Prophecy, Power and Propriety: The Encounter of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

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The encounter of Solomon with the Queen of Sheba stands out as one of the more noteworthy stories related in the Qur'an. Among the distinguishing characteristics of the majority of Qur'anic pericopes of pre-Islamic prophetic figures are the apparent disjointedness of the references, the absence of sustained narrative, and allusions to characters and events that do not appear in the Qur'anic text itself. The story of the Queen of Sheba stands out among all these pre-Islamic tales in these regards; it is elliptical and terse to the point that often one is not clear which of the principal characters in the story – God, Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, or some fourth party – is speaking. The Qur'anic references are fully comprehensible only if one is familiar with the narrative from some other source, which strongly suggests that it is intended for an audience that already knew the story of the encounter between Solomon and the Queen.

The story of Bilqīs, as the queen is called, captured the imaginations of early Muslim writers who embellished the skeletal Qur'anic account with a body of details, many of which are found in earlier Jewish writings. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed by early Muslim authors on certain aspects of the encounter, and the explanations provided by them for the events that transpired between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, provide important insights into the concerns and values of some of the better-known Muslim scholars from the period before the destruction of the Baghdad caliphate. Through a study of the Qur'anic account as it has been explained and embellished by key historians and exegetes, I will attempt to show how early Muslim writers saw in this epic meeting themes and underlying messages regarding religious and temporal authority which go beyond the obvious details of a fairy tale laced with sexual innuendo, and that their discussion of these themes provides a degree of understanding of the very nature of gender and authority in Islamic society. Among other things, I will try to show that the obvious message regarding the impropriety of woman rulers is a secondary point to the narrative, the primary concern being the ratification of Solomon's complex status as prophet and king.

The Qur'anic Account

The Qur'anic treatment of the narrative, found in Q. 27:15–44, is much shorter than the versions popularised in later Islamic works, and also is missing some of the critical

elements. The story is referred to in the Book of Esther, the Bible (1 Kings V, 9–14), and elaborated on in the Talmud and Targum.[1] As Jacob Lassner has demonstrated in his extensive documentation of the account in Jewish and Muslim works, it is most probably from the Haggadic version of the Talmud that the story of the Queen of Sheba has found its way into Islamic literature, where it occupies a prominent position in the *Isrāʾīliyyāt* (stories concerning Biblical figures and events).[2]

Among Muslim commentators and embellishers of the story, most of the details are provided by Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. *ca* 113/732) on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās. Later writers – most notably al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), whose *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* has served as an important source for this narrative – refer to Wahb ibn Munabbih, Muḥammad ibn al-Kaʿb, Qaṭāda, al-Jubbāʾī and Ibn ʿAbbās as their primary sources.

The Qur'anic narrative itself holds linguistic, rhetorical and structural interest, though it has not received the level of attention on these grounds given to other stories in the Qur'an, most notably that of Joseph, with which it holds some parallels. Certain ayas in the Qur'anic pericope are worth noting: the identity of the speaker is unclear in Q. 27:26, *God, there is no god but Him, Lord of the great throne* (*Allāhu lā ilāha illā huwa rabbu'l-ʿarshi'l-ʿaẓīm*); the same is true for Q. 27:40, *... he said: This is by the grace of my Lord!* (*... qāla hādhā min faḍli rabbī*); and Q. 27:42, *... and knowledge was bestowed on us in advance of this* [or *before her*], *and we have submitted ourselves* (*... wa-ūtīnā'l-ʿilma min qablihā wa-kunnā muslimīn*). The correct reading of Q. 27:43, *and she was prevented by what she worshipped instead of God, for she came from a disbelieving people* (*wa-ṣaddahā mā kānat taʿbudu min dūni'llāhi innahā kānat min qawmin kāfirīn*) remains unclear. The term *muslimīn* ('ones who have submitted') is used ambiguously in Q. 27:31, 38 and 42,[3] such that it is unclear whether it refers to individuals who have surrendered in a political or physical sense or else simply to Muslims. Also, the use of the phrase *ʿarsh ʿaẓīm* ('magnificent throne') with reference to the queen in Q. 27:23, *I found there a woman ruling over them and provided with every requisite; and she has a magnificent throne* (*innī wajadtu imraʾatan tamlikuhum wa-ūtiyat min kulli shayʾin wa-lahā ʿarshun ʿaẓīm*) begs a comparison with the divine throne, which is referred to with the same words in Q. 27:26. A similar comparison is obvious between Solomon and the Queen, who are both *provided with every requisite* (*wa-ūtīnā min kulli shayʾ* in Q. 27:16, and *wa-ūtiyat min kulli shayʾ* in Q. 27:23).

A major purpose of the Qur'anic narrative appears to be to emphasise the immense stature of Solomon as a prophet-king. This is clear from the two opening ayas, Q. 27:15–16, which state clearly that God had blessed Solomon with magical power in the form of comprehension of the speech of the birds. He is also identified here as the sole heir of David who, as is clearly stated elsewhere in the Qur'an, was a representative (*khalīfa*) of God on Earth.[5] The incident in the Valley of Ants

(Q. 27:18–19) further underscores Solomon's magical and temporal power. On both these occasions, and when the queen's throne is magically brought before him in Q. 27:40, Solomon is quick to thank God for all the powers and gifts bestowed upon him. Although it is not readily apparent from these ayas, this is in sharp contrast to the people of Sheba who are mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an as having been ungrateful for the blessings which God had showered upon them (Q. 34:15–21). Their ingratitude is echoed in ayas 23–5 of Sura 27 although, significantly, the Queen of Sheba is not expressly singled out as ungrateful.

