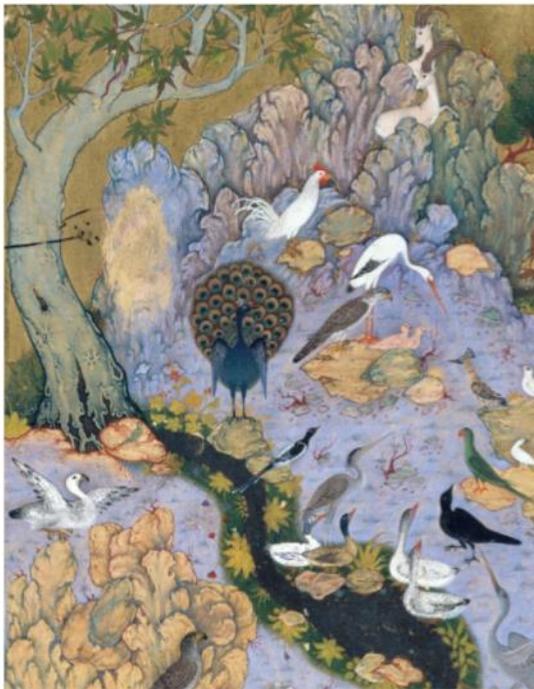


# The Mystical Reading of the Quranic Queen of Sheba

The attitude of the Quran and Islamic Tradition towards an Ancient  
Southern Arabian Queen

**Image 1:** Sava H. Artwork: Page from an illuminated manuscript of *Conference of the Birds*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1600.



**Image 2:** Scene from *Attributed to Ira, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, folio from an illustrated manuscript. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Image 3:** *Untitled tale of Solomon and the Phoenix* from the *Tipu Library*. British Library, London, 1255.



# **The Mystical Reading of the Quranic Queen of Sheba**

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*March 2023*

## Summary

The story of the Queen of Sheba has been the subject of numerous studies and has been approached from different academic angles (political, historical, theological, etc.). However, we lack a study that dwells on how the Quran contributes to a mystical interpretation of her character and story. This thesis focuses on such and interpretation and on the reception of the story of the Queen of Sheba in the late Middle Ages (around 1100-1500 C.E.). Her well-known encounter with King Solomon seems to have had a mystical function in this period, which is distinct from the one we find in the Hebrew Bible. This mystical function is especially visible in Islamic exegesis linked to minority groups, and in the interpretations in the late Islamic tradition. Taking these considerations into account, this thesis sets out to examine the construction of the mystical image of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran and late medieval sources.

The research uses reception theory from the primary understanding that the Quran draws on the Hebrew Bible's account of the Queen of Sheba but also departs from it. The various elements and the role of the Queen of Sheba in a narrative where she is not mentioned explicitly by this name (although the Islamic tradition identifies her as Bilqis) will be discussed. The contours of the mystical reading of her representation and authority will be drawn, too, by focusing on the Quran 27, *The Ants*. As will be argued, the interpretation attributes to her pious behavior through her conversion to monotheism through which it is possible to challenge some dominant perspectives on authority in Islam. In addition to the Quran and its interpretation, this thesis also analyzes the reception of the story in some Muslim sources from the late Middle Ages, a period in which we find numerous materials that shed light on aspects of how her character was received and represented. The conclusions of the thesis not only highlight the abundance of mystical interpretations of Bilqis. They also suggest that the narrative of the Queen of Sheba and her character possibly had a special appeal to some minority groups in Islam, such as sufis and women. This is an aspect that addressed here in a preliminary way and will hopefully serve as a basis for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible contains many stories that are similar in the Quran, this act of “borrowing” can be conceptualized in reception history, a theory in historical textual research.<sup>1</sup> Islamic or Quranic reception history emphasizes Biblical tradition and acknowledges its influence on the Quran. Nonetheless, the Quran has its own narrative.<sup>2</sup> One story that triggered me personally is the story of the Queen of Sheba who visited Solomon; this is a mysterious story with many mystical creatures such as the hoopoe mentioned in the Quran. This mysterious Queen from a desert land (most likely from Yemen) continues being used in a mystical context, scholars are reflecting on this queen by taking many perspectives. Her mystical character motivates to do proper research on her as an individual and influential person in Islam. Who was she? What role did she play in the late Middle Ages from approximately c. 1100-1500 C.E.?

This introduction is an attempt to outline the role of the Queen of Sheba through the lens of reception history, from the Biblical account provided in Kings I to its Islamic interpretation in sura 27. Next to that, this introduction explains the motivation of doing this research, in which I am trying to examine the individual role of the Queen of Sheba in Islam and her connection to mystical readings in Islamic tradition, such as in the sufi community and other minority groups in Islam.<sup>3</sup> The royal title “Queen” is a recurring theme in this thesis, in which minority groups in Islam such as women, are relating to the authority of the Queen of Sheba. Looking into the meaning of this title and its value in Biblical and Quranic texts help to identify its various uses. Furthermore, the Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> England, E., and Lyons, W. J. “Explorations in the Reception of the Bible”. In *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, edited by England, E. and Lyons, W. J. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. *Religion Compass* 1, Nr. 6 (2007), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*. 1st ed. New York: HarperOne, 2015, p. 2537.

perception of the text in sura 27, “the story of the Queen of Sheba”, differs from that of the Hebrew Bible in Kings I, taking on an entirely different approach. Hence, it becomes interesting to identify which parts are left out and which parts are incorporated to the Quran, supporting a mystical reading. In other words: what is familiar and what is strange in the story? Some added characters in the Quran such as the hoopoe and other mystical creatures, should not be missed in this thesis due to their continuity in other sources. The use of Biblical sources adds to the context of this thesis, in which both Jewish and Christian sources contribute to the research of the story of the Queen of Sheba and its use before Islam.

As mentioned before, the main primary text used in this thesis is the Quran; sura 27, *The Ants*. Other sources which are contributing to the mystical character of the Queen of Sheba can be found in Islamic tradition, such as mystical poetry from the *Conference of Birds* by Farrid ud-Din ‘Attar. In addition, scholarly interpretations on the primary text, such as the *Study Quran* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr will be consulted and contribute to the interpretation of sura 27. The leading research question will be as follows: *How does the Quran elaborate the mystical image of the Queen of Sheba when we work from the perspective of the historical reception of the story in the Hebrew Bible?*

### 1.1 Problems in Identifying the Queen of Sheba

The story of the Queen of Sheba and her encounter with Solomon is described extensively in the Hebrew Bible and Quran. However, the stories differ in that Biblical sources and Islamic sources are both supporting different arguments on who exactly this queen was. This thesis argues that according to the Islamic interpretation, the Queen of Sheba was a queen from the kingdom of the ancient Yemen (including Northern Ethiopia), named Bilqis (or Makeba, Ethiopian

version).<sup>4</sup> This is why the focus will be on her story in Islamic sources, in which “The Queen of Sheba” is being used metaphorically in poetry and art among other sources. The mention of a kingdom ruled by a woman contribute to the understanding of her as a leader, and this could unveil early conceptions concerning the role of Bilqis as a ruling queen. The following hadith motivates doing further research on the actual interpretation on Bilqis and her authority in Islam:

*Abu Bakr told: During the days of Al-Jamal (of the battle), Allah benefited me with the word I had heard from Allah’s Messenger after I had been about to join the companions of Al-Jamal, and fight along them. When Allah’s Messenger was informed that the Persians had crowned the daughter of Kisra as their ruler, he said, “Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful.”<sup>5</sup>*

This hadith is overtly negative about women being rulers. Yet the Queen of Sheba, Bilqis, lived approximately 1500 years prior to the queen this hadith is referring to and possibly her figure shows the opposite, namely, that female rulers can succeed in their task. Furthermore, the Queen of Sheba in Islam was highly valued as a respectable monarch<sup>6</sup> and is often mentioned in Islamic sources, most importantly in the Quran. Why is this so and what role does her story play in them? Possibly what is important is not her existence, in itself but, rather, the reception of the ideas linked to her figure. This thesis tries to answer the mentioned questions and attempts to analyze the Quran and the hadith. An important point to mention is that this research does not focus on whether the Biblical or Islamic version of the Queen of Sheba is correct, but mainly aims to shed light on the interpretation of the text, from the reception of Kings I into its Islamic context, where her story in Islam I argued had a new function. The story of the Queen of Sheba became a point of reference in Islamic sources, art and poetry, and, in them, she was used in a metaphorical way. Hence, those are useful additional sources to discuss the reception of the Queen of Sheba.

<sup>4</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Bukhari, al-/ Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.). *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., Riyad: Darussalam, 1997. Vol. 5. Hadith 4425, Book 64, p. 436.

<sup>6</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2539.

## 1.2 Story Plot

Kings I and sura 27, *The Ants*, are the primary texts used in this thesis. They tell the reader the event of a far-away queen, who was invited to the kingdom of Solomon. The story plot needs to be summarized first, before elaborating the arguments in the upcoming chapters.

### 1.2.1 Hebrew Bible

The appearance of the Queen of Sheba at the court of Solomon is described extensively in the Hebrew Bible with a marked focus on wealth. When she visited Solomon, she did not come empty handed according to the Hebrew Bible and brought with her many gifts, contrasting with the Quranic narrative that tells us that Solomon received no gifts (Kings I 10:4, sura 27:36). The Queen of Sheba was not only amazed by Solomon's wealth, but also by his wisdom when they were exchanging riddles. Yet, she did not convert to monotheism at the end of her visit, when he invited her, to do so, this, again, in opposition to the Quran where her conversion brings about an important twist in the story. The Lord is briefly mentioned in Kings I: 10:9, when the Queen of Sheba praises Solomon as a rightful ruler of the territory of Israel. Next to this expression of religiosity, the story rather focuses on all the gold and other valuable materials Solomon received, and the comparison between the extravagant thrones of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. The throne becomes a recurring theme in the Biblical and Quranic versions. The Hebrew Bible also refers to Hiram, another important king, yet only being mentioned in the version of the Hebrew Bible. Hiram gave luxurious items to Solomon and more importantly, he came with wood to strengthen the Temple of the Lord. These gifts indicate that Solomon was indeed powerful and wealthy, and a brief mention to the Temple makes his devotion to God explicit. The Hebrew Bible focuses on Solomon and his authority as a

monarch who lived close to a wealthy queen from the South and who became an interesting character in Biblical sources.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2.2 The Quran

The story in the Quran also symbolizes wealth and faith and it strongly emphasizes Solomon being an important prophet. The “idolatrous queen” became amazed by Solomon’s wisdom and converted to Islam, which is one of the main lessons in this story from the perspective of the Quran.<sup>8</sup> The role of the “Queen” also differs, and the Quran does compliment her based on her wealth and patience. She was respected, even if she worshipped the sun first. Sura, *The Ants*, discusses some added characters such the hoopoe and the jinn, all in order to bring to light Solomon’s prophethood.<sup>9</sup> So, what role does the Queen of Sheba play next to Solomon?

The next quotations from the *Conference of Birds* show an understanding of female kingship in Islam worth considering in relation to the Queen of Sheba. The *Conference of Birds* (composed in 1166 C.E.) is a mystical poem, in which the hoopoe takes a major role as a spiritual guide. The *Conference of Birds* by Farid ud-Din ‘Attar is interpreted as mystical poetry by sufis.<sup>10</sup> The sufi community is sometimes regarded with contempt by other Muslims because of its members’ emphasis on mysticism, and thus constituting a minority group. Poetry such as the *Conference of Birds* is used in sufism for spiritual practices. The hoopoe also appears in the Quran where he follows the orders of Solomon.<sup>11</sup> Besides, the metaphorical use of the Queen of Sheba is to be mentioned, as shown in the following quotations:

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<sup>7</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2537.

<sup>9</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 2012, p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 37.

- a) In *The Conference of Birds*: 'Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide; It was on you King Solomon relied to carry secret messages between His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen. He knew your language and you knew his heart.'<sup>12</sup>
- b) In Quran 27:20-23, Solomon inspected the birds and said, 'Why do I not see the hoopoe? Is he absent? I will punish him severely or kill him, unless he brings me a convincing excuse for his absence.' But the hoopoe did not stay away long: he came and said, 'I have learned something you did not know: I come to you from Sheba with firm news'. I found a woman ruling over the people, who has been given a share of everything – she has a magnificent throne-.

These quotations suggest a positive value attached to the Queen of Sheba and hence, we can compare these uses shown in the quotations, to inquire into what were the actual functions of the Queen of Sheba in Islam.

### 1.3 Methods and Questions and Thesis Overview

This thesis examines the reception history of the Queen of Sheba, in which an investigation on Islamic sources will contribute to identifying the Islamic Queen of Sheba, in order to understand the different perceptions of her character.<sup>13</sup> Primary texts such as Quranic verses and hadith, together with the Hebrew Bible (Kings I) and secondary sources from this particular time period (11<sup>th</sup> till 15<sup>th</sup> century) will be used to discuss the reception history of the story of the Queen of Sheba.

The theoretical framework states that all material from the Hebrew Bible can be turned into research material that has changed, and been shaped through time: *All manner of study objects could be included, whether popular, technical, artistic, hubristic, or ridiculous; virtually everything the biblical materials touch would be open to scholarly investigations.*<sup>14</sup> In Islam, reception theory elaborates on

<sup>12</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din/ Afkham Darbandi (trans.) and Dick Davis (intr.). *The Conference of the Birds*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex; New York, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Wahling, F. *Theory and Method in Religious Studies Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Berlin, Boston: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995, p. 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> England, E. and Lyons, W. J. *Reception History and Biblical Studies*, 2015, p. 3.

different aspects such as the religious matters as a mundane framework within which the influence of Biblical tradition seems not unlikely.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the elaboration of Islamic sources of the Biblical tradition can be understood as conceptual “borrowing”, and, here, the late Middle Ages are important due to the available Biblical sources. Muslims scholars consider Biblical influences important, and the revelation of Muhammed is placed in the footsteps of those to Jews and Christians, and do not rely exclusively on the one revelation to Muhammad. Hence, the Quranic narrative seems to be both familiar and self-contained:

*Finally, in the late antique Near Eastern milieu, scripture was almost never approached or understood in an unmediated form, but was typically filtered through diverse interpretive traditions that functioned not only to clarify the plain sense of scripture per se, but also to make scripture meaningful and relevant for the particular community in which such exegesis arose.*<sup>16</sup>

The theoretical framework explains the concept of “borrowing” texts, in which the motivations of writers on the Queen of Sheba are different based on the religious background and political history of their respective countries. Most of the sources discussed in this thesis are from a Shiite perspective, because those sources often refer to the Queen of Sheba as an authoritative and mystical character.

My thesis addresses the following research question which is meant to guide the reader through the thesis: *How does the Quran elaborate the mystical image of*

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<sup>15</sup> Najmuddin Anjeh, O. “Peaceful coexistence and its impact on the organization of society in terms of legitimacy (An analytical study and a comparison between what is stated in the Quran and the Gospel adopted by Christians)”. *Journal of Tikrit university for humanities* 22, Nr. 9 (2015), p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. (2007), p. 4.

*the Queen of Sheba when we work from the perspective of the historical reception of the story in the Hebrew Bible?*

It is followed by a number of sub-questions:

- ❖ How does the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran relate to the same story in the Hebrew Bible, when looked from the perspective provided by the reception history theory?
- ❖ How do pre-Islamic sources contribute to the knowledge of the Queen of Sheba, as a historical and narrative character?
- ❖ What elements in the Quranic narrative contribute to a mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba and her narrative?
- ❖ How is the mystical character of the Queen of Sheba being received in Islamic tradition, particularly in art and poetry?
- ❖ How do art and poetry serve as means of teaching Muslims a mystical reading of the story alongside Quranic exegesis?
- ❖ How do art and poetry contribute to the theory of reception in history?
- ❖ How can the Quranic mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba and its uses by minority groups in Islam during the Middle Ages be read in light of the theory of reception in history?
- ❖ How does the Quranic mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba lend itself to a use that can empowering minority groups in Islam, particularly sufis and women?

