

Assefa, Daniel ; Belachew, Tekletsadik

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2 | **Revisiting and Re-membering the Queen of Sheba**

The daughter of Wisdom, thirsty for Wisdom

Daniel Assefa & Tekletsadik Belachew

Introduction

Ethiopian literature and art, especially the epic “Kebra Nagast” (KN, The Glory of the Kings) reserves a unique place for the Queen of Sheba, the biblical figure who went to visit King Solomon (1 Kings 10), and was praised by Jesus for her search of Wisdom (Matthew 12:42). The way this fascinating figure has been described and understood in Ethiopian texts, starting from traditional Ethiopian biblical commentaries, is worth studying. While the references to the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian literature are difficult to exhaust due to their extraordinary abundance, this essay will focus on the Bible and the KN in terms of theology and hermeneutics. It will explore the gender constructions and roles associated with Queen of Sheba, and interrogate her story for possible feminist models it offers. While the paper will highlight that Queen of Sheba is constructed within patriarchal thought, the paper will particularly explore how the story of the Queen Sheba embodies theological leadership that transgresses gender-based dualisms and hierarchies to offer liberating paradigms for all members of the community. Accordingly, it has three parts: 1) Riddles of Wisdom: The Queen of Sheba in the Bible; 2) The daughter of Wisdom, thirsty for Wisdom: The Queen of Sheba in the Kebra Nagast; and 3) Theological Virtues: Insights from the Narrative of the Queen of Sheba for African Women Theologies.

1. Riddles of Wisdom: The Queen of Sheba in the Bible

Hearing about wisdom

In the book of Kings various people encountered King Solomon. That other people came to witness the wisdom of Solomon is mentioned in 1 King 5:9-14. Nevertheless, the Queen of Sheba is the only one mentioned alone, as an individual who went that far in search of Wisdom. Other people who met king Solomon did it for other interests.

All Isra'el heard of the decision the king had made and held the king in awe, for they saw that God's wisdom was in him, enabling him to render justice properly. (1 Ki 3:28 CJB)

Other leaders went to look for resources and economic benefits. Others looked for weapons or for expertise for military advantages. In the first Book of Kings, we see the Queen of the Sheba is interested in Wisdom. She decides that it is worthwhile to travel a long distance to meet a wise person, the famous King Solomon. This shows in the first place that the Queen of Sheba was attentive to what goes around the world concerning wisdom. One listens more carefully to what one most cherishes.

Testing the wisest

The Queen of Sheba did not go empty handed to meet King Solomon. Bringing tributes as a token of respect is expected from a visitor. The gifts may be accepted from any monarch.

She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones. (1 Kgs 10:1)

However, the queen had something in addition. She went with a collection of riddles, which are not expressed in the KN in detail. Instead of the riddles, the KN presents poetic verses on the mouth of the Queen, who wanted to verify whether what she heard about is true or not.

When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon (fame due to the name of the LORD), she came to test him with hard questions (NRS). (1 Kgs 10:1)

Discussing and admiring wisdom

The Queen of Sheba engages in a conversation. It is not about military or economic alliance. It is rather about wisdom. It is a time dedicated to learning, to inspiration. This shows how wisdom is treasured by this Queen. The Queen observes and admires. She appreciates harmony and beauty. She is capable of marveling. For wisdom is the source of happiness and blessedness. She remarked,

Happy are your wives! Happy are these your servants, who continually attend you and hear your wisdom! (1 Kgs 1:8)

Her thirst for wisdom turned to admiration, doxology and generosity. The Queen of Sheba concluded her admiring speech with the praise of the God of Solomon.

Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness. (1 Kgs 10:9)

The praise then leads to a most generous gesture of gift-giving.

Then she gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold, a great quantity of spices, and precious stones; never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. (1 Kgs 10:10)

Gifts of any kind are gifts of the person's herself. Material gifts are only extension of a person – the real gift. This captivating story of the Queen of Sheba interpreted in the KN as an epic narrative.

