

The Queen of Sheba Possibly Adored in the Song of Songs

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In the Old Testament, the Song of Solomon describes the love and passion between a woman and a man. This book has figuratively been interpreted as an allegory for God’s love of humanity or humanity’s love of God. Or in other words, “the union of the human soul with God.”<sup>1</sup> But interpreting the text literally, we have simply an erotic account of lovers. However, that is not all. This erotic account can be specifically interpreted as an allegory of King Solomon’s love of the Queen of Sheba. In this paper I first explore the history of this Sabean queen. I then show that the Song of Songs could be a heart-broken King Solomon expounding on a lost love.

Notably, I simply argue that the Queen of Sheba *could* be the subject of the book. I do not argue that she *is* the subject of the book. Doing this would invalidate (or at least undermine) the interpretation that the Song of Solomon is about God’s love for humanity. The book could be about this or not, but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

To best understand how the Song of Solomon is about the Queen of Sheba, we must first explore the Queen. Our knowledge of her comes from a variety of sources, including the Bible and Judaic sources, Islamic sources, and the *Kebra Nagast*, an Ethiopian holy book.<sup>2</sup>

In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba is described in most depth in I Kings 10: 1 – 13. She is again described in nearly identical terms in II Chronicles 9: 1 – 12. These two descriptions, as compiled by Harry Philby from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, are found below. To combine the passages, the few words found only in I Kings are in italics and the few words found only in II Chronicles are placed in parenthesis. Read this excerpt as a reminder of her:

(1) Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon *concerning the name of the Lord*, she came to (Jerusalem to) test him with hard questions. (2) *She came to*

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, The Archbishop Iakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Historical Sources, no. 12 (Brookline, Mass: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 47.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974), 104.

*Jerusalem with* (having) a very great retinue, *with* (and) camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; *and* when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. (3) And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from *the king* (Solomon) which he could not explain to her. (4) And when the queen of Sheba had seen *all* the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, (5) the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, (and) their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings which he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her.

(6) And she said to the king, ‘The report was true which I heard in my own land of your affairs and of your wisdom, (7) but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it; and, behold, *the* half (the greatness of your wisdom) was not told me; *your wisdom and prosperity* (you) surpass the report which I heard.

(8) Happy are your wives! Happy are these your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! (9) Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on *the* (his) throne *of Israel!* (as king for the Lord your God!) Because *the Lord* (your God) loved Israel (and would establish them) for ever, he has made you king (over them), that you may execute justice and righteousness.’ (10) Then she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold, and a very great quantity of spices, and precious stones; *never again came such an abundance of* (there were no) spices (such) as *these* (those) which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon...

(13) And King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all that she desired, whatever she asked besides *what was given her by the bounty of King Solomon* (she had brought to the king). So she turned and went back to her own land, with her servants.<sup>3</sup>

In this description, besides providing a partial review of the Queen of Sheba, we have two references that suggest a sexual or otherwise intimate encounter between the King and Queen.

The first is in verse two: “...and when she came to Solomon she told him all that was on her mind”. According to academic James Pritchard, in this aforementioned phrase, the original Hebrew uses the verb *bw*, which can translate as ‘to come in’. However, “in more than a dozen places in the Bible it [*bw*] is used specifically for entering a tent or house for the purposes of sexual relations.”<sup>4</sup> For example, in the story of the daughters of Lot bearing sons by their father (Genesis 19: 34), the same verb is used. “Come [*bw*], let us ply our father with wine and sleep with him.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> H. St J. B. Philby, *The Queen of Sheba* (London ; New York: Quartet Books, 1981), 29–30.

<sup>4</sup> Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 335.

The second reference to a possible sexual relation is in verse 13: “And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all that she desired...” This ambiguous wording could mean only that Sheba received the Wisdom of Solomon that she sought. Or it could mean a more nuanced relationship, in which Sheba desired more than wisdom.

From this passage in I Kings and II Chronicles—plus scattered references to both the land and Queen of Sheba in the Old and New Testament<sup>6</sup>—it is nearly impossible to claim a romantic relationship between Solomon and Sheba that would have led to the writing of the Song of Songs. To better understand the extent of their romance, we must look to additional sources that elaborate their relationship.

