

## **The Queen of Sheba Would rethinking the Quranic story support female public leadership in Islam?**

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### **Abstract**

The story of the queen of Sheba is a story about an impressive female queen, who has been praised in Quran and acknowledged as a distinguished leader. This celebrated queen is for sure a counter example that challenges all notorious fundamental Islamic arguments held against female public leadership. Unfortunately, the clear gender egalitarian message in the Quranic story didn't get much positive attention from the majority of classical and even modern exegetes. This paper is a linguistic analytic attempt to reevaluate the story from an Islamic feminist point of view. The paper asserts, contrary to mainstream Islam, a full as well as an unconditional acknowledgment of women public leadership.

**Key words:** the queen of Sheba, Islamic feminism, the Quran.

The Quranic story of the queen of Sheba consists of different scenes and doesn't appear to be that interested in providing too many details, beyond making a strong case for female public leadership. The story starts with the hoopoe bringing Solomon an exciting news about a people who - as he described - were into worshipping the sun instead of God, who knows everything including, "*what you conceal and what you declare*" <sup>1</sup>(27: 25). However, what seems to have got the attention of the hoopoe even more is their absolute obedience to their queen. Solomon orders the hoopoe to take a letter back to them and to wait for their response. As the hoopoe did, the scene moves to the queen of Sheba as she seems to have read the letter and as she seems to be consulting her court about the letter that she described as "*noble*" (27:29)<sup>2</sup> and as written, "*In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful*" (27:30)<sup>3</sup>. The story continues by this queen sending a gift to Solomon and eventually by her visiting his palace. After challenging her by moving her thrown miraculously to Solomon's palace, and by tricking her by way of building a crystal way that looked for her like water, she reached a point where she realized that this supernatural supreme power Solomon demonstrated could not be accessible without help from a mighty being. The story ends by her acknowledging of the mistake she did by worshipping other than God, and by her submitting to Allah, like Solomon.

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<sup>1</sup><http://quran.com/27>

<sup>2</sup><http://quran.com/27>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Now, what matters most is the detailed analysis of the story which can help us uncover the Quranic attitude of this female leading character. In the following I will be providing linguistic evidence supporting a full acknowledgement made in Quran of female public leadership. Also, I will uncover a clear misogynist approach to the story found in the majority of medieval and even in modern interpretations.

First, what deserves to be considered is the way the hoopoe described her when he came back to Solomon as he said, *"I have found a woman owning them, and she has been given of everything, and she has a great throne."* (27:23)<sup>4</sup>. The Arabic expression "tamlikuhm" that describes her status comes from the root "mlk" which means: to own something. Using this expression reflects with no doubt her powerful authority over her people; also describing her as a woman that has been given of everything suggests a unique high rank. However, what matters most is not only the impressive content that this expression might suggest by itself, but also the fact that this expression is the same expression the Quranic text used to describe Solomon himself! In the same chapter we read about Solomon describing himself this time as someone who, *"has been given from everything"* (27:16)<sup>5</sup>. The fact that the queen of Sheba was described in the Quran by the same way a mighty prophet like Solomon was described is a huge gender egalitarian message that -as we will see - will go for centuries with no appropriate recognition.

Not only does the Quranic text praise this female queen and draws an early attention to her as a peer of Solomon himself; in addition, more details about her extraordinarily wise leadership style will be provided. The Quranic text provides us by some carefully chosen details from the story. First, a reference is made to the strategy she adopted to deal with Solomon's letter as she turned to her court for an advice, *"advise me in my affair. I would not decide a matter until you witness [for] me."* (27:32)<sup>6</sup>. This scene portrays her as a wise democratic leader that insists on including her people in the process of making decisions. Even the way the court responded to her request suggests an unmistakable acknowledgment of a full trust and submission to her ability of making decisions, *"They said: "We are men of strength and of great military might, but the command is yours, so see what you will command."* (27:23)<sup>7</sup>. More importantly, even after she was reminded of the mighty military ability they have, she didn't resort to power, instead she resorted to a general wisdom concerning the way kings like Solomon do as they take over a town, *"She said, "Indeed kings - when they enter a city, they ruin it and render the honored of its people humbled. And thus do they do."* (27:34)<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, not only did she refuse to resort to power, but she came up with a plan to check Solomon's intentions and to examine whether he is a king? A faithful preacher? Or a messenger? In her investigation to uncover whether Solomon would be more interested in occupying her kingdom or in preaching a new religion-as his letter claims-she came up with the idea of sending him a gift. The fact that Solomon has initiated his letter by the name of God could have been the reason that made her think of him twice before taking any decision. Therefore, in a clever attempt to test Solomon's intentions and whether he would be acting more like a king interested in wealth, gold and tyranny, she decided to send him a gift, *"But indeed, I will send to them a gift and see with what [reply] the messengers will return."* (27:35)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Abla Hasan.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by Abla Hasan.