The Encounter in Early Islamic Scholarship

As noted above, the Qur'anic version of the story has been elaborated on by a variety of later writers. For my discussion, I will be focusing on the works of Wahb ibn Munabbih, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922) and al-Thaᶜlabī, supplemented by three later, influential writers: Abū ᶜAlī al-Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī (d. *ca* 548/1154), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1207) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372). Admittedly, this is an eclectic panel of authorities, but my purpose in drawing on them is to provide a broad (if partial) overview of classical Islamic thinking rather than a focused analysis of specific authors or even to trace the development of the story of the Queen of Sheba in Islamic society.

For purposes of clarity, I will first engage in a bit of story-telling, reconstructing a composite version of the narrative and providing important variants and a minimum of analysis before turning to the central implications of the encounter as it is presented in the Qur'an and understood by early Islamic scholars.[6]

The Queen of Sheba is commonly referred to as Bilqīs, although some versions say that this is a title, and that her real name was Balᶜama bint Sharāḥīl ibn Dhī Jadan ibn al-Bashrakh ibn al-Ḥirth ibn Qays ibn Ṣanᶜā ibn Sabāᵓ ibn Yashjab ibn Yaᵓrab ibn Qaḥṭān.[7] Her father was the Ḥimyarī king of all Yemen and had no equals in neighbouring kingdoms with whom he could intermarry. As a result, he took a jinn woman named Baltaqa as a wife, their sole offspring being Bilqīs who, as a result of her non-human parentage, was purported to have the hoofed and hirsute legs of an ass.[8] When Bilqīs' father was on his deathbed, he called all his people to vow allegiance to her. Some of them did so while others refused to be ruled by a woman and rebelled. However, their chosen king turned out to be a tyrant, so much so that he insisted on exploiting his subjects sexually. They wanted to depose him but lacked the power. When Bilqīs heard of his tyranny, she made peaceful overtures toward him, and indicated that she wished to have a child and would therefore like to marry him, a proposal he accepted readily. After the wedding banquet (but before the marriage was consummated) Bilqīs cut off the tyrant's head while he lay in a drunken stupor and stole back to her own palace. When the people awoke in the morning and saw his head

mounted on the palace gate, they universally swore allegiance to Bilqīs, beginning her reign, which preceded that of Solomon by seven years.[9]

Bilqīs ruled all of Yemen from Mā'rab, three days march from Sanaa. All the sources stress her personal virtue and wisdom and the proof they give as evidence of these qualities provides insight into notions of female moral uprightness in medieval Islamic society. She had no interest in men, was her own guardian, and was heedful of right and wrong. She was a virgin when she met Solomon, and slept in a palace that she herself locked every night, keeping the keys under her pillow.[10] She had a large retinue of male courtiers with whom she conversed from behind a veil, and surrounded herself with 360 virgin daughters of Ḥimyarī nobles. She kept these girls secluded until they reached puberty, then she told each about a specific man, and when the woman's colour changed, Bilqīs knew that she desired him. She would then send the woman back to her family and arrange her marriage and dowry.[11] Bilqīs thus appears to be not only the guardian of her own chastity but also that of the Ḥimyarī nobility.

She was equally competent as a ruler, and Yemen prospered under her reign. According to al-Ṭabarī (who mentions this on the authority of Wahb ibn Munabbih), she was an intelligent and cultured woman who did not possess anything except what was inherited from her ancestors.[12] Most sources also do not lay full guilt for her disbelief in God on her shoulders, but claim that she was following the religion of her progenitors:[13] when she first came to power she asked her advisors what her ancestors had worshipped, and they said 'the god of the heavens'. Bilqīs then asked where this god was, and was told that he was in the heavens while his knowledge (*ʿilm*) was on the earth. She responded that it was impossible for her to worship him if she couldn't see him, but that she knew of nothing in the sky more powerful than the sun (*al-shams*), so she began to worship it.[14] Hence she only came to worship the sun instead of God through a misunderstanding of what her ancestors did and of the true nature of a transcendent, celestial god.

Further evidence of the prosperity of Yemen under her rule is given by Solomon's hoopoe, named Yaʿfūr (ʿAnbar in some versions). While he was flying around in search of water for Solomon and his armies, he saw Bilqīs' garden and alighted in it, marvelling at its greenery. There he encountered the hoopoe of Yemen, named ʿAfīr. When Yaʿfūr bragged about his master's sovereignty over the jinn, humans, demons (*shayāṭīn*), animals and winds, ʿAfīr stated that Yemen was ruled by a queen named Bilqīs, whose realm was no less than that of Solomon.[15] 'Our queen is a woman the like of whom no man has seen in terms of beauty and beneficence, wisdom and governance, number of soldiers, and the good that she bestows upon her land. Her mother was a jinn but, despite this, she is a descendent of Ḥimyar.'[16] The Yemeni hoopoe then invited Solomon's bird to take a flying tour of Yemen, which he

completed in time to return to Solomon before the mid-afternoon prayer and reported what he had seen to his master who more or less immediately became intent on subjugating the Ḥimyarī kingdom.[17]

Given the prosperity of Yemen and the benevolence of its ruler, the question arises as to why Solomon was so intent on its subjugation. The commonest explanation provided by the sources is that the Ḥimyarī chieftains were extremely arrogant (and sun-worshippers to boot), so that God sent Solomon against them in order to show His power (*qudra*).[18] However, according to al-Ṭabarī, Solomon thought he was the only king in the world, and was also ever eager to engage in *jihād*. When the hoopoe told him of what he had seen, Solomon promised a severe punishment if the bird was lying, since Solomon could not believe that there could be a sovereign comparable to himself anywhere in the world.[19]