2. The daughter of Wisdom, thirsty of Wisdom: The Queen of Sheba in the Kebra Nagast

The *Kebra Nagast* (KN) or '*The Glory of Kings*' is a medieval Ethiopian epic narrative that interprets the stories of the Queen of Sheba among other stories and biblical texts. It has lots of relevance for anyone, and in particular African theologians. Some scholars call the KN narrative a historical novel. Mercy Amba Oduyoye in depicting the journey of contemporary African women theologians whereby she played a

significant role in forming the Circle emphasize the role of narrative as follows:

In forming their liberative theology, many African women employ a 'narrative' theology, utilizing their life-experiences and sharing their reflections in the form of stories, thus extending the study of theology beyond the academic realm. They also express theology in poetry and lyric in an attempt to heal the dualistic breaches that have been imbibed from Western education. (Oduyoye 2000:220).

Paying attention to Wisdom around the world

The KN inserts a narrative that fills the gap in the Book of Kings. According to 1 Kgs 10, we only learn that the Queen heard of the fame of King Solomon. We do not know who told her or how she came to know of the reputation of the king of Jerusalem. According to the KN chapters 22 and 23, there is a loyal servant merchant by the name of Tamrin who used to tell the Queen Sheba regularly about the Wisdom of Solomon.

And each morning TÂMRÎN related to the Queen [about] all the wisdom of SOLOMON, how he administered judgment and did what was just, and how he ordered his table, and how he made feasts, and how he taught wisdom, and how he directed his servants and all his affairs on a wise system, and how they went on their errands at his command, and how no man defrauded another, and how no man purloined the property of his neighbor, and how there was neither a thief nor a robber in his days. For in his wisdom he knew those who had done wrong, and he chastised them, and made them afraid, and they did not repeat their evil deeds, but they lived in a state of peace which had mingled therein the fear of the King. All these things did TÂMRÎN relate unto the Queen, and each morning he recalled the things that he had seen with the King and described them unto her. (KN 22)

The KN tells us also the reaction of the Queen of Sheba to what she hears. The text explains why she decides to go and see King Solomon. It is not just a question of skepticism. She is rather delighted because she was fascinated by wisdom. She is full of admiration.

Captivated by Wisdom

The Queen of Sheba is so moved to the point of weeping. In other words, one sees that she trusted her servant merchant who was also a seeker and admirer of wisdom. TÂMRÎN is depicted as a rich merchant who supplied goods to King Solomon as well as observed the Wisdom of Solomon.

And the Queen was struck dumb with wonder at the things that she heard from the merchant her servant, and she thought in her heart that she would go to him; and she wept by reason of the greatness of her pleasure in those things that TÂMRÎN had told her. And she was exceedingly anxious to go to him... (KN).

Search for Wisdom at any cost

A difficulty is mentioned in the KN. The queen desires to go to Jerusalem to see King Solomon. However, it is far away. It is not easy to go that far. After a long time of hesitation, the desire to make the journey became so strong. She decides to take all risk for the sake of wisdom. In other words, the thirst for wisdom enabled her to confront all eventual difficulties.

When she pondered upon the long journey she thought that it was too far and too difficult to undertake. And time after time she asked TÂMRÎN questions about how, and time after time TÂMRÎN told her about him, and she became very wishful and most desirous to go that she might hear his wisdom, and see his face, and embrace him, and petition his royalty. And her heart inclined to go to him, for God had made her heart incline to go and had made her to desire it. (KN 23)

The KN then depicts a speech of the Queen of Sheba that justifies her plan of her journey to encounter King Solomon. The speech is a poetic praise of wisdom. The Queen affirms that wisdom surpasses all treasures here on earth. She confesses that wisdom is the best thing among all creatures. For the sake of comparison, she mentions honey, wine, light, precious stones, oil, meat, gold and silver. Besides, comparison, she also presents wisdom as the source of various values like joy, light, speed, shield, helmet, chain-work and belt, understanding, consolation, preservation of wealth and kingdoms. Also, the Queen compares wisdom to a mother, a protector, a place of refuge. The KN narrates the Queen's expression of wisdom in beautiful poetic forms as follows:

And the Queen said unto them,
*Hearken, O ye who are my people, and give ye ear to my words.
For I desire wisdom and my heart seeketh to find understanding.
I am smitten with the love of wisdom,
and I am constrained by the cords of understanding;
for wisdom is far better than treasure of gold and silver,
and wisdom is the best of everything that hath been created on the earth.
Now unto what under the heavens shall wisdom be compared?
It is sweeter than honey, and it maketh one to rejoice more than wine,
and it illumineth more than the sun,
and it is to be loved more than precious stones.
And it fatteneth more than oil, and it satisfieth more than dainty meats,
and it giveth [a man] more renown than thousands of gold and silver.
It is a source of joy for the heart,
and a bright and shining light for the eyes,
and a giver of speed to the feet, and a shield for the breast,
and a helmet for the head, and chain-work for the neck,
and a belt for the loins.
It maketh the ears to hear and hearts to understand,
it is a teacher of those who are learned,
and it is a consoler of those who are discreet and prudent,
and it giveth fame to those who seek after it.
And as for a kingdom, it cannot stand without wisdom,
and riches cannot be preserved without wisdom;
the foot cannot keep the place wherein it hath set itself without wisdom.
And without wisdom that which the tongue speaketh is not acceptable.
Wisdom is the best of all treasures.
He who heapeth up gold and silver doeth so to no profit without wisdom,
but he who heapeth up wisdom—no man can filch it from his heart.
That which fools heap up the wise consume.
And because of the wickedness of those who do evil
the righteous are praised;
and because of the wicked acts of fools the wise are beloved.*

*Wisdom is an exalted thing and a rich thing;
I will love her like a mother,
and she shall embrace me like her child.
I will follow the footprints of wisdom
and she shall protect me for ever;
I will seek after wisdom, and she shall be with me for ever;
I will follow her footprints, and she shall not cast me away;*

*I will lean upon her, and she shall be unto me a wall of adamant;
 I will seek asylum with her,
 and she shall be unto me power and strength;
 I will rejoice in her, and she shall be unto me abundant grace.
 For it is right for us to follow the footprints of wisdom,
 and for the soles of our feet to stand upon the threshold
 of the gates of wisdom. (KN 24)*

Here the Queen expresses remarkable theological statements through the poetic genre that accommodates metaphorical and symbolic language. This is indeed significant when one considers the unique place and potential of African proverbs and poetry for theological discourse.

The Queen then exhorts her subjects to search wisdom, to follow wisdom with eagerness.

*Let us seek her, and we shall find her;
 let us love her, and she will not withdraw herself from us;
 let us pursue her, and we shall overtake her;
 let us ask, and we shall receive;
 and let us turn our hearts to her so that we may never forget her.
 If [we] remember her, she will have us in remembrance;
 and in connection with fools thou shalt not remember wisdom,
 for they do not hold her in honour, and she doth not love them. (KN 24)*

The KN then puts the rationale for the queen's decision to meet King Solomon. Loving wisdom includes, according to her, honoring the wise person. She loves a wise person because she loves wisdom. In other words, she believes that wisdom resides and is manifested in wise persons.

*The honouring of wisdom is the honouring of the wise man,
 and the loving of wisdom is the loving of the wise man.
 Love the wise man and withdraw not thyself from him,
 and by the sight of him thou shalt become wise;
 hearken to the utterance of his mouth,
 so that thou mayest become like unto him;
 watch the place whereon he hath set his foot, and leave him not,
 so that thou mayest receive the remainder of his wisdom.
 And I love him merely on hearing concerning him
 and without seeing him,
 and the whole story of him that hath been told me is to me as the desire of my
 heart, and like water to the thirsty man. (KN 24)*

The narratives of KN describes the reaction of the subjects of the Queen. On the one hand, they underline that wisdom is already with her. They assert that she is not lacking in wisdom. On the other hand, they respect her desire to go in search of wisdom and of discovering the wisdom of King Solomon. They will hence follow her and facilitate her journey.