<sup>6</sup> <http://quran.com/27>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://quran.com/27>

The strategy adopted by the queen of Sheba as based on consulting her court, her resorting to traditional conventional wisdom, her careful contemplation before resorting to power, her comparison between all possible options, her smart attempt to explore and know more about the enemy before taking any decision, all of those facts reflect her smartness and her unique leadership style. In addition, ending the story by her admitting her wrong religious belief after losing the challenge with Solomon indicates that the queen of Sheba must have been a woman so hard to be tricked and so hard to think of herself as a woman who can be easily deceived. Therefore, Solomon's strategy worked, since it spoke to her point of strength, i.e., the ability of making wise decisions. More importantly, the story teaches us one big lesson when acknowledged one fact about the queen of Sheba, i.e., she was able to prove herself right against all her court.

However, contrary to this distinguished Quranic image of the queen of Sheba, interpretations of the story seemed to have failed to stay faithful to the content of the text. The fact that both Solomon and the queen of Sheba were described by using the same expression was commonly overlooked. What seems even more puzzling is the fact that same expressions seem to have been variably interpreted by exegetes when applied to Solomon and when applied to the queen of Sheba. This unjustifiable variation makes us suspect that these expressions were not allowed to speak for themselves, rather they were merely projecting local cultural presumptions about the so-called: God given gender roles.

As we will see in the following examples, while the Quranic text was praising the queen of Sheba and asserting her exceptional charisma as a leader, interpretations were conveying a different message that insisted on drawing gender-based doubts when it comes to female public leadership. Even in cases where the Quranic text used the same expression to describe Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, exegetes seemed to have adopted a double standard way in interpreting the same expression. For example, both verses (27:16) and (27:23) seem to be sharing the same expression, once as ascribed to Solomon, "*And Solomon inherited David. He said, "O people, we have been taught the language of birds, and we have been given from all things. Indeed, this is evident bounty."*" (27:16)<sup>10</sup>, and then as ascribed to the queen of Sheba, "*Indeed, I found [there] a woman ruling them, and she has been given of all things, and she has a great throne."*"(27:23)<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly enough, investigating the way the same expression was interpreted by different books of tafsir reveals an easily identifiable gender bias. According to the majority of available interpretations, what the queen of Sheba was given doesn't go beyond wealth, luxury, everyday needs, etc. However, when the same expression applies to Solomon, interpretations seemed to include his knowledge, high virtuous rank, wisdom and his charisma as well. All are mentioned in a clear attempt to make the queen of Sheba look like less of a leader than Solomon. For example, "*She has been given of everything*" was interpreted by Al-Qurtubi, "*as everything the kingdom needs*"<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, Al-Tabari interpreted the expression as referring to providing her, "*by everything needed in the worldly life, like: weapons and machines*"<sup>13</sup>. In tafsir Al-Hanbali, the interpretation of "being given of everything" was reduced when ascribed to the

<sup>10</sup><https://quran.com/27:16>

<sup>11</sup><https://quran.com/27:23>

<sup>12</sup>Al-Qurtubi. Al-Jami' li-Ahkam Al-Quran. Vol 16. Al-Risala. First edition. 2006. P139. The quote is translated by Abula Hasan.

