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Queen Balqis, “Queen of Sheba”

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The Queen of Sheba exists in history more as a legend than a historical figure. It is a major task of this chapter to distinguish myth from history. Her ethnic identity is often described as of Yemeni or Sabaean origin, but she may have been both ethnically and politically Ethiopian. As a ruler of Ethiopia-Abyssinia, she can be placed within the Red Sea littoral and thus as a woman of African and Afro-Asiatic importance. Why and how she became sexualized as either seduced or a seductress in her famous encounter with King Solomon of Jerusalem has, perhaps, much to do with the patriarchal cultural environments in which her story has been told—in the West and the East. But her central role in Ethiopia is that of founder of the Ethiopian royal dynasty through her son Menelik, the product of a romantic encounter between Sheba and Solomon of Jerusalem sometime during the reign of King Solomon (970–931 BCE).

A critical review of her multicultural tale will be analyzed here through the cultural lenses of Western Christian, Eastern Muslim, and non-Chalcedonian Christian African religious traditions, making her identity one of an African woman. Her story is mostly a tale related in religious-political terms. Over the millennia of Ethiopian history, there have been 17 named queens from a total of 312 named regents, the overwhelming majority being men. According to the official list of Ethiopian kings from the *Kebra Nagast* recorded by the Ras Tafari Makonnen (Haile Selassie) in 1922, the history of kings began in Biblical times of the “Great Flood,” continued through the fabled “Fall of the Tower of Babel” and through the time before the birth of Christ, and continues after the birth of Jesus, distinguishing between those pre-Christian and Christian sovereigns.

According to the *Kebra Nagast*, six queens preceded Sheba, known in Ethiopia as “Makeda,” the mother of Menelik I, from whose birth Ethiopian dynastic history was born and firmly fixed with the state. Ten queens followed her over the lengthy course of Ethiopian dynastic history. In some cases, royal mothers ruled partly with their sons, a feature known to be present in Kush-Meroë in ancient Sudan during the millennium BCE. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that ancient Nubian royalty was absorbed into the Ethiopian list of kings after Ethiopia’s conquest of Meroë by King Ezana in the fourth century CE (Kramer, Lobban, and Fluehr-Lobban, 2013:144).

Sheba was a monarch of the ancient kingdom of Saba/Sheba who is referenced in the triple Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition: in Ethiopian/Habeshan history, the Hebrew Bible, the New
Testament, and the Qur’an. “Saba/Sheba” was an ancient name for a kingdom on the Red Sea in northeast Africa and southwest Asia, or modern Ethiopia and Yemen. In ancient times, Ethiopia was incorrectly known as Abyssinia, Nubia, or Kush/Cush, although this represents a confusion in the original sources between the ancient Sudanese kingdoms of Kush-Meroë (950 BCE–325 CE), with its capital at Napata, and that of neighboring Abyssinia-Ethiopia, with its capital at Axum. This prior Sudanese kingdom of Kush and its capital Meroë along the Nile at the fourth cataract were conquered by the Ethiopian King Ezana in 325 CE, as previously mentioned. It is probable that the Ethiopian list of kings incorporated the previous Kushite regents mentioned in the Bible as hailing from Ethiopia. The most famous of the pharaohs of Kush, Taharqa (Tirha-ka), is referred to as the “king of Ethiopia” (2 Kings: 19:8). In the pre-Christian civilization, “the earliest inscriptions of the rulers of the ancient kingdom of Dʿmt in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea mention queens of very high status, possibly equal to their kings.”

This confusion regarding “Ethiopia/ Ethiopians,” meaning the “land/peoples of the burnt faces,” is traceable to Greek texts describing Nubia, contemporary southern Egypt, and northern Sudan. The well-attested Meroitic/Nubian kings Kashta, Sabaka, and Piankhii are listed in the Bible among the Ethiopian kings (Book of Kings, 1:10–11). The names of Egyptian kings or deities, Amenhotep and Senefrou, also appear in this list of Ethiopian kings, referencing a larger geographical area than that associated with modern Ethiopia. It is tempting to see in the Biblical reference to Cush an historical association with ancient Kush at Meroë, the land of the “Kandakes” who appear in the Ethiopian list of kings or regents.

The Queen of Sheba is also known as “Makeda.” The etymology of this Ethiopian name, Makeda, is uncertain, but British scholar Edward Ullendorff holds that it is a corruption of “Candace,” the Ethiopian (read Nubian) queen mentioned in the New Testament. In Arabia and the Islamic world, the Queen of Sheba is known as Balqis. She is associated with the historic ruins of Marʿib, where there is a Sabaean temple with eight pillars that Yemenite tradition calls “Mahram Balqis,” “Balqis’ sanctuary.” This reflects a memory of ancient Sabean queendoms with a strong dimension of spiritual leadership.