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework
- Chapter 3: The Beginnings of a Legendary Character: The Queen of Sheba in Pre-Islamic Sources
- Chapter 4: The Quranic Reception of the Queen of Sheba

- Chapter 5: The Reception of the Queen of Sheba as a Mystical Character in Islamic Tradition: Poetry and Art
- Chapter 6: The Reception of the Queen of Sheba in Shi’I Islamic Tradition
- Chapter 7: Conclusion

Hopefully this thesis will provide the needed insights to the reader in order to understand the uses of the Queen of Sheba as a mystical character in the late medieval Islamic period.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of “borrowing” texts from the Hebrew Bible seems useful. Prophets from Jewish and Christian traditions are repeatedly mentioned in the Quran and in Islamic traditions such as in *The Tales of the Prophets* or *Qisas al-Anbiya* (c.1200 C.E.). The mentioning of prophets in Islam is meant to show the prophetic heritage linked to the last prophet, Muhammad. Here, the example of “borrowing” leads to the concept of the reception history from Biblical material to Quranic material. Islamic scholars argue that Muhammad was influenced by Jewish and Christian ideas when making the Quran, and therefore do not rely their understanding on the Quran’s revelation as a one-time event. Hence, the formation of the Quran took time to complete comparable to the long-lasting formation of the Hebrew Bible:<sup>17</sup> *Moreover, of the Pentateuchal material, it is the narrative contents rather than the legal that seem to have had the greatest impact on the formation of the Quran.*<sup>18</sup> Most of the stories seem to be familiar and, yet, the Quran empathizes “other” aspects compared to the Hebrew Bible especially in sura 27, in which the Quran introduces mystical element to the story of the Queen of Sheba.<sup>19</sup> The reception of the Queen of Sheba can differ from other stories which are “borrowed” or original in Islam.

The method used in this thesis is linked to reception history theory, often used by scholars who examine either the Hebrew Bible or the Quran. Reception history theory states that all material from the Hebrew Bible evolves into research material, taking different forms depending on the time period.<sup>20</sup> The concept of “borrowing” texts such as the story of the Queen of Sheba, is part of

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<sup>17</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. (2007), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. (2007), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. (2007), p. 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> England, E. and Lyons, W. J. *Reception History and Biblical Studies*, 2015, p. 3.

the reception history theory. The Queen of Sheba became a source of inspiration, and she was “borrowed” in many different ways, intentionally or unintentionally. By researching the Queen of Sheba and her characteristics, her influence in Islam becomes clearer. Visual exegetical sources, such as Islamic art, help to explain other aspects of the representation of the Queen of Sheba and the interpretation of her narrative. Exegesis can be defined as an explanation of a text, indeed, and a visual form of exegesis helps alphabetic believers to understand texts. This is the reason why this thesis does not primarily examine texts, but also takes recourse to art and poetry dealing with the Queen of Sheba. Those I argue, are needed to better understand her role in Islamic exegesis, or tafsir. Visual representation reveals a different and complementary understanding of her mystical depictions in tafsir,<sup>21</sup> and we see that in the late medieval period, the Queen of Sheba was often approached through poetry and art, especially in countries where the majority of people are Shiites. These sources are a clear example of the reception of the Queen of Sheba in Islam, where she has been mentioned intentionally with a religious motivation often by the sufi community. Minority groups in Islam rely on Islamic exegesis through mystical forms of reception, as will be explained in chapter 5.

The reception history theory interprets sources in two ways: as being intentionally modified by the author, or as being evaluated and commented by the reader. The reader or commentator, and author could hence be both re-using or borrowing the text for their own purpose, based on their own interpretation. Scholars should evaluate both forms of reception, and the intentional forms of reception should be brought into context, to understand what might have motivated the writers of the intentional forms to do so. This thesis discusses the different interpretations of the Queen of Sheba from the concept of “borrowing”

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<sup>21</sup>Vaid, M. “(Review) Ali Sulayman Ali, A Brief Introduction to Quranic Exegesis”. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 35, Nr. 1 (2018), p. 112-114.

texts, as a concept in reception history.<sup>22</sup> The historical narrative concerning the Queen of Sheba is discussed in chapter 3, where the following subjects matter: sociocultural, political and religious historical aspects during and before the Islamic period. The historical framework discusses the late Antique period, and the presence of the Queen of Sheba in other sources than just Islamic ones. Historical research methods are focused on the interpretation and understanding of the historical context in which “space and time” play a role:

*(...) considering to emphasize the concepts and hypotheses and aims at understanding the relations of the History with the Time, with the memory or with the Space. In this sense, two important structures need to be dominated by those who are interested in this type of historical studies. This is the theory and methodology of history.<sup>23</sup>*

The interpretation or reception of the Queen of Sheba in this thesis needs to be examined in different time periods, in which she is used with different purposes. Some information on the Queen of Sheba is based on fictional stories, stories that were transferred orally. Only from the late Middle Ages onwards texts became more expanded and commented, such as in poetry, Quranic texts, art and scholarly reflections. However, the intention of texts or the interpretations of texts might unfold in such a way, that the re-use of the Queen of Sheba can be surprising. To illustrate that, the period from 1100 C.E. until 1500 C.E. will be taken as reference in the following chapters. Nonetheless, the period prior to the late Middle Ages needs to be analyzed slightly, too, in order to create a timeline of the reception of the Queen of Sheba. There is no perfect way to apply the reception history theory in an Islamic context, It is, however, possible, and Neuwirth’s claims seem to fit this thesis when she states: *(...) it is the reception of the older narrative in a new setting and its evolution in that setting that matters most – not the fact that it is a biblical ‘borrowing’ that may indicate Jewish*

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson, P. M. “Reception Theory and the Interpretation of the Historical Meaning”. *History and Theory* 23, Nr. 3 (1993), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Almeida Filho, A. J. “The Historical Research: Theory, Methodology and Historiography (A pesquisa histórica: teoria, metodologia e historiografia)” *História da enfermagem, Revista Eletronica* 7, Nr. 2(2016), p. 385.

*'influence' on the Prophet.*<sup>24</sup> While most of the analyzed sources in this thesis are focused on the reception of Biblical sources, earlier traditions from the pre-Islamic period might show other aspects of the Queen of Sheba that influenced Islam.

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<sup>24</sup> Pregill, M. E. "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam". (2007), p. 16.

### 3. The Beginnings of a Legendary Character: The Queen of Sheba in Pre-Islamic Sources

The Queen of Sheba is mentioned in many different eras, but, her true existence is debatable and her exact birthplace and birth year remains unknown. Sources that can tell us about her origins, whether or not she was a real historical person or a narrative character, date her back to the pre-Islamic period and Yemen, where she is mentioned as a living ruler approximately about 1500 B.C.E. From late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, her representation in sources was provided through the lens of Rabbinic sources. This chapter is an attempt to outline her role in history by answering the question of how pre-Islamic sources contribute to the knowledge of the Queen of Sheba, as a historical and narrative character. The historical context adds to this thesis with sources directly linked to the Queen of Sheba. This historical framework helps to approach the reception of the Queen of Sheba in pre-Islamic sources.

#### 3.1 The Queen of Sheba in the Pre-Islamic Period and Late Antiquity

The Queen of Sheba is known in Islamic sources under the name Bilqis. This name is also used in this thesis when discussing these particular sources. The role of Bilqis as queen shifts from positive to negative depending on the perspective of the different authors. The Queen of Sheba is represented in other sources than just Kings I, such as in early Rabbinic sources, which influenced Islamic tradition. The reception of the Queen of Sheba changed from being a goddess, to being a demon or a warlord. Her polytheism influenced her reception through time.

### 3.1.1 Pre-Islamic Material and Archeological Evidence of the Queen of Sheba

In the pre-Islamic period, most of Arabia and neighboring countries were acquainted with a complex religious diverse social context. For example, there were large groups of Christians and Jews, and even more polytheists. A form of monotheism was already present, and not unknown to the people of Arabia: *The image has frequently been presented of a society in which monotheism was 'in the air' and of the Prophet as in some way building upon and directing the monotheistic ingredients already existing in his environment.*<sup>25</sup> However, this theory is debatable because Arabs still worshipped a diversity of gods during the early days of Islam, and this had impact on Islamic literature, the Quran and the hadith.

Polytheism is important in this thesis, knowing that the Quran referred to the Queen of Sheba as a sun worshipper. This period of multiple-God worship is called the "jahiliyya" in later Muslim sources, which means ignorance, and in connection to the Quran it is a period in time where people did not obey one God, as mentioned in sura 53:19-21. The Quran also has some verses linked to the jahiliyya: in truth, the Quran and Islam in general referred to rituals and practices from this period, such as the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, as belonging to the jahiliyya. Nevertheless, the focus is held on the form of worship, with the Queen of Sheba in this case being seen as a wrongdoer or mushrik (polytheist). The features of the jahiliyya are not to be taken lightly, because it is influential for the perspective on polytheism and its condemnation in the Quran. And therefore, the Quran elaborates on polytheistic traditions as stated in the next quotation:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 23.

*To the extent that anything outside the Koran can help us understand the koranic attack on shirk, it is likely to be other monotheist polemic against groups perceived as falling short in their monotheism, rather than the 'historical' recreation of Arabian idolatry in Muslim tradition.<sup>27</sup>*

Multiple-God worship continued existing during the rule of the Christians and therefore, the approach in the Quran is contradictory, and there are at the same time aggressive and positive attitudes towards wrongdoers. The Quran often empathizes that the individual should be responsible for his own actions in faith. Accordingly, morality in verses related to polytheism seems to become more important than the possibility of doing something wrong. Chapter 6 attempts to clarify the gnostic meaning of sura 27. The pre-Islamic period influenced the reception of the Queen of Sheba and her role in history.<sup>28</sup> The Queen of Sheba was from Southern Arabia, and to be precise from Yemen. Yemen's history is complex, due to many influences from abroad, such as Jewish influences or Ethiopian influences from the early to the late Middle-Ages.

### **The Temple of Barran**

The archeological site, the Temple of Barran, shows elements of polytheistic worship which adds context to the time period discussed in this paragraph. According to the author Marham Maraqtam in, "Legal Documents recently discovered by the AFSM at Maḥram Bilqīs, near Mārib, Yemen" In *Proceeding of the Seminar for Arabian Studies Vol. 36.* (2006), the temple of Barran in Yemen near the city Ma'rib was dedicated to Bilqis, and dates back to the 10th century B.C.E. Marham also stresses that this ancient site is connected to the kingdom of Sheba also known as Saba, where we find a Sabaeen culture and Ma'rib was the capital. The assumption that the temple was dedicated to Bilqis is rather debatable, since there is no other historical evidence, hence, the temple and minimal references to Bilqis can be argued to be insufficient to make such a claim.

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<sup>27</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 103.

However, the temple can be used as a point of reference in order to understand worship towards multiple gods and the shift from polytheism towards monotheism, by taking the polytheistic appearance of the temple as a point of reference.<sup>29</sup> This site is important because it is also linked to a god named Almaqa, who was a god of the moon and sun. The temple's appearance is linked to sun-worship, which can be linked to the Queen of Sheba who also worshipped the sun. This temple functioned as a religious site, which changed from a site with polytheistic features to monotheistic ones. The Sabaeans initially devoted the temple to multiple gods if we take as a point of reference Sabaean inscriptions and statues devoted to the god of the moon and sun. After the beginning of monotheism, the function of the temple remained religious:<sup>30</sup> *The abandonment of the site as a sacred place can now be reliably linked to the introduction of monotheistic religions in Southwest Arabia during the late 4th century C.E.*<sup>31</sup> The Temple of Barran was a place dedicated to the cult of one God,

**Image 4:** Wendell, P. *Temple of Barran*, Marib, Expedition of 1951–1952 CE.



probably due to influences from the Himyarites, Jews and Christians, from approximately 400 C.E.

The temple is shown in image 4. The Queen's existence is disputed by historians. Nonetheless, the Queen of Sheba was a mythical queen whose

<sup>29</sup> Maraqtam, M. "Legal Documents recently discovered by the AFSM at Maḥram Bilqīs, near Mārib, Yemen". *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006), p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Maraqtam, M. "Legal Documents recently discovered by the AFSM at Maḥram Bilqīs, near Mārib, Yemen". *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006), p. 58-60.

<sup>31</sup> Görsdorf, J. and Burkhardt, V. "Radiocarbon Datings from the Almaqah Temple of Bar'an, Ma'rib, Republic of Yemen: Approximately 800 Cal Bc to 600 Cal Ad." *Radiocarbon* 43, Nr. 3 (2001), p. 1365.

existence was echoed in Islamic sources, and she is mentioned as the Queen of Sheba in the Quran, referring to *Ants* 27:27. Furthermore, poetry, such as the one found in the *Conference of Birds*, is poetry about wrongdoers or mushrik; the enemies of the Prophet and Islam, as will be explained in the next chapter. The *Conference of Birds*, also emphasizes a search of a just king. The inclusion of polytheism and idols in poetry, art and literature, reflects the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamic sources include references and discuss religious diversity and traditions other than Islam. The Queen of Sheba is an important character in this context, in which she became a muse for many writers and artists in Islam.<sup>32</sup> Idols in the story of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon are included multiple times. The Quran approaches idols in many ways and not necessarily negatively, such as mentioned in sura 53; nonetheless the Quran warns about worship towards the wrong gods. The Queen of Sheba can thus be regarded as an exceptional source of inspiration in the context of reception history.

### 3.1.2 Sabaeans and Himyarites

During the period of the jahiliyya, polytheism influenced the wealthiest and most influential families in Arabia. On the trade routes, polytheism would influence neighboring countries as well, leading to familiarities between countries and people. Whereas the Queen of Sheba lived in a pre-Islamic world where she worshipped multiple gods, the Quran turned her story into a conversion story to monotheism. Even not knowing for sure whether the Queen of Sheba was a historical character, the time period is clear: she would be a character from the pre-Islamic period during the Sabaean rule. The Sabaean rule lasted for several centuries, most likely from 1500 B.C.E. until 700 B.C.E. During the period of the Sabaeans, Yemen expanded its power to an international level where the Sabaeans almost reached Egypt, and this comes along with the possibility of the

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<sup>32</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 72.

first encounters with Jewish communities. These encounters could indicate a period where these cultures influenced each other and might explain why the relation between these of the two kingdoms was noticed in the Hebrew Bible, where these encounters seem familiar:

*The Psalms and the prophetic books lay special emphasis upon the wealth and commercial activity of the Sabaeans. The gifts of the kings of Sheba (שֶׁבַח) and of Seba (סֶבַח) to Solomon are noted in Ps. lxxii. 10, gold being especially mentioned among these presents (ib. verse 15).<sup>33</sup>*

The Hebrew Bible refers to three different groups of Sabaeans and discusses the economic activity of the kingdom of Saba, which is related to the meeting with Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. During these possible encounters between two cultures, the Sabaeans might have shown their religion, which was polytheistic. Furthermore, the Himyarites also played a large role in Yemen, where they controlled the south: *the Himyarite kings adopted monotheism in the second half of the fourth century.*<sup>34</sup> For a small period, the Himyarites even conquered the kingdom of Saba. Due to the Himyarites, monotheism was introduced at a minimal level first through Judaism. Polytheistic and monotheistic influences stood next to each other, as stated in the next quotation:

*Among the South Arabian monotheists there were Jews, Jewish proselytes and more neutral monotheists (and also some Christians, especially in the sixth century). They seem to have venerated the one God, whose exact nature could perhaps have been understood in some different ways, but He had mostly the same name.<sup>35</sup>*

This quotation suggests that there was diversity within the religious climate of Yemen. However, 400 years later Islam began, and brought its own attitude towards polytheism into the picture. The Kingdom of Himyar felt connected to

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<sup>33</sup> Jacobs, J. & Gray, L. "Sabaeans". In *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 12 vols., edited by Singer, Isidore. New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1901-1906. Published online: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13514-sheba>.

