CHAPTER 21

A Queen of Many Colours

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1 Introduction

The books of Kings and Chronicles feature an ancient Hebrew tale about the meeting of two heads of state, the queen of Sheba and the Israelite king Solomon. This tale has, through the ages, captured the imagination of many, including the authors of the New Testament books Matthew and Luke. Their reference to the episode in the Hebrew Bible is, however, amazingly scanty and confusing: the queen is referred to as ‘queen of the South’, and apart from that she is only lauded for coming to hear Solomon’s wisdom, which is why she is assigned the future task of judging ‘this generation’. Both this role and the designation ‘queen of the South’ are rather difficult to reconcile with who and what she is and does in the primary source, and that elicits questions regarding the reason for this interpretation or the background thereof.

In view of this I shall first focus on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament passages concerned. Next, a necessarily limited excursion will be taken into postbiblical literary creations based on the narrative, with a view to tracing links or common ground that might benefit or be instrumental in finding answers to the questions mentioned above. Such an excursion is all the more interesting because it documents, among other things, that the queen of Sheba is one of the few women to feature in the sacred texts and the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Tentative answers to the initial questions structure the last paragraph.

2 The Hebrew Tale

The story of the royal meeting is recorded in both 1 Kings 10:1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1–12. As there are only minor differences between these versions, I shall confine myself here to 1 Kings 10:1–13. The story relates that the queen of Sheba travels from her country to king Solomon at his court in Jerusalem, in order to test his accomplishments and especially his wisdom. She hears and sees with her own eyes much more than she expected and blesses Solomon’s God who loved Israel so much that he gave them Solomon as their king. After exchanging luxurious presents with the king, the queen returns to her own land.
The episode is, according to many, no doubt a legend but nonetheless does have an important place and function in the machinery of the entire Solomon narrative, specifically in 1 Kings 3–11 of which women, wisdom and folly are salient features.\(^1\) This episode of the Solomonic golden age, begun in 1 Kings 3 when Solomon chooses wisdom, is concluded in the final frame in 1 Kings 10 with the visit of a queen who has come to test his wisdom.

Despite its legendary character, the story in 1 Kings 10, like other stories, provides signals and clues that highlight historical moments and elements. The text obviously locates the queen in the kingdom called Sheba. This kingdom was probably situated in the very south of the Arabian Peninsula in the area that is today Yemen, but archaeologists and historians are still investigating the origins of both the queen and her country.\(^2\) Interestingly, a number of texts in the Hebrew Bible do refer to Sheba as a kingdom and the centre of trade of all kinds of spices, precious stones, frankincense and gold (cf. Ps 72:15; Isa 60:6; Jer 6:20; Ezek 27:22–23). The fact that the story in 1 Kings is interrupted and framed by information regarding Solomon’s international trade (9:26–28; 10:11–12; 14–29) would fit into this wider context and so would, obviously, a female-led trade delegation. However, precisely because the story makes (more) sense when the vv. 11 and 12 are left out, this addition can also be seen as a means to curtail the queen’s importance while emphasizing Solomon’s international prestige.\(^3\)

In this context, a subject of interest was and is of course whether or not the queen herself was a historical figure. Nabia Abbott, who investigated the existence of pre-Islamic queens, emphasizes the problem of the extremely limited amount of sources, but concludes that the queen of Sheba can at

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\(^1\) Much in this paragraph is inspired by: Claudia V. Camp, ‘1 and 2 Kings,’ in The Women’s Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 101–102. I should like to point out that the term ‘legend’ rather readily pops up when (interesting) women enter the stage!

\(^2\) E.g. Robert G. Hoyland, Arabia and Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2011). Julius Wellhausen and others have noted that the Greek ἀνοτός in Mt 13:42 might be read as a direct translation of ימי so that the text could very well be the earliest source for locating the queen of Sheba in Yemen. Cf. Ulrich Luz, Matthew 8–20: A Commentary. Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible, transl. J.E. Crouch, ed. by H. Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 229 n. 64, and Bernard Leeman, Queen of Sheba and Biblical Scholarship (Westbrook: Queensland Academic Press, 2005), 144.