

The Challenge of the Queen of Sheba:

The Hidden Matriarchy in the Ancient East

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This study is rooted in the theme of the woman in the traditions of the East. I aim to revisit the myth of the Queen of Sheba who played a crucial role in the early history of the ancient East. She was a diplomatic ruler and religious leader who bridged the gap between the East and the West: the two Worlds. The idea of femininity within a 'patriarchal lineage' societal structure remains a terra incognita in the Study of Religions. She was the first 'non-Western woman' who negotiated secular and religious affairs with the West, rehabilitating the role of women.

My focus is on the nature of the encounter between the two head of states (Solomon-Sheba). The Queen of Sheba was an element of discussion in Islamic, Judaic and Christian folklore. Besides, the story of 'the Queen of South' symbolizes a unification of opposites (or dichotomies) in various religious and cultural traditions: 'male and female', 'old and new', and 'one and many'.

The Origins of the Queen of Sheba

The historian Michael Wood going in search of the Queen of Sheba myth has investigated who she was and where she was from, being one of the most fascinating women described in Western and Eastern traditions. Where is the Queen of Sheba from? Are the ancient Sheba and its queen more than a shadow?

The name Sheba refers to a land, an ethnic group and a state. The Queen of Sheba has far more names and stories than people thought. There is still a sense of mystery around the figure of this Queen and her kingdom. Archaeologists and historians are still investigating on her origins. It is supposed that she lived in the Near Eastern countries (the ancient Orient) adjacent to the Red Sea, from Egypt to Ethiopia and Eritrea to Southern Arabia (the province of the Yemen), an area known as the Sabean culture (Saba or Sheba). The story of the Queen of Sheba and her long journey to the Israelites appear in Islamic, Judaic, and Christian folklore. Despite this extensive

cultural influence the history of Sheba and her queen are still largely unexplained or unexplored. Indeed, there is limited evidence, only the recent discoveries, which attest to the existence of the kingdom of Saba.

It is however true that both oral and written accounts as well as art portray the Sabean culture as a magnificent civilization. It consisted of a strong economy and a political organization centred principally on international relations. The title held by the supreme ruler of Sheba is most significant, not only showing the origin of the woman who constructed a state but also pointing to the female ability to cope with a patriarchal world. She was a diplomatic ruler and a charismatic monarch from the East who dealt with the western world, the kingdom of Israel and its head of State, King Solomon. The Sheba civilization, apart from enjoying political and economic prosperity, possessed a strong religious tradition with a fertile pantheon of divinities. Indeed, it is said that the Queen of Sheba was a high priestess known as *Mukarrib* which means ‘bringer of unity’ and kin of the Moon.¹

The land of Sheba appears in the religious imaginary of Judaism, Islam and Christianity as a green place, the Garden of Eden (known also as Arabia Felix). The Qura’ānic Sūrah states:

There was for Sheba, aforesaid, a Sign in their Home-land – two gardens – one to the right and one to the left. “Eat of the sustenance provided by your Lord, and be grateful to Him: a territory fair and happy, and a Lord Oft-Forgiving.”
(Sūrah 34:15)

The economy of the land of Sheba was based on a caravan trade in spices and precious stones as well as on agriculture (cereals such as millet, barley and oats, and seeds such as cumin and sesame) and commerce. Gus W. Van Beek (in his essay *The Land of Sheba* from *Solomon and Sheba* edited by James B. Pritchard) tells of the wealth of Sheba, which included frankincense and myrrh². The Qur’an and the Bible describe Sheba as a place of immense wealth abounding with gold and silver as well

¹ Barbara Black Koltuv, *Sheba and Solomon: Inner Marriage and Individuation*, (York Beach, Me: Nicolas-Hays, 1993), 29.

² Gus W. Van Beek, “The Land of Sheba.” In *Solomon and Sheba*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, (London: Phaidon Press, 1974), 44.

as precious stones and ivory. Classical writers such as³ Diodorus Siculus and Pliny the Elder and historians like the Roman Josephus describe in their anthologies and works the beauty and riches of the realm of Saba and her Queen.