<sup>34</sup> Gajda, I. "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia". In *slam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Gajda, I. "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia". 2017, p. 8.

Judaism from approximately 340-570 C.E., and was influenced by Christianity after the Ethiopian domination of King Joseph. Polytheistic influences debunk the claim of a monotheistic Yemen under the Himyarites, where pre-Islamic data mentioned in the Book of Idols focused on idolatry during this period. Christian Robin in, *Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Himyar in Arabia: a Discreet Conversion (2021)*, stresses the possibility of a Jewish kingdom of Himyar existing next to a polytheistic culture.<sup>36</sup> The political climate of Yemen during the Himyarite kingdom differed in cities and moreover, there were cities that looked more monotheistic compared to the provincial communities. Royal inscriptions at Ma'rib support this argument where there are traces of both monotheism and polytheism, for example: *With the aid and help of God owner of the sky and the earth* (inscriptions of Ma'rib, 456 C.E.).<sup>37</sup> From the year 380 C.E., polytheism disappeared from many inscriptions, although, most likely not from all of society. These shift from polytheism to monotheism influenced the representation of Bilqis and changed her character from a polytheist to a new monotheist.

### 3.2 The Queen of Sheba as a Demon in Rabbinic Sources

This paragraph discusses the mystical character of the Queen of Sheba through the reception of Rabbinic sources, rather than it focuses on historical narratives. Rabbinic sources are focusing on the identity of the Queen of Sheba, and in them, she has been described as a demon or a jinn herself: *Solomon's Queen of Sheba was thus equated in Midrashic and later Jewish mystical literature with the prototypical Lilith, Adams original wife, who, according to legend, preceded the*

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<sup>36</sup> Robin, C. J. "Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Himyar in Arabia: A Discreet Conversion". In *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*. Edited by McDowell, G., Naiweld, R., and Stöckl ben Ezra, D. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers (2021), p. 171.

<sup>37</sup> Robin, C. J. "Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Himyar in Arabia: A Discreet Conversion". (2021), p. 177.

*creation of Eve*.<sup>38</sup> The link to the creation story from the Hebrew Bible is particular, especially because in Jewish literature the Queen of Sheba is being linked to the foremother of all humankind according to the source of the Alphabet of Ben Sira dated approximately around 700 C.E. Different translations of the name Lilith, are important in defining the amount of divinity or non-divinity connected to her. The name Lilith, has also been linked to the Queen of Sheba, and in particular, to her as a monarch and war chief having authority over a large number of people. This reference to a demon is important in the context of the Queen of Sheba's gender and her "metaphorical" authority or autonomy.<sup>39</sup> Next to that, it seems that the Queen of Sheba was not being seen as a woman, because a woman could never be a warlord while being a mother or a wife. For that reason, she has been represented either as a demon or as a goddess, which is an idea echoed in Islamic sources. Here, the Queen of Sheba has been imagined with hairy legs acting as a man, which makes her less desirable and less feminine. It is even said that Solomon spoke to her to shave her legs, to make her less demonic:<sup>40</sup> *The hair on her legs thus symbolizes this reversal of gender roles and forewarns Solomon of the potential danger in her remaining independent.*<sup>41</sup> The Quran and hadith are both not explicitly talking about shaving legs or impurity in the context of the story of the Queen of Sheba: they rather focus on not shaving your head. In hadith 1556, book 25, we read in this connection: (...) *the Prophet said: undo and comb your head hair.*<sup>42</sup> In the complete hadith 1556, a menstruating woman was allowed to perform the Hajj, if she would clean herself and comb her hair, her men companions had to shave their head hair before performing the Hajj. This hadith gives a perspective on the difference between women and men while performing a sacred ritual.

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<sup>38</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Becking, B., Toorn, K. van der, and Horst, van der W. M. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. 2nd extensively revised ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999, p. 521.

<sup>40</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Bukhari, al-/ Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.). *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., Riyad: Darussalam, 1997. Vol. 2. Hadith 1556, Book 25, p. 362.

Rabbinic sources in this case, focused on the reception of the Queen of Sheba on a metaphorical level, rather than looking at her as a historical source. Thus, how do pre-Islamic sources contribute to the knowledge of the Queen of Sheba, as a historical and narrative character? The historical framework shows that the Queen of Sheba is present in history, however, her role or her uses change depending on the text. So, the Quran attests on both the historical and metaphorical reception of the Queen of Sheba. On the other hand, in Yemenite Islamic traditions she is important and very much pious. This seems to contradict Rabbinic sources that refer to her as a demon.

### 3.2.1 The Queen of Sheba as a Goddess: The Letter of Solomon

Another perspective is that of some Rabbis, namely, that she could be a prophet herself just like other female characters from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>43</sup> Rabbinic sources are adding to the historical context sketched in this paragraph, due to their origin dated in 700 C.E., about the same time period when Islam emerged. Hence, the reception of Bilqis in Islam can be seen as echoing the mentioned time periods in this chapter. The Quran does not approach her as a prophet, it rather admires her "spirit". The Islamic perspective suggest that the Queen of Sheba was a great diplomat by not sending an army to King Solomon, and instead sending him gifts after she received a threatening letter. The letter Solomon sent had an impact on the Queen of Sheba and made her to prepare for battle. This shows her courage that even awoke the interest of Solomon. A translation from the letter is the following:

*from me, Solomon the King, who sends greetings. Peace unto you and your nobles, Queen of Sheba! No doubt you are aware that the Lord of the universe has made me King of the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the demons, spirits, and Liliths. All the kings of the East and West, and the North and South, come to me and pay homage. If you would come and greet me (that is, pay homage), I will honor you more than any kingly guest of mine, but if you refuse and do not appear before me to pay homage, I will send out against*

<sup>43</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 24-26.

*you (my) generals, contingents, and riders. You as, 'What generals, contingents, and riders has King Solomon?' then know that the beasts of the fields are all my generals, the birds in the sky are my riders, and the demons, spirits and Liliths are my contingents who will strangle you in your beds. The beasts will slay you in the fields and the birds of the sky will consume your flesh.<sup>44</sup>*

This letter contains a warning, a promise, and the Queen's response in the Hebrew Bible that differs from the story told in the Quran. It seems plausible that the Queen of Sheba appeared in Islamic sources as a stateswoman, general and warlord. Jewish literature approaches her as a deity, while Islamic literature approaches her as a great diplomat. These interpretations contradict each other, nonetheless, Rabbinic sources influenced Islamic tradition on the Queen of Sheba, where she also becomes a mystical character. Islamic stories from the Middle Ages focus on her as Bilqis, an heir to a jinn, and made her less human. Hence, there is no single use or interpretation of who the Queen of Sheba was, rather the historical narrative leads the diplomatic character of Bilqis and the Islamic tradition focuses on her as a mystical character instead. In Islamic tradition mysticism plays a key role:

*He disdained to marry among them, so they married him to a woman from the jinn, who was called Rayhanah bt. al-Shukr; for human beings, at that time, used to be able to see the jinn and associate with them. Bil'arnah, who was Bilqis, was born to her; and she had no other child. A verification of this story is what Ibn Mayrnunah related about it with his authorities from Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet said: "One of the parents of Bilqis was a jinni."<sup>45</sup>*

Even if some Islamic sources approach Bilqis as a stateswoman, there are other perspectives closer to Quranic texts, where the focus is put on Bilqis as an idolatrous woman such as in sura 48:6:

*also (so that) He may punish hypocrite men and women and polytheistic men and women, who harbour evil thoughts of Allah. May ill-fate befall them! Allah is displeased with them. He has condemned them and prepared for them Hell. What an evil destination!*

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<sup>44</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Brinner, W. M. (trans. And annot.). *Ara'is al-Majalis fi Qisas al-Anbiya or "Lives of the Prophets" as recounted by Abu Ishaq Ahmad Ibn Muhammed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Tha'abi*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 523.

This verse from the Quran refers to polytheistic worshippers who eventually will be punished, in which the Queen of Sheba fits this image of polytheistic worship. Nasr stresses the following interpretation on this verse: *But if your heart overpowers your soul and your bodily members, it will tether them with propriety (adab), compel them to worship, and then adorn them with sincerity in servanthood. All of these are God's hosts.*<sup>46</sup> This indicates "a way out", where conversion would lead to a more prosperous future. Yemen and the influences from different rulers with different religious identities, need to be seen as the most influential background for the reception of Bilqis through a large period of time.

### 3.3 Concluding Remarks

The period of idolatry existed during the Sabaean rule, which expanded its trade and possibly left traces of their culture and religion abroad. So, how do pre-Islamic sources contribute to the knowledge of the Queen of Sheba, as a historical and narrative character? The historical evidence from this particular time period, influenced ideas on the Queen of Sheba. After the Himyaritic influences, Northern Yemen also became mostly monotheistic, and only after the Jewish and Christian influences in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (or from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards) monotheism become dominant. The Queen of Sheba played a small role in the late Antiquity; only in later medieval texts the role of the Queen of Sheba became more prominent. This historical framework highlights just a fraction of the sources connected to the reception history of Bilqis, and only discusses traces of her that are needed in order to understand the following chapters. The next chapter focuses on the reception of Bilqis through late medieval, exegetical sources.

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<sup>46</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 3412.

## 4. The Quranic Reception of the Queen of Sheba

This chapter attempts to analyze the reception of the Queen of Sheba from the Hebrew Bible to the Quran. These primary texts are covered in this chapter, together with additional scholarly interpretations that are helpful in order to collect all the familiar and variant uses of sources of the Queen of Sheba. The concept of textual “borrowing” is especially evident in this chapter, in which the re-use of the narrative on the Queen of Sheba is often reflected in the familiar parts of the storyline:

*In short, what really matters is not that the Quran supposedly borrows narrative material from the Hebrew Bible (if this is even really the way to put it), but rather what it does with that borrowed material within the context of its literary structure and agendas.<sup>47</sup>*

The Quranic narrative is thus leading in the upcoming paragraphs, in which Biblical elements are used to strengthen the Quranic narrative.

### 4.1 The Biblical and Quranic Queen of Sheba

The following texts show the actual presence of the Queen of Sheba in the Hebrew Bible and the Quran, where we can see her function shifting from positive to negative. How does the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran relate to the same story in the Hebrew Bible, in Kings I, when looked from the perspective provided by the theory of reception history? The Quran focuses on the conversation between Solomon and his followers before the arrival of the Queen, the Hebrew Bible does not mention this and begins with the actual visit of the Queen of Sheba. The first familiarity between the two narratives is shown below, in which the Queen of Sheba refers to Solomon’s wealth and status as soon when she became acquainted with his presence. The left side of the pages is used for Kings I, and the right for the Quran, sura 27, *The Ants*.

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<sup>47</sup> Pregill, M. E. “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam”. (2007), p. 13.

10:1 When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, which brought honor to the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions.

27:29 The Queen (later) announced, 'O chiefs! Indeed, a noble letter has been delivered to me.'

### The Beginning

There is a significant difference between the approach to the Queen of Sheba reacting to Solomon's invitation. Whereas in Kings I it is possible to say that she wants to challenge Solomon, in the Quran she reacts in a more delighted way to his invitation. The Hebrew Bible starts with the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon's court and this is unlike the Quran, that starts with a conversation between Solomon and his followers. The exact verses of the Quran are provided here:

27: 20 (One day) he inspected the birds, and wondered, 'Why is it that I cannot see the hoopoe? Or could he be absent?'

27:21 'I will surely subject him to a severe punishment, or (even) slaughter him, unless he brings me a compelling excuse.'

27:22 It was not long before the bird came and said, "I have found out something you do not know. I have just come to you from Sheba with sure news,

27:23 Indeed, I found a woman ruling over them, who has been given everything (she needs), and who has a magnificent throne.

27:24 I found her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of Allah. For Satan has made their deed appealing to them- hindering them from the (right) Way and leaving them unguided.

27:25 So they do not prostrate to Allah, who brings forth what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you (all) conceal and what you reveal.

27:26 (He is) Allah! There is no God (worthy of worship), except Him, the Lord of the mighty throne.'

27:27 Solomon said, 'We will see whether you are telling the truth or lying.

27:28 Go with this letter of mine and deliver it to them, then stand aside and see how they will respond.'

### The Throne and the Divine

The conversation between Solomon and the hoopoe introduces mysticism into the story. Besides, another mystical character appears only in the Quran and this is the "jinn", a spirit creature to whom Solomon speaks to. These conversations have a function to make the prophethood of Solomon understandable, to which credibility is given by making such a connection with the divine.

The throne is a recurring theme where Solomon compared it with the one of the Queen of Sheba. There is a reference to the throne of the Lord that, hence, connects their thrones to the divine: *Mighty throne here is understood to refer not only to her power, but also to the actual physical dimensions and richness of the throne.*<sup>48</sup> Also mentioned is the worship towards idols and the sun, which bring attention to false worship according to the Quran. Nonetheless, the idolatry of the Queen of Sheba was not necessarily seen as disgraceful, because she converted to monotheism. Some scholars claim that the hoopoe blocked the sun for Solomon, which could be an indication that Solomon was protected from idol worship too, making both rulers loyal to one God from a Quranic perspective.<sup>49</sup>

Out of Kings 10:1 and sura 27:29, we could say that the story shows some similarities. However, the Quran does elaborate on some other themes which are important, and in which mysticism seems to play a key role.

<p>10:2 She arrived in Jerusalem with a large group of attendants and a great caravan of camels loaded with spices, large quantities of gold, and precious jewels. When she met with Solomon, she talked with him about everything she had on her mind.</p>	<p>27:30 It is from Solomon, and it reads: 'In the name of Allah- the Most compassionate, most merciful.'</p>
<p>10:3 Solomon had answers for all her questions; nothing was too hard for the King to explain to her.</p>	<p>27:31 'Do not be arrogant with me, but come to me, to me, fully submitting (to Allah).'</p>
	<p>27:32 She said, 'O chiefs! Advise me in this matter of mine, for I would never make any decision without you.'</p>
	<p>27:33 They responded, 'We are a people of strength and great (military) might, but the decision is yours, so decide what you will command.'</p>
	<p>27:34 She reasoned, 'Indeed, when kings invade a land, they ruin it and debase its nobles. They really do so!'</p>

<sup>48</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2533.

<sup>49</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2532.

