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Abstract

Solomon is an esteemed figure in Islam, venerated as prophet, king and judge. The Qur’an recounts his many attributes and these have been expanded and enhanced in a multitude of exegetical commentaries and in popular myths and legends. Many of his distinctive characteristics have also been visualized as colourful illustrations in Islamic literature, as frontispieces to important manuscripts or within intricate architectural designs. This chapter seeks to draw attention to the richness and sophistication of just a few of these illustrations but which are, nevertheless, representative of the quite vast repertoire of visual images associated with Solomon in Islamic culture through the centuries. In order to provide a contrast between these images and later European ‘Orientalist’ images of Solomon, I conclude by discussing the most famous painting of Solomon and Sheba in the Orientalist genre, Sir Edward Poynter’s *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon* (1890).

The visual images of King Solomon most familiar to many are those that have been inspired by his narrative in the Hebrew Bible and subsequently mediated through Christian tradition and popular legend. One of the best examples is Piero della Francesca’s incorporation of the biblical meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba into a rich tapestry of stories that centre on the discovery of the true cross of Christ,¹ based on the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Varazze. However, much less known are those traditions about Solomon shared by Judaism and Islam but absent in Christian interpretation. For example, Sarit Shalev-Eyni argues convincingly for the dependency of some Islamic miniatures on earlier Jewish manuscript painting that have no parallel in Christian iconography.² Lastly, and probably least well known, is the rich iconography relating to Solomon, distinct and unique to Islam, that illustrates the character of Solomon found in the Qur’an and expanded upon in popular Muslim myth and legend.³

The popularity of Solomon right throughout the entire Muslim world was such that stories and traditions about him and his court were appropriated in a vast number of political as well as religious contexts. Rachel Milstein notes: “Numerous natural and man-made sites bear Solomon’s name all over the Muslim world. Ex-

¹ Piero della Francesca, *Legend of the True Cross*, 1452–57, Basilica of San Francesca, Arezzo, Italy.

² Shalev-Eyni, *Solomon*.

³ The wider and more general question as to possible influences and connections between Islamic and early Christian Occidental art is beyond the scope of this chapter.

amples of natural phenomena include a mountain peak near Srinagar in Kashmir and large water ponds or reservoirs in Kyrgyzstan, Iran, and Algeria; mosques, palaces, and mausolea in Turkey, Iran, and India illustrate the products of his work. Many lakes and water installations, such as the thermal baths near Tiberias and around the Sea of Galilee, are said to have been initiated by the king.”⁴ In terms of miniature painting, depictions of Solomon in various guises, requested by patrons and painted by skilled artists and illuminators, were especially prized in Shiraz in Iran, centre of so much manuscript production and in Istanbul, capital of the powerful Ottoman empire. In this chapter, I want to look at some representative examples of these miniatures in order to demonstrate the rich iconography associated with Solomon distinctive to Islam. By way of contrast, I conclude with a brief examination of the most significant painting of Solomon in twentieth-century European Orientalist genre, Sir Edward Poynter’s *The Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon*, 1882. Even though it was widely regarded at the time as a superb example of an ‘Orientalist’ Solomon, I would argue that if we want to find the true image of an ‘Orientalist’ Solomon we will find him in Islamic miniature painting and not through the lens of nineteenth-century European Orientalism.

1 Solomon in the Qur’an and Islamic Tradition

The character of the biblical Solomon assumes great importance in the Qur’an, an importance that becomes even more developed and accentuated in subsequent Islamic interpretation and tradition. In the Qur’an Solomon is presented as a key prophet and an ideal king and ruler in seven significant texts (2:102, 4:163, 6:84, 21:78–82, 27:15–44, 34: 12–16, 38:30–40). He has the ability to make sound and wise judgments (21:78–79), take control over the winds (21:81, 38:36, 54:12), speak in the language of animals (27:16) and is a great lover of horses (38:32–33). Most importantly, he has control over the spirits and demons (jinn) (34:12) whom he forces to complete his large building projects and ‘whatsoever he willed: places of worship, statues, basins like reservoirs and cauldrons firmly anchored’ (34:13). Indeed, it is even suggested that, along with a number of other favoured prophets, Solomon should be regarded as a prototype of the prophet Mohammed (4:163, 6:85). Solomon’s encounter with the Queen of Sheba (27:15–44) is recounted at some length and ‘stands out as one of the most noteworthy stories related in the Qur’an, capturing the imaginations of early Muslim writers who embellished the skeletal Qur’anic account with a rich body of details’.⁵

In post-Qur’anic literature, traditions about each of Solomon’s characteristics was greatly developed and enhanced, most notably by the ninth-century Persian historian Al-Tabari, in his influential *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (The History of

⁴ Milstein, *Solomon’s Temple*, 188.