Solomon then commanded the hoopoe to take a letter from him to Bilqīs and to return with news of the Ḥimyarīs' reaction. When the hoopoe reached Mā'rab, he found Bilqīs sleeping in her locked chamber and placed the letter beside her head, then withdrew and waited.[20] When Bilqīs opened the letter and read it, she quickly gathered her nobles to share the contents with them: 'In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. From Solomon, son of David, to Bilqīs, daughter of Dhī Suruḥ ['Dhī Sharḥ' elsewhere]: Be ye [plural] not arrogant against me, and come to me in submission!'[21]

This letter has been a source of puzzlement for many commentators, specifically as to why Bilqīs referred to it as 'noble' (*karīm*), and to whom, precisely, the Ḥimyarīs were commanded to submit. Several explanations are put forward for her use of the word *karīm*: she was referring either to the nobility of its sender (because who, other than a great king, would have a bird as an emissary), its contents, to the eloquence of its writing, or the fact that it was sealed, since there is a *ḥadīth* on the authority of Ibn ᶜAbbās that claims the Prophet said: 'The nobility of a letter is in its seal.'[22] Another possibility is that she was referring to the *basmalah*, since this was purportedly the first time that formula was used.[23] As alluded to earlier, the use of the term *muslimīn* has caused its own set of problems, since the object to which one must submit remains unclear. Most sources take this to be submission to God – in other words, becoming Muslim. Others argue that the implication is political submission to Solomon.[24]

Bilqīs then sought the advice of her nobles and they, being arrogant and bellicose, expressed a readiness to fight Solomon. But Bilqīs was wiser than them, and knew that the Ḥimyarīs would suffer a defeat that would result in the destruction of Yemen and the humiliation of its nobility through capture and enslavement: 'A letter has come to me, the like of which has not come from any king before. If this man is a true prophet (*nabī mursal*) then we have no avail [against him].'[25] The latter half of Q. 27:34, *thus do they behave* (*wa-kadhālika yafᶜalūn*) is commonly understood to be

God's speech, confirming Bilqīs' opinion regarding the behaviour of kings.[26] This could either be a simple affirmation, with no condemnation intended, or a sentence suggesting that Solomon is primarily a prophet and not a king, and would not behave in this way.

In fact, according to the sources, Bilqīs suspected that the sender of the letter was a true prophet and decided to make him undergo a series of tests of his wisdom, prophetic office and temporal power. To that end, she sent emissaries with gifts, commanding them to observe his behaviour: if Solomon were to accept their presents it would prove he was a king concerned only with worldly wealth and power, since true prophets have no interest in these matters and would be satisfied with nothing but an acceptance of their faith.[27] They were also to notice if he received them with haughty arrogance or gracious hospitality, the latter being a mark of true prophethood.

At this point the hoopoe hurried back to Solomon to inform him of what had transpired, whereupon Solomon commanded his demons (the jinn in some versions) to manufacture bricks of gold and silver and line the streets with them as well as use them to build an arena in which Solomon gathered his human and non-human hosts. When Bilqīs' emissaries arrived, they were overwhelmed by the wealth of Solomon's kingdom and realised the relative insignificance of their own gifts.[28]

Solomon received the emissaries graciously but refused their presents, making a statement recorded in the Qur'an: *Will you give me abundance in wealth? But that which God has given me is better than that which He has given you! No, it is you who rejoice in your gift!* (Q. 27:36). He was then presented with a group of disguised slaves, the women having been dressed as men and the men as women, and challenged to tell them apart. This Solomon accomplished either by watching how they washed their hands or which item of clothing they used to carry grain (the men washing their hands less daintily and accepting the grain in their shirt fronts, thereby exposing their legs). He was then given a sealed box containing a pearl with a crooked hole (other versions mention an un-pierced diamond along with the pearl), and was to guess first the contents of the box and then to thread the pearl. Some versions of the event claim that he was informed of the contents by his demons, but others state that he was helped by Gabriel, implicitly bringing God into alliance with Solomon in his struggle with Bilqīs and the Ḥimyarīs.[29]

The emissaries then asked Solomon a series of riddles which he guessed correctly, though only with demonic help,[30] following which he sent them back to Yemen with a renewed threat of attack if they did not heed the commandments in his letter. When Bilqīs heard her emissaries' reports she was impressed and, according to some versions, either accepted the truth of Solomon's prophetic claim or accepted Islam at this point.[31] She decided to go to meet Solomon and hear what he had to say in

person, having first locked her throne behind seven doors and commanded her chamberlain to guard it carefully.

Solomon was told (either by the wind or by Gabriel) of Bilqīs' departure from Sheba, at which point he asked those around him: *Which of you can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?* (Q. 27:38) A jinn was the first to respond, saying he could return with it before Solomon left his throne room that day. But apparently this was not quick enough, since Solomon turned to his other subjects to see who could fulfill his wish.[32] Another attendant then offered to bring the throne *before ever thy glance returns to thee*, i.e. in the blink of an eye (Q. 27:40). There is some disagreement over the identity of this individual, as well as over the exact nature of the formula he used. Some sources state that this declaration was made by Gabriel, al-Khiḍr, or even Solomon himself. It is, however, generally agreed that the speaker was a human being, either a Muslim or an Israelite. He is said to have been Āṣif ibn Barakhiyya ibn Shamaʿiyya ibn Malakiyya, the *wazīr* of Solomon (and his sister's son according to some). Other sources state that he was named Barīkhā, ʿAṣṭūm, or was an Andalusian named Dhū'l-Nūr. Still others state that he was a stranger from an island who had come to see Solomon that day.[33] The formula he used was God's greatest name, something which is commonly believed to possess magical powers.[34] As soon as he uttered this mysterious formula the throne sank into the ground in Bilqīs' palace and reappeared in front of Solomon, whereupon Solomon expressed his gratitude to God and commanded the jinn to disguise it before Bilqīs arrived.