The *Targum Sheni*, an Aramaic translation and elaboration of the Book of Esther, provides details by describing how King Solomon learned of the Queen of Sheba. During a banquet to which man and beast were invited, Solomon takes roll call to ensure all are present. The cock-of-the-woods or hoopoe bird is absent. The King demands his appearance. When the hoopoe arrives, the bird explains that his delay resulted from a visit to a distant land where “silver lies about like dung in the street.”<sup>7</sup> This wealth was the wealth of Sheba. The hoopoe bird offers to bring a letter to the Queen of Sheba demanding she appear in the King’s court, paying homage. King Solomon acts on this offer, and sends a letter and an “armada of birds so great as to obscure the sun and cause the Queen such consternation that she ‘took hold of her clothes and tore them in pieces.’”<sup>8</sup>

The *Targum Sheni*, other *Targums*, and in various *Midrash* (Rabbinic commentaries on Hebrew Scriptures), provide an account of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon, which is far

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<sup>6</sup> Philby, *The Queen of Sheba*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

more detailed than that seen in I Kings. The widening of the story's scope ranges from expected to shocking. A simple addition is a recount of the riddles that Sheba used to "test him with hard questions". (1 Kings 10:2) For example, her second riddle is as follows:

[Like] dust it comes forth from the earth:

It is nourished from the dust of the earth:

It is poured out like water:

It illumines the house.

Solomon correctly divines the answer (shown in footnote).<sup>910</sup>

In the exchange of riddles, while not explicitly stated, there is time for flirtation and banter as the King and Queen test the other's wisdom and character. This interpretation is consistent with a perhaps budding romantic relationship.

A surprising elaboration of the story is a description of Sheba as feminine in appearance but underneath her garments hairy like a man. As Solomon found her, "pleasing in his eyes and he sought to lie with her," he invented a depilatory to correct her deficiency. He then "came to her at once".<sup>11</sup> In this description we have an explicit reference to a sexual relationship. The Song of Solomon could be about this.

A more shocking elaboration of the story is a tacit suggestion that the Queen of Sheba is a demon, who possesses a goat's foot and is hairy as previously noted. And not only that, but she engages King Solomon in sex and gives birth to Nebuchadnezzar: "She came unto him and he lay with her and from her went forth Nebuchadnezzar."<sup>12</sup> While the relationship described here would

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>10</sup> Riddle answer is Naphtha

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 77.

not lead to the writing of the Song of Solomon, its sexual nature confirms that Solomon and Sheba were romantically engaged.

A final notable story describes Solomon's preparation for the Queen's visit. To learn if she is hairy and has a goat's foot, Solomon has the floors of his throne room polished to bright luster, so as to give the appearance of water. In doing so Solomon can see the feet and ankles of the Queen either in the reflection or when she lifts her skirts to cross what she thinks is a pool.

While later, non-canonical Jewish analyses of I Kings diverge in their interpretation of the nature of the relationship between Sheba and Solomon, the elaboration that the exchange of riddles could build into romance is sound. On this basis, we can reasonably wonder if the Song of Songs is possibly about the Queen of Sheba. While Solomon possessed 700 wives and 300 concubines, any of which could be the subject of his adoration, Sheba could be his favorite. She was the one who tested his wisdom and impressed with clever questions.

Before delving into a specific analysis of Song of Songs, I will further consider the Quranic and *Kebrā Nagast* accounts of Sheba to gain stronger insight into the possible dynamic of their relationship.