And her nobles, and her slaves, and her handmaidens, and her counsellors answered and said unto her,
 "O our Lady, as for wisdom, it is not lacking in thee, and it is because of thy wisdom that thou lovest wisdom. And to for us, if thou goest we will go with thee, and if thou sittest down we will sit down with thee; our death shall be with thy death, and our life with thy life." Then the Queen made ready to set out on her journey with great pomp and majesty, and with great equipment and many preparations. For, by the Will of God, her heart desired to go to JERUSALEM so that she might hear the Wisdom of Solomon; for she had hearkened eagerly. So she made ready to set out. And seven hundred and ninety-seven camels were loaded, and mules and asses innumerable were loaded, and she set out on her journey and followed her road without pause, and her heart had confidence in God. (KN 24)

The dialogue between Queen Sheba and her subjects is worth noting. She is open to tell them what she thinks and what she feels. She expresses her emotions, her marvels. She shares her plan. The subjects listen to her and appreciate her adventurous plan despite its risks. Listening, consultation and decision are converging here.

Blessed is the wise!

With remarkable epistemic humility the Queen of Sheba expresses her admiration and her desire to be the servant of the wise King of the people of God.

And the Queen MÂKĒDÂ spake unto King Solomon, saying, "Blessed art thou, my lord, in that such wisdom and understanding have been given unto thee. For myself I only wish that I could be as one of the least of thine handmaidens, so that I could wash thy feet, and hearken to thy wisdom, and apprehend thy understanding, and serve thy majesty, and enjoy thy wisdom. O how greatly have pleased me thy answering, and the sweetness of thy voice, and the beauty of thy going, and the graciousness of thy words, and the readiness thereof. The sweetness of thy voice maketh the heart to rejoice, and maketh the bones fat, and giveth courage

to hearts, and goodwill and grace to the lips, and strength to the gait. I look upon thee and I see that thy wisdom is immeasurable and thine understanding inexhaustible, and that it is like unto a lamp in the darkness, and like unto a pomegranate in the garden, and like unto a pearl in the sea, and like unto the Morning Star among the stars, and like unto the light of the moon in the mist, and like unto a glorious dawn and sunrise in the heavens. And I give thanks unto Him that brought me hither and showed thee to me, and made me to tread upon the threshold of thy gate, and made me to hear thy voice". (KN 26)

***Reciprocal Recognition of Wisdom and Exchange of Gifts:
King Solomon recognizes the wisdom of the Queen of Sheba***

And King Solomon answered and said unto her, "Wisdom and understanding spring from thee thyself. As for me, [I only possess them] in the measure in which the God of ISRAEL hath given [them] to me because I asked and entreated them from Him. And thou, although thou dost not know the God of ISRAEL, hast this wisdom which thou hast made to grow in thine heart, and [it hath made thee come] to see me, the vassal and slave of my God, and the building of His sanctuary which I am establishing, and wherein I serve and move round about my Lady, the Tabernacle of the Law of the God of ISRAEL, the holy and heavenly ZION. Now, I am the slave of my God, and I am not a free man; I do not serve according to my own will but according to His Will. And this speech of mine springeth not from myself, but I give utterance only to what He maketh me to utter. Whatsoever He commandeth me that I do; wheresoever He wisheth me to go thither I go; whatsoever He teacheth me that I speak; that concerning which He giveth me wisdom I understand. For from being only dust He hath made me flesh, and from being only water He hath made me a solid man, and from being only an ejected drop, which shot forth upon the ground would have dried up on the surface of the earth, He hath fashioned me in His own likeness and hath made me in His own image". (KN 26)

The third part of this paper is to point out the major theological lessons in the biblical text and the narrative interpretation of the KN that possibly nurture contemporary African women theological reflections and practices.

3. Theological Virtues: Insights from the Narrative of the Queen of Sheba for African Women Theologies

There are a number of theological insights that can be drawn from the story of the Queen of Sheba from the Bible as well as the epic narrative of KN. There are at least three major insights we choose to highlight namely permanent quest for wisdom, conviviality and dialogue. Towards African virtuous and moral theologizing, proverbs, poetry and riddles play innovative and creative role (Bujo 2018:25).