## The Doubt

In general lines one could say that, the Biblical version describes the arrival and conversation between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, whereas in the Quran the courtly meeting comes last, at the end of sura 27, verse 42. The similarity between the story in the Hebrew Bible and Quran can be seen in the part where the same type of arrogance is being described. In the Hebrew Bible the Queen of Sheba is questioning Solomon and, in the Quran, she doubts about whether to visit him or not. Doubt in sura: 27:34 is interpreted allegorical by the sufis, and this phrase in verse 34: *She reasoned, 'Indeed, when kings invade a land, they ruin it and debase its nobles. They really do so!'*. This is regarded as a reference to power, indeed, given that the Queen of Sheba would endure defeat if kings would enter her land. The sufis and their role in providing an allegorical interpretation will be explained later in this thesis.<sup>50</sup> Next to mention is the theme: gifts, presented in the following quotes;

<i>10:4 When the Queen of Sheba realized how very wise Solomon was, and when she saw the palace, he had built,</i>	<i>27:35 But I will certainly send him a gift, and see what (response) my envoys will return with.</i>
<i>10:5 she was overwhelmed. She was also amazed at the food on his tables, the organization of his officials and their splendid clothing, the cup-bearers, and the burnt offerings Solomon made at the Temple of the Lord.</i>	<i>27:36 When the chief-envoy came to him, Solomon said, 'Do you offer me wealth? What Allah has granted me is far greater than what He has granted you. No! it is you who rejoice in (receiving) gifts.</i>
	<i>27:37 Go back to them, for we will certainly mobilize against them forces which they can never resist, and we will drive them out from there disgrace, fully humbled. '</i>

## Gifts and Wealth

In the Biblical version gifts might have a different function compared to the Quranic version, in which the gifts are described as something non decent and non-pious to receive: *Exult in your gift means that the gift was a means of celebrating their own wealth and power rather than a manifestation of generosity*

<sup>50</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2537.

or goodness.<sup>51</sup> The Quran loads the purpose of the giving of gifts with a religious message, by not giving any gifts or not accept them, in which the giver needs to re-consult their purpose of the gift and question themselves if it is an act of showing wealth indeed. The palace mentioned in the Hebrew Bible appears at the end in the Quran. Both moments are pointing at the immense wealth of Solomon, and the Quran refers to the prophetic characteristics of this wealth, which could only be possible due to something divine. The following quotes describe a similar moment in both texts, in which the palace and throne play a role to show the wealth associated with both kingdoms:

<i>10:7 I didn't belief what was said until I arrived here and saw it with my own eyes. In fact, I had not heard the half of it! Your wisdom and prosperity are far beyond what I was told.</i>	<i>27:38 Solomon asked, 'O chiefs! Which of you can bring me her throne before they come to me in (full) submission?'</i>
<i>10:8 How happy your people must be! what a privilege for your officials to stand here day after day, listening to your wisdom!</i>	<i>27:39 One mighty jinn responded, 'I can bring it to you before you rise from this council of yours. And I am quite strong and trustworthy for this (task).'</i>
<i>10:9 Praise the Lord your God, who delights you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you King so you can rule with justice and righteousness.</i>	<i>27:40 But the one who had knowledge of the Scripture said, 'I can bring it to you in the blink of an eye.' So, when Solomon saw it placed before him, he exclaimed, 'this is by the grace of my Lord to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful, it is only for their own good. But whoever is ungrateful, surely my Lord is Self-Sufficient, most generous.'</i>
<i>10:10 Then she gave the King a gift of 120 talents (4000kg) of gold, great quantities of spices, and precious jewels. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the Queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon.</i>	<i>27:41 (Then) Solomon said, 'Disguise her throne for her so we may see whether she will recognize (it) or she will not be able to.'</i>
<i>10:11 (in addition, Hiram's ships brought gold from Ophir, and they also brought rich cargoes of red sandalwood and precious jewels.</i>	<i>27:42 So when she arrived, it was said (to her), 'Is your throne like this?' She replied, 'It looks to be the same. We have (already) received knowledge (of Solomon's prophethood) before this (miracle), and have submitted to (Allah).'</i>
<i>10:12 The king used the sandalwood to make railings for the Temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and to construct lyres and harps for the musicians. Never before or since has</i>	<i>27:43 But she had been hindered by what she used to worship instead of Allah, for she was indeed from a disbelieving people.</i>

<sup>51</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2538.

<i>there been such a supply of sandalwood)</i>	
<i>10:13 King Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba whatever she asked for; besides all the customary gifts he had so generously given. Then she and all her attendants returned to their own land.</i>	<i>27:44 Then she was told, 'Enter the palace.' But when she saw the hall, she thought it was a body of water, so she bared her legs. Solomon said. 'it is just a palace paved with crystal.' (At last) she declared, 'My Lord! I have certainly wronged my soul. Now I *(fully) submit myself along with Solomon to Allah, the Lord of all worlds.'</i>

#### 4.2.1 Concluding Remarks

Familiarity can be seen in the reaction of the Queen of Sheba, when she notices Solomon's wisdom and prosperity. The Biblical version also puts focus on the story of Hiram, who was another disbeliever and became amazed with Solomon's wealth and, hence, presented his own gifts before Solomon to gain an alliance, as he was a trade and statesman too.<sup>52</sup> The throne becomes a recurring theme linked to divinity, and Solomon asks a jinn to get one for him, the appearance of the jinn is rather mystical, as the jinn functions as a mystical and spiritual character. After the gifts are presented, the Queen of Sheba submits to Allah and abandons her former religion. The miracle concerning the throne is another example of Solomon proving his prophethood.<sup>53</sup> In the Hebrew Bible there is no clear conversion to the Lord by Solomon, nor by the Queen of Sheba. The Quran is very clear about the conversion of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon the prophet. Muslim sources and traditions reflect on the meeting between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as a possible love story; in addition, all versions end with their conversion. In them, the story is often associated with mysticism. It is accordingly that;

*commentaries on Ibn 'Arabi's Fuṣūṣ mention that Bilqīs was taught here a lesson about appearances, about seeing what she believed should not have been there (her throne) and about not seeing what was in reality there (glass, not water), which is a kind of allegory for*

<sup>52</sup> Fensham, F. and Boer, de P. A. H. "The Treaty between Solomon and Hiram and the Alalakh Tablets". *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, Nr. 1. (1960), p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2539.

*the challenge of overcoming appearances to reach the true nature of things, a goal of the spiritual life.*<sup>54</sup>

The whole story refers to spiritual and mystical moments, and therefore, allegorical interpretations are possible. So, how does the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran relate to the same story in the Hebrew Bible, chapter Kings I, when looked from the perspective provided by the theory of reception history? The question is timely because the narrative from the Hebrew Bible is for most part borrowed, but the Quran adds to it mystical elements. What is more, the Quran constructs its own narrative.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr elaborates on the possible interpretations on the Quran in the *Study Quran, a New Translation and Commentary* (2015). There are some interesting notions worth mentioning especially in the context of the added characters. Sura *The Ants* is named after the Valley Solomon passes through where he hears the voices of ants. According to Nasr's interpretation he destroys a colony of ants as an act of revenge after he was bitten by a single ant. One interpretation could be that in reality the colony would be a Umma he destroyed while passing the valley.<sup>55</sup> Sura 27 is themed with judgment and remorse, and somewhere the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba continues into the story of Moses, a prophet who saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.<sup>56</sup>

In short, the Hebrew Bible and the Quran differ in the reception of the story of the Queen, and in the latter the focus lies on her character and attitude towards the wealthy and prophetic character of King Solomon. The main difference of the Quran lies in the materials included in the introduction that functions as a preparation to the meeting: in them, mystical characters are mentioned, such as the hoopoe and the jinn. Furthermore, the religious message is more dominant

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<sup>54</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2543.

<sup>55</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2512.

<sup>56</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2533.

in the Quran, according to which Solomon even rejected the gifts of the Queen of Sheba because of piety. This contrasts with the Hebrew Bible where the gifts play a large role and one that is not religious. It is clear that the story functions in the Quran as a means to teach about worship towards Allah, which brings prosperity by especially turning down forms of idol worship (polytheism).

#### 4.2 Characters needing further explanation

The following characters are playing a role in one or both versions, and we see, for example, that Hiram the King of Tyre adds with his wealth in the Biblical one, while the hoopoe and the jinn play a role as mystical characters in the Quran. The Biblical story puts emphasis on Solomon being a statesman, while the Quran puts focus on Solomon being a prophet. Which elements in the Quranic narrative contribute to a mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba as a character and the narrative about her as a whole? It is my understanding that the added characters such as the hoopoe and jinn are contributing to the mystical reading of the story of the Queen of Sheba, and it is this claim that I will try to demonstrate in what follows based on the explanation and analysis of these characters.

##### 4.2.1 Solomon

The Jewish King of the Israelites turned into a prophet in the Quran. His meetings with the mystical characters such as the hoopoe and the jinn, are contributing to the amount of divine connection enjoyed by Solomon, and so the Quran refers to of birds being able to transmit the divine language, a reference that can be linked to the mystical understanding of such an ability in the *Conference of Birds*, which will be explained later. Solomon spoke the language of the birds and controlled these mystical creatures with a special ring, which made

him able to perform miracles and thus, to be recognized as a prophet.<sup>57</sup> In the Jewish tradition he became a legendary king with a legendary court, and it seems to be more of a historically oriented narrative.<sup>58</sup> To be mentioned, too, is the *Conference of Birds*, which is a conference between mystical birds who spoke about hierarchy and kingship led by the hoopoe. The focus on the actual source itself will be addressed in chapter 5, within which the interpretation of the source plays a role. For now, I will pay attention to some of its characters and, we see that the introduction of the *Conference of Birds* leads to mention the hoopoe as the most important one among them.

#### 4.2.2 Hoopoe

The hoopoe is introduced in the Quran in verse 20 of this sura 27, yet it is not present at a meeting of Solomon with the Queen. The hoopoe symbolizes many things; however; scholars focus on the spiritual function of the bird:

*The hoopoe symbolizes an aspect or faculty of the soul, while Solomon is the spiritual heart that must control the soul and take it to task when it disobeys. The soul can become lost in heedlessness of God; yet its faculties are able to bring to the soul knowledge and wisdom previously undiscovered.* <sup>59</sup>

The hoopoe is also being interpreted by the sufi's as the spiritual leader of their community, nonetheless, in this context the hoopoe is obeying Solomon, and therefore, the role of Solomon as a prophet and, thus, as leader of the community is being shown.<sup>60</sup> The next quotation illustrates the meeting between the hoopoe and Bilqis which, I recall, is the name that the Quran reserves for the Queen of Sheba:

*There he found another hoopoe, a Yemenite one. Solomon's hoopoe was called Ya'fūr. The hoopoe of Yemen said to Ya'fūr, "Where have you come from, and where are you heading?"*

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<sup>57</sup> Tottoli, R. *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Mutarrif al-Tarafi*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2021, p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2532.

<sup>60</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 300.

*"I have come from Syria with my master Solomon son of David, peace be upon them both."  
"Who is Solomon?" "The king of the jinn, mankind, demons, birds, beasts, and the wind."<sup>61</sup>*

The Yemenite hoopoe is probably the hoopoe owned by the Queen of Sheba, and this hoopoe gives information about Solomon to her. The Queen does not immediately believe all what the hoopoe says about Solomon, however, she will believe it when she sees it, which she also says at the end of the sura 27 verse 44.

#### 4.2.3 Jinn

The jinn is also an added character in the Quran with a specific meaning:

*The inclusion of jinn as part of Solomon's host indicates not only that it was of a miraculous and wondrous nature, but also that Solomon had the stature and power to control and make use of the jinn, beings ordinarily considered uncontrollable by human beings and most often mischievous.<sup>62</sup>*

This quotation suggests a contributing to the amount of divine connection enjoyed by Solomon. The jinn has also been analyzed as found in al-Bukhari and Muslim:

*Abu Huraira reported God's Messenger as saying, "An 'ifrit of the jinn escaped yesterday to interrupt my prayer, but God gave me power over him, so I seized him and intended to tie him to one of the pillars of the mosque in order that you might all look at him; but I remembered the supplication of my brother Solomon, 'My Lord, give me such a kingdom as will not be fitting for anyone after me' (Al-Qur'an; 38:35) so he was dismissed humiliated." (Bukhari and Muslim.)<sup>63</sup>*

One argument that can be made is that Solomon is being seen as an important prophet in the Quran due to his connection with mystical creatures and divine miracles: *this ḥadīth supports the idea that an 'ifrīt is a kind of mischievous jinn.<sup>64</sup>* The jinn also have a role in the Quranic creation story where they were created through fire, a different source of material used compared to the creation of the first human beings, which contributes to the mystical readings of these

<sup>61</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 300.

<sup>62</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2531.

<sup>63</sup> Bukhari, al-/ Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.). *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., Riyad: Darussalam, 1997. Vol. 1. Hadith 461, Book 8, p. 292.

<sup>64</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2539.

characters in the Quran. *And to Dust we return* (Quran 20:55), is one important phrase stating that the first human beings were created in the same way, through the use of mainly clay. This phrase has been re-used in the Quran in sura 15:26: *And We indeed created man from dried clay, made of molded mud, (27) and the jinn We created earlier from scorching fire.* Commentary on these lines is focused on “clay” as material. The jinn that is mentioned in 15:27, is an added character with its own creation showing the difference, between mystical characters created from fire and human beings, created from mainly clay:

*The clay from which human beings have been created is variously described as simply clay (6:2); a draught of clay (23:12); a viscous clay (37:11); and dried clay, like earthen vessels (55:14); see 55:14c. Elsewhere, the jinn are described as created from smokeless fire (55:15).<sup>65</sup>*

The fact that Eve has been created the same as men, points out that it was not necessarily to mention another form of creation, which could indicate that the creation from an Islamic point of view is based on equality and less complicated than Genesis suggests.<sup>66</sup> The story of Eve is not directly relevant for this thesis, nonetheless, it is worth noting that the approach in the Quran to Eve is quite similar to the approach to the Queen of Sheba, and these women are not judged by their gender.

#### 4.2.4 Hiram

As said before, Hiram is one of the trade men mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. This mention in passing is in order to understand one of the main differences between the two versions, the Biblical one with an emphasis on wealth, that contrasts with the Quranic view, which leaves Hiram out of the story. In the Hebrew Bible, Hiram causes Solomon to gain in wealth by providing important material such as gold and wood, where the wood serves as material to

<sup>65</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 1731.

<sup>66</sup> Schöck, C. “Adam and Eve”. In *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, 6 vols, edited by Mc Auliffe J, D. Leiden (etc.): Brill, 2001-2006, vol. 1, p. 25.

strengthen the Temple of the Lord. In fact, Hiram was the King of Tyre and the negotiations with Solomon led to a treaty between two kingdoms: *This parallel between the treaties points to a probable common legal background; and the deed is to be taken as a contract for the exchange of property.*<sup>67</sup> The Biblical version focuses more or less on Solomon as a statesman and the Quran focuses on him as a prophet. The Queen of Sheba functions as an extravagant neighbor, in which her “religion” is not discussed in the Hebrew Bible. The next quotation contributes to this chapter and introduces the next one:

*Others note that she likely knew more than they did in any case, and hence her question was more diplomatic than practical. In his commentary on this incident in his Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, Ibn ‘Arabī notes that the queen’s handling of the letter from Solomon demonstrated her superiority and worthiness to rule. Such attributes along with her willingness to embrace true faith when challenged (unlike other figures such as Pharaoh) can also be interpreted as constituting a Quranic model for beneficent and wise female leadership and governance.*<sup>68</sup>

This quotation comments Quran 27:32-33, when the Queen of Sheba argues about the letter sent by Solomon. It explains the Quranic perception of the Queen of Sheba and her leadership. Here, she is being complimented for her governance, so that even her worship to the sun does not put her in a negative position or demonized her, but rather makes her ignorant of the true monotheistic religion. Finishing this chapter with a specific quote on the Queen of Sheba in the Quran, opens up another part of this thesis, which is focused on the use of her in other Islamic sources.

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<sup>67</sup> Fensham, F. and Boer, de P. A. H. “The Treaty between Solomon and Hiram and the Alalakh Tablets”. (1960), p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 2536.

## 5. The Reception of the Queen of Sheba as a Mystical Character in Islamic Tradition: Poetry and Art

In this chapter, the Queen of Sheba is approached through other sources, particularly Islamic exegetical sources will be discussed. Tafsir are interpretations of texts with a sacred status (Kings I and sura of *The Ants*). Yet, interpretation can be understood more broadly, and is also possible when used for poetry and art forms of expressions through which the audiences directly look before at the interpretation of authors. Poetry for example can explain certain verses from the Quran from a different perspective: *Generally speaking, the tafsir of the tabi'un was simple and clear. It included very few quotations from poetry to support the definition of Qur'anic text.*<sup>69</sup> A non-Quranic source takes central place in this chapter, namely, the *Conference of Birds*. It would be impossible to review all of the Islamic writings in which the Queen of Sheba is mentioned. Poetry and art are a focus point for this chapter that narrows down this research and is moreover an appropriate one because of its exegetical function in the theory of reception history. Islamic tradition contributes to understand the reception of the Queen of Sheba and, as we will see, it mainly focuses on her as demon or goddess.