In the Quran, the story of Sheba most closely parallels that of the *Targum Shemi*. There are, however, two notable deviations. The first is the general thrust of the Quranic account, where King Solomon demands not political submission of the Queen to him but submission of the Queen to his God, as a Muslim. Or in the words of Jacob Lassner, "The Muslim prophet wishes to subdue her for one reason and one reason along: she is an unbeliever." Any thought of her being a demon is associated with her worshipping a sun God. The second deviation is a detail of the account. In the Quran prior to the arrival of the Queen of Sheba, a Quranic believer magically transports the Queen's throne to Solomon in the "twinkling of an eye". This symbolizes her loss of power. And then in preparation for the Queen's arrival, Solomon disguises the throne as a test

to see if she recognizes it as her own and is “truly guided”. When put to the test, the Queen cryptically responds, “It is as if it were”.<sup>13</sup>

The lone instance of any sexual tension in the Quranic account of Sheba occurs when she enters the palace of Solomon and needs to cross his well-shined floors:

One said to her, ‘Enter the palace.’

She thought it a pool and uncovered her legs.

[Solomon] said, ‘It is a palace paved with glass.’

She said, ‘I have wronged myself;

to God, the Lord of the worlds, with Solomon I make submission.’<sup>14</sup>

Sheba baring her legs in this quote from the Quran is slightly titillating. But it evolves in meaning in commentaries on the Quran, such as in *Stories of the Prophets*. There the story goes that Solomon saw the Queen’s hairy legs and had her clean herself with depilatories and hot baths. Once that was done, (and she had converted to Islam) Solomon married her.<sup>15</sup>

In the Islamic account of the Queen of Sheba we see a similar pattern to the Judaic account. In canonical texts (Tanakh vs Quran) the story is relatively tame with hints at a possible relationship. But in subsequent interpretations the story goes that the King and Queen were married. So again, we are confirmed in our belief that the Song of Songs could be about the Queen of Sheba.

In our final text, the *Kebra Nagast*, we have the strongest case for love between Solomon and Sheba. In this narration, the two monarchs pass many days and nights impressing their wisdom on the other. This continues for weeks and months, with tension building in their coy

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<sup>13</sup> Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 36–46.

<sup>14</sup> Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

friendship. During this time Solomon tries seducing Sheba; but the demure and virgin Queen resists all advances. This continues until the final day of Sheba's visit. With no time left, Solomon lays a trap. He first begs and convinces the Queen to stay one final day. That night, to celebrate her, he serves a lavish feast of spicy food. But he serves not water, wine, or drink. And he continues the feast far into the night. Finally, when it is finished, he invites the Queen to sleep in his castle so she can avoid a trip back to her camp. She agrees, but makes Solomon promise that he will not touch her. The cunning Solomon agrees to these terms but asks a reciprocal promise from her, that she will not take anything of his. The Queen agrees and they both go to their chambers to sleep. But later that night, Sheba wakes with a persistent thirst from the spicy food. She searches Solomon's castle for a drink of water and finds a lone pitcher placed at Solomon's bedside. As Sheba discretely pours a cup of water, the King, who has feigned slumber, grabs her wrist. "You have broken your promise and now I can break mine." That night the two make love. And the following morning Sheba departs to her land, leaving a forlorn Solomon, who begins to realize the extent of his passion for the Queen.<sup>161718</sup>

In this final example, we have a heart broken Solomon who could have penned a wishful and fanciful account of how his love should or could have been. Hints of such a possible desire are also seen in the Judaic and Islamic accounts of the Queen of Sheba. So reasonably, whichever story one believes, there is basis for considering if Song of Songs is inspired by Sheba.

Notably, I have taken the accounts of Sheba largely at face value, rather than interpreting them through a critical lens where the story tells just as much about the writer or editor as it does

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<sup>16</sup> "Digging for the Truth: The Real Queen of Sheba DVD," *History Channel Store*, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://shop.history.com/digging-for-the-truth-the-real-queen-of-sheba-dvd/detail.php?p=69573>.

<sup>17</sup> *King Solomon & the Queen of Sheba FULL DOCUMENTARY* (BBC Worldwide, 2014), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvXg2Pq9lfs&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvXg2Pq9lfs&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>18</sup> *Queen of Sheba: Behind the Myth* (Discovery Channel), accessed August 4, 2014, <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/queen-of-sheba-behind-the-myth/>.



the subject. For example, the *Kebra Nagast* was authored more than 2000 years after the reign of Sheba. And the book arguably is used to “provide the origins of the Solomonic dynasty of the Ethiopian Kings”.<sup>19</sup> This is a specific agenda that demands adaptation of fact to fit needs. And the large time gap only facilitates this task. Nevertheless, I am not arguing that the stories of Solomon and Sheba are accurate; rather, I argue only that they support the possibility that Solomon may have written Song of Songs while thinking of Sheba.