The study of Sheba continues to survive in response to changing historical circumstances. I believe that Judaic, Islamic and Christian scriptures and works of art have given us diverse images ('a great picture') of the Queen of Sheba. The names of the Queen of Saba are respectively: Queen Bilquis, Lilith (a female demon or a dangerous queen of the occult) who is mentioned in Isaiah 34:14 but mainly in the *Targum Sheni* and *Alphabetum Siracidis*, Makeda (the Queen of Ethiopia which derives from the Ge'ez, *malkat*, which signifies queen), and the prophetic queen from the south, Queen Candace⁴ or Nicaulae. Makeda, belonged to the Ethiopian tradition, as evidenced by its central text, the Ethiopic *Kebrā Nagast* ('The Glory of Kings'). Most mainstream religions (Islam, Judaism and Christianity), are agreed that the historical origins of the Queen date from around the 10th century BCE, (circa 950 B.C.E.).

A woman between the East and the West

Michael Wood has investigated the historical background of the Queen of Sheba. He says in his article that the figure of the Queen of Sheba was a subject of discussion in many religious works:

The Queen of Sheba - an exotic and mysterious woman of power - is immortalised in the world's great religious works, among them the Hebrew Bible and the Muslim Koran. She also appears in Turkish and Persian painting, in Kabbalistic treatises, and in medieval Christian mystical works, where she is viewed as the embodiment of Divine Wisdom and a foreteller of the cult of the Holy Cross. In Africa and Arabia her tale is still told to this day and, indeed, her tale has been told and retold in many lands for nearly 3,000 years.⁵

³ The literary works which talk about Arabia Felix and its tribes (the Sabaeans) which surpassed all the people in the world can be found in the Loeb edition. In Pritchard's edition Pliny's *Natural History* is mentioned. See Gus W. van Beek, "The Land of Sheba", 45; also the Qur'an (S III 47:5-8).

⁴ Queen Candace is often confused with the Queen of Sheba. Queen Candace is mentioned in the New Testament and this appellation comes from the Nubian word *kandake* which indicates the queen mother.

⁵ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/sheba_01.shtml

The story of the Queen of Sheba is inspired canonically by sacred sources like the Bible (in the First Book of Kings 10:1-13; in the Book of Job 1:15; in Psalm 72; and in the Second Book of the Chronicles 9:1-12) and the Qur'ānic texts (in Sūrah xxvii: 15-44) which narrate and celebrate her visit to Solomon's court. There are also rabbinical texts – such as the Aramaic *Targum Sheni* or second Aramaic translation of the *Book of Esther*⁶, *Midrash, Proverbs*, and the *Midrash ha-Hefez* and other influential works, mainly paintings and sculptures.

There are also several artworks which depict the scene of the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon: the enamel plaque '*King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*' (1181) of the altarpiece realized by the Flemish artist Nicholas of Verdun (1130-1205) at the Abbey of the Klosterneuburg Monastery in Austria; the panel '*Solomon*' from the '*Gates of Paradise*' (1452) by the Italian artist Lorenzo Ghiberti⁷ at the Baptistery in Florence; Raphael's '*King Solomon Receives the Queen of Sheba*' (1510), where for the first time the Queen of Sheba was portrayed as a black woman; Paolo Veronese's '*The Queen of Sheba offers gifts to Solomon*' (1588); Tintoretto's '*The Queen of Sheba and Solomon*' (1555); Eustache Le Sueur's '*Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*' (1650) at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham; Marc Chagall's '*Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba*' (1957) in his Bible Series; the Romare Bearden's collage '*She-ba*' (1970) and the contemporary visual black art '*Queen Omega*' (2010) in America by the American-Caribbean Laura James with her numerous religious paintings rendered also in the Ethiopian Christian style (34 illustrations). Moreover, there is the famous portrait created in 1590 in a Persian miniature of the Queen of Sheba. Her gown is decorated with the heads of several

⁶ The *Targum Sheni* is an Aramaic scriptural text (elaboration and translation) which rewrites the *Book of Esther* and contains a series of homilies in Aramaic and in Greek. It is probably of Palestinian origin dated between the eighth and tenth centuries. This manuscript includes long prayers in a poetic style which recounts the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon's kingdom to test his wisdom and his extraordinarily capability as ruler. See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 676. See also Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 14.

