, 18 October 1902, supplement, p. xi; *Athenaeum*, 13 December 1902, p.788.

77. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 February 1872, p.4.

78. 'The Partition of Africa', *Glasgow Herald*, 24 February 1893, p.9; Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, p. 366.

Great Zimbabwe had ‘enslaved the local population by tens of thousands to labour in the mines and other public works.’⁷⁹

The promotion of Solomon to the status of divinely ordained colonizer accompanied a revisionist take on his commercial accomplishments. Peters denied that Solomon’s ‘purely agricultural country’ could possibly have traded anything to India or Arabia worth such ‘vast quantities’ of gold; his conclusion – that ‘the gold of the Ophir voyages was not obtained by barter at all, but by mining’ – was shared by nearly all of his British contemporaries.⁸⁰ Haggard argued that ‘a mere trading expedition was impossible’ owing to the three-year duration of the journey, and Wilmot added that the Phoenicians were ‘not merely traders, but explorers and colonists’. Switching the focus from trade to mining did come with some complications, most notably the warfare and forced labour that modern-day South African gold had brought in its wake. Haggard, among others, tried to soften these sharp edges by qualifying the parallels with ancient Semites: the Phoenicians, he suggested, were ‘the English of the ancient world without the English honour’.⁸¹

Nowhere was the transition from commerce to direct investment in mining more fraught than among late-Victorian abolitionists who invoked ‘legitimate trade’ to promote the liberation of enslaved central Africans, well aware that many freed slaves subsequently worked under brutal conditions in European gold mines.⁸² These tensions came to the surface in a tortured effort by one leading abolitionist, Horace Waller, to use Ophir as an allegory for contemporary South Africa.⁸³ In an 1891 ‘African contemplation’, Waller cast Solomon in his earlier role of legitimate trader, who ‘by his commerce threw beams of light into all lands whence came the “Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks” of our Bible story’.⁸⁴ The task of the late-Victorian Solomon, however, was more specific: to free ‘the patient negro’ from enslavement in ivory-producing Central Africa, so as to allow him to work in gold mines under the watchful eye of Europeans, who alone could be trusted to ‘raise up nations which must [otherwise] inevitably have come to an end’.⁸⁵ The ‘purport of the sailings from Ezion Geber and the Victoria Docks’, he concluded, ‘are all one’.⁸⁶

79. H. Rider Haggard, ‘The Real “King Solomon’s Mines”’, *Cassell’s Magazine*, 44 (1907), 144–51 (p. 148).

80. Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, p. 334.

81. Wilmot, *Monomotapa*, pp. xvii–xviii, 57.

82. Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860–1910* (London: Heinemann, 1994); Kevin Grant, *A Civilized Savagery: Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926* (London: Routledge, 2004).

83. On Waller see Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 152–74.

84. Horace Waller, *Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks: An African Contemplation* (London: Edward Stanford, 1891), p. 87.

85. ‘Review of *Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks*’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 11 (1891), 73; Waller, *Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks*, p. vi.

86. Waller, *Ivory, Apes, and Peacocks*, p. 11.

VI. Conclusion

A striking irony of the congealing late-Victorian belief that King Solomon's gold mines resided in South Africa was the fact that throughout this process, people continued to argue about the precise location of Ophir. A new thought, initiated by Lassen and Ritter, that perhaps Ophir was an *entrepôt* and not a vast empire, enabled people to argue that the gold came from South Africa but that Ophir itself might be somewhere else. A leading turn-of-the-century spokesman for this view was the Irish ethnologist Augustus Keane, who argued that:

Ophir itself was not a gold-producing land, or, strictly speaking, a land at all, but a seaport, the chief Sabaean emporium on the south coast of Arabia, whither the precious metals and other exotics were forwarded and thence distributed over the eastern world.⁸⁷

