

The Queen of Sheba / מַלְכֶּת-שֶׁבָא

Biblical Texts

The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, **through the name of Adonai**, and she **came** to test him with hard questions. She arrived in Jerusalem with a very large retinue, with camels bearing spices, a great quantity of gold, and precious stones.

When she came to Solomon, **she asked him** all that she had in mind. Solomon had answers for all her questions; there was nothing that the King did not know, [nothing] to which he could not give her an answer.

When the Queen of Sheba observed all of Solomon's wisdom, and the palace he had built, the fare of his table, the seating of his courtiers, the service and attire of his attendants, **and his wine service**, and the procession with which he went up to the House of Adonai, **she was left breathless**.

She said to the King, "The report I heard in my own land about you and your wisdom was true. But I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half had been told me; **your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports that I heard**.

How fortunate are your men, and how fortunate are these your courtiers, who are always in attendance on you and can hear your wisdom! Blessed is Adonai your God, who delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel. **It is because of Adonai's everlasting love for Israel that God made you King to administer justice and righteousness.**"

She presented the King with 120 talents of gold, and a large quantity of spices, and precious stones. Never again did such a vast quantity of spices arrive as that which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.— Moreover, Hiram's fleet, which carried

The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, and **came to Jerusalem** to test Solomon with hard questions, accompanied by a very large retinue, including camels bearing spices, a great quantity of gold, and precious stones.

When she came to Solomon, **she spoke to him** of all that she had on her mind. Solomon had answers for all her questions; there was nothing that Solomon did not know, nothing to which he could not give her an answer.

When the Queen of Sheba saw how wise Solomon was and the palace he had built, the fare of his table, the seating of his courtiers, the service and attire of his attendants, **his butlers and their attire**, and the procession with which he went up to the House of Adonai, **it took her breath away**.

She said to the King, "What I heard in my own land about you and your wisdom was true. I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half of your great wisdom had been described to me; **you surpass the report that I heard**.

How fortunate are your men, and how fortunate are these courtiers of yours, who are always in attendance on you and can hear your wisdom! Blessed is Adonai your God, who favored you and set you on God's throne as a King before Adonai. **It is because of your God's love for Israel and in order to establish them forever that God made you King over them to execute righteous justice.**"

She presented the King with 120 talents of gold, and a vast quantity of spices and precious stones. There were no such spices as those which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon— also, the servants of

<p>gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir a huge quantity of sandalwood and precious stones.</p> <p>The King used the algum-wood for decorations in the House of Adonai and in the royal palace, and for harps and lyres for the musicians. Such a quantity of almug wood has never arrived or been seen to this day.</p> <p>King Solomon, in turn, gave the Queen of Sheba everything she wanted and asked for, in addition to what King Solomon gave her out of his royal bounty. Then she and her attendants left and returned to her own land.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- I Kings 10:1-13</p>	<p>Hiram and Solomon who brought gold from Ophir brought algum-wood and precious stones.</p> <p>The King made of the algum-wood ramps for the House of Adonai and for the royal palace, and lyres and harps for the musicians, whose like had never before been seen in the land of Judah.</p> <p>King Solomon, in turn, gave the Queen of Sheba everything she expressed a desire for, exceeding a return for what she had brought to the King. Then she and her courtiers left and returned to her own land.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- II Chronicles 9: 1-12</p>
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Classical Midrash

Solomon, it must be remembered, bore rule not only over people, but also over the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, demons, spirits, and the apparitions of the night. He knew the language of all of them and they understood his language. When Solomon was of good cheer from wine, he summoned the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the creeping reptiles, the shades, the apparitions, and the ghosts, to perform their dances before the Kings, his neighbors, whom he invited to witness his power and greatness.

The King's scribes called the animals and the spirits by name, one by one, and they all assembled of their own accord, without fetters or bonds, with no human hand to guide them.

On one occasion the hoopoe was missing from among the birds, and could not be found anywhere. The King, full of wrath, ordered him to be produced and chastised for his tardiness. The hoopoe appeared and said: "O lord, King of the world, incline your ear and listen to my words. Three months have gone by since I began to take counsel with myself and resolve upon a course of action. I have eaten no food nor drunk any water, in order to fly about in the whole world and see whether there is a domain anywhere which is not subject to my lord the King. I found a city, the city of Kitor, in the East. Dust is more valuable than gold there, and silver is like the mud of the streets. Its trees are from the beginning of all time, and they suck up water that flows from the Garden of Eden. The city is crowded with people. On their heads they wear garlands wreathed in Paradise. They know not how to fight, nor how to shoot with bow and arrow. Their ruler is a woman, she is called the Queen of Sheba. If, now, it please you, O lord and King, I shall gird my loins like a hero, and journey to the city of Kitor in the land of Sheba. Its Kings I shall fether with chains and its rulers with iron bands, and bring them all before my lord the King." The hoopoe's speech pleased the King. The clerks of his land were summoned, and they wrote a letter and bound it to the hoopoe's wing. The bird rose skyward, uttered his cry, and flew away, followed by all the other birds.