⁷ The sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) created a set of doors in bronze, known as the *Gates of Paradise*, which are in the Duomo in Florence. These marvellous works were made in 1452 in Gothic and Renaissance style. Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* represent scenes and figures from the Old Testament from the Creation to the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. For further information see the images available on the websites: <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Florenca146.jpg>
<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/italy/florence/ghibertiparadise/ghibertiparadise.html>;
<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/italy/florence/ghibertiparadise/0118solomon.jpg>;
<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/italy/florence/ghibertiparadise/0118det.jpg>;

creatures (including the hoopoe bird whose task was to find water for the camp in the wilderness. The Hoopoe was considered sacred and for example was a symbol of virtue in Persia. According to the Qur'an, this bird went to inform Solomon, 'the prophet of God', of a kingdom ruled by a wise and beautiful queen). Finally, the legend of the Queen of Sheba was portrayed in the modern works of the Ethiopian painter Yohannes Tesemma (1918- 1975). Working in Addis Ababa, he specialized in Ethiopian religious iconography, developing his artistic inspiration on Ethiopian traditional themes. He painted 66 parchments (*Le 66 miniature del ciclo della Regina di Saba*)⁸ which are dedicated to the Queen of Sheba. These paintings illustrate the legend of the serpent (part of the oral tradition of Ethiopia) who ruled before the Queen of Ethiopia.

Scriptures, literary works and artworks demonstrate the different nature of this queen. Firstly, Queen of Sheba was diplomat (a head of state) who established ('went to visit to King Solomon') international (ambassadorial) and religious relations with another leader. Secondly, although her status and power, she had that positive inclination as a 'woman of valour' to meet up and confront with a different culture. Thirdly, this queen is also idealized in the sacred texts for her astute capacity to deal with men (patriarchal order) as men. She competed with Solomon for political and religious hegemony testing him 'with hard questions'. Finally, as portrayed in the Judaic traditions, the Queen of Sheba is described as a dangerous queen (Lilith) who is linked to a warrior goddess of the ancient mythology. Indeed, she was a woman who challenged sexual politics and religions.

The Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of the Israelite King, 'who exceeded all the kings of the heart in riches and wisdom' (II Chronicles 9: 22-23 and see I Kings 11: 14-24); a king who ruled over animals, birds, demonic spirits and Liliths. In *Targum Sheni* we can read about Solomon's famous throne. The King of Israel was a king where all the kings of the East and West, and the North and South, came to him and pay homage (I Kings 11:24). Therefore the Queen of Sheba thanks to her

⁸ Regarding the biography of the artist, see Brita Björnesjö, "Yohannes Tesemma: un pittore etiopico tradizionale", in *Quaderni di studi etiopici*, Asmara I (1980), 54-57. Also see A. Silverman ed., *Ethiopia: Traditions and Creativity*, (Michigan State University Museum, University of Washington Press: London, 1999). Concerning the parchments see the miniatures published by Renata Riva in *Kebrā Nagast: La Gloria dei Re; Solomone and La Regina di Saba*, edited and translated from Ge'ez by Osvaldo Ranieri, (Roma: Fondazione Editrice Benedetta Riva, 2008), 155-220.

extraordinary political skill left her country to visit Solomon's kingdom and to see whether or not he is wise. She tested him with hard questions 'with three riddles' which represent a political, cultural, and religious confrontation/allegiance between two rival parties (female ambition versus male authority).

The Queen of Sheba: a gender perspective

The image of the Queen of Sheba appears to be confined in a patriarchal society where the role of women is secondary to men (male authority) and divine order⁹. The Queen of Sheba might be regarded in a patriarchal world as a 'foreigner and mother'; her status depends exclusively on a man and one God. In a gender sense, this queen has been manipulated by the male literature and has become a property of Solomon - a woman's body - both in respect to his pleasure and his position as paterfamilias.