Permanent quest for wisdom

The Queen of Sheba does not stop learning and searching for wisdom. Although she is wise, as mentioned by her subjects, she still wants to grow in wisdom. Here, one may mention Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who defines perfection as constant growth, as something dynamic (Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses). Gregory of Nyssa presents Moses and Saint Paul as models of perfection, because both of them continue to grow in their loves and knowledge of God.

Incompleteness is an epistemic stance that the Queen of Sheba exhibited in her search for wisdom. Her community and King Solomon himself acknowledged she is a wise woman. And yet, she seeks more. Her humility her self-understanding of imperfection was part of her journey. The queen was not self-sufficient but someone who is in permanent work in progress in her continued quest for wisdom. As the famous story of “The Complete Gentleman” written by Amos Tutuola and as explained by Francis B. Nyamnjoh, incompleteness and indebtedness are important virtues as permanent quest for wisdom. African theological wisdom particularly among the Circle is a search that is not a lonely journey but a deliberate activity of ubuntuism that seeks wisdom in the community of past, present and future. In the words of Nyamnjoh, “For Tutuola, incompleteness is not a condition to shy away from, or be guilty of, or feel that you need to work hard to complete it, but rather just something to recognize and embrace.” (Nyamnjoh 2022:594). This leads us to the next section namely conviviality over against isolated independence.

Conviviality

Conviviality may include several points but here we are limiting it to gifts and hospitality. The exchange of gifts and wisdom through riddles lends to the concept of convivial African women's theological scholarship. Incompleteness, interconnections, interdependence, reciprocity and mutuality suggests an important scholarly virtue summed up in conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2017:61). One needs to learn to be both guest and host, as well as embrace the "stranger" as his/her own. Across the continent of Africa, particularly in the rural areas, welcoming guests, offering meals and other gestures of hospitality are common practices. Some African theologians proposed Guest Christology as a helpful, Incarnational, and culturally relevant theological category (Tiéno 1990). Can we extend such a superb culture of hospitality to African theologians to ponder about it? Conviviality implies hospitality and reciprocity of gifts.

Hospitality as a celebration and enactment of the cross is all about embracing the other. In Christian tradition, the theological idea of *perichoresis* (meaning "mutual indwelling," "making room," or "dancing around"), ascribes it to the holy Trinity and to God's embrace of the human other on the cross. The God who embraces us through the cross also calls us to participate in embracing one another. This is hospitality as an African cultural value and a character of virtuous theologian.

It is only love that dispels the sin of fear, exclusion, and alienation. Hospitality in the deepest sense is recognition of the image of God in the human other across differences of ethnicity and gender. The famous African maxim on communitarianism known as *Ubuntu* (in the South African language) says: "I am, because We Are!" The mystery of humanity involves recognizing God's image in the human other and affording her respect and dignity, as if we are seeing our creator and redeemer. Thus, the crux of hospitality is profound dialogue as an expression of understanding, respect, recognition, love, and embrace of the mysterious human other.

God is the ultimate and pure Giver and in Christ the Gift *par excellence*. God is the source of all good gifts and not in need of anything from creatures in return. Ethiopians mothers fondly quote an Amharic wisdom saying that can be roughly translated as "love is downward." This proverb

lays emphasis on the fact that the overflow of love usually descends from the mother to the child. Loving and pure gift is divine and maternal. Divine love-gift is more fundamentally unidirectional from God to humanity through Christ. This is true to wisdom, the ultimate source and the reciprocal exchange of gifts. No human person can monopolize wisdom and it is shared in the community of others imperfectly as incompleteness. “Incompleteness must be taken not as an apology, not as something you should be guilty of, but to say, that it is the way of the world, a universal; we are all incomplete, no incompleteness is exactly the same as for another person, but each incompleteness offers an opportunity for interesting encounters.” (Nyamnjoh 2022:597).