⁵ Elias, *Prophecy*, 57.

The Prophets and Kings), and by the eleventh-century historian Ibn Kathir in the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets). In these and other great works of Islamic literature, Solomon, as Rachel Milstein rightly sums it up, is regarded as unique for his three great achievements: first, he built the Temple over the centre of the world in Jerusalem; second, he maintained peace and justice in the greatest kingdom of world history; and third, he controlled the demons, harnessing them to his service and preventing them from doing evil.⁶ In addition, Solomon, again and again, is personally associated with important places and sites all over the Muslim world but especially in Ottoman Turkey and in the region of Fars and Shiraz in Iran. In Islamic tradition, Solomon becomes the archetype of the strong and just ruler, a leader and a saviour who creates a bridge between heaven and earth. As a king he maintains order and discipline, as a magician he offers healing, and as a builder of the Temple he establishes for believers a place of devotion and a gate to Paradise.⁷

The Queen of Sheba, not mentioned by name in the Qur'an but later known as Bilqis, features prominently in many guises throughout Islamic tradition. The eleventh-century historian Al Thalabi, elaborating on the Qur'anic text, relates how Solomon who had heard about the famous queen in a distant land, sent Bilqis a letter by a bird, the hoopoe, with a request that she convert to the true religion of Islam (and it is from this story that the hoopoe becomes an identifying feature of Solomon in the multitude of miniatures that depict him). Bilqis expressed her desire to visit the king but the jinn were fearful of a union between Solomon and Bilqis in case she disclose to him the secrets of the jinn which she had acquired from her mother. To prevent her visit, the jinn told Solomon about about her supposedly demonic legs: 'her feet are like the hooves of a mule and she has hairy ankles because her mother was a jinn.'⁸ When Bilqis arrives in Jerusalem, Solomon suspected that she might indeed be an evil spirit, or jinn, and so invited her into a room with a glass floor. She mistook the floor for an expanse of water and lifted up the hem of her dress to reveal legs that were too hairy. From this, Solomon deduces that Bilqis must indeed have had an ancestor who was an evil spirit, a jinn. However, the splendour of Solomon's palace is said to have impressed Bilqis so much that she converted to Islam. Some legends suggest that Solomon married Bilqis and bore him a son; other legends state that she returned to Yemen as its queen where Solomon visited her for three days every month. But, Bilqis, as we

⁶ Milstein, *Solomon's Temple*, 188.

⁷ Milstein, *Solomon's Temple*, 188.

⁸ For a detailed account of Al Thalabi's treatment of the story of Solomon and Sheba, with relevant references, see Lassner, *Demonizing*, 189–190. For a comprehensive account of a range of other Islamic traditions about Bilqis, see Stowasser, *Women*, 62–66.

shall see, was a source of fascination not just for story-tellers and authors; she became a subject of particular interest for artists and illuminators of manuscripts as well.

2 Solomon in Islamic Miniature Painting

Several strands of the intertwining exegetical and literary traditions about Solomon in Islam were richly and imaginatively illustrated and disseminated far and wide. The extent of Solomon's popularity is particularly evident in a vast number of miniature paintings from Shiraz and Istanbul, painted to accompany religious, historical and literary texts, such as Al-Tabari's history; they feature scenes from Solomon's life and achievements and illustrate his central place in Islamic culture and tradition. Several of these miniatures accentuate very specific aspects of the Solomonic legend with which the reader must clearly have been familiar and so could easily identify. If we can speak of a specific 'iconographical tradition' in Islam where specific characteristics of Solomon are copied and repeated, then the two dominant aspects would be the representation of his supernatural powers and his encounter with Bilqis, Queen of Sheba. These are the two aspects that occur again and again in illustrated Islamic literature and are frequently appropriated to suit specific cultural or geographical contexts.

Solomon dominates the frontispieces of many poetic texts and epics such as the *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (History of the Prophets and Kings) and the *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets)⁹ as well as Firdawasi's *Shahname* (Book of Kings). The *Shahname* narrates the history of the ancient kings from the creation of the world to the Arab Conquest and was completed in c.1010 by the Persian poet Firdawasi and dedicated to the ruler Mahmud of Ghazna who had gained power over eastern Iran and modern-day Afghanistan by the end of the tenth century. Solomon was deemed a most appropriate personage to introduce and adorn the *Shahname* since his inclusion served to associate a Qur'anic prophet with an earthly, temporal ruler. The image of Solomon was also used as a frontispiece introducing several other majestic and noble works of literature.¹⁰ Often the scene depicting Solomon is not linked to the text or narrative of the volume it introduces but rather reflects the concept of the ideal ruler; the image of Solomon, the revered prophet close to God is deliberately merged with the image of the just king or ruler, the merits of whom are expounded in the manuscript.