The tale of Solomon and Sheba across three religious traditions

The story of Solomon and Sheba has recognizable consistencies across the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious traditions. Solomon is a recognized king famous for building the Temple of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem; for his wisdom and sagacity; and for his great number of wives and concubines. Sheba, known as Makeda in Ethiopian traditions, is most often mentioned as a queen from Saba, an important trading nexus in northeast Africa. Solomon sought to acquire gold, ebony, and sapphires for the building of the Temple and employed the services of an intermediary, Tamrin. Sheba, who heard of the wisdom and wealth of Solomon from this trader, planned and executed a grand journey, bearing numerous gifts of the East, to meet him in Jerusalem. The tale of their mutual attraction, as told in Ethiopian tradition, has Sheba testing his wisdom with riddles and Solomon tricking her into staying the night in his palace – resulting in their eventual sexual union and Sheba’s conversion away from “idolatry” to acceptance of Yahweh and monotheism; eventually, she is seen as an early convert to Christianity. The story varies by religious tradition, but the Ethiopian version culminates in the birth of Solomon’s son Menelik, the first king in the new Ethiopian Christian dynasty. Sheba returns to Ethiopia and establishes a capital at Axum, where the Ark is secretly brought by Menelik after a visit to meet his father in Jerusalem; Ethiopian Christians believe it resides there to this day and that they are its caretakers.
The oldest account of the Queen of Sheba comes from the Bible, in the Old Testament book of Kings (11:10–14). During the period of the 39-year reign of King Solomon, 970–931 BCE, it is related in the Bible that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Solomon is considered one of the 48 prophets in Judaism, and Islam considers him a major prophet. Although a revered person in the Christian Bible, his role is more one of sage and wise ruler. The encounter between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, emphasizing either the romantic and/or the political, is treated most seriously in Ethiopian religious texts, especially the Kebra Nagast, and in Muslim sources, both textual in the Qur’an and in folkloric renditions. The names of Solomon and Sheba also have notoriety in Western Christianity as a story, but they lack the meaningful ancestral connotations they have in Ethiopian sources or the allegorical power they have in Islamic texts, perhaps because Sheba/Balqis is an eastern woman of Asiatic and African importance.

The Ethiopian narrative is derived from the primary religious document of Ethiopian Christianity,7 the Kebra Nagast:

When the Queen met Solomon she gave him rich presents (Chap. 25), and he supplied her with food and servants and rich apparel. The Queen was fascinated as much by his wisdom as by his physical perfections …

During her stay in Jerusalem Makeda conversed daily (Chaps. 26, 27) with Solomon, and she learned from him about the God of the Hebrews … She herself worshipped the sun, moon and stars, and trees, and idols … but under the influence of Solomon’s eloquent words she renounced Šabaism …

At length Makeda sent a message to Solomon that it was time to return to her own country. When Solomon heard this he [was] determined to company with her, for he loved her physical beauty and her shrewd intelligence, and he wished to beget a son by her. Solomon had 400 wives and 600 concubines, and among them were women from Syria, Palestine, the Delta, Upper Egypt and Nubia.

… Nine months and five days after Makeda bade Solomon farewell she brought forth a man child, and in due course she arrived in her own country, where she was received with great joy. She called her son Bayna-Leḥkem, [Menelik] “the son of the wise man,” and he grew into a strong and handsome young man. At the age of twelve he questioned his mother as to his parentage, and … he continued to do so until she told him; and ten years later … Makeda sent him to Jerusalem, accompanied by her old chief of caravans, Tāmrīn (Chaps. 32, 33). With him she sent a letter to Solomon, telling him that in future a king should reign over her country … and that her people should adopt the religion of Israel.

In this Ethiopian telling of the tale of Solomon and Sheba, Makeda lays claim to the Solomonic line for the Ethiopian royal dynasty, an African patrilineage descending from the Hebrew king. The Kebra Nagast credits her with building her capital Debra Makeda on a mountaintop, the new capital city at Azeba, Aksum. Boavida and Ramos argue that this founding narrative served to establish the legitimacy of the political change to Ethiopian royal rule that was then bolstered by King Solomon and monotheism, and ultimately Christianity, which became the state religion and was entwined with its political structure, which lasted for 20 centuries until the reign of Haile Selassie that ended in 1975.8

In the Christian Bible, Sheba appears by inference in the Song of Solomon and also in the Bible’s most famous passage from the book of Kings. As the story is related, Sheba, hearing of Solomon’s wisdom from a traveling merchant, journeyed to Jerusalem to meet him. After their
encounter, which was an intellectual exchange with strong romantic overtones, Sheba is said to declare: “From this moment I will not worship the sun, but will worship the Creator of the sun, the God of Israel.” The Ethiopian queen converted to Judaism.


Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones … And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king which he could not explain to her. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, and … the burnt offerings which he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her.

And she said to the king, “The report was true which I heard in my own land of your affairs and your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it; and, behold, the half was not told me; your wisdom and propriety surpass the report which I heard. Happy are your wives! Happy are these your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel. Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king that you may execute justice and righteousness.” Then she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold and a very great quantity of spices and precious stones, never again came such an abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all that she desired, whatever she asked besides what was given to her by the bounty of King Solomon. So she turned and went back to her own land, with her servants.

In this account, the Queen is a peer of King Solomon, not a subordinated or inferior figure.

There are various stories of how Sheba became pregnant by King Solomon, thus giving birth to their son Menelik, who became the founding ancestor of royal Ethiopian descent. In some accounts, before Sheba departs, Solomon deceives her into sleeping with him. Staying in his palace, she had asked him to swear that he would not force her into sex. He agreed, on condition that she would not take anything from his house by force. He fed her a lot of spicy food, and in the night, when she reached for water in her thirst, he appeared and said that she had broken her promise, having taken water, the most valuable of all things. So, according to the Kebra Nagast and the Bible, Makeda consented to have sex with Solomon. As she departed, he gave her a ring for their future son. Then, Solomon dreamed that the sun [and its worship] were no more in Israel. When Makeda’s son Menelik came of age, he traveled to Jerusalem for his father’s blessing and was recognized by the ring. Solomon wanted Menelik to succeed him as king, but he insisted on returning to Ethiopia. So, Solomon put together a noble company to go back with him. Angry at being forced to leave their homes and families, these young men secretly took the Ark out of the Temple and away to Africa. Menelik was not implicated in this deceit, but he found out along the way. He was divinely transported back to Ethiopia through the skies, thwarting Solomon’s attempt to recover the Ark. Menelik’s return to Ethiopia was celebrated with great pomp at Axum, and Makeda gave up her throne to him. Ethiopia became “the second Zion.” The Queen of Sheba is also mentioned as the “Queen of the South” in the New Testament (Matthew 12:42): “The Queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and held, something greater than Solomon is here”; the same wording appears in
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Luke 11:31 in the context of Jesus saying that she and the Ninevites will judge the contemporaries of Jesus who rejected him.

In Islamic sources, Sheba is known as Balqis and has an acknowledged south Arabian origin. Yemen and Ethiopia share a heritage across the Red Sea, where rule by women in antiquity was established after the advent of Islam with two acknowledged ruling queens, Asma bint Shihab al-Sulayhiyya (d. 480 AH/1087 AD) and her daughter in law ‘Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhiyya. They co-ruled with a husband or son, Queen ‘Arwa ruling for nearly half-a century. Both queens bore the same royal title, al-sayidda al-hurra, “the noble lady who is free and independent, the woman sovereign who bows to no superior authority.” These queens descended from the pre-Islamic regents of the realm of Sheba, the family tracing its roots to the Yam clan of the Hamdan tribe. Shi’a Islam is notable for its emphasis on heredity over meritocracy in leadership succession; thus, the Yemenite sovereigns brought a sense of hereditary rule to Ethiopia and parts of Shi’ite Africa, including the powerful Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. The Yemenis bestowed upon these queens the affectionate title of “Balqis al-sughra” or “little queen of Sheba,” or more precisely, “young queen of Sheba.”

Balqis is introduced in the Quran as a ruler who worshipped the sun, and as being led by Satan instead of Allah. In her story, Balqis loses her throne when a jinn (spirit) working for Solomon steals it. Although stripped of her assets, Sheba gains in spirituality and surrenders first to Allah and then to his prophet Solomon (Mardrus, 142). Thus, in the Muslim telling of Sheba’s story, she is a convert to Islam before her encounter with Solomon.

Mernissi asks: did she actually marry Solomon, or was she a consort? Nothing in the Quran tells us that she was a virgin or that they were married. However Muslim theologians and historians have decided that she was a virgin, perhaps for predictable reasons of patriarchal revisionist history. Nonetheless, Mernissi argues that Balqis as a royal woman poses a problem for historians, with al-Mas’udi – a highly regarded Muslim historian – declaring that she was born from a human father and a jinn mother, implying magic or intervention of the supernatural. With such a throne and a people at her feet, Balqis could not be completely human, and there are vivid stories of her possessing the cloven feet of a donkey (Ibid., 143).