Having shown that possibility, my next task is investigating Song of Songs itself, and exploring whether descriptions therein could refer to Sheba. In the scope of this paper I will first address the theme of eroticism and the theme of a powerful woman in a patriarchal society. Then I will investigate two categories. The first category is specific factual claims, asking if they could refer to Sheba. I consider three statements, including that of the lover being black, mention of myrrh and frankincense, and description of necklaces of gold. The second category is stylistic. I ask if Solomon would write directly or obliquely about Sheba.

Overall, the theme of Song of Songs is erotic, describing mutual love between a man and woman. The eroticism is reasonable considering the undercurrent of potential relationship between lovers that is glimpsed in I Kings. Let us review the first four verses, with my bolding and italics for emphasis:

(1) Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. (2) She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came [**in a sexual way**] to Solomon, *she told him all that was on her mind.* (3) *And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king which*

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<sup>19</sup> Deborah M. Coulter-Harris, *The Queen of Sheba: Legend, Literature, and Lore* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), 142.

*he could not explain to her. (4) And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon...*<sup>2021</sup>

As seen here, ambiguity of language gives rise to a second interpretation of the account of their meeting (i.e. sexual). And here the Queen of Sheba is slightly coy in how she speaks to Solomon. So the coyness and sexual imagery of Song of Songs fits this interpretation of her personality. Moreover, the flirtation described in sources beyond the Old Testament, where Solomon and Sheba tested the other with riddles, again speaks to the plausibility that she is the heroine of the erotic poetry.

Inspecting the Song of Songs, I will briefly show how translations have attenuated (or expurgated) sexual imagery. The books opening chapter in the Kings James translation reads as follows: “(1) The song of songs, which is Solomon’s. (2) Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love *is* better than wine.”<sup>22</sup> In this passage the translated word love comes from the Hebrew word *dodim*, which “refers specifically to sexual love”.<sup>23</sup> It is specifically *not* love in a deist, platonic, or figurative way. A more appropriate translation could be as such: “(1) The song of songs, which is Solomon’s. (2) Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving [i.e. sexual] is better than wine.”<sup>24</sup> The word *dodim* appears not only in this passage but in five other instances in the Song of Songs. Supporting my claim of attenuated sexual imagery, we can again consider the verb for “to come into,” *bw*. As previously noted in regards to I Kings, it has sexual meaning. So the King James translation of 5: 1, “I am come into my garden, my sister

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<sup>20</sup> Robert P. Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible: Authorized King James Version, The World’s Classics* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> N.B. Throughout this paper I quote the King James Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

<sup>22</sup> Carroll and Prickett, *The Bible*.

<sup>23</sup> Ariel A. Bloch and Chana Bloch, eds., *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 1995), 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*my spouse...*” is about coming in for sexual purposes. Additionally, Bloch notes that this translation should read in the perfect tense of, “I have come into [sexual] my garden...” In total, according to Bloch, the Song of Songs is about consummated love.<sup>25</sup> For the purpose of this paper, my point is twofold: first, the Song of Songs is more sexual than typically translated, which supports my claim that it could be about love between Solomon and Sheba (and less likely about love between man and God); and two, the language with double meanings and sexual undertones mirrors (somewhat, but to a greater degree) the language of I Kings. And this subtle and erotic language mirrors an implied relationship between Solomon and Sheba centered on cerebral riddles and cerebral flirtation, with an undertone of sexual passion and lust.