⁹ For a detailed study of the illustrations in the *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, see Milstein, *Stories of the Prophets*.

¹⁰ The images used as examples in this chapter demonstrate that as these work of literature were copied and re-copied, images of Solomon were gradually added to each version.

An illustration from a sixteenth-century copy of the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (fig. 1) shows the typical way Solomon is presented. The king sits on a raised dais or throne and is surrounded by the angels and the jinn over whom he has complete control. His raised status accentuates his superiority over the other seated figures – the jinn seated on the ground before him and the revered elders to the right. The horses on the upper left of the image suggest Solomon's love of horses, a Qur'anic theme (38:32–33) enhanced and expanded in Islamic literature.

A more detailed version of the king and his royal court appears as an introduction to Firdawasi's *Shahname*, an image most appropriate as an introduction to legends of the mighty kings of old (fig. 2). The painting represents Solomon and his court, including his vizier Asaf,¹¹ surrounded by animals, birds, angels, and jinn.



Fig. 1: *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (Abu Khalaf al-Naysaburi, 1577).



Fig. 2: Solomon Enthroned with Angels, Beasts, and Demons (from a copy of the *Shahname*, c.1575–90).

Hovering above Solomon is a large hoopoe, the bird associated with bringing news of Bilqis to Solomon in the Qur'an and subsequently used as a messenger between the two. The rich detail, bright colors, and lively composition of this frontispiece would have made it visually suitable for introducing the kingly adventures narrated and depicted in the following pages of the manuscript.

In some cases, events in the life of biblical Solomon, not referred to in the Qur'an, appear in popular Islamic legend. One such case is the biblical episode in which the wisdom of Solomon becomes apparent when Solomon judges between two women's competing claims over a child (1 Kings 3:16–28). Although the biblical episode does not have a parallel in the Qur'an, there were, nevertheless popular versions of the story in Is-

¹¹ In Islam, Asaf bin Barkhiya is Solomon's chief vizier. His name is not specifically mentioned in the Qur'an but rather alluded to in 27:40 'Thereupon one who had knowledge of the Book said...'. Muslim tradition describes him as an intelligent man, a poet, doctor and student of astronomy. Some argue that the origin of his connection to Solomon ultimately derives from the Bible where Asaf is referred to as one of the most prominent Temple singers. See Brosh, *Biblical Stories*, 103.

lamic tradition. Al Bukhari describes how a wolf took away the child of one woman and thereupon she claimed the second child as her own. When the two women came to Solomon for judgment, he said 'Bring me a knife so to cut the child into two pieces and distribute it between them'. The younger woman said, 'May Allah be merciful to you. Don't do that. Give the child to her, it is hers'. So, he gave the child to the younger woman.¹²

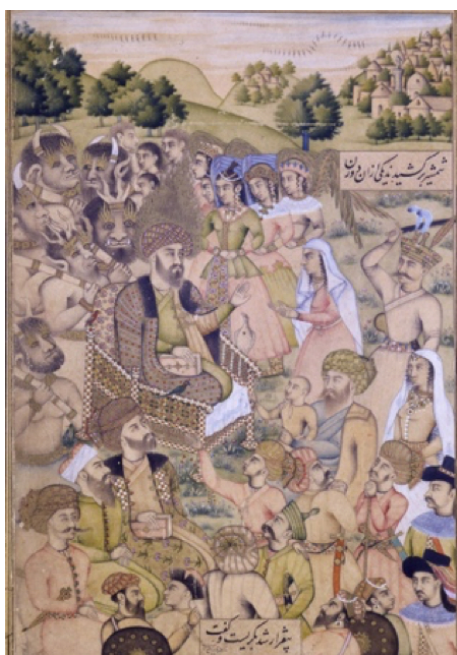


Fig. 3: The Judgment of Solomon (Miniature on an album leaf, 1664).

Al-Bukhari's story is depicted in a miniature from Isfahan (fig. 3) where the court of Solomon is set in seventeenth-century Iran. In the centre of the miniature, Solomon is seated on his throne with three birds by his side, one of which is the hoopoe. To the left of the picture the wise Asaf holds a book while on the right side, are two women, one of whom pleads to the king with outstretched hand, while a man stands between them holding a child. The wise king is surrounded by the usual figures over whom he has control, but the picture also includes Indians in flat Mughal turbans and Europeans in cavalier hats, suggesting the universal power and reputation which Solomon enjoys.