Despite such assaults on her dignity, Balqis has held her own against these onslaughts to reduce or humiliate her. Balqis remains a powerful figure today in Arab poetry, and many contemporary poets use her name to suggest “a female presence such that she still fascinates and enchants” (Ibid., 140). Mernissi argues that although Shi’ites have been more liberal toward women holding power, ultimately it is Yemeni culture, more than Shi’a Islam, that is the main factor in the persistence of her story. In Yemen, female rulers were needed for political legitimacy (Ibid., 158).

In the Qur’an, the verses telling the story of Solomon and Sheba (Sura 27:22–4) specify that Solomon, hearing “news from Saba” of “a woman ruling over them” and in possession of a great throne (Sura 27:22–3), is said to have uttered these words:

Indeed, I found a woman ruling them, and she has been given of all things, and she has a great throne. I found her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of Allah, and Satan has made their deeds pleasing to them and averted them from [his] way, so they are not guided, so they do not prostrate to Allah …

(Holy Qu’ran: Sura 27:24–5)

After this news of a “great queen from the east,” Solomon sent a letter to Sheba through the messenger Tamrin. The last portion of the Qur’anic passage sheds light not only on the peaceful intent of Sheba but also on her understanding of the destructive effects of war on innocent
citizens, while her method of pacification is the initiation of a peace process through a display of generous gifts, as described by Madrus from both Christian and Muslim accounts:

As she approached: “O King of Kings, the Queen of the South and of the Morning stays at four parasangs from the King’s tents, with a glittering escort and a mighty army.” And so Solomon spread forth his magnificence. Then he rose up on his two feet, and went to meet his destiny.

First he saw a single line of fifty elephants opening the way, blaring with lifted trunks, heavy and unafraid; and their rank was dressed as straight as a brass wall. They were half-hidden by their cloths and towers; and were led by rose-copper-colored Abyssinians, with small gold cords as tresses in their hair. These cornacs held gilded sticks in their left hands and cried in their own tongue terrifyingly. (no page no.)

Solomon related: “An ‘ifreet of the jinn10 said ‘I will bring it [Sheba’s throne] to you, before you rise from your seat, and I am indeed capable of it and faithful.’ He said: ‘Disguise her throne for her, so that we might see she be well-guided or will be one of those who are not well-guided.’ When she arrived, it was said (to her): ‘Is your throne like this one?’ She said ‘it looks like it.’ However, when she worshipped, apart from Allah, … she was indeed one of the unbelieving people.”

The Qur’an’s Sura 27 portrays a powerful “pagan” woman in a compromised yet mystical light and is the closest that the Qur’an gets to a prophetess as an early convert to Islam, although the historical dates do not match with the story, as Islam is not introduced until the seventh century CE. Also, in the Qur’anic account, she is shown coming not to seek wisdom but to avert a disastrous invasion of her country. Solomonic Israel was likely incapable of mounting such an invasion, least of all against far-away Yemen or Ethiopia. But because the Queen of Sheba appears in the Qur’an, Muslims have spread her story around the world, although it has become heavily mythologized.

Race and representation

Contemporary Ethiopian folk pictorial renditions of the story are enhanced with indigenous details that are missing from the foreign renderings of the tale. The story begins with the river birth of a giant serpent, “Arwe,” who becomes the ruler and demands tribute from his subjects. Agabos, Sheba’s father, ends this feudal tradition by poisoning a goat, which is fed to the serpent, who then dies. Agabos becomes king, and upon his death, Makeda (Azeb) succeeds him. From this founding genealogical background, the story continues along the same lines as related earlier; however, the “peculiarity of the Ethiopian story must be stressed” (Boavida and Ramos, 2005:86). In one of these folk paintings, specific local cultural details are included, such as portraying the Menelik family member playing an Ethiopian lute, the gena (a stringed instrument or lute, known as the rabab in Arabic).

