

The Queen of Sheba

1 Kings 10: 1-10+13

We have this story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba at the court of King Solomon. Solomon is his father, King David's, successor to the throne in Jerusalem. His mother was Bathsheba. David had had Bathsheba's first husband Uriah killed in battle in order to hide an affair he had with Bathsheba, or, actually, to be honest, to hide the fact that he had abused Bathsheba and betrayed Uriah, one of the most faithful leaders in his army. As a widow Bathsheba was free, and David made her his wife.

So, Solomon is not King David's first son, but the first son King David had with Bathsheba. Bathsheba becomes David's favourite wife, and Solomon becomes the favourite among David's sons.

King Solomon initiated the building of the first temple in Jerusalem. In the tradition of the Bible he is regarded as the image of a wise and just king.

There is no evidence of Solomon in history. No word can be found about him outside the Bible. Historians cannot prove his existence.

So, is the story a mere tale?

Can one invent such an outstanding figure without a real role model? I guess so. We will never really know.

What counts is that the figure of Solomon is important and of great interest to the biblical narrator and it is the same with the Queen of Sheba.

There is an interest in royals... today and in Bible times. Kings and queens draw people's attention. Their splendour, their power, their beauty too, are things people like to see.

King Solomon is the brightest royal in the Bible. He had established the temple. He'd possessed a glorious palace. He avoided wars and built on the politics of peace. His name lives on in words like Shalom or Salam.

When young Solomon began his reign, he'd asked God for a listening heart so he could be a blessing to his people.

God, so we read earlier in the book of Kings, not only granted him wisdom but also wealth. Solomon seems to have it all: personal abilities, enormous wealth, international prestige and power. No doubt, says the narrator, that Solomon was chosen by God.

In today's story another fascinating royal enters the stage. The Queen of Sheba. A great queen visits and unusually gifted king!

As is Solomon, the Queen of Sheba is a figure with a fairy-tale quality. Sheba was a kingdom in South Arabia, where Yemen is today. There are also hints which could locate the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopia. Nothing is sure here, not even the times of the two kingdoms coincide. Sheba as a nation existed probably much later than the kingdom of King Solomon.

But again, the assumption that today's story is a legend without historical evidence is no problem. What counts is that the tale exists. What is of interest is the message it transports.

We have this foreign queen with fabulous wealth and outstanding beauty visiting a similarly rich king and asking him "hard questions". There is evidence of a queen, or queens ruling in the North of Africa and Solomon was engaged in international trade. Sheba was a centre of trade – with spices and other precious goods.

Maybe the core of the tale is that there was a rich and wealthy trade delegation visiting Solomon's court, led by a woman – a trades woman – queen or not.

Apparently, the Queen of Sheba had heard of King Solomon. He was famous beyond the borders of his kingdom.

This foreign queen wants to know if this is really true. She comes to get to know Solomon, to test Solomon with a form of speech that has its tradition in the wisdom literature of the Bible. She wants to see him and witness his reign with her own eyes.

Who is this woman who travels an enormous journey to test a foreign king? How self-confident, smart and curious must she have been?

Was the meeting of king and queen of political interest? Were there trade arrangements between their countries? Political and strategic interests and maybe the need or the desire of cooperation?

My take on this is the following: We have a state visit. The Queen of Sheba comes with loads of gifts and goods to Solomon's court in Jerusalem.

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. ²Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. ³Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. ⁴When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, ⁵the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. (v1-5)

The queen is impressed with both, the richness and the wisdom of Solomon.

What the story certainly wants to show is, how famous Solomon was, how glorious his reign, how outstanding his personality. And the visit and encounter with this wise, rich and beautiful queen, - even the length and distance of her tremendous journey – emphasise the might and glory of the fascinating king!

The narrator lets her say:

“The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. ⁷But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. ⁸How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! ⁹Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.” (v6-9)

A great king is praised by an even greater or equally great queen!

Outside the Bible love stories of the two are told. Art and music have been inspired by those two awesome royals. Their image, their royalty, the rich and fantastic world in which the two must have lived, were the stuff of the narrators' and the people's dreams...

What, however, does the story tell us? Why did biblical editors decide to have it in the book of Kings? In our Bibles? What for?

I think, I can discover three significant themes which we can learn from.

The first is about wisdom and justice, the second about diversity and respect, and the third about a heart ready to listen.

Let us look at wisdom and justice first.

Solomon's exemplary wisdom and righteousness cannot be overlooked. Here, wisdom does not mean sheer intelligence. Wisdom means an obedient heart that is ready to listen, that is a heart that takes God's commandments seriously, that doesn't think too much of itself, but knows its own capabilities as well as its own limits. This is what makes Solomon great. Only in this way does he become a just judge who sees the welfare of the people and not his own enrichment. To this day, Solomon is the image of a good ruler. How much better would the world look if Washington or London were led by rulers like Solomon! And how much more peaceful would the world be if we ourselves were less hasty in judging others, if we seriously sought peace and justice around us as our foremost interest.

Something to seriously meditate on...

Let's take a look at the next point. Diversity and respect.

There is this interplay of diversity and respect in the encounter between the two royal figures. The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are truly exotic flowers in God's garden. But instead of competing against each other, instead of making the others bad in order to appear in a better light and shine more, the two royal figures can admire and appreciate each other without reservation. Both shower each other with compliments and gifts. Without any reservations they can recognize each other's greatness. They both are figures of the splendor and wisdom. Both see each other's tradition not as a questioning of their own or an attack on their own, but as an enrichment and a blessing. The two royal figures are the embodiment of the exotic in the ancient world. The world becomes more colorful, diverse, more beautiful and richer through their meeting and cooperation. Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba is an early example of successful globalization. Their attitude, their mutual respect are models for how people can live together.

The last of my three points is: A heart ready to listen.

King Solomon has a heart that is ready to hear. Solomon is said to have a listening heart, and the Queen of Sheba also seems to have it. Ready to listen means being able to accept other people without reservation. It means to be able to empathize with each other, to see what is

important to the other person. To be able to hear or listen in this sense is a form of loving one's neighbor.

People understand and accept who the other person is and what he or she needs.

It doesn't happen often that someone listens to you so intensely – but when it happens, it is wonderful. Solomon was able to listen in such a way that those who spoke to him felt this was a gift and went home happy. I wish and hope that we too can experience the privilege of meeting people who can listen like this. And my prayer for myself is to ask God for such a listening heart as Solomon had it. What a blessing it would be if we all had a listening heart...

Admittedly, the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon has fantastic features. It's like a fairy tale but the encounter is still a good example. From the royals and their behavior, like in a mirror, we can see how our society, how the coexistence of peoples, could function all together: We could treat others with respect and be wise in our judgments about others. We could look forward to the diversity we experience and see the differences in others as an enrichment. We can ask for an open ear so that we can really see and understand other people. We can ask for encounters that make both sides happy. That make all people happy. So, let's be wise and just, respectful and open minded, and over all be prepared to listen. Let's be queens and kings in the land of our everyday lives.
Amen.