An important aspect of Solomon's character was his magical skills; a key symbol of his power in this regard was the seal or ring that gave him the ability to command demons, or to speak with animals. In several publications, Rachel Milstein has discussed in some detail how the magical qualities of Solomon are included and illustrated in a number of Islamic manuscripts, especially in those depicting the *Mirabilia* or Wonders of Creation. As an example, she refers to a sixteenth-century copy of the *Mirabilia* from Egypt where many details of an illustration of Solomon and Sheba are connected with the art of magic.¹³ She demonstrates how the author, scribe and painter of this manuscript, Ibn Zunbul, who was himself a practitioner of various magical techniques, must have esteemed Solomon first and foremost as a magician.

The legend of the seal of Solomon was developed primarily by medieval Arabic writers, who relate that the ring was engraved by God and was given to the king directly from heaven. Due to the proverbial wisdom of Solomon, his seal or ring,

¹² Al Bukhari, *Sahih*, 1.487.

¹³ For a discussion of this illustration (now in the Topkapi Museum Library, Istanbul, MS R. 1638, fols 122b–123a) see Milstein, *King Solomon's Temple*, 188.

or just even its design, came to be seen as an amulet or good luck charm in medieval and Renaissance magic and occultism. His command over the demons endowed him with healing powers and also allowed him, according to tradition, to write medical texts. The knowledge was given to the king in the form of the seal; with it, the king controlled the demons and forced them to carry out work for him that human beings were unable to perform. According to Milstein the seal of Solomon was hexagonal in shape and appears on endless Ottoman monuments and minor objects throughout the Islamic world and 'is the most powerful, and common symbol of the Divine, of magic powers and of divinely inspired loyalty'.¹⁴ In figure 4, it appears as a full page image in an illustrated copy of an An'ami Sharif, or prayer-book.



Fig. 4: Seal of Solomon (from an An'am-i Sharif, c.1790).

A regularly recurring motif in Solomon miniatures is his throne.¹⁵ There are many legends about it in Islamic literature, since it could be used as a metaphor for the importance and success of Solomon's role as ruler and judge. A link between the lion-protected throne and the administration of justice was also of particular importance for early Islamic rulers who were involved in the resolution of disputes and the dispensation of justice. Al Thalabi's description of the throne is unusually elaborate and contains many details not given in the Bible. The steps of the ivory-and-gold throne were flanked by lions who stretched out their paws to help Solomon's ascent and the entire apparatus rotated. It was surrounded and protected by palm trees, grapevines, eagles, and peacocks. The vegetation was made of gold and encrusted with rubies and emeralds, and the birds shaded Solomon and also scattered musk and other perfumes over him. Solomon's throne was flanked on the right by a thousand demons or jinn. Birds shaded the assembled company. When witnesses appeared before Solomon to seek judgment, the whole throne structure made two quick rotations.¹⁶

¹⁴ Milstein, King Solomon, 17.

¹⁵ For detailed discussion of the importance of Solomon's throne in Islamic literature, see Soucek, Solomon's Throne, 112–113.

¹⁶ Al Thalabi's description here is taken from Soucek, Solomon's Throne, 113.



Fig. 5: The Arrival of King Solomon (from a copy of *The Book of Wonders of the Age*, 17th or 18th century).

The notion that Solomon's throne was a mobile royal household is mentioned frequently in Islamic sources (see fig. 5). His mode of transport was a platform large enough to hold his entire army and retinue. When it was at rest it was supported by demons, and when he wished to travel it was propelled by those same demons metamorphosed into winds.

The eighth-century author Ibn Munabbih describes how Solomon arranged his entourage during those journeys:

Solomon commanded the wind to carry his throne and ordered it to carry the chairs of his companions. Then he sat on his throne. He seated the men on his right and left, and he placed the jinn behind him in this way - some sitting, some standing. Then he said to the wind, 'Carry us', and to the birds, 'Shade us'. Then the wind carried him and the birds shaded him and his companions among men and jinn from the sun. The horses were standing and the cooks sitting in their stalls at their work.¹⁷

As might be expected, given her importance in Islamic tradition, the figure of Bilqis features in many illustrated manuscripts, either alone or, more frequently, alongside Solomon. In a drawing, probably undertaken around 1590–1600 for the library of Shah Abbas, the fifth Safavid Shah of Iran, Bilqis reclines beside a stream while gazing at the hoopoe holding a letter from Solomon in its beak which is perched on the tree stump to the right (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Bilqis, Queen of Sheba (attributed to Sadiqi Beg, c. 1590–1600).

¹⁷ Munabbih, *Kitab*, 152.

The sinuous form of Bilqis, wearing an ornamented dress printed with animal and human faces interwoven with arabesque designs, echoes the flow of the meandering stream next to her. A single tree and bush frame her on either side, while two flowering plants appear above.