And they came to Kitor in the land of Sheba. It was morning, and the Queen had gone forth to pay worship to the sun. Then the hoopoe alighted near her. Seeing that a letter was tied to his wing, she untied it and read it. And what was written in the letter?

"From me, King Solomon! Peace be with you, peace with the nobles of your realm! Know that God has appointed me King over the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the demons, the spirits, and the



apparitions. All the Kings of the East and the West come to bring me greetings. If you will come and salute me, I shall show you great honor, more than to any of the Kings that attend me. But if you will not pay homage to me, I shall send out Kings, legions, and riders against you. You ask, who are these Kings, legions, and riders of King Solomon? The beasts of the field are my Kings, the birds my riders, the demons, spirit, and shades of the night my legions. The demons will throttle you in your beds at night, while the beasts will slay you in the field, and the birds will consume your flesh.”

When the Queen of Sheba had read the contents of the letter, she again rent her garment, and sent word to her elders and her princes: “Do you see what Solomon has written to me?” They answered: “We know nothing of King Solomon, nor of his dominion – it is nothing to us!” But their words did not reassure the Queen. She assembled all the ships of the sea, and loaded them with the finest kinds of wood, and with pearls and precious stones. Together with these she sent Solomon six thousand youths and maidens, born in the same year, in the same month, on the same day, in the same hour all of equal stature and size, all clothed in purple garments. They bore a letter to King Solomon as follows: “From the city of Kitor to the land of Israel is a journey of seven years. As it is your wish and behest that I visit you, I shall hasten and be in Jerusalem at the end of three years.”

– *Legends of the Jews 4:5:51-56*

When the time of her arrival drew near, Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Yehoyada to meet her....[He] conducted the Queen to Solomon, who had gone to sit in a house of glass to receive her. The Queen was deceived by an illusion. She thought the King was sitting in water, and as she stepped across to him she raised her garment to keep it dry. On her bare legs the King noticed hair, and he said to her: “Your beauty is the beauty of a woman, but your hair is masculine; hair is an ornament to a man, but it disfigures a woman.”

Then the Queen began and said: “I have heard of you and your wisdom; if now I inquire of you concerning a matter, you answer me?” He replied: “The Lord gives wisdom, out of God’s mouth comes knowledge and understanding.”

She then said to him:

1. “Seven there are that issue and nine that enter; two yield the draft and one drinks.” Said he to her: “Seven are the days of a woman’s impurity, and nine the months of pregnancy; two are the breasts that yield the draught, and one the child that drinks it.” She then said to him: “You are wise.”
2. Then she questioned him further: “A woman said to her son: ‘Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband; you are my son, and I am your sister.’” “Surely,” said the King, “this is Lot’s daughter speaking to her son.”
3. She placed a number of males and females of the same stature and garb before him and said: “Distinguish between them.” The King made a sign to the eunuchs, who brought him a quantity of nuts and roasted ears of corn. The males, who were not bashful, seized them with bare hands; the females took them, putting forth their gloved hands from beneath their garments. Whereupon he exclaimed: “Those are the males, these the females.”
4. She brought a number of men to him, some circumcised and others uncircumcised, and asked him to distinguish between them. He immediately made a sign to the high priest, who opened the Ark of the covenant, whereupon those that were circumcised bowed their bodies to half their height, while their countenances were filled with the radiance of the Shekinah; the uncircumcised fell prone upon their faces. “Those,” said he, “are circumcised, these uncircumcised.” “You are wise, indeed,” she exclaimed.
5. She put other questions to him, to all of which he gave replies. “Who has neither was born nor died?” “It is the Lord of the world, Blessed be God.”