It is noteworthy that in monotheistic traditions there is a tendency, based on a masculine thesis to portray the 'Queen of the South'¹⁰ (from the East) as a woman who had to be educated by a wise man towards the 'true religion', monotheism. She was a pagan priestess who worshipped the 'Sol and Luna'¹¹. This view, which is expressed in biblical and non-biblical sources, associates the male-one principle with superiority and the female-many with inferiority. Indeed, men are always seen as possessing "virile" qualities - logic, courage, and determination - while women exhibit their opposites - irrationality, cowardice, and vulnerability.

Monotheistic religions recount that after experiencing the wisdom of Solomon the Queen of Sheba accepted his God. In the Bible, it is said 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me' (Exodus 20:30). And also the Qur'an relates that the Queen of Sheba became conscious of her 'wrong' attitude in worshipping the sun: 'I have wronged

⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

¹⁰ The biblical name of the Queen of the South (see Matthew 12:42 and Luke 11:31) alludes to the East which for the Bible means far away where the sun rises.

¹¹ In a Jungian interpretation of the archetypal image of Sol (masculine principle, the Father) and Luna (the principle of the feminine psyche, the Mother) we can see a constant duality which is mutual and inter-changeable. Men can be lunatic and women solar; this idea reflects the hermaphrodite concept of the opposite where in each human being there are two sides: man's unconscious femininity and woman's masculinity. In Sheba's times the worship of 'Father-Mother' (the unity of opposites) testifies that the question of female equality and opportunity (autonomy and emancipation) was on the public and religious agenda.

myself; to God, the Lord of the worlds, with Solomon I make submission' (Qura'ān 27:44). The biblical and Qura'ānic verses seem to share the same view. The queen abandoned her worship of the sun and moon (the pagan symbol of 'the devil') to submit herself to the patriarchal God, the Father God (the male archetype) at the expenses of the Great Goddess or of the androgynous theory based on the gender unity of God. If God, as the divine ruler, has a dual nature, God is father and mother; God is also indivisible and this quality creates the unity of opposites (*coniunctio*), which are always divisible.¹²

Could the Queen of Sheba be an independent woman who preferred her solitude rather than to be mastered by Solomon or to be doomed to slavery of his God? Did she escape from him and choose the authentic liberty like Lilith (a matriarchal society)?

The point is this woman is willing to surpass a man (the superior man) and thus to be self-sufficient. The Queen of Sheba had the prestige of a great man. This queen represents a woman of intellect and will who demonstrated to cope with any patriarchal and hegemonic societies. From a hermeneutic angle, the Queen of Sheba is a resource for the liberation movements of women; she gave voice (*una collocazione simbolica* - a symbolic placement) to 'the women' in the sense of that their sexuality and bodies are not designed intentionally as consumer goods and thus to be subject to commercialization by the world of men. The sensuality (the oriental attitude) of Queen of Sheba is not an object to be enjoyed or the weaker sex 'passive and vegetal' in the world. But she is a new ideal of woman who is perfectly the input of *sophia* and *intelligentia*. She is not just young and sincere; on the contrary this queen is wise and astute. As a woman, Sheba negotiated with the opposite sex and different cultures and religions *in tempore opportuno* (at the opportune time), reflecting how a woman of the past could be equal to men intellectually and morally. She constructed her matriarchal society where the woman may possess the same virtues as men and assume leadership tasks.

¹² The *coniunctio* is the unity of separated qualities (opposites), as Carl G. Jung says in his work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 3.

The mystery of the Queen

The figure of the Queen of Sheba, however, is considered to be an enigma, a riddle within a riddle. She is a melange of interpretations and different names: from a monarch, a religious leader, but also this queen had the instincts of Lilith. According to Kabbalistic interpretations (Hebrew mythology), the Queen of Sheba was like a Lilith, a demonic queen (the quintessential dangerous female) who lived in a matriarchal world where women were successful leaders. In her domain women know how to speak and to manipulate men with her feminine wiles.