A second theme in Song of Solomon is egalitarianism, or even deference to the female gender, in a patriarchal society. This is unexpected or even shocking. The typical form of relations is male dominated, which can be witnessed in these biblical quotes: “Enoch begat Methuselah,” “he knew her,” “he came in unto her,” and “he lay with her”.<sup>26</sup> Instead, in Song of Songs, we have many instances where the woman takes the lead. In the opening lines, 1: 2, “Let him kiss me...” and in the closing lines, 8: 14, “Make haste, my beloved [Solomon]...” Elsewhere in the text the woman is more assertive. For example, she is the only one to command the elements, (4: 16): “Awake, O north wind; and come though south; blow upon my garden; *that* the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits. And she boldly pursues her lover: “(3: 2) I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. (3: 3) The watchmen that go about the city found me: *to whom I said*, Saw ye him whom

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3–4, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

my soul loveth?” This egalitarianism speaks to the possibility of Solomon’s love for Sheba, who he viewed as his equal, both in intellectual prowess and in a loving relationship.

In contrast, Solomon typically viewed women as his possession. “(1) But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughters of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonite, Edomites, Zidonians, *and* Hittites....(3) And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines...” (I Kings 11: 1) Here we see Solomon treating women in the typical patriarchal way. Song of Songs is clearly an exception to this.

Using this framework of Solomon thinking of Sheba differently, we can take another look at I Kings 10. Note particularly the italicized sections.

(1) Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, *she came to test him* with hard questions. (2) She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, *she told him all that was on her mind.* (3) And *Solomon answered all her questions*; there was nothing hidden from the king which he could not explain to her.

In this passage we see Sheba leading the interaction. While she came ostensibly to pay homage to a more powerful monarch, it is her asking the question, not him. Again, Solomon viewed Sheba differently. And I Kings parallels this theme of egalitarianism seen in Song of Solomon.

As a related matter, I will note that Sheba’s wealth may have influenced Solomon’s egalitarian attitude towards her. In I Kings 10: 10 we read that Sheba gave the King “an hundred and twenty talents of gold”. In today’s weight, that would amount to over four-and-a-half tons of gold.<sup>27</sup> With a gold price of \$1300/ounce, that’s a largesse worth nearly 150 million dollars.

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<sup>27</sup> Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba*, 10.

While the weight of the gift of gold may have been greatly exaggerated, the point remains that Sheba was vastly wealthy. With this the case, Solomon would rightly treat her differently than the usual Princess or Queen.

If we consider the archaeological record, we gain some additional insight into Sheba's wealth. First and foremost though, the home of the legendary Queen is yet to be positively verified. The best guess is she came from the ancient city of Marib, in modern day Yemen. Assuming archaeologists are correct in their assumption that she came from Marib, we know that the Queen headed a large trading state that transported precious stones, metals, spices, and incense. This trading and production entrepôt flourished, thanks to favorable geography. Mountains to the west and desert to the east provided protection. And a dam 2000 feet wide trapped seasonal rains, transforming arid land into productive farms. On the basis of such favorable conditions, the land of Saba generated great wealth, which may have eclipsed that of Israel.<sup>282930</sup> With such wealth, when Sheba visited Solomon, the King would more favorably welcome her as an equal. This could open the door to a loving relationship, where Sheba would exceed in status the 1000 women of Solomon's harem.

We have now considered two themes of Song of Solomon: namely, its erotic nature exceeding what is seen in traditional translation; and its egalitarian attitude towards the woman therein. We have held this analysis against a similar analysis of I Kings and found the same themes. Combining this information with historical understanding of Sheba as a coy, flirtatious, and wealthy Queen, we see that the general framework of Song of Songs strongly supports the claim that it is possibly written about the Queen of Sheba.

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<sup>28</sup> Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed (Detroit : Washington, D.C: Thomson/Gale ; Catholic University of America, 2003), sec. Saba.

<sup>29</sup> *Queen of Sheba*.

<sup>30</sup> Pritchard and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), *Solomon & Sheba*, 63.

Our next task is investigating specific verses (and facts) of the book itself, Let us consider 1: 5 – 6.

(5) “I *am* black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. (6) Look not upon me, because I *am* black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother’s children were angry with me; they make me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.