Racial mythology has surrounded the legends of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba has been an alluring subject across the ages, continuing into the present era, where she is revered in Ethiopian lore and remains an enigmatic figure across the triple religious tradition in both the West and the East. Her physical representation varies across the many cultures and regions where her story has migrated. This section offers a glimpse of the diverse ways in which Sheba has been portrayed, not only by race (skin color and physical features) and culture (dress and setting) but also by gender, especially how she is portrayed in terms of agency. For example, in a painting by a contemporary Ethiopian artist Bizuhayeu Taddesse,11 Sheba is portrayed as lighter in
skin tone than her Ethiopian attendants and darker than King Solomon, perhaps depicting her Asiatic as well as African roots, as the king bends to kiss her hand in what is, presumably, their encounter in Jerusalem. Although the cultural setting is Orientalist, the cultural-racial diversity of her attendants is evident.12

Ethiopian folk portrayals are often produced for the tourist trade but nonetheless keep the legend of Sheba alive into the present moment and reveal a conscious racial and cultural differentiation between Sheba and the other characters essential to her story. In these panels, there is a clear difference in skin colors.13 The servant is Black, Makeda is red, and Solomon is white. Moreover, in these twentieth-century portrayals, white dress covering the whole body for males and females is typical, along with traditional rural houses made of clay (“adobe”) walls and thatched roofs, both consistent with contemporary Ethiopian culture.

In Madrus’ Islamic text, Abyssinians are described as “rose-colored” (no page number). In European imagery, Sheba was typically portrayed as white, although she was depicted as a Black woman for the first time in 1181 CE in the monastery of Klosterneuberg, Germany, where she appears as a dark-skinned queen in royal regalia (Figure 3.1). Jan Nederveen Pieterse has analyzed this as part of a stylistic re-evaluation of Black, no longer seen as demonic once Ethiopia was viewed as a Christian land. This may have contributed to an association of Ethiopia with the fabled African Christian kingdom ruled by Prester John, which was both a destination and viewed as a potential Christian ally during the Crusades.

Figure 3.1 Queen of Sheba as Black, 1405 AD. Solomon and Sheba, c.1452 AD.
Unlike the eastern writers, European authors and artists often showed Solomon as the political superior of the Queen of Sheba and also as her spiritual senior and initiator. They also added a racial distortion, whitening her, a feature that can also be seen in Persian manuscripts. While race is still viewed in the eye of the beholder, there is no doubt that Sheba is an African queen, irrespective of her physical attributes. Depictions of the Queen of Sheba and thus, of Ethiopia can be seen as reflecting changing images and the utility of these images of the African – from negative to positive at various historical times: 1) as positive when Europe needed an ally during the Crusades against the eastern Islamic threat; 2) as negative during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as colonialism advanced and the continent became “darkest Africa”; and 3) as a twentieth-century postcolonial revival of a majestic African queen redeeming the continent’s history and providing a case of an African queen with independence, agency, and healthy sexuality. Happily, in the world of gender scholarship, we are at a moment where women of African descent and their enthusiastic allies can begin to re-envision who the Queen of Sheba may have really been, beyond the scriptural traditions within which her original story has been told.

Notes


2 In the *Kebra Nagast*, there are named queens whose dates reflect the western Christian calendar and the Ethiopian lunar calendar having 13 months [No. IV, Queens Borsa: 1246; 4254; XIII Elyouka: 1769; 3731; VIII Nehassat Nais (after the Fall of the Tower of Babel; 3096; 2904; Kasiyope; 3629; 1890; Mumazes; 3829; 1671; Helena; 4163; 1307; Makeda (78 sovereigns reigned in Ethiopia before the advent of Menelik I); Nicauta Kandae; Hadina; Nikawla Kandat; Akwasis Kandake III [#34, 36, 39]; Amsena; Wakan (2 days); Ahywa Sofya (last three after Christianity; Sofya a Queen Mother); Adhana I and II; Zaudita and Tafari Makonnen (1916) – Haile Selassie, 1930–74. In October 2018, the Ethiopian government appointed its first woman president, Sahle-Work Zewde (NY Times, October 26, 2018). www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Queen_of_Sheba

3 Ethiopia is known in Arabic as *al-Habash*, and Ethiopians as *al-Habashiyeen*.


7 Coptic Christianity is the eastern, Monophysite branch of Christianity whose theology denies the divinity of Jesus Christ. Its popular bases are in Christian Egypt and Ethiopia, who share a common patriarch, or pope.

8 My husband and I saw Haile Selassie in 1971 during an official visit to Khartoum on the occasion of the opening of the new Sudan National Museum, which featured an entire floor with a collection of frescos removed from Christian churches at Faras, Sudan, during the lengthy period of Christianity from the 5th to the 15th century AD. They bear a close resemblance to Ethiopian religious paintings.


10 Jinn are invisible beings, either harmful or helpful; ‘ifreet are demons. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, Arabic-English*, edited by J. Milton Cowan, third printing (Beirut: Libraire du Liban, 1980).

11 Postcard reproduction of a painting from the National Museum of Ethiopia, “The Queen of Sheba,” traditional painting, 1.23 × 2.52 cm, by Bizuhayeu Taddesse.


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References