This image depicts an important moment from the Qur'an (27:15–44) when the hoopoe delivers a letter from Solomon to Bilqis. Believing that the queen worshipped the sun instead of God, Solomon wrote to her

'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate; do not act proudly against me, but come to me in humble submission' (27:30–31).

The queen subsequently responded with a letter and gifts and set off to visit Solomon in his palace. The gifts that Bilqis sends to Solomon are a great source of interest and awe throughout Islamic folklore. Meyouhas cites a typical account of the story:

Bilqis says: 'I shall send messengers to Suleiman, bearing gifts from me to him and I shall place questions and riddles to him in the mouths of my messengers. And if Suleiman solve the riddles and questions after my heart, I shall know that he is surely the prophet of Allah. Then I shall go to him and shall hear the Law from his mouth and shall keep it and do it.

Then Bilqis sent to Solomon: five hundred tablets of gold, five hundred of silver, five hundred double-edged swords encrusted with precious stones and two crowns of gold inlaid with gems and one great and precious pearl sealed in a case of onyx. Five hundred maidens whose beauty was only to be wondered at. And she gave all into the hands of Al Munzair, the son of Umar, her general and also wrote a letter to Solomon and sent it by his hand.¹⁸

The lavishness of the event is illustrated in a detailed and colourful way in a double-page frontispiece to Firdawasi's *Shaname*, a fitting introduction to a narrative that describes in exalted terms the wealth and prestige of the kings of old (fig. 7). To the right, Solomon is seated on his throne with his vizier Asaf by his side while the hoopoe circles over his head. In the heavens above, birds accompany the hoopoe on its mission. Solomon is surrounded by an array of angels sent by the queen and by groups of jinn bearing their characteristic weapon, a pole with a stone at its tip. To the left, other angels and jinn present gifts to Solomon, spices, precious cloths and in the top left, a pair of horses.

Serpil Bagci argues that frontispieces, such as that in figure 7, not only present Solomon as a fitting model for the kings and rulers contained in the national epic of Iran, the *Shaname*, but also reveal how the artists who painted these frontispieces wanted to be associated with Solomon also.¹⁹ Many of the manuscripts which have Solomon and Bilqis as their frontispiece date from the late-fifteenth to the late-sixteenth century and were produced by artists in Shiraz who belonged, in

¹⁸ Meyouhas, *Bible Tales*, 184–187

¹⁹ For a full discussion, see Bagci, *A New Theme*, 101–111.



Fig. 7: Bilqis sends gifts to Solomon (from a copy of the Shahname, c.1570).

most likelihood, to a corporate body, catering for a market extending to the most distant corners of the Islamic world. The dedication of such an impressive number of illustrated manuscripts to Solomon reflects their desire to identify their craft as artists (not a very respectable calling at that time) with the important figure of Solomon whom they considered to possess artistic powers also. In addition, they considered Solomon's vizier, Asaf, a constant figure by Solomon's side, to be a prophet and painter and they believed that it was he who decorated the throne of Solomon's palace.

While Solomon remained a constant figure adorning frontispieces to the Shaname in Iran, his characteristics as a successful and powerful leader and king were appropriated even more zealously by the Ottomans. As Rachel Milstein notes, the Ottomans, who inherited the Byzantine Empire and established in Constantinople a court rich with formal ceremonies, made ample use of the Solomon myth in their quest for legitimation. She cites a text written and composed for Sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople, stating that King Solomon himself had constructed a large decorated building, a pavilion within a garden, in the very precincts of the new Ottoman palace.²⁰

A richly illustrated manuscript, entitled *The Book of Solomon*, which was composed and copied for the Ottoman Sultan Beyazid 11 (1481–1512) around 1500 is embellished with an image of King Solomon as its frontispiece (fig. 8). In it, Solomon is enthroned at the summit of a seven-storey structure, above hierarchically descending floors covered with planets, angels, jinn, warriors and prophets.

²⁰ Milstein, *King Solomon's Temple*, 191.



Fig. 8: Book of Suleiman (Sharif al-Din Musa, c.1500)

Water jugs on the floor below the king suggest that the building is the Temple in Jerusalem. Milstein and Shalev-Eyni refer to a legend in which the Temple only became stable when Solomon later inserted large containers into its foundations and to the Muslim tradition of a staircase leading to an underground pool where two large pitchers are placed.²¹ Various categories of creatures are arranged in descending order below Solomon, relative to their place in the hierarchy of the universe. Quranic prophets are seated just below, a row of kings below them, then military commanders, angels, the jinn and finally the planets. The seven levels of hierarchy in the miniature are discussed by Milstein in relation to the symbolic shape of the Temple in Judaism and to the division of the universe into seven spheres, a well-known concept in different cultures. The ordering of the miniature in seven levels at the top of which are Solomon and the Temple also refers to the divine sovereignty of Solomon encompassing the entire universe. While

²¹ For full details and discussion, see Milstein, King Solomon, 19–21 and Shalev-Eyni, 157–159.

