

# THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

(Translated and annotated by David Ben-Abraham)

When King Solomon had invited the neighbouring kings bordering upon his country to come up unto him, in order to show them his glory, and especially, to show them his ability to converse with the birds and animals and creeping things, compelling them to do whatsoever he should command, simply by speaking with them, he obtained his desire and had the kings of the east and west, north and south, gathered together in his banqueting hall, where they all sat down together to observe this great spectacle. King Solomon then called in the animals, birds and creeping things, one by one, to parade before the king and his onlookers, without any man leading them, and without any of them being bound by fetters or restraints. While this was taking place, King Solomon noticed that the hoopoe bird was absent among the birds, and commanded his servants to bring unto him the bird, even if it meant chaining him. When he was eventually brought before the king, the king enquired where he had been. The hoopoe replied that the king should not be wroth, for he had gone for days without food and drink, flying in the heavens, hoping withal to find a land or kingdom where Solomon's fame had not yet reached, and then to return unto the king, and duly report his findings to the king. After these entreaties, the bird proceeded to report on a kingdom which he had discovered afar off, governed by a queen, the queen of Sheba, from the castle Qitor. Their country, he said, was a good land, with trees and gardens watered by the rivers issuing forth from the Garden of Eden, and where there was gold and silver aplenty, and where the citizens of that country made no warlike gestures, and wore crowns upon their heads. At hearing this, King Solomon took up the hoopoe in his hands, and commanded his scribes to write an epistle unto the queen of Sheba, which epistle should then be bound to the wing of the bird, and the bird sent back on his journey into the land of Sheba. The content of that epistle was this:

“From me, King Solomon. Greetings unto thee, and greetings to thy servants. In order that you might know that G-d hath made me king over the wild beasts and fowl of the air, and that all the kings of the east and of the west, of the south and of the north, do come and salute me, so too, if it shall now please you, come thou unto me and pay homage unto me. I shall do unto thee great honour, moreso than what I do to the other kings who sit before me. But if you do not wish to do so, neither wilt thou come and salute me, then know of a certainty that I will send against thee kings, and legions, and horsemen to wage a war against you. And if you shall ask within yourself who are these kings and legions and horsemen whom King Solomon hath to send, be apprised that the wild creatures *they* are the kings and legions and horsemen. And if you shall ask, moreover, which of the creatures are the horsemen in this army, be apprised that the fowl of the air *they* are the horsemen. They are my troop, the legions who will strangle you upon your beds in the midst of your houses. And

the wild beasts shall kill you in the fields, while the birds of the air shall devour your flesh from your bodies!”

**N**ow since the hoopoe bird was greatly desirous of being sent back to the land of Sheba with a message from the king, he was forthwith released with this message to bring to the queen of Sheba. Whereupon, he spread his wings aloft, chirped as he flew away, and was quickly joined by a large flock of birds incapable of being numbered. These all lighted upon the castle Qitor, in the land of Sheba, at the time when the queen of Sheba was going out in the morning to make her obeisance to the sun, which was on the rise. But for the multitude of birds, the sun would have put forth its rays. Yet, now, the sky was darkened by the multitude of fluttering creatures. The queen, being astonished by such a sight, immediately rent her garment. At this token, the hoopoe bird suddenly descended in plain view of the queen, and she took notice that there was an epistle bound to one of its wings. She took up the bird and untied the letter, reading what was written therein. Again, she could not withhold her shock and surprise, and so she raised her hand a second time, and rent her garment. She then sent and called for the elders and great men of her kingdom, saying unto them, “Have ye not heard what King Solomon has sent unto me?” They answered her, “We do not know such a one as King Solomon, neither will we acknowledge his kingdom.” Yet, the queen was not satisfied with their counsel and advice, and so quickly called and sent for all of her ships at sea, and commanded her sailors to load them with timbers of box-wood, and jewels and precious stones, and that all vessels should be fitted out to the deck’s brim with such things as they might stand in need of for a long and protracted voyage at sea. Camels were also to be carried along, so as to permit hauling the burthens once they had landed and gone ashore. She also commanded that six-thousand youth, some boys and some girls, should accompany her on this journey, children who were to make up the main core of her delegation, besides a great entourage of sailors and servants and attendants, and only those children who were born all in the same year, and in the same month, and on the selfsame day, and in the same hour, and all of them must needs have the exact same height or stature, and all of them must have the same hair trimmings, and all must be clothed in purple tunics, so as to make it hard, at first sight, to distinguish between them, that is, the boys from the girls.<sup>1</sup>