Solomon's desire for the queen's throne has been a source of some bewilderment, and the authors discussed here have put forward several interpretations for it. One explanation is that he was so intrigued by the hoopoe's description of the throne that Solomon wanted to see it before Bilqīs came to him. This statement makes little sense unless it is understood in the context of a much commoner explanation, that when Solomon heard about the throne's magnificence he wished to usurp it, and knew he must do so before Bilqīs came and converted to Islam, since confiscation of her property would be forbidden under Islamic law subsequent to her conversion. It is also said that he did this to show the power and glory of God (and hence miraculous proof of Solomon's sincerity and prophethood), a theory that is supported by the claim that he asked only for her throne and not her entire kingdom.[35] A final explanation is that the throne was brought so that it could be disguised in order to test Bilqīs, in much the same way as she had asked riddles to test Solomon.[36]

The most widely promoted explanation of why the throne was disguised relates to the series of events that transpires after Bilqīs' arrival, and which itself constitutes one of the most important and mysterious parts of the narrative. The jinn and demons were allegedly afraid that once Solomon gazed upon Bilqīs' legendary beauty he would want to marry her; she would then tell him all the secrets of the jinn and demons

which she knew because her mother was one of them, causing them to come completely under the control of Solomon and his descendants. To prevent this, they spoke maliciously about Bilqīs, saying that there was something wrong with her mind and that her legs were like those of an ass.[37] It was to test the first of these allegations that the throne was disguised. To the latter end, Solomon commanded that a palace be built with slabs of glass for the floor. He then pumped water underneath these slabs and added fish and other marine life.[38]

When Bilqīs arrived in Solomon's capital city, she was first presented with her disguised throne and then asked if it belonged to her. That she did not answer in the affirmative or negative, but was rather circumspect in her reply (Q. 27:42, *it seems the same*) is taken by the sources as proof of her soundness of mind since, on the one hand, it was inconceivable that this could be the throne she had left behind seven locked doors in her palace in Yemen yet, on the other hand, it bore a close resemblance to her own.[39]

The exegetes and historians disagree over who spoke the latter half of Q. 27:42, *and knowledge was bestowed on us in advance of this, and we have submitted ourselves.* If this was said by Bilqīs, it would imply that either she had converted to Islam before her departure for Solomon's kingdom, or else she had accepted the truth of Solomon's prophethood before the miraculous sign (*āya*) of the throne, and had come in submission to Solomon's command to hear what he had to say regarding his religion. It is also claimed that this statement was made by Solomon or his subjects, asserting that they were themselves Muslims before these events transpired.[40]

Bilqīs was then asked to join Solomon on his dais, which she could only do by crossing the glass floor. Mistaking the floor for water, she lifted up her skirts to keep them dry, thereby exposing her legs. It was when she realised that she had been tricked that she made her final remarks in the Qur'anic pericope: *'O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul: I do submit with Solomon to God, Lord of the Worlds'* (Q. 27:44). Most of the sources claim that this remark was made because she realised the error of her past life, although some of them maintain that when she was commanded to cross the glass floor she thought Solomon was trying to drown her, and that she made this statement when she believed she was about to die.[41] The sources agree that the primary reason why the glass-floored palace was built was to trick Bilqīs into exposing her legs in order to find out if they were, indeed, similar to those of an ass. As it turned out, they were very attractive human legs, marred only by their being extremely hirsute. Ibn Kathīr claims, on the authority of Muḥammad ibn Kaᶜb, that this was because she had no husband, and therefore presumably had no reason to shave.[42] When Bilqīs saw Solomon staring at her hairy legs, she said: 'O Prophet of God! You don't know what a pomegranate is until you've tasted one!' Solomon replied: 'What is sweet to the eyes isn't [necessarily] sweet to the mouth!'[43] He then

asked his subjects what would get rid of the hair. The humans claimed a razor would, but Solomon rejected their suggestion on the grounds that a razor would leave unsightly nicks on her thighs. He then asked his jinn for something other than a razor that would accomplish the same end, but they did not know of anything. Finally, he turned to his demons who feigned ignorance, but when he pressed them on it, they manufactured a depilatory paste and built a bath (*ḥammām*) for Bilqīs to use. This was the first *ḥammām*, and the first time a depilatory preparation was used.[44]

Solomon then married Bilqīs and sent her back to Yemen where he used to visit her for three days every month.[45] After her death, Bilqīs was succeeded by her son by Solomon, Raḥbaᶜam ibn Sulaymān.[46] This version is considered suspect by al-Rāzī, who prefers another common redaction which states that after Bilqīs had converted to Islam, Solomon asked her to choose a husband from among her own people. She expressed her dismay at this prospect because, since she was the Queen of Yemen, marrying a Ḥimyarī subject would be humiliating. She therefore requested Solomon to marry her to a peer, so he betrothed her to the ruler of Hamadān and sent them to Yemen where, depending on the version, her new husband ruled as king, they ruled jointly, or Bilqīs ruled as Solomon's vassal.[47]

Women Rulers, Hair, and the Natural Order

The developed versions of the story of Bilqīs' encounter with Solomon – which gained even greater popularity across the Islamic world in the centuries after the period being discussed in this essay – can be understood at several registers. Interpreted literally, this is the tale of the calling of a pre-Islamic people to the true religion of the one God. At another level, it is an epic confrontation between matriarchy represented by Bilqīs and her feminine deity, *al-Shams*, and patriarchy represented by Solomon and his masculine deity, *Allāh*. At yet another level, however, the legend constitutes the incorporation of an irregular, lawless, microcosmic patriarchy into the universal, macrocosmic, patriarchal order.