### 5.1 Queen of Sheba in Islamic Tradition

How is the mystical character of the Queen of Sheba being received in Islamic tradition, particularly in art and poetry? The *Conference of Birds*, is a poetical composition in which the hoopoe's role is that of a mystical and spiritual leader. The hoopoe is often mentioned in sufism (mystical Islam), the bird is also known as a wood cracker in Biblical sources and mentioned in the Pentateuch among the impure birds. The latter clearly opposes the perspectives of sufis, who like to compare themselves with the hoopoe. Sufis can be traced back early on in Islam,

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<sup>69</sup> Vaid, M. *Brief Introduction to Quranic Exegesis*, 2018, p. 11-12.

but they started flourishing as a community is about between 1100 and 1300 C.E., the same period in which most of the manuscripts with illustrations of the Queen of Sheba were made. Against this background, the mystical poetry by Farid ud-Din 'Attar written in 1166 C.E. adds to her reception. The reference to the *Conference of Birds* has to be included because it speaks about kingship from a mystical point of view. Even though the Queen of Sheba does not take a leading part in this poetry, her mention is notable and can be linked to an undeniable form of kingship. The character of the Queen of Sheba becomes more present during the Islamic blossoming in the late Middle Ages, especially in art, poetry and literature.

## 5.2 The Conference of Birds

The *Conference of birds*, by the Persian Farid ud-Din 'Attar is clearly using birds to symbolize authority. The hoopoe represents the spiritual leadership of the king: *In decrypting this allegorical work, it has been told that Attar wrote the Conference of the Birds to express truth in recognition of God and only believed that whoever knows himself, knows God.*<sup>70</sup> The poem functions as a spiritual work in which kingship is valued through the use of mystical creatures. The *Conference of Birds* shows another perspective on kingship compared to the Quran, where Solomon stands above all creatures and the birds consult the hoopoe so as to find a just king. In the poem, the hoopoe functions as a spiritual guide and, for this particular reason sufis admire the hoopoe and take the bird as if he is their spiritual leader above all others.<sup>71</sup>

The Queen of Sheba is mentioned briefly in the poem, the next quotation illustrates the use of the hoopoe and its relation to kingship, also slightly relating

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<sup>70</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". *Journal of History and Art research* 6, Nr. 4 (2017), p. 116.

<sup>71</sup> Irwin, R. *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature*. London: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 244.

to the Queen of Sheba. In the following part of the poem the birds assemble and the hoopoe tells them about the Simurgh:

*The world's birds gathered for their conference and said: 'Our constitution makes no sense. All nations in the world require a king; How is it we alone have no such thing? Only a kingdom can be justly run; We need a king and must inquire for one.' They argued how to set about their quest. The hoopoe fluttered forward; on his breast There shone the symbol of the Spirit's Way And on his head Truth's crown, a feathered spray. Discerning, righteous and intelligent, He spoke: 'My purposes are heaven-sent; I keep God's secrets, mundane and divine, in proof of which behold the holy sign. Bismallah.'<sup>72</sup>*

In this part of the poem there is a clear reference to the divine, where the hoopoe is in contact with God. Due to his conversation with the hoopoe, Solomon stands close to the divine, too. The poem can be interpreted allegorically as it continues with mystical elements:

*The allegorical framework of the poem is as follows: the birds of the world gather together to seek a king. They are told by the hoopoe that they have a king – the Simorgh – but that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous (...) The group flies a little way, formally adopts the hoopoe as its leader, and then decides to ask a series of questions about the Way before proceeding.<sup>73</sup>*

The hoopoe symbolizes many things and can be seen as a leader, as the path of love, and as poetry itself. It seems that the hoopoe is being admired, especially by sufis, for whom the image of the bird itself becomes mystical and interpret the hoopoe not necessarily as a physical bird. Sufism embraced the allegorical and non-physical interpretation of the hoopoe and implemented it into their rituals, such as in their dancing and singing, in which they devote themselves to God through the hoopoe.<sup>74</sup> The *Conference of Birds* approaches the hoopoe differently compared to the Quran in the chapter of *The Ants*, where Solomon even threatens the hoopoe. The poem stresses the importance of the hoopoe. The poem can be linked slightly to female kingship and in relation to the Queen of Sheba, mainly the first part: *Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide; It was on you King Solomon relied to carry secret messages between His court and*

<sup>72</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 300.

*distant Sheba's lovely queen. He knew your language and you knew his heart.*<sup>75</sup>  
This part introduces the Queen of Sheba as a leader in power.

The poem does speak about an alliance between the king and the hoopoe, where the hoopoe is assigned to give messages to another kingdom, the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba to be more precise. The poem continues with another useful detail: *He knew your language and you knew his heart.*<sup>76</sup> This quotation indicates the wealth of Solomon, and his knowledge of speaking the language of the mystical creatures. Furthermore, the poem also elaborates on the magical ring of Solomon: *No jewel surpasses that which Solomon Wore on his finger. It was just a stone, A mere half-dang in weight, but as a seal Set in his ring it brought the world to heel. When he perceived the nature of his rule.*<sup>77</sup> The ring gave him the power to speak to animals and other creatures, and the jewel becomes a recurring theme in Islamic literature, showing its power and a connection to divinity: *Dependent on the credit of a jewel – He vowed that no one after him should reign with such authority.*<sup>78</sup> The ring is linked directly to the divine, and hence we could say that Solomon is portrayed as an important prophet. The *Conference of Birds* continues discussing many other great kings, but no one who had a king's jewel and who could speak to birds. This poetry is dedicated to Solomon, nonetheless the poem is noteworthy and brings a perspective to the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, too. Hence, could we ask how do art and poetry serve as a means of teaching Muslims a mystical reading of the story alongside Quranic exegesis? The *Conference of Birds* can be a source that contributes to Islamic exegesis or tafsir, and in it early converts played a role, (...) *in Muslim accounts, these converts are credited with bringing a certain amount of older scriptural lore into the Muslim community, material on the Bible and related matters that*

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<sup>75</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 31.

<sup>76</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 51.

<sup>78</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 51.

supposedly helped early Muslims to interpret the Quran.<sup>79</sup> Additional sources explain verses from the Quran through commentaries or tafsir, also for example visual exegesis as it appears in art.

### 5.2.1 The Birds

The following quotation introduces a form of commitment of the birds to search for a good king: *Love made them clamor for the journey's start. They set out on the Way, a noble deed! Hardly had they begun when they agreed. To call a halt: 'A leader's what we need.'*<sup>80</sup> As the birds continued their journey to find a suitable king they faced some troubles, like arid deserts and a scourging sun. This part of the thesis discusses the birds in general and their hierarchy. Their story contributes to the conversation with the hoopoe about to search for a suitable king. In this regard, as already discussed, Solomon was perhaps the most suitable king. The birds have a major role in Islam and in the poem, they see themselves as ignorant. The hoopoe addresses Solomon again to convince the other birds that he is the most suitable king:

*The hoopoe tells them about the glance of Solomon. The hoopoe answered him: 'Great Solomon Once looked at me – it is that glance alone Which gave me what I know; no wealth could bring the substance I received from wisdom's king. No one can gain this by the forms of prayer.'*<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Solomon is presented as the most suitable king who could eventually relieve the birds of all their troubles: *Consume your life with prayer, till Solomon Bestows his glance, and ignorance is gone. When Solomon accepts you, you will know. Far more than my unequal words can show.*<sup>82</sup> The hoopoe closes the poem with the following verses: *The greatest orator would here be made. In love with silence and forget his trade, and I too cease: I have described the Way – Now, you*

<sup>79</sup> Pregill, M. E. "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam". (2007), p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 105.

<sup>82</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 106.

*must act – there is no more to say.*<sup>83</sup> In this sentence the hoopoe tries to illustrate the ultimate way to obey rightful authority. Overall, wisdom in the poem is related to kingship and how to be a just king, a wisdom that he explains to all other birds. The link to the Queen of Sheba can be found in her connection to the hoopoe, in the fact that she has her own hoopoe to consult with. Islamic sources include a lot of references to birds:

*Thus, image of this powerful bird is a sign of dominance of universe on the earthy world. In addition to bird reliefs, however, there were combined symbols. For example, consider the winged man with a horned helmet: wing on humans or animals is a divine symbol and a sign of protection.*<sup>84</sup>

This quotation suggests that birds are indeed creatures with a special connection to the divine, and that the hoopoe is ranked high in the hierarchy. The fact that Solomon and the Queen of Sheba could speak with the hoopoe and the other birds suggests a form of close connection with divinity too. Other birds mentioned in the poem are hawks, peacocks and doves; yet, there is one creature that is probably just as mystical in connection to the divine as the hoopoe is, and is named the Simurgh, *a mysterious, sacred bird associated with the world beyond and it is never polluted by material world. Outer characteristics of Simurgh are similar to characteristics of Gabriel, an Islamic Archangel.*<sup>85</sup> The comparison to angels has a different function here, illustrating a less physical, real bird, and this suggests that the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba contains connections to divinity and portrays relationships within which the characters come close to God, as in the parallel story in the Quran. Furthermore, the poem is composed by a Persian artist who relied on his own cultural heritage including birds in non-Islamic sources. For example, the peacock already had a function in Zoroastrianism, where this particular bird was connected to the tree of life and

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<sup>83</sup> Attar, Farid al-Din, e.a. *The Conference of Birds*, 1984, p. 315.

<sup>84</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". (2017), p. 115.

<sup>85</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". (2017), p. 119.

the existence of life in general.<sup>86</sup> Birds in the context of this thesis are linked to the mystical parts of the primary texts that can be explained by recourse to works such as the *Conference of Birds*. Furthermore, the writer's background should be considered as an important element too, and thus one should pause before the fact that the poem could be influenced by mysticism as understood by religions before Islam. Minority groups in Islam relied on allegorical works, especially the sufi community:

*This allegorical work is a perfect example of symbolism which quotes very deep and meaningful stories using animals and birds. This allegorical work is a symbol of sufi's mystic journey to the truth. Hoopoe which is messenger of the King Solomon to the Queen of Sheba is a symbol of Sheikh sufi whose presence is assumed inevitable in mystic journey to God.<sup>87</sup>*

It is not strange that sufis are relying on this poem as a spiritual exercise, as in it we find, indeed, references to a mystical journey to come close to God. It is therefore a valuable source for this thesis, in which the Queen of Sheba and the mystical creatures are coexisting and interacting. At the end of the *Conference of Birds* the Queen of Sheba is mentioned shortly, and it is here that her role is fraught with questions and un-clarity. She plays a role in the story or conversation between the hoopoe and Solomon. But it is noteworthy that she is mentioned in a positive way, and that Solomon acknowledges her as an excuse for the hoopoe to be absent at his meeting. Overall, the hoopoe and the birds are in a search to find the best king possible, and Solomon clearly comes very close to fulfil this role.

### 5.3 The Quran Commentary (tafsir) by al-Damiri

Another insight to consider is the communication or relation between kingdoms and how the two interacted, in this case by the use of the hoopoe birds. The

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<sup>86</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". (2017), p. 122.

<sup>87</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". (2017), p. 116.

following words from al-Damiri, an author who lived during the ‘Abbasid Empire (approximately from 750 C.E. until 1258 C.E.), are commentaries or tafsir on sura 27, *The Ants*: “(...) Now choose yourself a king, anyone you wish.” They all said, “No one is more worthy of this than you!” So, they made her their queen and she ruled over them, until the matter of the hoopoe and Solomon (peace be upon him).<sup>88</sup> This quotation tells us about the legend of how the Queen of Sheba became queen, mainly because she did not obey a “miserable man” and took matters into her own hands, being applauded by her people. As mentioned before, a king would consult the wisdom of his hoopoe, and in this context the Queen of Sheba, she most likely would do the same. The hoopoe of Yemen discussed how she became queen with the hoopoe of Solomon, suggesting that kingdoms required their own hoopoe.<sup>89</sup> This was also the same scene where Solomon forgives the hoopoe for his absence during his meeting, knowing that the hoopoe could have been at that time in consultation with the Queen of Sheba.<sup>90</sup> The hoopoe of the Queen of Sheba named Ufayr said to the hoopoe of Solomon named Ya’fur, that the Queen of Sheba was the queen of all of Yemen, and that Solomon was not a threat to her.<sup>91</sup> Solomon did see her as the ruler of a competitive kingdom and desired that she would become his subject.<sup>92</sup>

So, how is the mystical character of the Queen of Sheba being received in Islamic tradition, particularly in art and poetry? In regards to poetry, in certain sections of the *Conference of Birds*, kingship is an important theme, probably because kings are leaders for the people and they need to be wise according to this source. Furthermore, the source considers the hoopoe as a mystical leader and, no doubt, a kingdom’s legitimacy could benefit from a connection with mysticism that brings it closer to the divine. It seems correct to say, that,

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<sup>88</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 117-118.

<sup>89</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 299-300.

<sup>90</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 302.

<sup>91</sup> Brinner, W. M. *Studies in Arabic Literature*, 2002, p. 520.

<sup>92</sup> Lassner, J. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 1993, p. 17.

kingdoms competed over who had the most wisdom and probably who had the best hoopoe. The connection between the Queen of Sheba and the hoopoe leads to a possible connection with the divine, in which the Queen of Sheba plays a role on a mystical level.

#### 5.4 The Queen of Sheba in Islamic Art

Now, let's turn our attention to art. How does Islamic art contribute to the theory of reception in history? The reception of the Queen of Sheba can be seen in visualized representations in the medieval period, and, here, exegesis in Islamic art is an explicit example of such visualizations. The Queen of Sheba is mentioned in poetry and storytelling or so-called Islamic tradition, from the late Middle Ages, in the regions of Egypt, and also in Persia. In particular, Persian artists used the Queen of Sheba in art such as in manuscripts, paintings and other forms of visual representations. Image 5 shows the complete illustration from which a fragment was used in the cover of this thesis. Persian artists used many mystical creatures in their art, partly because of their own heritage within which they used to worship the sun and the peacock. Those represented the origin of life in their former religion: Zoroastrianism. The Queen of Sheba has been represented in these visual sources surrounded by these Persian elements, especially by using birds.<sup>93</sup>

This manuscript in image 5 was finished in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and hence much later than the time period this thesis investigates. Nonetheless, the manuscript illustration has been inspired by the medieval period. Artists looked at stories from the late Middle Ages, when the Queen of Sheba became a source of artistic inspiration, especially for sufis.<sup>94</sup>

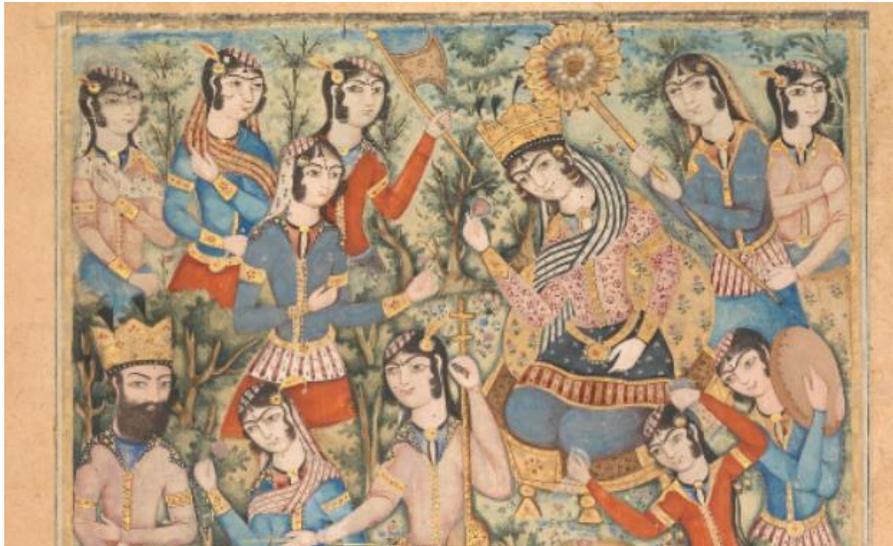
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<sup>93</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". (2017), p. 117.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen, A. "How the Queen of Sheba connects the Art of Three Major Religions". *Art Journal online*. (Last modified, March, 2019). <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-queen-sheba-connects-art-three-major-religions>.