**M**eanwhile, the queen of Sheba sent back a message to King Solomon, requesting leave of the king to come unto him in seven years’ time, considering the long voyage that had to be taken at sea. For such would be the time needed to fit out an expedition, and to set sail when the winds were favourable, and then to circumnavigate the entire continent,<sup>2</sup> docking at the various ports while en route, in order to rest and to replenish their supplies, and again, to avoid traveling the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean) in the midst of winter for fear of

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<sup>1</sup> However incredible this might sound, we are admonished to remain faithful to the traditions as they have been reported, without changing or altering what has come down to us.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning, the continent of Africa, since the Suez Canal was not yet built.

being shipwrecked. Yet, she added, if the king should pray to his G-d, perhaps she could come unto him in only three years' time. Now the men and sailors of Sheba, though skillful at sea, knew not that had they embarked on their journey by foot, traversing the great and barren wastelands, they would have reached their destination in far less time.

**A**t the end of three years, the queen of Sheba came with her entourage, a great train of servants and attendants, bearing in their camels' baggage precious stones, and gold and silver, and much spices, as well the Balsam of Mecca.<sup>3</sup> The king, having intelligence that they had arrived off shore, sent along Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, to greet them and to escort them along their way to Jerusalem. Now this man was of extraordinary beauty and grace, like a flower when it blossoms in the morning, and like the planet Venus which shines out brightly among the stars, and like a rose standing by the rivulets of water. So when the queen of Sheba saw him, she mistook him for being King Solomon, and so alighted from off her camel. Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, enquired why she had gotten herself down from her camel. She answered, "Art thou not King Solomon?" He returned an answer, saying that he was not the king, but rather one of his attendants who stood before him. At hearing this answer, she immediately turned away her face, and made this proverb to her great men who came along with her in this journey: "If you have not seen for yourselves the lion, then at least observe his resting place. If you have not yet seen King Solomon, then at least observe the good man who standeth before him!"<sup>4</sup>

She and her great train were conducted by Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, to Jerusalem, and when the king was told that the queen of Sheba had just arrived in the city, he stood up from his place and went to sit in his glass house. The queen was brought before him, and when she saw the king sitting in his glass house, she thought within herself that the king sat upon water, and so proceeded to draw up the hem of her dress so that she could pass over without getting wet. The king then saw her legs that they were full of hair, and when the queen had sat down beside him, he said unto her, "Thy beauty is the beauty befitting women, but thy hairs are the hairs befitting men. Hair on a man's body is comely, but uncomely on a woman's."

**N**ow the king greatly desired her beauty, but was taken aback by the hair upon her legs, and so it was that he devised a method by which unwanted hairs may be removed, that is, by taking an admixture of lime and water and orpiment (arsenic trisulfide), which the king himself discovered and made known its usage abroad, calling it *neskasir*. When the queen had bathed herself that night in its solution, the hair upon her legs fell off, and she found favour in the eyes of the king. Now while she yet sat in his glass house, the king asked

<sup>3</sup> Heb. **afarsemon**, also **falsemon**. Believed to be Balsamodendron opobalsamum, but classified by some botanists as Commiphora opobalsamum (which has yet still the other taxonomic name of Commiphora gileadensis), a tree still found in the Dhofar district of Yemen. A similar tree is Commiphora meccanensis.

<sup>4</sup> Meaning, if you wish to know the greatness of a king, observe the calibre of men who serve him.

her, “What portends to thy coming, my fair queen? Hath the tokens of the hoopoe bird summoned thee unto me, which he didst carry in his wings aloft?” She answered, “Nay, my lord the king. T’was not merely tidings from thee which didst trouble me, for I fain not look with contempt upon thy calling. But rather, we have heard it stated by our ancestors of old, even by Abraham who was married to Keturah, who bare him six sons, from whom came Sheba our ancestor, that Abraham’s descendants through Isaac would bring forth a deliverer into the world, even the Messiah. For this is what was meant by the words, ‘For unto the sons of the concubines belonging to Abraham, Abraham did give unto them *gifts*, and sent them away, etc.’ (Gen.25:6); Those *gifts* meaning none other than the mystery of the earth’s redemption, delivered unto us by our ancestor Abraham. I have come here out of due respect to his great name, to wit, G-d’s name, to know whether or not thou art this Messiah.” Now Solomon knew not what to answer the woman at her words, being astonished at her great measure of faith. And so, not willing to disappoint the queen who had endangered herself to come unto him, he wisely evaded her question, and asked, “Who are these youths, my fair queen, who have come along with thee?” “My lord,” she said, “if thou art so wise that even the wild beasts of the field and the birds of the air do heed thy call, then I shall yet make trial of this thy wisdom. For I would prove thy wisdom by words and by riddles, and by way of puzzling problems which I shall pose unto thee. Canst thou then distinguish between manchild and womankind, though they might appear to thee to be alike?”