Dialogue

An African narrative theology employs folkloric orality and includes riddles. Such important ingredients of African culture and African women theologies ... gives context. Not only contemporary African women griots and matriarchs but also ancient African Christian spirituals are exemplars of the pursuit of wisdom. Earliest examples are including ancient African mothers who witnessed their Christian faith through martyrdom and in desert spirituality offer wisdom. Like riddles, in ancient Christianity and particularly in the Egyptian desert, many visited Spiritual Mothers (*Ammas* or *Mamas*) to seek psycho-spiritual consolation. They were great storytellers. People often go to their spiritual mother and ask “*Amma*: give me a word!” In such riddle-like exchanges the female desert dwellers were vulnerable and honest (Swan 2001:32). They were also known for their subtle humor, joyful spirit, self-denial, simplicity, profound humility and hospitality, and their love for God and neighbor.

Mercy Amba Oudyoeye in describing African women-centered theology mentioned “It is intentionally dialogue-oriented and consciously invites and honors all voices.” She also adds “It seeks to replace hierarchy with humility.” (Oduyoeye 2000:219). “The Circle begins doing theology with theological discourse and dialogue which then nurtures liberative and transformative thinking. Such reflection urges action. Action leads to further reflection, which then flows back into praxis.” (Oduyoeye 2000:220). The Circle creates a space for women African theology do not exclude women and their perspective (Mombo 2003:91-103).

African Women Christian theologians are in dialogue with others including their spiritual ancestors. This requires remembering and revising the tradition such as the KN narrative of the Queen of Sheba. Kwame Bediako argued, “the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a church with a memory” (Bediako 2004:33). The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) remembers Mark the evangelist as an African apostle, St. Athanasius (the author of *On the Incarnation* and *The Life of Anthony*) consecrated the first bishop of Ethiopia St. Frumentius (Belachew 2021:170-173). He stated, the Ethiopian Orthodox memory of the Bible as the great national epic KN narrates goes back to three thousand years, to the Old Testament story of the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Israel, the ark of covenant and the New Testament together (Bediako 2004:33).

CONCLUSION

The Queen of Sheba is a humble leader, thirsty of Wisdom. The Bible presents her as a wise queen who marvels at the discovery of mystery and knowledge, open-minded to learning, inquisitive, not relying on hearsay but ready to verify, and open to admiration. After appreciating what she sees, she congratulates the wise, including those who live with the wise king – the wisdom community. Her permanent quest for wisdom indicates that she was already wise, knew riddles and was capable of testing Solomon. Yet her wisdom consists also in her desire to be wiser.

From an intellectual curiosity that seeks wisdom at a sacrificial cost and admiration, the Queen of Sheba moves to generosity and doxology. One learns from this Queen important values for East and Central African women theologians, namely humility, a thirst for learning, capacity to admire, readiness to praise God and generosity or conviviality as a fruit of happiness.

The KN, which means the glory of kings, fills gaps so that the reader of the first Book of Kings understands better why and how the Queen of Sheba decided to go to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon. Accordingly, the main reason of her journey is a burning love of wisdom and the conviction that the wise persons are embodiment of wisdom. If wisdom is the best thing among all creatures, the most precious creature of God, theological

inquires should take seriously the theme of wisdom. This is true when one appreciates that wisdom is an attribute of God in the Sacred Scriptures. One may thus affirm that lady wisdom called the Queen of Sheba to eat from her banquet. And the queen's positive response becomes a model for East and Central African women theologians to imitate as it is praised by Christ in the Gospel. If she travelled so far in search of wisdom, what does it take for contemporary African theologians needs in order to discover the treasure of the Kingdom of God.

East and Central African women theologians can get valuable insights from the love of wisdom, conviviality, the dialogical search for wisdom exercised in the life of the Queen of Sheba through revisiting and remembering the queen of Sheba both from the biblical text and the narrative of the Kebra Nagast. To end with the prayer of Oduyoye:

“My experience is that whether the fire of faith smoulders in the ashes of wrong, we affirm that the grace of God will fan the dying embers into active flames.” (Oduyoye 2005:282).

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