Image 5 shows the Queen of Sheba and her noblemen, with whom she consumes wine. Solomon is placed lower in the scene. The composition and placing of the characters are running counter the more traditional story accounts, because we can see the queen being placed at the center by the painter instead of putting Solomon in that place. Furthermore, the instruments presented have the function of illustrating the life at the court of the Queen of Sheba. Her kingdom represents joy and beauty shown through art.

**Image 5:** *Attributed to Ira, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.* folio from an illustrated manuscript. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 19<sup>th</sup> century.



It is remarkable from a modern perception that the illustrators did not sign their art: this is a common phenomenon in Islam, especially in the late Middle Ages and after that period. It was a widespread belief that the illustrator was seen as being less important than the actual artwork itself. Islamic attitudes towards figurative art were divided and most people assumed that only calligraphy and architecture were permitted and allowed in Islam and that aniconism prevailed: *Nevertheless, even though Muslims would deny that the divine inheres in objects of human manufacture, visual religious arts (of which pictorial arts are a subset) remain widespread in Islamic society*<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Elias, J. *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 217-19.

**Image 6:** *Bilqis and the Hoopoe*, British Museum London, 1590.

Another example is shown in image 6 that seems to indicate the possibility of a conversation between the Queen of Sheba and the hoopoe, suggesting that she spoke the language of the birds just like Solomon did. The Quran speaks of a divine gift when Solomon could speak the language of the birds, and this ability could have been a gift granted by God to the Queen of Sheba as well, as suggested in image 6. Even though, the Queen of Sheba was first polytheist, Islam still has many rituals based on the pre-Islamic period, and thus God might have granted her such an ability, too, knowing beforehand that she would convert to monotheism. The painting was made in Persia approximately about 1590 C.E. and shows again a depiction of a centered Queen of Sheba, and here, too, their positioning of the characters in which the scene in image 6 shows the Queen of Sheba and the hoopoe possibly interacting with each other.

Another manuscript shown in image 7 depicts a rather harmonious scene of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and their kingdoms positioned next to each other. This depiction seems to convey a positive relationship between the two characters, absent of any conflict. The harmonic relation depicted in image 7 might have been different if the Queen of Sheba had not converted to monotheism. This manuscript is the earliest one of the examples and was copied approximately around 1492 C.E. in Persia.

**Image 7:** Jami, *Folio from Haft awrang (Seven thrones) Bilqis and Solomon next to each other*. Gallery of Art private collection, New York, 1492.



All images from the manuscripts regarding the characters mentioned in this chapter follow the same style, as they are all from Persian origin. What we can see is that the Queen of Sheba takes a central place in these works of art. Next to the characters represented, there are demons, animals and not to forget, the hoopoe which is placed next to the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. These elements are crucial for the painters, just like they were for Muslim writers who used the same symbols in their poetry and Islamic sources. The function of the paintings is conveyed through visual exegesis, and also sufis in particular relied on art as a form of exegesis. The so-called sufi mysticism was crucial for the development of Islamic art.<sup>96</sup> Islamic art arose especially in the late Middle Ages, and among others, evolved into Asian-styled art, which was a trend influenced by art from India brought to Arabia through the trade routes. The typical face expressions in the examples mentioned can be compared to those in Indian art. Art in the mentioned examples adds to the visual exegesis of the story that is represented, so that people could understand the narratives from the Quran.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, one more depiction shown in image 7 contributes to understanding the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Islamic tradition, and in this scene in which she is even being romanticized by the artist. This scene explains the moment in which the Queen of Sheba and Solomon are vowing to each other, which concluded in a marriage that will be explained in the next paragraph.

**Image 7:** *Bilqis with feet in water.* Hulton Archive, 1590.



<sup>96</sup> Elias, J. *Aisha's cushion*, 2012, p. 217-19.

<sup>97</sup> Elias, J. *Aisha's cushion*, 2012, p. 110-114.

Art contributes to expounding the texts from an Islamic perspective and shows the artists' approaches to the story of the Queen of Sheba, particularly in the period when sufis flourished and the *Conference of Birds* was written:

*It is noteworthy that the Herat miniaturist, Behzad, found the anecdotes and stories of the Conference of the Birds an excellent opportunity for creative realism and created masterpieces of Persian miniature. Symbolic expression in mystical literature in which the Conference of the Birds is linked with visual language of miniature.<sup>98</sup>*

Art is one subject which is necessary to be discussed in order to understand the different forms of reception of the Queen of Sheba. There are recurring themes and symbols in the mentioned sources, and all contribute to read the story by giving it a mystical reading. Hence, the Queen of Sheba becomes an important character with a close connection to the divine.

## 5.5 Tradition

As said above, it seems plausible that artists and writers approached the Queen of Sheba as a mystical character, either as a goddess, or as a demon. There is another traditional account to mention told by the Egyptian storyteller Abu Mohammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Kisa'i, who generated a long-lasting lore about Bilqis in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>99</sup> He described a love story in *Qisas al-Anbiya'* (Tales of the Prophets), in which he suggests that Solomon and Bilqis were lovers. The Tales of the Prophets by this author is hence another example of tafsir in Islam broadly understood,<sup>100</sup> and helps to show that the interpretation of the Quran in Islamic tradition allowed for a wide range of perspectives.<sup>101</sup> In al-Kisa'i's work there is even a reference to the book Song of Songs, where Solomon adores his lovers, concubines and wives by using poetry. There are parallels in the book

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<sup>98</sup> Rohani, N. "Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds". 2017, p. 124.

<sup>99</sup> Tottoli, R. *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Mutarrif al-Tarafi*, 2021, p. 67.

<sup>100</sup> Vaid, M. *Brief Introduction to Quranic Exegesis*, 2018, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Clapp, N. *Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, p. 29.

Song of Songs to the Quran sura 27, such as the appearance of the hoopoe. It is suggested that there is a poem devoted to the Queen of Sheba in which Solomon spoke to her with admiration and devotion.<sup>102</sup> Even the hoopoe takes appearance in the book Song of Songs, where we can see similar themes to those in the Quran and where we can even find small correspondences with the *Conference of Birds*. These possible correspondences lead to the following assumption, namely that Islamic traditionalist used sources from the Hebrew Bible as a form of reception, and moreover, that the comparison to other sources such as the book Song of Songs, contributes to the understanding of the origin of the Queen of Sheba in Islam. This notwithstanding, the Quran and Islam has its own narrative.<sup>103</sup>

The tales of the prophets, or Qisas al-Anbiya, elaborates on the story of the Queen of Sheba, with a focus on her mystical character and as a possible lover of Solomon. She is even regarded as his favorite due to her challenging character, for triggering him with riddles.<sup>104</sup> The love story took place due to demonic tricks, and demons were those who told Solomon that Bilqis was indeed a jinn, with hooves and goat legs. Solomon tested her with building a pavilion (also shown in image 7);

*when Bilqis came, she was told: "Enter the pavilion." (ibid.) When she saw it, she thought it was a deep sea a large body of water so she uncovered her legs to wade through it to Solomon. And Solomon looked, and, she had the most beautiful legs and feet, except that her legs were hair.<sup>105</sup>*

The hairy legs are a recurring theme in Islamic literature, probably because they would indicate impurity to most Muslims.<sup>106</sup> Muslim hygiene rituals are important in Islam. Hence, the negative image of the Queen of Sheba is focused

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<sup>102</sup> Philby, H. *The Queen of Sheba*. London, New York: Quartet Books, 1981, p. 29-30.

<sup>103</sup> Pregill, M. E. "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish Influence on Islam". (2007), p. 14.

<sup>104</sup> Brinner, W. M. *Studies in Arabic Literature*, 2002, p. 519.

<sup>105</sup> Brinner, W. M. *Studies in Arabic Literature*, 2002, p. 534-35.

<sup>106</sup> Brinner, W. M. *Studies in Arabic Literature*, 2002, p. 534-35.

on her non-Islamic character and appearance. The positive image of her is based on her conversion to monotheism. Nevertheless, the unshaved legs were also a turning point for the relationship between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, a narrative in which the demons were initially trying to prevent any type of marriage from happening, and, yet, resulted into a marriage. Solomon built a fortress for her in Yemen and would stay three days with her, which is an important detail in the context of their possible love story, due to his devotion to her.<sup>107</sup>

## 5.6 Concluding Remarks

The Queen of Sheba has been represented as a demon, goddess, warlord and great diplomat. So, how do art and poetry serve as a means of teaching Muslims a mystical reading of the story alongside the Quran and its exegesis? The Queen of Sheba and her idolatry are echoed in the Quran. Her reception in Islam can thus be divided into two categories: one of them is the mystical interpretation through art and poetry, the other, the human-oriented interpretation in the Quran. The late medieval period shows exegetical interpretations of her character in Islam. The symbolism used in exegetical, literary-and artistic sources contribute to building her mystical character, and in this connection, there is a focus on the use of birds and demons. The reason why the Persians centered the Queen of Sheba in art will be explained next by focusing on Shiite sources from Persia.

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<sup>107</sup> Brinner, W. M. *Studies in Arabic Literature*, 2002, p. 537.

## 6. The Reception of the Queen of Sheba in Shi'i Islamic Tradition

The Queen of Sheba's story is an exceptional source of mystical inspiration for Muslims, and the focus is put on her respectable kingship and conversion to monotheism. It seems that the Queen of Sheba is viewed positively, as she is described positively in poetry and other literary genres. In the introduction to this thesis, hadith 4425 was quoted and, there, reference is made to another queen, whose rule is described as foolish:

*Abu Bakr told: During the days of Al-Jamal (of the battle), Allah benefited me with the word I had heard from Allah's Messenger after I had been about to join the companions of Al-Jamal, and fight along them. When Allah's Messenger was informed that the Persians had crowned the daughter of Kisra as their ruler, he said, "Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful."*<sup>108</sup>

This queen was an important character in the forming and communication of Islamic perspectives on female kingship. The legend of Kisra is based on an oral tradition from the same time period when Muhammad was alive. This and other sources that will be discussed in this chapter are from Persia and Yemen, with the aim to make an argument about female kingship through the lens of minority groups in Islam.<sup>109</sup>

### 6.1 Southern Arabia, the Queen of Sheba and Empowerment of Minority Groups in Islam

This chapter attempts to outline the role of the Queen of Sheba in Islam, with a focus on her possible functions among minority groups such as sufis and women. This chapter answers the following questions: how can the Quranic mystical

<sup>108</sup> Bukhari, al-/ Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.). *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., Riyad: Darussalam, 1997. Vol. 5. Hadith 4425, Book 64, p. 436.

<sup>109</sup> Jenssen, H. "Arabic Language", In *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, 6 vols, edited by Mc Auliffe J, D, Leiden (etc.): Brill, 2001-2006, vol. 1, p. 127.

reading of the Queen of Sheba and uses by minority groups within Islam during the Middle Ages be read in light of the theory of reception in history? And furthermore: how does the Quranic mystical reading of the Quranic Queen of Sheba lend itself to a use that is empowering to minority groups within Islam, particularly sufis and women? Here, minority groups and their use of mystical texts such as surah 27 will be discussed.

### 6.1.1 Islam and Female Leadership, Hadith 4425

Hadith 4425 refers to Queen Boran, who ruled over Persia during the time of prophet Muhammad. Persian royal families during the Sasanian dynasty (approximately 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) included female family members in matters of politics, and it was not unusual but rather common to do so. Persia at this time was not completely Islamic. Hence, hadith 4425 might be referring to Boran's kingship in a negative way, not because a woman was the ruler, but because of the religious political climate in Persia at that time, when Zoroastrianism was dominant.<sup>110</sup> The Sasanian empire did not exist for long and was defeated by the Arab Muslims in 651 C.E. which led to an increased Islamic influence in Persia. Furthermore, Queen Boran only ruled for nearly two years, which was a short period. Nonetheless, she left her mark: *Boran was credited for her commitment to justice as well as her compassion and generosity toward her subjects, which was reflected in her decision to forgive a portion of required taxes.*<sup>111</sup> We have already seen that an important characteristic in kingship is that a king or queen is wise and committed to justice; these features are related to the discussion in the previous chapter. The hoopoe also insisted on wisdom as a characteristic of a good king. This might have been the way of thinking from this particular era during the rule of the Sasanians.

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<sup>110</sup> Kia, M. *The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols.. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2016, p. 244-45.

<sup>111</sup> Kia, M. *The Persian Empire*, 2016, p. 245.

### 6.1.2 Yemen, Religion and Politics

Other queens are worth mentioning in this thesis because of their connection with mysticism and the Queen of Sheba. After the Seleucid period (approximately from 312 B.C.E. until 63 B.C.E.), Persia never got a queen again, at least, not as holding power her alone. The only queens were the wives of the kings and male rulers, who got the same title of queen, but were consorts. Shiite countries approached female kingship differently compared to Sunnite countries, which as be explained next.<sup>112</sup> Yet, Yemen, the possible birthplace of the Queen of Sheba and nowadays majority Sunni, took a different approach on leadership during the Middle Ages under Shii rule, and it seems that possibly the pre-Islamic religiosity of Yemen could have influenced its politics.<sup>113</sup>

Yemenite pre-Islamic polytheism might have brought with it wider perspectives on kingship, indeed. The polytheistic background (i.e. the worship of multiple gods, including female ones) might indeed explain that people found it easier to obey female leaders, given that they were used to worshipping female deities.<sup>114</sup> The Queen of Sheba serves as a great example of a queen in the polytheistic time period. After the early days of Islam polytheism continued existing, mainly within smaller nomadic tribes. These nomads who worshipped multiple gods or deities were considered part of the pre-Islamic culture, and even though some idol worshippers recognized a sort of monotheistic God above all other deities, they still prayed to lesser deities.<sup>115</sup> The Quran explicitly includes warnings about polytheism: *the lesser deities that the Qur'an condemns are indiscriminately referred to as deities and angels; some of them were female, and some or all were*

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<sup>112</sup> Kia, M. *The Persian Empire*, 2016, p. 287.

<sup>113</sup> Gajda, I. "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia". 2017, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Notenboom, B. "Return to the Arabian Nights - Inspired by Fantastical Tales of the Queen of Sheba and the Thousand and One Nights's Scheherazade, a Solo Woman Traveler Sets Off on the Ancient Frankincense Trail through Oman and Yemen. - Photos by Martin Hartley". *National Geographic Traveler* 23, Nr. 4 (2006), p. 4.