**A**t these words, she nodded, and the children whom she had brought along with her came forward in single file, passing before the king. Each child carried within his bosom a vessel laden with either gold or silver, and the best of the spices and incense that grew in their land. When each child reached the place where the king sat, he or she bowed down before the king, presenting his vessel to Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, who stood before the king and queen, while Benaiah passed the same onto a servant who stood nearby. When this procession came to an end, each child returned to his place within sight of the king, and the king answered:

“Tis but a trial of character, it is. For the mannerisms of a lad are not as those of a maid. Call hither my servants, and let them fill the floor of the room with walnuts. Let each child take up into the borders of his skirt his fill, or as many as he can thereby hold, and I shall forthwith tell thee who is male, and who is female.”

No sooner had the word been spoken than the floor of the room was filled with walnuts. At the given signal, the children began to fill up their garments, racing to outdo the other. The boys filled their garments by lifting up their skirts, exposing their legs without the slightest embarrassment or shame. The girls, however, bent over awry, and out of modesty would not expose their legs.

“Here, then, my queen, are thy menservants and here are thy maidservants!” quoth Solomon, who rising up from his chair did intimate with his hand to separate the boys from the girls, putting the one on his right side, and the other on his left side.

The queen, not yet convinced of the king's wisdom, answered: "My lord the king, this may have been but a simple trial of character for thee, yet perchance other questions and hard riddles will prove thy wisdom most consummately. Allow me, therefore, to ask thee three questions, which if thou shalt answer correctly, disclosing the secret meanings of my words, I shall know indeed that thou art a wise man of uncommon wisdom. Yet, if thou shalt fail, you shall be esteemed as all other men of regal order. Tell me, if you can, since we have heard that thou art wise also in the natural sciences, what is like unto a wooden well, the contents of which are drawn up, as it were, by a bucket of iron; that thing taken up no more than stones, which forthwith are irrigated by water?"

Answered the king: "The reed container, or vial, which carrieth the black antimony known as stibium, which stone when crushed is used by women in painting their eyelids, and by men as a remedy in eye ailments, and which they apply to themselves by wetting the iron pin with their spittle."<sup>5</sup>

"Correct!" said the queen, and then proceeded to ask the king another question, saying: "What is like dust, in that it cometh forth from the earth? Yet, when it comes forth, its food becomes the earth upon which we stand. It is spilt as water, and causes the house to be seen?"

Answered the king: "Kerosene!"<sup>6</sup>

"Correct!" said the queen, and then propounded an even harder riddle to ask the king, saying: "Whenever there is a strong gale, this thing is always at the forefront. It makes a great and bitter shout, and bows down its head as a bulrush.<sup>7</sup> It is a thing lauded by the rich and wealthy, yet deplored by the poor; a thing of praise to the dead, yet strongly detested by the living. It is the happiness of birds, yet the grief of all fishes. What is it?"

Answered the king: "Flax linen!"<sup>8</sup> For a strong gale can only mean that it is used in making sails for ships, which same sails are driven by strong winds. Now these linen stalks, after soaking, are first pounded and beaten in order to expose the good fibres, hence the great and bitter shout it makes. (Like bulrushes, the head of its stalks are split open, appearing to bow down.) The rich laud it, because they are able to afford the softest and most fine quality of linen produced, whilst the poor cannot afford to buy it, and settle for a poorer quality, which causes them great discomfort when first worn by them, until the fabric of the linen cloth is broken in by long wear. Moreover, when men die, only the rich can afford to buy coloured linen shrouds to bury their dead, whilst the poor cannot afford it.<sup>9</sup> A dead man who is wrapped in a burial shroud finds praise from men, but woe unto the living man who wears a burial shroud! Birds eat the flax seeds and make their nests from its fibres, and they are made happy

<sup>5</sup> Id est, the stibium clings to the spittle on the iron pin.

<sup>6</sup> Distilled from petroleum, and used in burning lamps since ancient times.

<sup>7</sup> To-day, these plants are more commonly called Cattails.

<sup>8</sup> Linum usitatissimum

<sup>9</sup> For which reason, Rabban Gamaliel the elder later changed the practice, and made it compulsory that all men, whether poor or rich, buy and make use of only non-coloured burial shrouds to bury their dead, so as not to shame those who were poor.

thereby. But fish are caught in nets made of linen cords, and are grieved thereby.”

**T**he queen of Sheba, not being able to conceal her amazement at the ease with which the king answered her questions, propensed to ask him yet other questions, saying: “Seven are departing. Nine are entering in. Two are giving drink, but only one is drinking. What are they?”