The sources under consideration do not stress the fact that, as far as is known, the sun was probably worshipped as a feminine deity in southern Arabia. Nevertheless, this implication should be clear to any reader of Arabic, since the sun (and most other celestial entities) are feminine nouns. The Qur'anic narrative and most of the commentaries repeatedly emphasise the fact that Bilqīs worshipped *al-Shams*; it is on only one occasion (Q. 27:43) that the Qur'an accuses her of disbelief rather than the worship of a deity other than *Allāh*. On the whole, Bilqīs' innate virtue and wisdom is repeatedly emphasised in the narratives. Her rise to power gives evidence of her positive characteristics, as does the prosperity of Yemen under her rule.

Important elements in the story of Bilqīs bear strong resemblances to other narratives that gained popularity in early Islamic writing. Most important of these tales is that of the famous Arab queen Zenobia (called al-Zabbāʾ in Islamic sources), who ruled Palmyra from 267–72 CE. Zenobia is not mentioned in the Qur'an, although the popularity of the name Zaynab – the Arabic equivalent of Zenobia – at the time of Muḥammad would suggest that she was probably very much alive in popular memory at the time.[48] In many ways, Zenobia is more important to early Islamic historical memory than is Bilqīs, and al-Ṭabarī affords her a major place in his account of the history of Syria, Iraq and northern Arabia.

In his important study of the place of Zenobia in Islamic writings, David S. Powers has argued for the existence of an identifiable pattern by which a particular kind of strong woman is represented in classical Islamic literature, and which fits the story of Bilqīs, despite some important differences between how she and Zenobia are represented by posterity. Nāʾila al-Zabbāʾ (as Zenobia is known in popular Islamic writings) was the daughter of ʿAmr ibn Ẓarib ibn Ḥassan ibn Udhayna (as distinct from the Queen of Odenathus/Udhayna who is the likely historical Zenobia). She succeeded her father as ruler after he was killed in battle by Jadhīma. She first consolidated power, then set out to avenge the death of her father by invading Jadhīma's kingdom, but was dissuaded by the council of her sister who pointed out that she might end up losing her power and causing the destruction of her lands. Al-Zabbāʾ heeded council and decided instead to use cunning to defeat the tyrant: she sent Jadhīma a missive acknowledging that women make weak and inept rulers, flattered him as a king, and invited him to 'come to me and join my kingdom to yours ... let us unite our countries and rule together'.[49]

On receiving her letter, Jadhīma sought the advice of his ministers, all but one of whom enthusiastically supported the idea of accepting al-Zabbāʾ's proposal. The sole dissenter, a loyal servant of Jadhīma, warned him that al-Zabbāʾ hated the king for having killed her father, and must surely be trying to exact her revenge. However, Jadhīma rejected his counsel and instead sought out his own nephew, ʿAmr ibn ʿAdī who had his own reasons for hating Jadhīma, and advised him to go to Palmyra with the assurance that ʿAmr's clansmen in the town would support him against the queen.

When Jadhīma and his troops approached Palmyra, al-Zabbāʾ sent emissaries to him bearing gifts. Through a number of twists – including Jadhīma ignoring the counsel of his wise servant yet again, the revelation of the deceit of his nephew, and a twist in which the servant symbolically becomes the master by escaping on a royal horse – the king was brought before the queen as a virtual captive. In a moment of denouement, we learn why the queen Naʾila bears the title *al-zabbāʾ* ('the woman with much or long hair'): she faced the king and lifted her skirts to reveal long braids of pubic hair

covering her vagina, and asked him: 'Do you think this is the handiwork of a bride?' (*'a-daʾb ʿarūs tarā'*).[50] At this point, Jadhīma comes to realise that he has been tricked, but al-Zabbāʾ does not extract her vengeance immediately, though only out of a desire not to spill royal blood. Instead, she gets Jadhīma drunk, and then has her attendants slit his wrists, gathering all the blood in a bowl.[51]

The similarities between the story of Bilqīs and that of the Arabic Zenobia, al-Zabbāʾ, are somewhat obvious: daughters of kings who were murdered through deception, they ascend the throne for lack of a qualified male heir and avenge their fathers by seducing the usurping tyrants and getting them drunk before killing them. Both are good rulers and are associated with the jinn on that count, Bilqīs through her supposed parentage and al-Zabbāʾ because she is believed to be demonically possessed. And with both of them, deception, and the lifting of skirts to reveal nakedness and body hair occupy a central place at a crucial moment of regnal transformation. Yet the differences between the two are also stark, and arguably signify something equally important about notions of gender and power in early Islamic society. While Bilqīs' lifting of her skirt is an act of surrender, that of al-Zabbāʾ is an act of aggression and defiance. For Bilqīs, the story comes to a fairytale-like ending in which she gets married, has a child, and ostensibly lives happily ever after. In contrast, al-Zabbāʾ is obliged to continue fighting for power and is eventually trapped by the nephew of the tyrant Jadhīma whom she killed. She chooses to commit suicide rather than be slain by Jadhīma's nephew ʿAmr and swallows poison from her signet ring, but is robbed of this final act of (queenly) self-determination because, before the poison can take effect, ʿAmr unsheathes his sword and kills her with it.

In the end, both queens eventually lose power in the face of patriarchy, the defiant queen Zenobia through her death and Bilqīs through her surrender to Solomon and his God. It is in this important distinction between the two female protagonists that some critical aspects of the narrative concerning Bilqīs are to be found, in that whereas – in the memory of Muslim writers – Zenobia and her story belong entirely to a pagan Arab past, Bilqīs is a pagan who converts to Islam and becomes part of the Muslim prophetic narrative of Solomon.