Milstein and Shalev-Eyni argue persuasively that the motifs were taken from earlier Jewish traditions,²² in terms of its current position as the frontispiece of the Book of Solomon, it fits into the political and scholarly aspirations of the Ottoman court around 1500 and, in particular, associates the figure of the Sultan with King Solomon. It helps justify Beyazid's claim to the throne and is regarded by scholars as the first Ottoman representation of King Solomon.²³

The association between the Sultan and King Solomon was made very explicit in the case of Suleiman the Magnificent, more commonly known in the Ottoman world as Kanuni Sultan Suleiman, meaning Sultan Suleiman the Lawgiver. The comparison between the two rulers, King Solomon and Sultan Suleiman, can be seen in a painting that acts as the introduction to the *Enbiyaname*, the first volume of Ottoman dynastic history and chronicle of Sultan Suleiman (fig. 9). Here, King



Fig. 9: Sultan Suleyman in the Guise of King Solomon (from a Manuscript of the *Shahnama-i al-i Osman*, c.1588).

Solomon is seated on a pulpit under a high dome, elevated from the surrounding prophets and scholars. An inscription on the wall of the monument reads, 'He is the Solomon of his time; he has the kingdom of Solomon in his days'. The hoopoe, iconic messenger of Solomon, rests on the pinnacle of the dome. Milstein argues convincingly that it is clear that the monarch described as 'the King Solomon of his time' is none other than Sultan Suleiman, who occasionally identified himself as 'Suleiman the Second' and was commonly referred to elsewhere as 'Suleymani Zaman', the 'Solomon of the time'. The king is seated in an elevated position above three other prophets with whom he converses. Two groups of three people, all wearing elaborate headgear, are located below the king and the group of three prophets. The trio on the left may be scholars on account of the open manuscript placed in the hands of one of them. The

three others are seated in the lower part of the composition and one of them holds an important astrological instrument, the astrolabe. Taken as a whole, the composition depicts a monarch who combines scientific knowledge with religious understanding, a combination that characterizes King Solomon but also, conveniently, represents a concept of the Ottoman sultan. Thus, as Milstein concludes, the

²² Shalev-Eyni, *Solomon, His Demons*, 157, refers to scholarship arguing that because of the unusual style of this illustration in Islamic art, it suggests a western source and possibly brought to Istanbul by Jewish immigrants expelled from Spain in 1492. She argues for a link between a Jewish Mahzor from the Lake Constance region (c.1322) which she sees as a possible predecessor.

²³ Milstein, *King Solomon*, 19.

composition of the picture does not represent an architectural entity but rather a particular concept of the Ottoman sultanate. The tower above the king represents the political aspect of monarchy, while the building on the right, where the other prophets are seated, reflects an ideal type of the royal Ottoman mosque.²⁴ The composition and particular details of this miniature painting are a visual expression of the qualities that apply equally to both King Solomon and Sultan Suleiman. The image represents Solomon as prophet, judge, scholar, head of state and builder of the Temple but it also represents the characteristics and achievements of Suleiman the Magnificent, the 'Solomon of his time' and, as such, it becomes very appropriate as the frontispiece of his history chronicle, the *Enbiyaname*.²⁵

3 Solomon in Nineteenth-Century Orientalist Art

In marked contrast to how Solomon and the Queen of Sheba featured in Islamic miniature paintings in earlier centuries, the figure of Solomon, and to a far greater extent that of the Queen of Sheba, served quite different purposes for the nineteenth-century European orientalist artist.

Since Edward Said's classic definition of Orientalism as 'a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient',²⁶ the role of the Orientalist artist has often been seen as serving the European imperialist discourse.²⁷ Many such artists (the classic example given is usually Jean-Léon Gérôme) depicted the Islamic and Arab worlds of North Africa and the Middle East as inferior and backward, places of unbridled eroticism, characterized by vice and indolence, in contrast to a developing, modern Europe. In depicting this exotic and distant world, female characters from the Bible, such as Bathsheba, were especially appealing as subjects since it allowed artists to present erotic scenes from the Middle East with a greater degree of sanction and license.



Fig. 10: The Queen of Sheba (Julius J. F. Kronberg, 1888).

²⁴ Milstein, *King Solomon*, 21.

²⁵ Sultan Suleiman's association with King Solomon is also enhanced by the account of his structural improvements to the city of Jerusalem. In Islamic tradition, the Dome of the Rock, associated with the biblical temple, is said to have been initiated by King David, completed by King Solomon and re-built by Sultan Suleiman. See Milstein, *King Solomon's Temple*, 192–193.