Now the king thought within his heart, no man will speak upon a matter except that which is closest to him in his heart. So, too, this woman will ask none other than that which is in her heart, and a woman’s heart is mostly on child bearing and children, jewellery, perfumes and cosmetics and clothing. So the king answered her:

“The seven whom you have spoken of as departing are the seven days of a woman’s separation from her husband when she is unclean by reason of her natural purgation. Yet, while she enters her nine months of pregnancy, the seven days of uncleanness are not to be found with her, since she remains clean for that entire duration of time. Thus, the seven being departed, the nine come in. Whilst the two whom you have said are giving drink, these are the two breasts giving milk to the newborn infant. However, the only one actually drinking from those breasts is the babe himself!”

Again, she asked the king: “This thing, at first, goes upon four. Then it goes upon two. At last, it goes upon three. What is it?”

The king replied: “When a child is born, he first crawls upon four. When he learns to walk, he walks upon twain. When the child becomes old, and is waxen in years, he is holpen by the cane – hence, he goes upon three.”

She asked furthermore: “A woman once said to her son, ‘Thy father is my father. Thy grandfather is my husband. Thou art my son, and I am thy sister.’ Who can this be?”

The king, reflecting, said: “This can be none other than one of the two daughters of Lot.<sup>10</sup> They alone could have said this.”

**T**he queen, realizing the wisdom with which King Solomon had been endowed by his G-d, left off asking him riddles. Now when King Solomon had entertained her a great while, and had given her gifts to take back into her own country, and had shown her his house, and the great feats of engineering used by him in constructing the house of the forest of Lebanon, as well the splendour of his table and the orderly manner of his attendants and their fine apparel, as also the ascent he would make use of when going up unto the Temple of G-D, with its impregnable walls, she resolved to ask him one last question, saying:

“My lord and Sovereign, at thy behest I have come unto thee, traversing both land and sea, and taking the entire Government along with me, to hear this thy wisdom. And, indeed, it was but a small report that I heard in mine own

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<sup>10</sup> The story of Lot’s daughters is related in Genesis 19: 30-ff.

land concerning thee, until I came here to see and hear it for myself. Thy wisdom far exceedeth that which was told to me by my servants. And even then, I could not believe it until I had seen it! Happy are the men who serve thee, and blest is the G-d who delightest in thee to make thee a king of his people! Art thou then the Messiah who is wont to come into the world?"

Answered the king: "Let not thy countenance be distraught, O fair queen, that G-d hath chosen to impart wisdom unto his subjects. For he is the G-d who made heaven and earth, and we are his people. Is it not then commensurable with his excellence to make me a king of his people? Yet, even so, I am not he whom thou seekest."

So, she went away into her own land, leaving behind her a great reputation for one who sought after virtue. END

## **SOURCES:**

I Kings 10: 1-ff; RABASH; Yilquth Shimoni on Chronicles, section 1085; Talmud, Baba-Bathra 15.b; Midrash on Proverbs known as Shoher Tov; Alpha-Beta of Ben-Sira (in manuscript form); Midrash Hagadol on the Book of Genesis, 25:6; Targum Sheni of Megillath Esther; Antiquities of Josephus; and Midrash Hahefetz, in the section known as *Haftarah*.

(David Ben-Abraham has been fascinated over the subject of the Queen of Sheba, ever since his tour of Yemen in 1979, where allegedly the queen had her origins. An avid reader of ancient Arabian histories, and one who has had recourse to ancient books of Jewish lore, he has combined his knowledge of both fields to help him build this short-story. Many of the scenes described herein are found in, both, ancient Arabic and Aramaic sources. For instance, the Qu`ran (in the 27th chapter known as "*Surat al-Namal*," or The Ant) specifically mentions the hoopoe bird (Arabic: "hud-hud"), while so does the Second Aramaic translation of the book of Esther, which is read by the Jews. The bird, as the story goes, was sent with a message to the Queen of Sheba from King Solomon. The Qu`ran (*ibid.*) also mentions the glass floor used by King Solomon, and which was mistaken by the queen for water. David Ben-Abraham makes his living as a freelance writer and translator of, both, biblical and exegetical literature, translating such works into English which were heretofore unknown to most English readers. His style is unique, preferring an archaic style over the contemporary, and has a complete command of the King's English.)

He may be reached at e-mail: [Davidbenabraham@yahoo.com](mailto:Davidbenabraham@yahoo.com) or contact: David Ben-Abraham, 1590 Branding Iron Drive, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80915-2414, U.S.A.

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