6. “What land is that which has but once seen the sun?” “The land upon which, after the creation, the waters were gathered, and the bed of the Red Sea on the day when it was divided.”
7. “There is an enclosure with ten doors, when one is open, nine are shut; when nine are open, one is shut?” “That enclosure is the womb; the ten doors are the ten orifices of man his eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, the apertures for the discharge of the excreta and the urine, and the navel; when the child is in the embryonic state, the navel is open and the other orifices are closed, but when it issues from the womb, the navel is closed and the others are opened.”
8. “There is something which when living moves not, yet when its head is cut off it moves?” “It is the ship in the sea.”
9. “Which are the three that neither ate, nor did they drink, nor did they have bread put into them, yet they saved lives from death?” “The signet, the cord, and the staff are those three.”
10. “Three entered a cave and five came forth therefrom?” “Lot and his two daughters and their two children.”
11. “The dead lived, the grave moved, and the dead prayed: what is that?” “The dead that lived and prayed, Jonah; and the fish, the moving grave.”
12. “Who were the three that ate and drank on the earth, and yet were not born of male and female?” “The three angels who visited Abraham.”
13. “Four entered a place of death and came forth alive, and two entered a place of life and came forth dead?” “The four were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and the two were Nadab and Abihu.”

14. "Who was he that was born and died not?" "Elijah and the Messiah."
 15. "What was that which was not born, yet life was given to it?" "The golden calf."
 16. "What is that which is produced from the ground, yet man produces it, while its food is the fruit of the ground?" "A wick."
 17. "A woman was wedded to two, and bore two sons, yet these four had one father?" "Tamar."

18. "A house full of dead; no dead one came among them, nor did a living come forth from them?" "It is the story of Samson and the Philistines."

19. The Queen next ordered the sawn trunk of a cedar tree to be brought, and she asked Solomon to point out at which end the root had been and at which the branches. He told her to cast it into the water, when one end sank and the other floated upon the surface of the water. That part which sank was the root, and that which remained uppermost was the branch end.

Then she said to him:

"You exceed in wisdom and goodness the fame which I heard, blessed be your God!"

The last three riddles which the Queen of Sheba put to Solomon were the following:

20. "What is this? A wooden well with iron buckets, which draw stones and pour out water." The King replied: "A rouge-tube."
 21. "What is this? It comes as dust from the earth, its food is dust, it is poured out like water, and lights the house." "Naphtha."
 22. "What is this? It walks ahead of all; it cries out loud and bitterly; its head is like the reed; it is the glory of the noble, the disgrace of the poor; the glory of the dead, the disgrace of the living; the delight of birds, the distress of fishes." He answered: "Flax."

-- *Legends of the Jews 4:5*



Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: Anyone who says that the Queen of Sheba [Malkat Sheba] who came to visit King Solomon (see I Kings, chapter 10) was a woman is nothing other than mistaken. What is the meaning of ***Malkat Sheba***? The Kingdom [*malkhuta*] of Sheba, as is mentioned in Job: "And Sheba fell on them and took them away" (Job 1:15). – *Talmud Bava Batra 15b*

"May Your God Be blessed" – this is the language of righteous converts, said by Yitro (father in law of Moses), Rahav (innkeeper in Jericho), and the Queen of Sheba.

– *Shemot Rabbah 27*

The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, through the name of Adonai (I Kings) – This means that she heard that

Solomon's wisdom was only used in God's name, because God had said to him, "I have given you a wise and prudent heart, with a level of discernment that has never before, and never will, appear in any person. This wisdom it is all in the service of God's name." When she heard this, she understood what it meant to have wisdom for the sake of God's name, and wondered if [the King] would always cling to it and to act wisely, for wisdom is simply a tool that can be used to make good or bad choices. She chose to come to try him in riddles in order to examine his wisdom as a way of testing if he was truly using his gift from God in the manner in which it was intended. – *Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, 13th century France*

The servants of Solomon who went on the ships of Ofira passed on their way to Sheba – the sea that surrounds it connects with the Red Sea on the west side – and they told the Queen of the wisdom of their King. She wondered if his wisdom was divinely given or if it was simply acquired through human experience, for if it was acquired solely through human experience, this can be compromised, such as that of Samson, who lost his ability to propeshy - but if it was divinely given, it could not be diminished.

– *Rabbi Meïr Leibush ben Yehiel Michel (19 cent. Russia / Poland)*

Other Historical & Religious Source Texts

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, when he said there were three hundred and thirty Kings of Egypt after Menes, who built Memphis, did therefore not tell us [the rulers'] names, because they were in common called Pharaohs. For when after their death, a Queen reigned, he calls her by her name, **Nicaule**, thereby declaring, that while the Kings were of the male line, and so admitted of the same name, while a woman did not admit the same, he did therefore set down that her name, which she could not naturally have. As for myself, I have discovered from our own Books, that after Pharaoh, the father-in-law of Solomon, no other King of Egypt did any longer use that name; and that it was after that time when the fore-named Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia came to Solomon: concerning whom we shall inform the reader presently. But I have now made mention of these things, that I may prove that our Books and those of the Egyptians agree together in many things. – *Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews*