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

²⁷ See recent studies by Bohrer, *Orientalism*; Kabbani, *Regarding Orientalist Painting*; Kalmar, *Orientalism*; Kalmar, *Arabizing the Bible*; McGeough, *The Ancient Near East*; Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient*; O'Kane, *The Bible*.

The Queen of Sheba coming from a far-flung and mysterious land became an especially popular subject, as can be seen from a typical painting from this genre by Julius Johann Ferdinand Kronberg (fig. 10), which is clearly set not only in an exotic world but also in an Islamic one.²⁸

For the nineteenth-century viewer, along with a keen interest in oriental erotic fantasy, there was a great popular fascination with the archaeology of the Near East, growing out of the recent excavations in ancient cities such as Babylon, Nineveh and Persepolis, especially as more and more spellbinding artefacts from these cities went on display at major museums such as the British Museum and the Louvre. In particular, there was a desire to visualize biblical characters against an 'authentic' Middle Eastern background. This was especially the case with regard to Solomon. In nineteenth-century Britain, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba were located in two distinct worlds: a world of oriental erotic fantasy but, at the same time, archaeological precision. In this regard, the most influential painting by far was "The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" by Sir John Edward Poynter (fig. 11) in which he attempts to express the Victorian love of both sense oriental exoticism and archaeological authenticity.

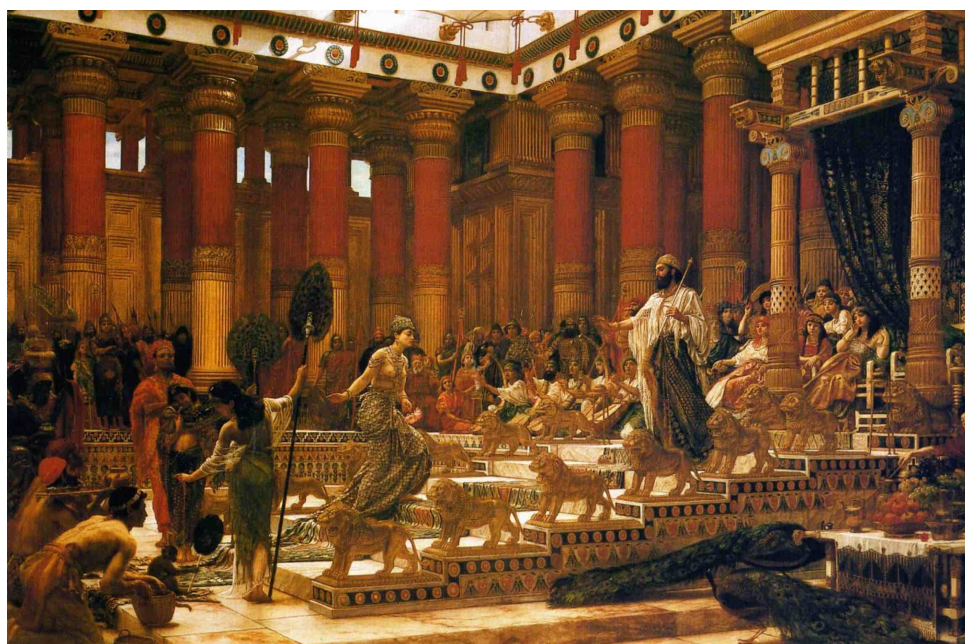


Fig. 11: The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (Sir Edward Poynter, 1890).

After the painting had been completed, in a hugely enthusiastic review, The London Times newspaper claimed that 'modern archaeology has given scope for a great deal of plausible guessing as to what 'Solomon in all his glory' was really like'.²⁹

²⁸ See full discussion in Llewellyn-Jones, *The Queen of Sheba*, 12–15.

²⁹ The London Times, 17 May, 1890, cited in Llewellyn-Jones, *The Queen of Sheba*, 14.

Poynter spent much time and effort planning and depicting the intricate details of Solomon's court and the entire scene is informed by a wealth of scholarly opinion. The architectural elements of the composition were painstakingly based on recent archaeological research in the Near East, particularly the newly discovered palaces of Nineveh and Persepolis since Poynter believed that the court of Solomon would have been highly influenced by the aesthetic tastes of these powerful empires. Indeed, research in 1851 had attempted to reconstruct Solomon's palace on the lines of ancient Near Eastern architecture. Following such conjectures, in order to depict Solomon's canopied throne, Poynter drew inspiration from the thrones of many of the reliefs from the ancient city of Nineveh (which were available for all to see in the British Museum). Poynter's Solomon is dressed in the fringed robes of an Assyrian king and his court including the women in his harem and his musicians wear pleated woolen garments that would have been familiar to Victorian audiences from the multitude of recently discovered sculptures displayed in the British Museum. In short, Poynter attempted to expand the brief biblical account of Solomon's palace with physical evidence drawn from recent archaeological discoveries in Assyria and Iran. One of the most striking features of Poynter's reconstruction of Solomon's palace is the magnificent throne, described briefly in 1 Kings 10:18–20:

The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps. The top of the throne was rounded in the back, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests, while twelve lions were standing, one on each end of a step, on the six steps. Nothing like it was ever made in any kingdom.