In many respects, the story of Bilqīs should be seen less as the independent tale of the Queen of Sheba and more as one of several Qur'anic pericopes concerning the life of Solomon. As Klar has noted, his biography is 'a tale dominated by women' – not only by Bilqīs but also by an idol-worshipping wife. 'Women are given a voice in the denunciation of Ṣakhr the demon, and in the giving and withholding of the Ring of Power; even the tufted ant with whom [Solomon] has a lengthy interchange is female, and it is frequently because of his desire for and tenderness towards women that [Solomon] goes astray'.[52]

Patriarchy and Prophethood

Within an Islamic, and especially Qur'anic, context, Solomon's character is quite problematic in the details of his succession to David, reliance on the magical, and motivations in dealing with Bilqīs. In some ways, the writers discussed here had trouble understanding Q. 27:16, *and Solomon was David's heir*, since, according to Muslim belief, prophethood is not hereditary, prophets do not leave their property to their descendents, and the property of a deceased person is supposed to be divided among survivors according to a prescribed formula. In contradiction of Muslim values, al-Thaʿlabī claims that Solomon inherited his father's prophethood (*nubuwwa*), wisdom, knowledge and kingdom to the exclusion of David's eighteen other sons.[53] Al-Ṭabarī claims that it was only wealth and kingship which Solomon inherited.[54] Al-Rāzī makes a similar claim with some reservations, since there is a tradition of Muḥammad which states that prophets do not leave property to their heirs.[55] Keeping in mind the same *ḥadīth*, Ibn Kathīr believes that what Solomon inherited had to be kingship and prophethood as offices, but not wealth.[56]

In addition to inheriting kingship and prophethood in extra-Islamic ways, Solomon possessed knowledge unlike any prophet before or since, which gave him command of the speech of animals and mastery over the jinn and demons. Besides emphasising a magical element to his office quite unlike that of any other prophet in the Islamic tradition, his mastery over non-human beings is testimony to his sovereignty rather than his prophethood. It is only his human subjects who were Muslims,[57] and the sincere devotion of the jinn and demons is open to doubt since they were afraid of falling completely under his control and tried to deceive him – that is, they were not in a true state of submission (*islām*).

Cognisant of these problematic aspects of Solomon's person, al-Rāzī provides a more palatably traditional Muslim interpretation (though one reflecting al-Rāzī's own philosophical and theological commitments), and asserts that the knowledge (*ʿilm*) Solomon possessed was that of God and His attributes. It was this knowledge of the divine that Solomon valued because, even though he and David had been given wealth unlike what has been given to anyone else, Solomon offered thanks for his knowledge and not his wealth.[58]

Solomon relies on all means at his disposal in order to defeat Bilqīs. When his knowledge fails him, he solicits help from demons in answering the riddles, and he also enlists the aid of the hoopoe and the jinn as spies to stay one step ahead of his adversary. The defeat of Bilqīs involves the outright use of magic on several occasions, in each case the magical act being performed by a third party at Solomon's command. Nevertheless, Solomon's reliance on magic and supernatural beings in no way diminishes his stature in the eyes of the commentators; instead, it provides proof of God's categorical approval of Solomon and his mission.

Given the powers that Solomon commands, it is no surprise that Bilqīs is defeated. Yet her conduct through the entire encounter carries a clear message regarding gender roles. Bilqīs' chastity is stressed almost as much as her wisdom and, in the final analysis, it is the latter which makes her realise her true feminine role. She seeks the advice of her male nobles as soon as she receives Solomon's letter. She then chooses not to act in accordance with their implied advice, and is proven by later events to have been correct and therefore wiser than the Ḥimyarī chieftains. Throughout the encounter, one is struck by the fact that Bilqīs is intimately familiar with the nature and characteristics of prophethood. Her sending of emissaries is therefore a vainglorious attempt to flaunt the natural order, and when she realises Solomon's strength she decides to visit him, suggesting either complete submission to the divinely appointed patriarch, or else a final plea for leniency made from a position of inferiority and weakness. Solomon's initial display of power and warning to Bilqīs constitute a threat of rape. This is implied in aya 34, *Kings, when they enter a city, despoil it, and make the noblest of its people its most debased* (*inna'l-mulūka idhā dakhalū qaryatan afsadūhā wa-jaᶜalū aᶜizzata ahlihā adhilla*), in al-Ṭabarī's statement that the jinn claimed he could be trusted not to have sexual intercourse with her, and in the commonly held assumption that it would be within Solomon's power to marry Bilqīs when he saw how beautiful she was. Bilqīs' final defeat through the use of magic constitutes seduction. She is deceived into raising her skirts, thereby compromising the chastity that she guarded as long as she held power. Like her sovereignty, her body is now at Solomon's disposal, to wed himself or to marry off to someone else as he chooses.

Bilqīs' physical surrender to Solomon parallels her abandonment of the sun and acceptance of the patriarchal god of Solomon. In so doing, she accepts the natural order and can now be completely rehabilitated in the narrative. As long as Bilqīs is sovereign, we are led to believe that she is the daughter of a jinn woman and has the legs of an ass, implying that there is something inhuman about a woman being a ruler. Al-Thaᶜlabī echoes this sentiment by quoting a non-canonical *ḥadīth* that states 'no people shall prosper who entrust their affairs to a woman'.[59] When Bilqīs finally accepts the patriarchal order, we are informed through a colourful twist of events that her legs are normal, and that the misunderstanding concerning them was caused by their being exceptionally hairy. The message is quite clear: Bilqīs' (re)habilitation into the human race involves her surrender to the patriarchal order.

A final perspective of the writers, and one to which I have already alluded, provides further confirmation that, in the eyes of the commentators, matriarchal government goes against the natural order. Bilqīs' rise to power is anomalous for the Ḥimyarīs who are normally ruled by men. It is through a failed patriarchy and patriliny (her father had no sons) that Bilqīs is first appointed queen. Her sovereignty over all of Yemen comes through the elimination of a distorted patriarchy, symbolised by the

unregulated sexuality of the Yemeni tyrant. In such a reading, Bilqīs is an aberration, who lives in legend only to mark the benevolent incorporation of a faltering regional patriarchy into the universal patriarchal order represented by God and his earthly representative, Solomon.