In a Jungian sense the Queen of Sheba was the transcendent queen of the sunrise (the Queen of Alchemy, a prototype of the antithesis and synthesis of opposites –feminine on the outside and masculine on the inside). She is also the key (*clavicula*) of power which in general symbolizes the combinations of opposites; she is the ‘Father-Mother’, ‘the white-black’, the quintessence of all things. In mid-fourteenth century in the city Prague, it is said that the melancholic King Rudolf II Hapsburg (1552-1612), known as Holy Roman Emperor was obsessed by the occult and intrigued by alchemy. It said that this king had a whole library of magic books. He consulted Kabbalists and alchemists whose books talked about the Queen of Sheba as a divine and transcendent figure. They believed that the queen was the queen of darkness and they invoked her as the queen of the dawn, known also as ‘the South Wind’ (*Aurora Consurgens, the Rising Dawn*). Nicholas Clapp investigated the alchemical sources of the myth of Solomon and Sheba: ‘Solomon was celebrated as the king of alchemy and Sheba the Queen, whereupon she became identified with several key elements and forces.’¹³ For example, as is demonstrated in *De Alum et Salubus (The Book of Alums and Salts)*, there are some elements like alum, salt, quicksilver, and silver which are seen to symbolize the Queen of Sheba. In a passage of this book she is described as follows: ‘I am the mediatrix of the elements, making one to agree with another.’¹⁴ In other words, she transforms the substances thanks to her esoteric power. However, these remain legends which are only used in alchemical and esoteric studies. *De Alum et Salubus* was translated into many Arabic versions, being based on Alexandrian

¹³ Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba: Through the Desert in search of the legendary Queen*, (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 311.

¹⁴ Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba*, 312

sources which dealt with chemistry and alchemy¹⁵. It is supposed that this book was written by *al-Razi* but according to the scholar Julius Ruska *De Alum et Salubus* was produced by the Muslim chemists Zosimos and Jabir. The correspondence of the Queen of Sheba with various metals calls to mind Jung's work about alchemy, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Here he talks about the *corrispondentia* between Moon-Nature and Salt. He says that the 'Luna represents the six planets or spirits'; Salt is the attribute of the Luna:

From Saturn, Mercury, Jupiter, Mars and Venus nothing and no other metal can arise except Luna [i.e. silver]...For Luna consists of the six spiritual metals and their powers¹⁶

The Jungian Luna is seen as the essence of the nature of metals; she is a personification of archetypes (a plurality of archetypes and personas) and from the Luna derives the energy of all the stars. Salt is linked with the lunar side (the feminine) which is identified with the *femina alba* or *candida* (the white water, the light of illumination). Moreover salt is, according to the philosophy of alchemy and medieval Arabic thought, the symbol of an arcane substance which is the receptacle of all things. Jung writes: 'It is a concentrated centre of the elements'.¹⁷ These qualities seem to reflect the features of the Queen of Sheba. Metaphorically, she can be compared to the Luna who expresses herself as a mother of all the metals; she gives the tincture and the light to all things, thus also producing unity.

Finally, in considering the Queen of Sheba's links with alchemy, we should note that there is an analogy with the mother, *regina*, Venus, virgin of the earth and Sophia. She might also be identified as the arcane substance, and could be equated with Isis, the Black One, who is the symbol of the synthesis of opposites and the elixir of life (the myth of Isis)¹⁸ - as Karl Jung points out in his masterpiece, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*.

¹⁵ *De Alum et Salubus* came to the knowledge of scholars in medieval Europe. The manuscript was translated into Latin by the Italian Gerard of Cremona (1114-1187) who moved to live in Toledo (Spain) for the rest of his life. Here he became interested in Arab and Hebrew culture translating many Arabic scientific works (medicine, chemistry and other sciences) into Latin. However, in medieval alchemy salt was used as a secret element to prepare other minerals.

¹⁶ Carl G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 176.

¹⁷ It is quoted by Carl G. Jung in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 190. Cf. Johann R. Glauber, *Tractatus de natura salium*, (Amsterdam, 1658), 44.

¹⁸ Carl G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 20.

CONCLUSION:

The Queen of Sheba's psychology revolutionises any patriarchal superiority over the woman world. Women are not the weaker sex, subordinated to a man, husband or 'partner' (I Peter 3:7; Colossians 3:18 and Ephesians 5:22-23). The Queen of Sheba represents an independent woman who rehabilitated the role of all women; her leadership role *ought* to give a new input and voice to women in the socio-cultural and religious spheres. The story of 'the Queen of South' enables women to iterate the noblest qualities she possessed: honour, dignity and status in society.

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