Wilmot split the difference, placing one Ophir near Sofala and another across the Indian Ocean in Malabar.⁸⁸ Only Peters insisted, with all the Teutonic certitude he could muster, that Ophir and the ancient gold mines he had rediscovered were one and the same.⁸⁹

Lurking beneath this irresolution was the hard fact that none of the many mining projects spawned by the Victorian hunt for Ophir ever paid off. Prior to 1850, alleged Ophirs in the Gold Coast, Sumatra, and Ceylon belied their proponents' claim that superior British know-how would surpass even the fantastic yields achieved by Solomon. Mining companies in Malabar and the Limpopo Valley likewise failed to recoup their investment in the Solomon myth, and subsequent speculators such as Peters were no more successful in translating biblical exegesis into mineral wealth. Gold certainly abounded in southern Africa, but its only tangible connection to Ophir existed in romance fiction. In the end, it was perhaps fitting that so many Victorians compared their search for Ophir with Walter Raleigh's earlier quest for El Dorado, which likewise yielded no gold. The only difference was that most Victorians dismissed Raleigh's claims as delusional or fraudulent, whereas few could bring themselves to doubt the existence of Ophir.⁹⁰ The key to this disparity, perhaps, lay in the respective source texts: Spanish conquistadors' rumours, in Raleigh's case, versus divinely inspired history in the case of Ophir.

If Ophir never yielded the economic payoff that its fantasists imagined it would, Solomon's application to British Protestantism also tended to come up short. Victorians struggled with Solomon in different ways as they moved from a trading empire, in which contact with non-Christians in Asia and Africa was mediated by commercial exchange, to a more interventionist empire peopled with missionaries and colonial officials. In the first phase, lasting into the mid-nineteenth century, ambivalence concerning Solomon

87. Augustus Henry Keane, *The Gold of Ophir, Whence Brought and by Whom?* (London: Edward Stanford, 1901), p. 14. Cf. Ritter, *Comparative Geography*, 1, 116.

88. Wilmot, *Monomotapa*, p. 83.

89. Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, pp. 302–38. At present the Arabian and Somali coasts are the most popular locations for Ophir among biblical scholars; Zimbabwe receded once a consensus formed among archaeologists that the ruined gold mines dated only to the tenth century AD: see Carroll, 'Solomonic Legend', pp. 233–36.

90. See, for example, Macvey Napier, 'Sir Walter Raleigh', *Edinburgh Review*, 71 (1840), 3–98; 'The Original Dorado', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, 500 (1853), 70–72.

focused less on the means by which he acquired wealth and more on the moral consequences of his treasures once he had acquired them. This suited a culture that was in the middle of grappling with the often-contradictory tendencies of rapidly expanding wealth accumulation and a rising tide of evangelical religion – often among the same middle-class urban families.⁹¹

Although such concerns never entirely vanished, they declined after 1870, only to be replaced by new contradictions that Solomon called to mind. Most of these highlighted the differences that allegedly set British Protestants apart from both Solomon and the foreigners that late-Victorian missionaries hoped to convert to Christianity. It was in this latter context that Solomon's prominent position in the Bible, both as an historical figure and as the author of many of its most-read books, caused the greatest discomfort. Much as earlier British writers tried to scrub Solomon's filthy lucre from his divinely inspired commerce, writers like Horace Waller wound themselves in knots trying to square archaeological evidence of Ophir slave camps with Christianity's civilizing mission. Hence, for a society that insisted on finding inspiration from the whole of the Bible and not just its convenient parts, it may have been a blessing in disguise that the true location of Ophir always remained just out of their reach.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Catherine Delyfer for inviting me to present an earlier version of this article at the conference 'Gold in/and Art' in Toulouse; Peter Buck and members of my New York-area writing group (especially Tanya Agathocleous) for their feedback on earlier drafts; and Alastair Owens for his spot-on editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Timothy Alborn
Lehman College
timothy.alborn@lehman.cuny.edu

91. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988).