Here we see a specific claim that the female character is black, and black like the goat hair tents of Kedar (made from black wool). However, the reason given is that she is sunburned, perhaps from working in the vineyards. A nuanced translation of this passage recognizes the Hebrew word *sehorah* can mean not only black but also dark. So the woman is darkened from the sun. While this passage could speak to race, it is more likely speaking to skin darkened by the sun. And we read, I am dark, but comely. This “but” conjunction is in recognition that traditionally, light skin was feminine and beautiful, as it reflected someone who did not need to work outdoors. However, this reference to beauty is somewhat ambiguous, as the Hebrew conjunctive *ve-* can mean “and” (in addition to “but”). In this understanding, the woman is “dark [e.g. tanned] and beautiful” which could hint at exotic.<sup>31</sup> This would be consistent with Solomon loving many “strange women”. Thus, in this passage, reference to dark skin could refer to Sheba’s time in the sun traveling to Jerusalem, her Arab skin, or her exotic race.

The second question involves conclusions we might draw from the three mentions of myrrh and frankincense (perfumes from tree resin) in Song of Songs. These commodities are of

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<sup>31</sup> Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 139 – 141.

particular interest, as they come from either southern Arabia or northern Somalia. In Figure 1, see their growing regions. And not only do these perfumes come from the land of Saba, but they are also associated with the Queen of Sheba. For example, in Isaiah 60: 6 we read this: “The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; and they shall come from Sheba: they shall bring forth gold and frankincense.”

And in Jeremiah 6: 20 we read this: “To what purpose cometh there to me

frankincense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country?”<sup>32</sup> In contrast, in I Kings 10 and II Chronicles 9, frankincense is not by-name mentioned in the lengthy description of Sheba.

Rather, only spices are named: “(1) Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to (Jerusalem to) test him with hard questions. (2) She came to Jerusalem with (having) a very great retinue, with (and) camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones...” Despite this omission, the word spices did linguistically encompass perfumes, including frankincense. Thus, the three mentions of frankincense in Song of Songs suggests the Queen of Sheba.

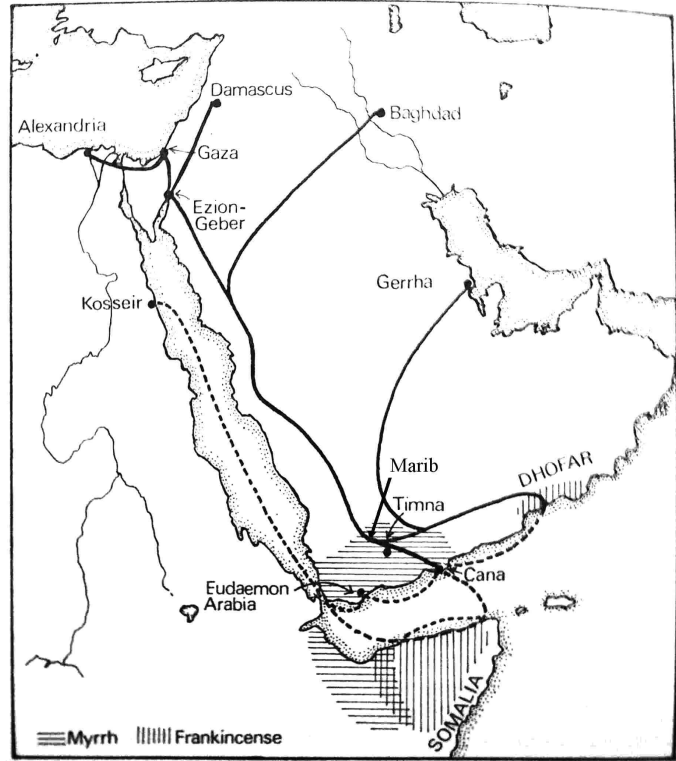


Figure 1 Cultivation areas of Myrrh and Frankincense

From: Pritchard and Thomas Leiper, *Solomon & Sheba*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Philby, *The Queen of Sheba*, 31.