[King Solomon's servant] said, "I have learnt something you did not know. I have come to you from Sheba, with reliable information. I found a woman ruling over them, and she was given of everything, and she has a magnificent throne. I found her and her people worshipping the sun, instead of God. Satan made their conduct appear good to them, and diverted them from the path, so they are not guided. If only they would worship God, who brings to light the mysteries of the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God—There is no god but Allah, the Lord of the Sublime Throne."When she arrived, it was said, "Is your throne like this?" She said, "As if this is it." "We were given knowledge before her, and we were submissive." But she was prevented by what she worshiped besides God; she belonged to a disbelieving people. It was said to her, "Go inside the palace." And when she saw it, she thought it was a deep pond, and she bared her legs. He said, "It is a palace paved with glass." She said, "My Lord, I have done wrong to myself, and I have submitted of what you do."

– *Qur'an Sura 27, 23-26, 42-44*

[Al-Himyari]'s wife, the djinn Umaya, died. Their child was left in the desert wilderness, to be succored by gazelles, raised by the djinns of the dunes, and watched over by angels. With each passing year, young Bilqis became even lovelier in face and form....

Bilqis, Queen of Sheba, emerged from her palace in a cloud of frankincense. Her viziers bowed before her.....She said: my viziers tell me this Solomon, by God, is a prophet, and we have no strength to resist him. Besides, I have become curious and want to meet this King and discover his true intentions." Her attendants loaded up her treasury – all except her throne, which she had locked behind seven iron doors, and she set off in Solomon's direction....

Bilqis married Solomon and bore him a son called Rehoboam, whose arms reached down to his knees, a sign of chieftainship. – *Abu Mohammed ibn 'Abd Allah al-Kisa'i (Egypt, 12th century)*

And **Queen Makeda** spoke to King Solomon, saying, "Blessed are you, my lord, in that such wisdom and understanding have been given to you... I look upon you and see that your wisdom is immeasurable, your understanding inexhaustible: it is like a lamp in the darkness...I give thanks to the One that brought me here and showed you to me... King Solomon answered, "Wisdom and understanding spring from you yourself!"

Nine months and five days after she had separated from King Solomon, the pains of childbirth laid hold upon [the Queen], and she brought forth a man child, and she gave it to the nurse with great pride and delight...the child grew and she called his name **Menyelik**. The child reached the age of twelve...and went to the Queen his mother, saying to her, "O Queen, tell me - who is my father?" The Queen spoke to him angrily, "Why are you asking me about your father? I am your father and your mother; there's nothing more to know!" He asked her a second time, and a third time....one day, she responded, "His

country is far away, and the road there is very difficult; don't you want to live here?"When he was 22 years old he was skilled in the art of war and of horsemanship.... everything that young men should learn. And he said to the Queen, "I will go and look upon the face of my father, and I will come back here by the will of God, the Lord of Israel."

....the Queen...gave him that symbol which Solomon had given her: the ring on his finger, so that he might know his son, and might remember her word and her covenant which she had made [with him], that she would worship God all the days of her life, she and those who were under her dominion, with all [the power] which God had given her. And then the Queen sent him away in peace.

-*Kebrā Nagast (Ethiopian Orthodox Sacred Text, 6th–14th centuries C.E)*



Contemporary Midrash

The riddles that the Queen of Sheba put to Solomon attest to familiarity with the stories of the Torah, and especially with those about Gentiles (the daughters of Lot, Balaam and Job). The Queen's interest in Jewish culture is consistent with the tradition that her encounter with Solomon led to her conversion to Judaism (see below). The main shared element of all her riddles is that they are concerned with gender: the first focuses on women, the two middle riddles relate to males and females, and the fourth, to men. The first riddle pertains to the female's birth cycle: menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and nursing. The riddle is elusive, since its verbs are couched in the masculine: "*yotzim* [issue] ... *nikhnasim* [enter] ... *mozgim* [offer drink]," and Solomon's wisdom is patent in his discovery of the solution in feminine matters. The second riddle is about the family unit. It threatens the generational hierarchy within the family, by interchanging father and grandfather, husband and father, mother and sister. The solution restores the normal order, since it reveals that this is an exceptional case, which held good only for the daughters of Lot. The third riddle indicates the differences between males and females that are already noticeable in young children, and is connected to the shame felt by girls at publicly exposing parts of their bodies; Solomon's wisdom is evident in his knowledge of human nature. The last riddle regards male sexuality and distinguishes between someone who underwent circumcision and one who remained uncircumcised. Solomon shows that this physical difference has spiritual consequences, since these two groups exhibit disparate religious behavior. King Solomon's ability to answer the Queen's four questions is indicative of his wisdom, since he is as cognizant of female nature as of the male character.

- *Tamar Kedari*