NOTES

1 For a fuller discussion of the Israelite version of the legend, see C.H. Toy, 'The Queen of Sheba', *Journal of American Folklore* 20 (1907), pp. 207–12; J. Pirenne, 'La Reine de Saba dans le Coran et la Bible', *Dossiers de l'archeologie* 33 (1979), pp. 6–10. A detailed study of the role of the Queen of Sheba in Judaic, Islamic, Christian and Ethiopian tradition is found in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon Press, 1974). A linguistic and structural analysis, combined with a historical study of the pre-Islamic and extra-Islamic versions of the story has been conducted by Claus Schedl in 'Sulaiman und die Königin von Saba' in Roswitha G. Steigner (ed.), *Al-Hudhud: Festschrift Maria Höfner* (Graz: Karl-Franzens-Universität, 1981), pp. 305–24. By far the fullest treatment of the Israelite roots of the most popular Islamic versions of the narrative is found in Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

2 Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, pp. 36ff.

3 Q. 27:31, *be ye not arrogant against me, but come to me in submission* (*allā taʿlū ʿalayya wa-ʾtūnī muslimīn*); and Q. 27:38, *he said, 'Ye Chiefs! Which of you can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?'* (*qāla yā-ayyuhā'l-malaʾu ayyukum yaʾtīnī bi-ʿarshihā qabla an yaʾtūnī muslimīn*).

4 Q. 27:16.

5 *O David! We did indeed make you a representative (khalīfa) on earth: so judge between men in truth* (Q. 38:26).

6 Other reconstructed versions of the Islamic narrative are found in a number of works, including Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 62–6; and David S. Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia: The Legend of al-Zabbāʾ in Islamic Sources' in Petra Silverb, Adam Sabra and Roxani Markoff (eds), *Histories of the Middle East: Studies in Middle Eastern Society, Economy and Law in Honor of A.L. Udovitch* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), pp. 164–219.

7 Ibn Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿa Ḥijāzi, 1950), pp. 183–4. An annotated translation has been published by William M. Brinner, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ or Lives of the Prophets as recounted by Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). An important study of the text, including the episodes concerning Solomon, is found in Marianna Klar, *'And We cast upon his throne a mere body*: A Historiographical Reading of Q. 38:34', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6:1 (2004), pp. 103–26. A paraphrase translation of this work, along with a Turkish version, is found in W.M. Watt, 'The Queen of Sheba in Islamic Tradition' in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon Press, 1974), pp. 85–103. A later popular version is reproduced in Jan Knappert, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam* (2 vols, Leiden: Brill, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 138–45. The claim that 'Bilqīs' is only a title supports the hypothesis that the name is derived through the Hebrew *pilgesh* from the Greek *pallakis*, meaning 'concubine' (Watt, 'The Queen of Sheba', pp. 100–1).

8 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 184; Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān fī mulūk Ḥimyar* (Sanʿa: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa'l-Abḥāth al-Yamaniyya, 1928), p. 171; Ibn Kathīr

(2000), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Muṭafā al-Sayyid Muḥammad et al. (15 vols, Cairo: Muʾassasat Qurṭaba), vol. 5, pp. 400–1.

9 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 184; Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, pp. 161–2.

10 Abū Jaʿfar ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān* (15 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1987), vol. 9, p. 95.

11 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 161.

12 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 97.

13 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 105.

14 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 185. It is commonly held by Muslim historiographers that Sabāʾ, the legendary ancestor of the Ḥimyarīs and a number of other Arab tribes, was a Muslim. His Ḥimyarī descendents in Yemen were blessed with many good things and continued on the righteous path for some time, but eventually repaid God's blessings with disbelief (*kufr*). They were then sent thirteen prophets, but continued in their idolatrous worship of the sun (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya* [15 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1984], vol. 1, pp. 147–8).

15 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 183–4.

16 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 166.

17 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 184–5. The hoopoe was responsible for finding buried water, and therefore had to be back for Solomon to perform his ablutions before the *ʿaṣr* (afternoon) prayer. Other versions state that Solomon's army was on the march, and the hoopoe was searching out drinking water for the troops.

18 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 162.

19 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 92, p. 100. Note that there is no mention of Solomon's prophetic office in this account. Solomon's ignorance of the existence of other monarchs contradicts al-Ṭabarī's statement (p. 87) that the wind would inform him of events in distant places.

20 Another version states that he arrived at sunrise and found Bilqīs praying to the sun in a niche she had constructed for this purpose. He then threw the letter at her (al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 185).

21 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 95.

22 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 185; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 95; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (16 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), vol. 23, p. 194. The sources claim the letter is so short because prophets always write succinctly, never exceeding what God has commanded them to say.

23 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 185; Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (30 vols, Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayā, 1961), vol. 19, p. 217; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5 p. 403.

24 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 96; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 195; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 404. One of the cognates for *muslimīn* used by Ibn Kathīr is *tābiʿīn*, a word that does not normally carry religious connotations in classical Arabic but implies obedience to commands. Ibn Kathīr also states that many sources believe the last sentence was not part of the letter.

25 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 97.

26 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 186; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 405.

27 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 97; Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 167.

28 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 186; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 221. Other versions state that the gold and silver bricks were used to build 1,000 palaces (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 406).

29 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 187; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 221; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 98. The pearl was threaded by a worm carrying a thread in its mouth. In return for this service it was given permission to burrow in fruit until the end of time (al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 187).