<sup>115</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 20.

of pagan origin if we trust the names assigned to them in the Qur'an.<sup>116</sup> The Quran repeatedly warns believers not to be enticed to worship lesser deities such as Al-lat, Al-Uzza and Al-Manat, who are indicated as female deities.<sup>117</sup> For example sura 53:19-21 states: "Now, have you considered (the idols of) Lât and 'Uzza. and the third one, Manât, as well? Do you (prefer to) have sons while (you attribute) to Him daughters?" This verse clearly refers to the female gender in a negative way:

*the attribution of "daughters" to God is presented as unjust in light of the contempt that the pagan Arabs are said to have had for female offspring (see 16:57–59, 62). This is one of several passages that criticize the pagan Arabs for ascribing offspring, especially daughters, to God.<sup>118</sup>*

This verse mainly warns pagans about their pagan beliefs, about the pre-Islamic tradition they must turn away from. The focus on idolatry and authority through the mentioned sura and hadith, contributes to the understanding of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran and Islam. The role of the Queen of Sheba as an idolatrous queen who converted to monotheism shows her pious behavior, and this gave her the right to exert kingship.

### 6.1.2 Islamic Queens after the Queen of Sheba

This paragraph returns to Yemen to discuss other queens besides the Queen of Sheba. These queens during the Islamic period need to be mentioned because they are connected to the Queen of Sheba through the name Bilqis. Bilqis is mentioned in Islamic sources and through sura 27. Yemen is an extraordinary place, which distinguishes itself from other Arab countries and inspired medieval artists and writers to use Yemen and the Queen of Sheba as a source of inspiration. Yemen also parts itself due to the Shiite background, in which it is

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<sup>116</sup> Crone, P. "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers". In *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Kalbî Hišâm Ibn al-, and Nabih Amin Faris. *The Book of Idols*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 3529.

even possible that Yemen was the birthplace of Shiism.<sup>119</sup> The following queens Asma and Arwa are explicitly mentioned and connected to Shiism in Yemen:

*Yemen is exceptional in the Arab world, not because many women exercised political power there, but because two of them, Malika Asma and Malika 'Arwa, enjoyed the privilege and unquestioned criterion of a head of state: the khutba proclaimed their name in the mosques. No other Arab woman had this honour in any Arab country after the advent of Islam.<sup>120</sup>*

Both queens Asma and Arwa were ruling independently, and their rule was legitimized by a large community in the mosque, something that was already remarkable in itself. It is even said that the queens ruled with their faces uncovered. The fact that they were unveiled suggests that they were judged by their qualities instead of their gender. Female rulers were even honored through ceremonies at the khutba (Friday sermon). In Yemen, kingship and religion were combined together and was unique in this last development.<sup>121</sup> Besides that, these queens, who ruled autonomously, were noticed in history according to Abdallah al-Thawr: *a contemporary Yemeni, 'Abdallah al-Thawr, clearly affirms that the reign of Malika 'Arwa was a particularly beneficent and peaceful period in the history of Yemen.<sup>122</sup>* During the reign of Arwa, she notably built more mosques and other Islamic buildings than any other ruler before her. Yemen is exceptional due to the story of the Queen of Sheba that was echoed throughout Yemenite history and possibly influenced the practice of Yemenite political power.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, most Yemenite rulers and queens were Shiite Muslims. The Shiite doctrine in Islam approached kingship differently compared to the Sunnite doctrine. It is even claimed that the Shiite doctrine originated in Yemen (the birthplace of the Queen of Sheba). Persia also felt more affinity with Shiism. This could be a reason why Sunnism in general approached kingship differently, and possibly in a more negative way, as they saw female leaders as inseparable

<sup>119</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993, p. 115.

<sup>120</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 115.

<sup>121</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 116-117.

<sup>122</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 117.

<sup>123</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 118.

from Shiite doctrines.<sup>124</sup> The positive image of the Queen of Sheba in Shiite communities relates to the previous chapters, in which most of the primary sources such as poetry from a Shiite Persia, provided a rather positive image of the Queen of Sheba. Most of the sources discussed in this thesis take a Shiite perspective, and this makes it plausible that, due to their Shiite background, the authors were encouraged to write positively about the Queen of Sheba.

Shiites looked at kingship through the lens of the belief that (...) *only the quality of an individual's faith can legitimately be claimed as establishing his or her superiority over another*.<sup>125</sup> Shiites would follow the lineage of the descendants of Muhammad and evaluate Quranic teachings based on visions from Imams. These beliefs would encourage people to follow rightful rulers based on their qualities, even if they were women. This idea became more popular at a later stage in Islam, and opposition between Sunnis and Shiites and their beliefs would lead to struggles between countries. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Shiite political system became a threat for Sunnis due to the Fatimid Caliphate established in Cairo. During that time, the Abbasside Empire became surrounded by large Shiite settlements. It is also the period when sufism flourished. Besides, the Yemenite kingdom under the previously mentioned queens became more internationally oriented due to the development of Shiite kingdoms ruling over a larger area.<sup>126</sup> The Shiite doctrine gave Yemenite queens more opportunities compared to the ones granted to them within the Sunnite Abbasside Empire centered in Baghdad, which was the Islamic capital during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it seems plausible that a more positive tradition in Islam towards the Queen of Sheba's kingship was more present in Shiite countries in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>124</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 118.

<sup>125</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 122.

<sup>126</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 124-128.

### 6.1.3 The Appearance of a 'Sheba' Queen in Yemen

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century queens were described as equal to men, not based on their appearance and gender, but on their judgment: *the chroniclers report that she attended the councils of state 'with her face uncovered'. No veil for a woman who loved her husband and believed in him, and no false humility for an Arab woman who had something to say!*<sup>127</sup> Using a veil could put the focus on their gender, and so it is likely that this was a reason to discourage them from using one. The title of a Yemenite queen was al-Hurra, "the free-one" meaning a sovereign leader who does not obey any superior authority. Queen Arwa even ruled for half a century and was loved by her people. These Muslim queens were also described by "the title 'little Queen of Sheba'," and this was remarkable knowing that the Queen of Sheba was first pagan. Writers compared Arwa, for example, to the Queen of Sheba, based on her possessions: *this is the way Balqis, the queen of Sheba, is presented in the Koran in full exercise of royal power.*<sup>128</sup> These Yemenite queens were directly linked to the Quran thanks to sura 27, which made them to be included in Islam more than any other ruler from Yemen ever in its history. However, after the Ethiopian invasion in the sixth century C.E. and the continued shifts of authority from Ethiopian to Yemenite rule, the Queen of Sheba was depicted as a Christian Queen. Christian Ethiopians named her Makeba, and thus the Christian view brought a shift in her characterization.<sup>129</sup> The Ethiopians thought of the Queen of Sheba more as being part of the Jewish tradition, rather than the Islamic one, since they knew about the Himyaritic influences on Yemen;

*this startling information shows yet again how the Queen's visit to Jerusalem figured no less significantly in the Arabian tradition than in the Ethiopian, and it indicates a belief, however indefensible, that some Jews had been in the peninsula for a very long time.*<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 140.

<sup>128</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 142.

<sup>129</sup> Bowersock, G. W. *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*. Emblems of Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 93.

<sup>130</sup> Bowersock, G. W. *Throne of Adulis*, 2013, p. 94.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Queen of Sheba was mostly depicted according to Islamic tradition, as Bilqis, and such a depiction became inseparable from the Yemenite political and religious tradition. The Ethiopian characterization of the Queen of Sheba was left out of Islamic tradition, in which Islamic tradition viewed Ethiopians in general negatively.<sup>131</sup> The polytheistic environment of the jahiliyya in which idols had played a large role, influenced the Quran and Muslim history<sup>132</sup> according to the following quotation by Lakeland and Mernissi:

*the essential point is that Bilqis comes to us directly out of the jahiliyya, and despite scholarship and its dictates her life is as enduring as her legend. Scholarship or no, Bilqis reigns supreme today in Arab poetry, and many contemporary poets use her to suggest a female presence that fascinates and enchants.*<sup>133</sup>

Historians are still focusing on the use of the Queen of Sheba in literature and poetry, rather than seeing her as an actual queen who lived and ruled.<sup>134</sup> This seems to be in line with sources referencing to the Queen of Sheba that became ingrained into the cultural heritage of Yemen and to a much lesser extent as part of inquiry of her as a historical character.

## 6.2 The Queen's Function in the Quran

The Quran speaks positively about the Queen of Sheba and in fact it sanctions her power. However, other queens might receive a different treatment in Islam, possibly because they were not linked to Solomon. The Sunni perspective might hold a different view about the Queen of Sheba and her kingship compared to the Shiite perspective. So, how does the Quranic mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba lend itself to a use that can empower minority groups within Islam, particularly sufis and women?

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<sup>131</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 109.

<sup>132</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>133</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 144.

<sup>134</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 144-150.

The Islamic perspective on the Queen of Sheba depends on the approach, and, here, the Sunnite perspective links with a Northern Arabian view on female leadership, and with a history that was greatly marked by the centers of power within the 'Abbasid Empire. The Islamic background of these ruling Caliphs would be most likely Sunnite, the latter likely having influence on their perspectives on kingship. The hadith and Quran are strictly followed by Sunnites, whereas the Shiites follow an alternative perspective, depending on their spiritual leader.<sup>135</sup> The 'Abbasid Empire dealt differently with female leadership:

*According to the Abbasids, the claims to power of those descended from 'Ali are completely unfounded, because the transmission of the caliphate through women is impossible. Women, excluded by definition from the major leadership of the state (al-imama al-kubra), cannot transmit it.<sup>136</sup>*

The Caliphs did consult women at court. However, they would not approach these women as individual leaders, but rather as members of the Caliphate, and so we read that *after the assassination of Hazrat Umar (R), the board appointed by him for selection of a Caliph consulted women too.*<sup>137</sup> The Queen of Sheba and her kingship should be approached through more moral focused suras that can be interpreted allegorically. It is my understanding that sura 27 should be interpreted mostly allegorically, and that in this interpretation Shiites and Sunnites might not be in line with each other.<sup>138</sup> The Shiite interpretation from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards is often linked to a positive approach towards the Queen of Sheba and differs from Sunni perspectives, in which Shiites might read the Quran different compared to Sunnis, especially in its approach to her polytheistic character.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Brown, D. *A New Introduction to Islam*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2017, p. 156.

<sup>136</sup> Mernissi, F. and Lakeland, M. J. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 1993, p. 154.

<sup>137</sup> Elius, M. "Islamic View of Women Leadership as Head of the State: A Critical Analysis." *Arts Faculty Journal* 4 (2012), p. 202.

<sup>138</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 744.

<sup>139</sup> Brown, D. *A New Introduction to Islam*, 2017, p. 156-58.

### 6.2.1 Focus on Idolatry

Paganism and idolatry in Islam are useful to be considered in this thesis because the Queen of Sheba has been mentioned often as an idolatrous queen, who worshipped multiple gods. The Quran explicitly focuses on the issue of worship towards the wrong “gods” or idols. Idolatry, as already mentioned, increases understanding of the meaning of the Queen of Sheba’s authority during the so-called jahiliyya in Islam, when polytheism played a large role. Idolatry is an important factor in understanding the attitude in Islam towards rulers who had an idolatrous or pagan history, and in this group, especially towards the Queen of Sheba. Another perspective in the context of the story of the Queen of Sheba and her kingship is found in sura 53:23, in which we read:

*these (idols) are mere names that you and your forefathers have made up—a practice Allah has never authorized. They follow nothing but (inherited) assumptions and whatever (their) souls desire, although (true) guidance has already come to them from their Lord.*

Although this sura argues against worshipping idols, it also refers to authority, specifically to the fact that it is impossible to take idols as authorities or to follow commands of idols. The Queen of Sheba has been referred to as a pre-Islamic queen who worshipped the sun. From an Islamic perspective, her kingship could not be considered authorized by God. Hence, her conversion to monotheism could indicate an authorization of her kingship. For example, hadith 524, told on the authority of Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, revolves around the function of worship in monotheism as stated in the Quran: *Abu Bakr as-Siddiq (May Allah be pleased with him) reported:*

*"O you people! You recite this Verse: 'O you who believe! Take care of your own selves. If you follow the (right) guidance [and enjoin what is right (Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do) and forbid what is wrong (polytheism, disbelief and all that Islam has forbidden)] no hurt can come to you from those who are in error.' (5:105) But I have heard the Messenger of Allah saying: "When people see an oppressor but do not prevent him from (doing evil), it is likely that Allah will punish them all. " <sup>140</sup>*

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<sup>140</sup> Bukhari, al-/ Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.). *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., Riyad: Darussalam, 1997. Vol. 1. Hadith 524, Book 9, p. 321.

This hadith possibly teaches people to warn the idolatrous ones about their wrongdoing and disbelief. It also states that monotheists would most likely gain no harm in the Hereafter. Witnesses of wrongdoers are not the ones to be blamed. This suggests that there are moral standards to judge the worth of an individual, and the focus is on the individuality of faith, (...) *as asserting that all human beings have responsibility for the fate of their own souls.*<sup>141</sup> The conversion of the Queen of Sheba is an example of pious behavior, and of taking responsibility of one's soul. Such pious behavior, authorized her kingship or at least made her kingship in Islam acceptable. The Quran, specifically sura 5:105, focusses on the individuality of worship: *oh believers! You are accountable only for yourselves. It will not harm you if someone chooses to deviate—as long as you are (rightly) guided. To Allah you will all return, and He will inform you of what you used to do.* This verse is focused on the moral responsibility of the believers and that they should following pious advice,<sup>142</sup> just like the Queen of Sheba who followed the advice of Solomon. Mushriks or wrongdoers in the context of this thesis do have a function: they inspire believers to stay on the right path of Islam, and, in it, which believers are responsible for their own actions:

*as with the idea of idolatry in the other traditions of monotheism, so in the Islamic, shirk has covered a range of beliefs and practices as well as moral failings such as pride and the belief in premonitions and presentiments.*<sup>143</sup>

The individual journey of faith can be difficult to examine, because it is often a subjective journey. For that reason, individuality has been approached differently based on the background of the writers of some sources.<sup>144</sup> All these interpretations affect the views found in Islamic sources about the Queen of Sheba and thus do not go unnoticed in this thesis in order to understand her function as a queen, whether positive or negative.

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<sup>141</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 892.

<sup>142</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 893.

<sup>143</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 78.

<sup>144</sup> Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, 2003, p. 66.

### 6.2.2 Righteousness and Moral

Generally speaking, the approach towards the Queen of Sheba is positive and her characteristics regarding kingship are described positively in the Quran, being an example her character as a good queen. In this thesis a difference is shown in the approach held by Sunnis and Shiites. This thesis has used mostly Shiite approaches and sources, and in those, moral turns to be a category that helps to understand kingship in connection to the Queen of Sheba. When it comes to moral standards and norms, the Quran promotes equality more than hierarchy and differences. An example of this equality is found in verses that can be subject to a mystical interpretation, such as the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>145</sup> One rather positive reference from the Quran on gender and hierarchy is found in sura 3:195: *and their Lord hath heard them (and He saith): Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. Ye proceed one from another.* This verse states that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, due to the same standards in labor. Nasr focuses on the following verse while talking about moral equality, and he argues that obedience and rightful deeds are equally rewarded: *there are many verses in the Quran which state that in the matter of reward and punishment both men and women will be treated alike as individuals and will suffer the consequence of their actions.*<sup>146</sup> In the context of female kingship, this verse can be used as an argument pointing at the equality of women in regards to men. Hence, queens can be seen as equal to kings based on their righteousness. This is supported by the commentary on queens mentioned earlier, which states that these queens were praised for their fair judgment. However, as mentioned before, Sunnis and Shiites understand these suras differently, and there were positive and negative approaches. These approaches confirm previously made conclusions regarding the fact that Shiites approached the Queen of Sheba and her kingship positively. The story of the

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<sup>145</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 611.

<sup>146</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 540.