The first mention of frankincense in Song of Songs is in verse 3: 6. “Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant?” In this King James translation, we can further refine it, noting that the word wilderness can also be translated as desert and powders can be translated to mean spices.<sup>33</sup> This triumphant presentation of the Shulamite princess, rising from the desert and smelling heavenly of myrrh and frankincense, fits well with the narration of the Queen of Sheba entering Jerusalem at the head of camel caravan with all manner of luxury goods. This is arguably the most literal example of Song of Songs being about her.

The fourth century capadocian theologian Saint Gregory of Nyssa also comments on this triumphant desert scene. He writes, “the bride’s beauty is compared to the smoke of incense; not simply this, but incense mixed with myrrh and frankincense as if her beauty can only be described by the combination of these two fragrances.”<sup>34</sup> This smells strongly of the Queen of Sheba, who traded both from her capital of Marib.<sup>35</sup>

The second mention of frankincense is in verse 4: 6. “Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountains of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.” In this verse the bridegroom speaks of his bride, whom he names with these two perfumes. While not necessarily Sheba, these spices could be a nickname between lovers.

The third and final mention of frankincense is in verse 4: 14, (with two preceding verses added here for context). (12) “A garden inclosed *is* my sister, *my* spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. (13) Thy plants *are* an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, (14) Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of

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<sup>33</sup> Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 159.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 134.

<sup>35</sup> Saint Gregory had a radically different interpretation of what smelling of myrrh and frankincense meant theologically. I discuss this briefly in this paper’s conclusion.



frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices.” In this verse frankincense and myrrh are found in the lovers’ Garden of Eden, where plump pomegranates and fragrant plants flourish. In this passage, the mention of these perfumes is more passing, and could or could not hint to the presence of Sheba.

Taken together, these three mentions of frankincense in Song of Songs, strongly indicate that the book could be a story of Sheba. And to put the three mentions in perspective, note that in the entire King James Bible, there are only seventeen mentions of Frankincense, ten of which are found in Leviticus and other books in the context of prayer and sacrifice instructions. As such, the mention of frankincense outside this priestly context is rare and thus merits scrutiny.

The third phrase to explore (following “I am black” and those phrases involving frankincense), is mention of a necklace, in verse 1: 10. “Thy cheeks are comely with rows of *jewels*, thy neck with chains of *gold*.” Notably, this chain of gold, however, is not necessarily a gold necklace. Depending on the

translation, the word *jewels* is often substituted for gold. For example, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible reads, “Your cheeks are comely with ornaments, your neck with string of jewels.” A question we can ask about this jewelry is, did the Queen of Sheba have gold necklaces and necklaces of jewels? If she did, this description could possibly

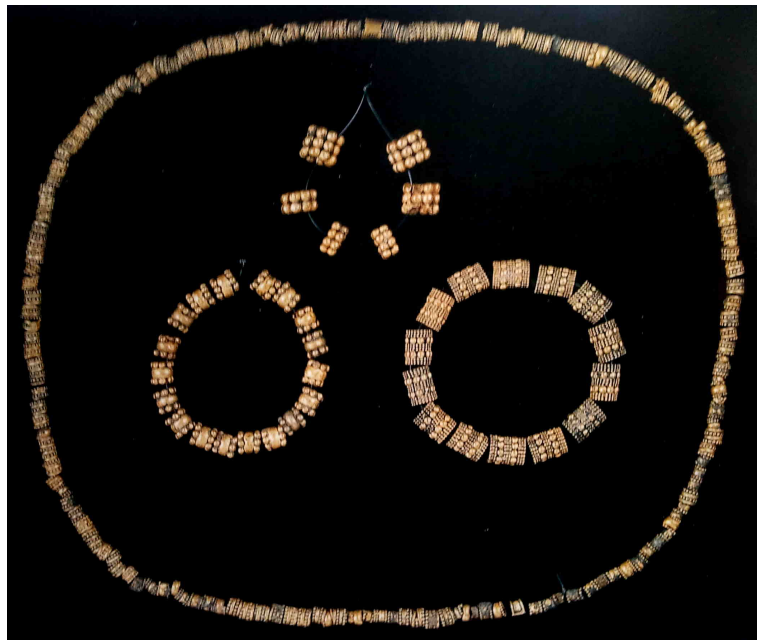


Figure 2 Undated gold necklaces

From: British Museum, p. 120.