30 The commonest riddle mentioned is: 'What is water that comes neither from the heavens nor the earth?' Solomon successively asked his humans and jinn for the answer but they did not know it. Finally he turned to the demons who replied: 'Sweat on a galloping horse' (Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 170). Other redactions state that the riddle regarding the horse's sweat was asked later on by Bilqīs (al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 188; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 406), which is more in keeping with the Haggadic version of the story.

31 Al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 222; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 406; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 200.

32 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 102. The jinn who made this statement was named Kawzan. Al-Ṭabarī takes 'trust' in the jinn's answer to Solomon: 'Indeed I have full strength for the purpose, and may be trusted' to refer not only to the jinn being trustworthy not to steal the throne or its jewels, but also not to have sexual intercourse with Bilqīs. Solomon may not have allowed the jinn to fetch the throne because he did not trust him, the self-control of the jinn always being somewhat suspect in Islamic thought. Al-Ṭabarī's statement also brings the sexual aspect of Bilqīs' interaction with Solomon into the open, this issue having being referred to only indirectly until this point.

33 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 188; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 225; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 197; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 408.

34 God's greatest name (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*) is of great importance in Islamic mysticism, both at an intellectual and popular level. The name itself is unknown, but there are several accounts of what it was that Solomon's associate said: 'God', 'the Compassionate' (on the authority of Mujāhid); 'O Possessor of Majesty and Honour!' (on the authority of al-Zuhrī); 'O our God and God of all things, Unique God, there is no god but You!' or (on the authority of ʿĀʾisha) 'O Living, O Eternal!' (al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 226; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, pp. 408–9).

35 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 101; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, pp. 225–7. Al-Rāzī claims that the throne represents the kingdom, and Solomon did this to learn the extent of Bilqīs' monarchical power before he came face to face with her (al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 197).

36 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 106.

37 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 171; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 104; al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 188; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 229; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 200; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, pp. 410–11.

38 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 105–6; al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 187–8; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 410.

39 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 104; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 227. This test is seen by some sources as proof not only of her soundness of mind, but also of her wisdom; cf. al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 228; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 410.

40 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 105; al-Thaʿlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 187–8; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 228; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 410; al-Rāzī, vol. 23, p. 200. The latter half of the following aya is commonly understood to be God's speech,

although a minority of sources claim that it was said by Solomon (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 410; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 200).

41 Al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 229; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 411; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 9, p. 201. Al-Ṭabarī states that after she crossed the floor, Solomon called her to the worship of God to the exclusion of the sun, and she replied in heretical language. On hearing her, Solomon prostrated himself before God and all his human subjects followed suit. It was when she saw this that Bilqīs realised her error and converted to Islam (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān*, p. 106). Deception through the use of water is a common trope in stories in other parts of the world as well, which tell of people mistaking moonlight or linseed fields for water (cf. W. Crooke, 'The Queen of Sheba', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1913), pp. 685–6; C.H. Tawney, 'The Queen of Sheba', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1913), p. 1048).

42 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 411. The word used is *baᶜl*, which carries the connotation of a husband as lord or master.

43 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 172.

44 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 172; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 106–7; al-Ṭabarsī, vol. 19, p. 222; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 411. Some versions state that it was Bilqīs who refused to use a razor; Solomon expressed his agreement with her and commanded the preparation of a depilatory paste.

45 Al-Thaᶜlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāᵓ*, p. 189.

46 Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān*, p. 173.

47 Al-Thaᶜlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāᵓ*, p. 189; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 229; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 201.

48 Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia', p. 165. One of Muḥammad's daughters and two of his wives were named Zaynab, as was one of his granddaughters. Powers argues that the onomastic transformation of Zenobia into al-Zabbāᵓ was necessary because of the association of the name Zaynab with prominent women in Muḥammad's life and the manner in which Islamic legend remembers Zenobia. 'Whereas in non-Islamic sources Zenobia is remembered for her beauty, bravery and chastity, in Islamic sources she is portrayed as a sexually brazen, vengeful and blood-thirsty demon ... No Muslim storyteller in his right mind would dare to use the name of one of the Prophet's wives or daughters to refer to a figure – historical or fictional – associated with sex, murder and mayhem' (Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia', p. 184). Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, Muḥammad's wife who was previously married to his adopted son Zayd, also fits certain elements of Power's pattern. For more information, see the article by Powers cited already as well as his *Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

49 Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia', p. 185.

50 Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia', pp. 187–8. The Aramaic *zabbai* became the Arabic *al-zabbāᵓ*, signifying *a woman with much or long hair* (p. 184).

51 Powers, 'Demonizing Zenobia', p. 188.

52 Klar, '*And We cast upon his throne a mere body*', p. 115.

53 Ibn Kathīr states that David had one hundred wives (*Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 395).

54 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 87.

55 Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 23, p. 186. The tradition is found in the collection of al-Bukhārī.

56 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, p. 395. Al-Ṭabarsī avoids the problem altogether by claiming the Qur'an means that Solomon took over David's place (al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 205).

57 It was only the humans who join Solomon in prostrating themselves before God (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 106). Al-Ṭabarsī states that the hoopoe did not know about God, and the only reason he was critical of sun worship was because he believed that anything contrary to Solomon's actions must be wrong (al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*, vol. 19, p. 214).

58 Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 9, p. 185. Al-Rāzī is sceptical about many of the details of the story, but believes they must be accepted on faith.

59 Al-Thaᶜlabī, *Kitāb qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, pp. 194–85. This *ḥadīth* retains continued relevance in theories of Islamic governance to this day. For a revisionist reading of the origins of this tradition, see Fatima Mernissi, *Le harem politique: le prophête et les femmes* (Paris: A. Michel, 1987); English translation by Mary Jo Lakeland, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading, Massachusetts, Addison-Wesley: Basic Books, 1991).

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