<sup>13</sup>Al-Tabari. Jami' Al-Bayan. Vol 18. Dar Al-Hajr. 2001. P 39. The quote is translated by Abula Hasan.

queen of Sheba to “*her fitting worldly requirements*”<sup>14</sup>, but “being given of everything” was interpreted when ascribed to Solomon as “*everything kings and prophets are given concerning worldly as well as hereafter affairs*”<sup>15</sup>. In short, interpretations seem to have understood by the expression as applied to the queen of Sheba her ownership of what a king might need to rule a kingdom. The surprising turn however is when the same expression is used in the context of describing Solomon; this time the same expression will be referring- in what looks like a complete consensus- to Solomon’s ownership of all leadership qualities required for any successful leader. This incoherence of interpretation does appear even in the same interpretations sometimes. For example, in tafsir Al-Tabtabaei, he interprets “*to be given of everything*” when ascribed to Solomon as, “*all blessing anyone can get like prophethood, knowledge, authority, kingdom and all material as well as moral blessings*”<sup>16</sup>. The same expression as ascribed to the queen of Sheba means for him, “*Everything a great kingdom requires like: power, authority, wide extension, treasures, fighters, and obedient people. And he made a particular reference to her great throne*”<sup>17</sup>.

Not only all kinds of discrepancies can be discovered as we move on with our analytic study of the available interpretations of the story, a threatened misogynist unmistakable tendency starts to be more easily observable as all attempts are made to deny any feminine leadership rule the story might be asserting. Unfortunately, the empowering message seemed to have challenged the patriarchal manipulation of power; therefore, all kinds of underestimating the role the queen of Sheba played were systematically adopted and used in mainstream interpretations. In his comment on the verse Al-Alusi says that the verse doesn’t indicate the permissibility of assigning public authority to a woman because, “*those people were nonbelievers*”<sup>18</sup>.

More clearly speaking, the common overwhelming objection to any feminist interpretation of the story comes mainly from what I refer to as “the unauthenticated contrasting of Quran by Sunnah fallacy”. In our particular case, the hadith usually referred to is, “no people will prosper as long as they assign their leadership to a woman”<sup>19</sup>. However, “the unauthenticated contrasting of Quran by Sunnah fallacy” is a puzzling case that goes beyond the interest of this paper, since Sunah is supposed to explain Quran not to contradict it as believed by almost all Islamic schools. What matters most for my discussion is the way this particular hadith was used to deactivate the gender egalitarian message of the story. In some interpretations, the aggressive language sometimes intensifies, as we see in the following explanation to her hesitation of resorting to power, “*it was because thy assign their leadership to an animal, with a shaking bosoms*”<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the so many unauthenticated details inserted in the story in many books of tafsir helped nothing but distracting the reader from the pioneer applicability of the story. Unfortunately, instead of focusing on the paradigm shift the story of the queen of Sheba is initiating, unauthenticated distractive details, such as her marriage to Solomon,

<sup>14</sup>Al-Hanbali. Fatih Al-Rahman. First edition. Vol 5. Al-Nawadir. 2009. P127. The quote is translated by Abla Hasan.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p 119.

<sup>16</sup>Al-Tabtabaei. Al-Mizan. First edition. Vol 15. Al-A’lami. Beirut. 1997. P 352. The quote is translated by Abla Hasan.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. P 356.

<sup>18</sup>Al-Alusi. Ruh Al-Ma’ani. First Edition. Vol 10. Dar Al-Kutub Al-A’lmiah. Beirut. 2010. P 185. The quote is translated by Abla Hasan.

<sup>19</sup> The hadith “No people will prosper if ruled by a woman”. <http://fatwa.islamweb.net/>  
<http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=Fatwald&Id=32552>

<sup>20</sup>Al-Mawardi. Al-Nukt wa Al-A’uun. Vol 4. Dar Al-Kutub Al-A’lmiah. Beirut. 2010. P 208. The quote is translated by Abla Hasan.