Queen of Sheba, focused on her previous polytheistic worship and later conversion to monotheism, serves as an example for rightful and accepted female kingship. Furthermore, the political climate of a country, and probably the history of that country concerning female leadership, is intimately linked to the interpretation of the Quran. The position of a queen depends on how a country deals with female kingship, and female kingship in the Quran is not necessarily clarified or explained: *this deliberate silence means that Islam has given full freedom and direction to the Muslim community to decide on this matter according to the ever-changing socio-political circumstances.*<sup>147</sup> The next paragraph takes a closer look at Sunnite and Shiite approaches concerning female kingship, and focuses on the acceptance of the Queen of Sheba's potential authority.

### 6.3 Shiite and Sunnite Approaches to the Authority of the Queen of Sheba

The previous paragraphs already explained the different doctrines in Islam; this paragraph tries to explain the connection between doctrines and politics in a more specific way, focusing on authority and hierarchy. The attitude of the Shiites towards authority contributes to their particular interpretations of the story of the Queen of Sheba and how she has been approached. Verse 4:59 of the Quran presents a perspective on kingship, in which authority is linked directly to religiosity:

*o believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you (..) Sunni Islam considered the Caliphs (khalifa, deputy or successor) the heirs to the Prophet and Imams (imam, leader), making them, together with their appointees, beneficiaries of this Verse and thus entitled to obedience.*<sup>148</sup>

From a religious perspective, it is claimed that God is the ultimate ruler on men, and that his deputies are the authorities on earth. However, there are barely references to theocratic perceptions in Islam and of its implementation in the

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<sup>147</sup> Elius, M. "Islamic View of Women Leadership as Head of the State: A Critical Analysis.", p. 204.

<sup>148</sup> Arjomand, S. A. *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 5.

Middle Ages. Theocratic perceptions relate to the idea of theology in Islam according to which the interpreter is not bound by any rules on how to interpret text:<sup>149</sup>

*Quranic phrases relate to terms in the Quran which the tabi'un have interpreted differently due to a lack of knowledge of hadith that mentions the meaning of these phrases or because there were no hadith concerning difficult phrases, leading to each individual using his own opinion or knowledge in explaining the meaning.*<sup>150</sup>

Sunnis, and among them, the Tabi'un, too, are in general concerned about sources focused on authority in the context of the Sunnah. Nasr states that:

*Others identify those in authority among you as Muslim religious and legal scholars ('ulamā'), because of their knowledge of the Quran and the Sunnah, through which God and the Prophet are obeyed. Still others consider this a reference to the Companions of the Prophet in general or Abū Bakr and 'Umar (the first two Caliphs) in particular.*<sup>151</sup>

Shiites dealt with the Sunnah differently than Sunnis, as discussed above. The differences between the majority and minority groups in Islam are present and are shown especially by different interpretations. Thus, can the Quranic mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba and its uses by minority groups within Islam during the Middle Ages be read in light of the theory of reception in history? What stands out is that in Islam there is a form of reception. Nonetheless, this paragraph focuses on the narrative of the Quran given that, Islamic countries, each have their own heritage, but all rely on the Quran as a main source of religious authority. The interpretations of the authority of the Queen of Sheba by minority groups in Islam differ, whereas Yemenite queens looked at her as an authoritative person, and sufis interpret her throughout the story with its allegorical meaning. There are a number of parallels when we take evidence altogether, such as her mystical character. Nonetheless, female kingship has been interpreted differently by Sunnis and Shiites. What can be said is that Shiites focused on the mystical interpretations of Quranic texts, which are closer

<sup>149</sup> Vaid, M. *Brief Introduction to Quranic Exegesis*, 2018, p. 10.

<sup>150</sup> Vaid, M. *Brief Introduction to Quranic Exegesis*, 2018, p. 10.

<sup>151</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 638.

to morality than any other texts, especially in terms of obedience. Shiites judge those who are in authority under God and understand that imams need to prove their authority with their spiritual capabilities. In this sense, the Shiite perspective comes close to the sufi perspective: sufis would consider themselves to be mystical Muslims, and they can be seen as a sectarian current in Islam, too, that can be compared to Shiism. The sufi community became larger in the late Middle Ages and even became dominant North of Africa, especially Egypt. Many poets were sufis and used the hoopoe as a mystical creature and as a spiritual guide. The goal of sufis was to gain a "mystical union with God," and this they tried to achieve by performing rituals.<sup>152</sup> Sufis distanced themselves from the Sunnite doctrine. A similarity with Shiism can be found in the sufis' approach to leadership, according to which a leader was tested or qualified according to whether he or she was a just and rightful ruler. In this case the allegorical interpretations of Quranic texts about authority are contributing to understand female authority or authority in Islam in general: *in the sufi tradition, those in authority among you can also refer to sufi shaykhs, or guides, as well as to the "gnostics," that is, those who have sought out and acquired spiritual knowledge of God.*<sup>153</sup> The allegorical interpretation focused on moral contributes to the idea of female kingship, associated with the Queen of Sheba and based on her righteousness.

#### 6.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter answered the following questions: how can the Quranic mystical reading of the Queen of Sheba and uses by minority groups within Islam during the Middle Ages be read in light of the theory of reception in history? And: how does the Quranic mystical reading of the Quranic Queen of Sheba lend itself to a use that is empowering to minority groups within Islam, particularly sufis and women? The main argument is on the interpretation of authority and the

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<sup>152</sup> Gelder, G. J. H. van. *Classical Arabic Literature*, 2012, p. 76-79.

<sup>153</sup> Nasr, S. H. *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, 2015, p. 639.

position of women as authoritative, within which the story of the Queen of Sheba is claimed to be unique in the context of female kingship. The discussion has been about the presence of these queens, whether or not they are included in the Quran and hadith based on their individuality. It seems that the Quran used the story of the Queen of Sheba in order to teach about more than just kingship. The theme of individuality remains an important factor and is probably the most difficult subject to analyze on the basis of the Quran. However, it seems most likely that individuality was encouraged in Sunnite and Shiite doctrines if the focus is on individual moral and worshipping of God. The Queen of Sheba's story is exceptional in the category of female kingship, and she became a mythical character mainly in Yemen, which was dominantly Shiite. This chapter did not explain female kingship in Islam in general. However, this chapter made some attempts to contextualize the Queen of Sheba's kingship and use by minority groups in Islam.

## 7. Conclusion

The sources discussed in this thesis deserve a more detailed investigation that would include more interpretations from different perspectives and sources. Yet, this thesis has brought forward some arguments that are helpful in answering the main question: *how does the Quran elaborate the mystical image of the Queen of Sheba when we work from the perspective of the historical reception of the story in the Hebrew Bible?* The most important of them are the contours of the historical context sketched in this thesis help to support some of the particular arguments made, most importantly, the insight that attitudes towards the Queen of Sheba are broad and seem to range from positive to negative in Islamic sources. The story of the Queen of Sheba is recurring in Islamic sources, therein she functions as an influential ruler. However, it seems most likely that, in these sources, she is rather a legendary character than a historical one. Other queens from Yemen relate their kingship to hers, and those have been discussed in this thesis, too. Despite this, more research on these queens is needed to better understand how female kingship is being interpreted in Islam by minority groups, such as by women. Apart from women, sufis and their connection to the story of the Queen of Sheba have also been discussed. These two minority groups seem to have used the story of the Queen of Sheba as a means of empowerment. Remarkably, the character of the Queen of Sheba in Islam shows similarities in her description from the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless the Quran shows its own narrative concerning the story.

The concept of textual “borrowing” can be applied in the research of Quranic texts, yet the Quranic narrative should be considered as important when doing research. The Quranic perspective focuses on Solomon as a prophet and on the Queen of Sheba as an idolatrous sun-worshipping queen. However, she is respected and it is likely that having converted to monotheism helped to that. She is, moreover, the only queen in the Quran who acts next to an important prophet in Islam such as Solomon. The conversion of the Queen of Sheba is an

example of pious behavior, which made her authority acceptable in Islam. The Queen's character as an idol worshipper is important. Idols are not alien to the Quran; besides, many Islamic sources approached the theme of idol worshipping and polytheism differently but always in a condemnatory way. These attitudes towards idol worshippers or wrongdoers contribute to understanding Islamic perspectives on the Queen of Sheba, which were not necessarily always and only outspokenly negative. Islamic sources reflect on a time when there was quite coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims, but attempts were made to convert polytheists to Islam. The historical periods discussed in this thesis contribute to understanding the change from polytheistic to monotheistic developments mostly in Yemen, that influenced writings and depictions of the Queen of Sheba. It has been argued that the Queen of Sheba, who worshipped the sun, became a source of inspiration for minority groups in Islam too, and here was recurring in sufi literature and rituals, in which the hoopoe took a leading role. The other characters from sura 27 play a mystical role in the Quran as well. The hoopoe in general is a spiritual and mystical bird, which played a key role in mystical symbolism. The source the *Conference of Birds* elaborates on the role of this bird and many other birds. The argument has been made that it is precisely the possibility of such a mystical reading that has been taken by some minority groups, such as women and sufis, to define their respective identities with respect to other more mainstream understandings of the narrative and of leadership in Islam. This seems to have been a fruitful tool to empowerment of these groups.

Other exegetical sources, such as art, particularly the visual exegesis and the mystical parts of the story of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, show the Queen of Sheba placed at the center, mainly in Persian art and poetry. It has been demonstrated that the relation between the Queen of Sheba and the hoopoe was possible because they were claimed to have spoken the same language, just like prophet Solomon did: he spoke the language of the birds. The reception of a powerful queen differs depending on the perspective taken, even sufis had their

particular approach to the Queen of Sheba. The mainstream interpretation in Islam of the story of the Queen of Sheba thus coexisted with the other possible interpretations discussed here and was not the only possible approach to it by Muslims. Yemenite queens such as Arwa and Asma, were directly linked to the Quran in sura 27, which made their kingship to be accepted within the framework of Muslim thought. Yemen and Persia embraced Shiism and hence distanced themselves in some sense from Sunnite neighboring countries. It has been argued that this most likely had an impact on the more positive attitude towards the Queen of Sheba and her kingship in these regions. It has been underscored that whereas one could say that in Islam broadly there is an understanding that the judgment of righteousness by rulers is more important characteristic of a ruler than gender. It has been in Shiite countries (or at least, in the two examples chosen for the present thesis) that these views have been more strongly developed. Historians are still focusing on the use of the Queen of Sheba in Islamic sources as a legendary character, rather than as an actual queen who lived and ruled.

*So, how does the Quran elaborate the mystical image of the Queen of Sheba when we work from the perspective of the historical reception of the story in the Hebrew Bible?* The historical reception of the Queen of Sheba has not been fully discussed in this thesis, nevertheless, the arguments put forward contribute to an understanding of the Queen of Sheba present in other sources consistent with the reception theory overall. The Queen of Sheba is one of the most mentioned queens in Islamic sources which provides a most inspiring story to explore female kingship in Islam. The reception theory is useful while researching Quranic texts similar to Biblical texts, and where a large number of subjects such as, poetry and art, are functional as forms of reception. The Quran has its own narration of the story of the Queen of Sheba: this narration puts its own spin on events and explains the story from its own perspective, although it also “borrows” elements or traces from the Hebrew Bible. One of the most exiting

aspects of this story has been the use made of it by some minority groups in Islam, as demonstrated here.

## 7. Timeline

c. 1500-1000 b.c.e.	Sabaeen rule in Yemen, idol worship	Polytheism
c. 1000 b.c.e.	Temple of Barran, serves as a site to worship idols	
c. 1000-700 b.c.e.	Sabaeen rule continued, and expanded > possible link to Hebrew Bible due to trade expeditions from the kingdom of Saba	
c. 700 b.c.e.	Ma'rib becomes capital city	
c. 700-200 b.c.e.	Multiple shifts of authority in Yemen, between Northern Africa and Southern Arabia	
c. 600 b.c.e. – 200 c.e.	Himyarites influencing Northern Yemen, first introduction of monotheism	Small traces of monotheism
c. 200 c.e.	Jewish settlement in Yemen, Temple Barran became a place for monotheistic worship	
c. 200-500 c.e.	Jewish culture Yemen, Christian introduction, Monotheism grew	
c. 500-600 c.e.	Christians dominating Yemen (Ethiopian invasion)	
c. 651 c.e.	End of the rule of the Persian Queen Boran (Hadith 4425)	Monotheism dominating
c. 700-900 c.e.	Early days of Islam in Yemen	
c. 1000-1100 c.e.	Yemenite queens, Asma and Arwa Shiite dominance	
c. 1000 – 1300 c.e.	Art including Bilqis, mostly from Persia	
c. 1177 c.e.	<i>Conference of Birds</i> , composed by Farid ud-Din 'Attar	
c. 1780 c.e.	Latest used manuscript of Bilqis in this thesis	

## 8. Wordlist

*Almaqa*, an idol who has been connected to the sun and moon at the *Temple of Barran* (p. 21).

*Asma*, a queen in Yemen, who has been referred to as a little Queen of Sheba (p. 62-64).

*Arwa*, a queen in Yemen, who has been referred to as a little Queen of Sheba (p. 62-64).

*Bilqis*, Islamic name of the Queen of Sheba (p. 18).

*Boran*, a queen who ruled Persia during the time of Mohammed, according to Hadith 4425 (p. 60).

*Caliph*, an Islamic ruler during the Abbasid imperial period in Iraq (p. 67).

*Conference of Birds*, a mystical Islamic poetry originated by Farid ud-Din 'Attar, in 1166 C.E. (p. 43).

*Exegesis*, the interpretations of Biblical and religious texts also visualized (p. 11-15).

*Hadith*, important literature on Islamic wisdoms next to the Quran. (p. 8).

*Hiram*, the king of Tyre, from same time period as Solomon (p. 41).

*Hoopoe*, a spiritual bird that acted as a leader in the *Conference of Birds* and appears in the story of the Queen of Sheba (p. 39-42).

*Himyarites*, the rulers of Yemen from approximately 600 B.C.E. -200 C.E. (p. 22-24).

*Idols*, gods and entities from pre-Islamic period (p. 22-24).

*Jahiliyya*, Idolatrous period/ pre-Islamic period according to Islam (p. 19).

*Jinn*, mystical, spirit creature, made of fire (p. 27).

*Kings I*, chapter from the Hebrew Bible, including the story about the Queen of Sheba and Solomon (p. 3-11, 19-21).

*Lilith*, a demonic character linked to the Queen of Sheba in Rabbinic sources (p. 24).

*Makeba*, the Christian name of the Queen of Sheba (p. 8, 65).

*Marib*, the capital of Yemen (p. 21).

*Monotheism*, worship of one God, examples can be the mainstream religions such as; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, who worshipped one God (p. 19-21).

*Polytheism*, worship of multiple gods, the period of *jahiliyya* serves as an example of this practice (p. 28-30).

*Reception History*, a theory in historical research, where all Biblical material serves a form of exegesis (p. 12-19).

*Sabaeans*, the rulers in Yemen from approximately 1500- 1000 B.C.E. (p. 22-24).

*Shirk*, a polytheist according to the Quran (p. 19).

*Simurgh*, a sacred bird in Islam (p. 47).

*Solomon*, the Prophet in Hebrew Bible and Quran (p. 38).

*Song of Songs*, a chapter from the Hebrew Bible, containing poetry at the court of Solomon (p. 57).

*Sufism*, Mystical Islam (p. 42).

*Sura*, chapters in the Quran, such as the Chapter Ants (p. 6-10).

*Tafsir*, Islamic exegesis (p. 16, 42, 48).

*Temple of Barran*, a polytheistic worship site (p. 21).

*Temple of the Lord*, the name given in the Hebrew Bible to the Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed twice. This paper linked the character Hiram to the Temple, through his contribution to strengthen the Temple (p. 10).

*Zoroastrianism*, the original Persian religion before the emergence of Islam, centered on sun worship and spiritual guidance through birds, such as the peacock (p. 47, 50, 60).

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