describe her. To answer this question, I looked to the catalogue of a 2002 British Museum exhibit

of “Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen”. Contained therein I found photographs of both undated gold necklaces (see figured 2) and 7<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE necklaces of various materials including glass, bronze, shell, carnelian, and garnet.<sup>36</sup> Based on this evidence, I cannot conclude that such necklaces existed in 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE Saba; however, I also cannot discount it. Additionally, I know that archaeologists in the ancient city of Marib, where Sheba most likely reigned, are yet to dig deep enough in the site, so any lack of evidence today could be easily disproved tomorrow. (Additional excavation necessarily requires political stability—instability in the past ended research expeditions in both the 1950’s and 2000’s over security concerns).<sup>37</sup>

In the preceding pages, I have asked three questions based on specific facts given in Song of Songs. Through my analysis, I have maintained the possibility that the book is about the Queen of Sheba. Next, I will once again take a broader view, but rather than returning to the topic of themes, I will instead ask a question of the writer. Would Solomon have written such an ambiguous account of his love of Sheba? Or would he have addressed the topic directly, proclaiming whom he loved?

This question of direct versus oblique has a simple answer. Solomon would have been ambiguous. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the opening lines of Ecclesiastes: “(1) The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (2) Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher...” In these lines, and in the entire book, Solomon conceals his identity. He calls himself a teacher and a preacher; he describes his wealth and experience; and he describes his wisdom. Yet he refuses to name himself. On this basis, we can imagine that any proclamation of

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<sup>36</sup> British Museum, *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, ed. St John Simpson (London: British Museum Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> *Queen of Sheba*.

love for Sheba would be concealed and obscure. And perhaps he would treat the love like another riddle. On this basis, we can still say Song of Songs may be a tribute to Sheba.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout this paper I have ignored the fact that the authorship of Song of Songs (and Ecclesiastes), while nominally attributed to Solomon, should perhaps be attributed to writers and editors of a later date. For example, in 4:13, “Thy plants *are* an orchard...” the Hebrew word for orchard is *pardes* (from which comes the English “paradise”). This is a Persian loanword that dates this passage to the third century BCE.<sup>39</sup> This question of dating and authorship complicates but does not refute my claim, however, namely that the book could be about the Queen of Sheba. As oral historians and editors reshaped and reworked the story, some truth remains. And as Nicholas Clapp notes, even if the Song of Songs was extensively reworked, fragments of it might have been composed in Solomon’s time.<sup>40</sup> The effects of time, while making it harder to divine the truth, do not make it impossible.

In the preceding pages, I have advanced an arguably modest claim—Sheba perhaps the subject of Song of Songs—and stretched its justification to many pages. To put this lengthy justification into perspective, and by way of conclusion, let us revisit an earlier quote: “the bride’s beauty is compared to the smoke of incense; not simply this, but incense mixed with myrrh and frankincense as if her beauty can only be described by the combination of these two fragrances.”<sup>41</sup> The fourth century theologian who penned these words did not mean for them to refer to an exotic and alluring Sheba. I previously twisted his words to do that for me (p. 15). Rather, Saint Gregory argues that this sweet combination of perfumes is virtue. The myrrh represents grace, as it (and aloe) was used in the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial (John 19:

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<sup>38</sup> We can also question if Ecclesiastes is the writing of a forlorn and heart-broken Solomon.

<sup>39</sup> Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 177.

<sup>40</sup> Clapp, *Sheba*, 315.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 134.

39 – 40). And frankincense is consecrated for God’s honor. The combination of the two is virtue in life, where only one is incomplete. I note this anecdote to make my final point. If I strengthen my claim that “Song of Songs could be about Sheba” to, “it is probably about Sheba,” or “it is about Sheba,” then I must debunk over two millennia of scholarship. That is a large task for a more extensive paper.

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