her demon ancestry, and even her hairy legs have occupied the way the story was thought of. What seemed to have completely gone missing was the applicability of the story and the possibility of rethinking the traditional presupposed God given roles. In her explanation to this unjustifiable juristic marginalization of the story of the Queen of Sheba, Stowasser suggested that this *"may have to do with the fact that her qur'anic story deals with events prior to her acceptance of Islam"*<sup>21</sup>. Another way of understanding the jurist's indifference was accurately explained by Kecia Ali, who rightly elaborates on this point by saying, *"Today, when we speak of the ethical with regard to gender in Islamic law, we often mean egalitarianism. It is vital to recall that these jurists did not idealize an egalitarian order. Instead, they believed that some people were, though not inferior as believers, properly subordinate to others in the life of this world."*<sup>22</sup> In her critical approach to the way imams adopted when it comes to women rights, Fatima Mernissi refers to a bias selectivity in approaching even the divine text as she says, *"the imams, who devote their life to explaining the divine will, could have developed an egalitarian Islam based on the verse that Umm Salama obtained from Heaven (33:35), which established the principle of equality between the sexes. But instead of citing that verse, they brandished verse 34 of the sura on women"*<sup>23</sup>. In addition, another explanation of the deactivation of the logical as well as the legal outcomes of reflecting on a story like the story of the queen of Sheba might be found in recalling the historical dominance of the totalitarian approach to the Quran and the historical political- religious alliance that, as Ziba Mir Hosseini rightly observes, ended by a distinction between, *"faith (and its values and principles) and organized religion (institutions, laws, and practices)"*<sup>24</sup>. This division paved the way only for some views to find their way to the surface. This alliance albeit unable to change the text itself was able to highlight only what seemed more appropriate and more politically fitting. In times of conflict, only voices of the elite were heard, including the religious elite, leaving behind the religious opposition either unheard, persecuted or sometimes totally excluded. The unmistakable humanitarian message in the Quran in favor of freedom, gender equality and human dignity had sometimes to be suppressed as the Arabic empire was expanding in all directions and as slaves and concubines were pouring in from all over the world. Although one should acknowledge that Muslims would have been centuries ahead of any expected human development if they had ended slavery, this doesn't change the fact that the potentiality for such a liberal reading of the text was already embodied in the text itself and the step needed to end slavery was only one logical step. In his analysis of the reasons that can explain the lack of originality in Islamic later schools of jurisprudence and the repetition of the already provided opinions of preceding scholars, Adnan Ibrahim refers to what he calls the punishment of Ijtihad that everyone was trying to avoid.<sup>25</sup> However, in my analysis of the source of the problem, I believe we should also keep in mind that the political pressure on thinking about religion took on a very complicated nature that ended by altering and radically transforming the motivations and goals of religious training and education. Late theological schools didn't encourage critical thinking the way they encouraged ways of reasserting and glorifying the already existing arguments. This observation can be better understood if we take into consideration the evaluative system and the standards used

<sup>21</sup>Stowasser. Barbara. Women in the Quran: traditions and interpretation. Oxford University, 1994, p 65.

<sup>22</sup>Ali. Kecia. Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam. On ed. Harvard University Press, October 2010. P190.

<sup>23</sup>Mernissi. Fatima. The veil and the male elite. Basic books. 1991. P 154.

<sup>24</sup>MirHosseini. Ziba. Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism. Critical Inquiry. The University of Chicago. 2006, p632.

<sup>25</sup>To Judge or to Understand. By Dr. Adnan Ibrahim. 13/11/2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR73kAQewYU>

to accept or reject scholarly works. Except for Arabic golden ages, academic standards stressed more supporting theologically established arguments rather than innovation, which was always suspected in terms of fitting the overall theological training plan. This becomes more notable as we move with the Arabic history towards the collapse of the Ottoman Empire which officially launched the modern Arabic dark ages.<sup>26</sup> Jamal Al-Bana, a reformist who personally suffered from the Al-Azrah institutional tyranny which ended by banning his views and some of his books refers to *“One thousand years of imitation ended by rust in the Islamic mind”*<sup>27</sup>.

To sum up, the story of the queen of Sheba is a Quranic challenging counterexample to all assumed traditional understanding of women public leadership, still adopted by the majority of schools of Islamic jurisprudence<sup>28</sup>. The linguistic as well as the contextual analysis of the Quranic text is for sure our most powerful tool to challenge the objection to the feminist side of the story based on claiming that the queen of Sheba was a pagan queen. As I argued in this paper, the easily distinguishable references in the Quranic text indicated an acknowledgement of the extraordinary leadership skills the queen of Sheba was able to prove. More importantly, the text never paused once to question her authority- which should have been the ideal place to do so- if the Quranic text had anything to say against female public leadership.

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<sup>27</sup>Al-Bana. Jamal. Muslim Woman between the Liberation of the Quran and the Restriction of Clerks. Cairo: Dar Al-Fiker Al-Islami, 1998, P 176.

<sup>28</sup><https://islamqa.info/en/71338>

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