

Outsider Queen, Judge of Jewish Leaders, or Convert to Islam?

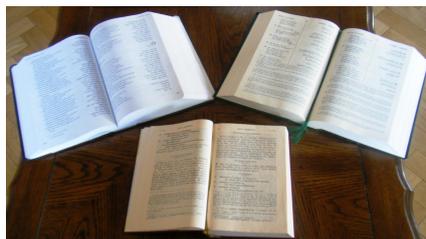
Sarah Snyder presents a case study in Jews, Christians, and Muslims reading their scriptures together.

The Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon as related in the Bible and the Qur'ān offers us a revealing glimpse of how Christians, Muslims, and Jews approach our scriptures differently and of the different questions that we ask of them. A Scriptural Reasoning conversation around these three passages (1 Kings 10: 1–13;¹ Matthew 12: 38–42;² and Qur'ān 27: 15–44) might begin with the Hebrew text being read or recited in Hebrew, as if in a Jewish-only setting. A Jewish member of the group explains the context in which the passage is often heard, and introduces some of its rabbinic interpretation. Much of the latter, for example, speculates about the queen's mental agility. What were the 'hard questions' she brought to Solomon (verse 1)? How did he answer them?

A Christian colleague asks why the queen is not named. Who was she? Very much an outsider to the Jewish community, comes the reply. It is her 'otherness' that is stressed by the narrative. Her actual identity is not revealed. Perhaps it is this which prompted unfavourable speculation in subsequent Jewish tradition, or merely the embarrassment of a female dignitary of such high standing. The passage clearly presents the superiority of Solomon's wisdom, declaring the source of that wisdom as God Himself.

A Christian then reads the Gospel passage in English (as is normal in a Christian context) and points out that Jesus accords the Queen of Sheba great respect. The Gospels record him contrasting her earnest search for godly wisdom with the shallow display of godliness he sees in the Jewish leaders of his day, depicting her even as *judge* over them: 'The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon'.³ Her 'outsider' status, it seems, was no barrier to her recognition of the true source of Wisdom.

Muslim members of the group are concerned more with whether the queen converted to Islam. Does she become in any sense an insider? The group turns to read the Qur'ānic passage, first hearing it recited in Arabic as is usual in an Islamic setting. In *Sūra 27* (The Ant) of the Qur'ān, the queen is so overwhelmed by her encounter with Solomon that in verse 44, she submits to His God, declaring, 'My Lord, I have wronged myself: I devote myself, with Solomon, to [the one and only] God, the Lord of the Worlds'. Of her previous unbelief, Solomon had noted in verses 42 and 43, 'We were given knowledge before her, and we devoted ourselves to God [but] she was prevented by what she worshipped instead of God, for she came from a disbelieving people'.



After briefly introducing Muslim understanding of the passage, the reader points out how it indicates the queen's 'submission' (becoming a Muslim) after her encounter with Solomon. Solomon was, of course, a Muslim prophet, not a Jewish King, he explains, and as a prophet, he was without sin.

At this point, a Christian interjects. Christians have often viewed Solomon allegorically as a kind of forerunner of Jesus. Just as Solomon reflected the wisdom of God, so Christ embodied it. The group then reads the Gospel passage again. Somebody notes that Jesus seems to imply that Solomon was a sign, pointing the queen to the true source of Godly wisdom. A Christian member of the group explains the context of this episode, commenting that Jesus compares the queen's ability to

recognise the truth, despite being foreign and a woman, with the supposed 'deaf' ears of his Jewish opponents. In a way, the queen is like the early Gentile church – foreign, yet able to understand Jesus' message in a way many Jews could not. Another member of the group then asks what Jesus meant by 'something greater than Solomon' being here... and so the discussion continues.

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In one sense we are all outsiders to one another's faith communities and their readings of Scripture. By welcoming the 'Other', we offer them a glimpse of our journey, share our testimony, and learn from one another as we study the scriptural passages before us. We are not asked to accept the Other's scripture. This is a space without need for compromise. It is one, rather, in which we can share our differences and challenge each other in a context of genuinely seeking God's word for our lives—individually, communally, and in the wider multi-faith neighbourhoods in which we live and work. In doing so, we build relationships of trust, understanding, and friendship across boundaries that are too often impenetrable.

Notes

¹Repeated in 2 Chronicles 9: 1–12

²Repeated in Luke 11: 29–32

³Matthew 12:42; see also Luke 11:31

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A starter bibliography on the history of Christians and Muslims responding to one another's scriptures can be found at:

<http://www.cmcsxford.org.uk/index.php?pageid=6>