The twelve gold lions in the painting were inspired by an Assyrian sculpture in the British Museum, a colossal stone lion discovered in 1849 by the noted archaeologist Layard, originally one of a pair flanking the entrance to the Temple of Ishtar in the Assyrian city of Nimrud in Northern Iraq. Commentators at the time praised and commended the archaeological authenticity of Poynter's lion throne.

Hand in hand with Poynter's careful attempts at archaeological precision was his desire to imbue the characters in the scene with a sense of exotic and erotic orientalism. Exotic features are especially obvious in the young slave girl and the black skinned servant who stand at the foot of the steps but, most of all, in the way Sheba herself is presented. The queen is an exotic creature. Her hips are swathed in a richly patterned cloth, her naked torso is draped with jeweled bands and necklaces and her breasts are conspicuously exposed. In the nineteenth century, the colour of her skin was the focus of much speculation and the subject of continuing debate. In the Song of Songs, (1:5) the female voice states 'I am black'. So, was the Queen really black or was it only symbolic? If black, then African or Arabian? Should the queen be depicted as black or white? Poynter's original sketch showed that he used a white European woman as his model but in his reworking, he depicts the queen as dark skinned, a type of Indian princess, an exotic

subject of the then British Empire. Llewellyn-Jones argues that by making Sheba dark skinned, Poynter gave himself permission to eroticize her body beneath her jeweled ornaments. A bare-breasted, oriental Sheba was acceptable to and expected by a Victorian audience. A programme pamphlet to accompany the first exhibition of the painting highlights the orientalist credentials of the painting:

Balkis blazes with gems. Her costume, if costume we can call it, resembles that of a Hindoo goddess [...] behind her stands her black chamberlain and she is attended by two girls holding fans. Nearer the frame come more Ethiopians kneeling [...] all these blaze with barbaric colour [...] suggestive of the lowest civilizations of Sheba.³⁰

Poynter's work and perspective had considerable influence on subsequent British art, most notably the Scottish painter, John Duncan in his painting *Ivory, Apes and Peacocks* (fig. 12). The title is a reference to 1 Kings 10:22:

The king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea and once every three years the fleet used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory and peacocks.



Fig. 12: *Ivory, Apes and Peacocks* (John Duncan, 1923).

But, despite the name, the subject is clearly the visit of Sheba to Solomon's court and it reflects the classic eroticism of the Orientalist tradition. The bare-breasted Sheba sits cross-legged on the elephant, her female servants are exotic creatures and the entire scene is set within an Egyptian context. The appearance of Sheba's entourage, like

Poynter's depiction of the figures in Solomon's court, tells us more about the expectations of the intended viewership than about any imaginative adaptation or appropriation of previous interpretations of the scene.

4 Conclusion

The references to Solomon in the Qur'an and his many afterlives in Islamic literature have resulted in a rich legacy of imaginative representations of Solomon which have been appropriated in various religious and cultural contexts throughout the Islamic world, but most notably with reference to his namesake, Sultan

³⁰ Excerpt from contemporary exhibition pamphlet cited in Llewellyn-Jones, *The Queen of Sheba*, 15.

Suleiman the Magnificent. Not only do they offer us an iconographical tradition that is distinct from standard portrayals of Solomon in western art but they also help to dispel the myth of the lack of enthusiasm for figurative art in Islam, especially in relation to how prophets can be portrayed. The legacy bequeathed by Islamic miniature painters lives on in the work of contemporary artists, most notably the Iranian artist Mahmoud Farshchian in his depictions of Solomon³¹ and especially in the work of the Brazilian artist, Ana Maria Pacheco (fig. 13). Pacheco, inspired by Jewish and Islamic traditions of Solomon and Bilqis, painted many images of their encounter, including at least three of the episode of Solomon discovering the hairy legs of Bilqis and a series of six dry-point prints called *Sheba and Solomon* (2004),³² in addition to an Artist's book called *Sheba and Solomon with poems* by Ruth Fainlight (2004);³³ all her work contains references to motifs in Islamic miniature painting such as Solomon's throne and his iconic messenger, the hoopoe, as well as angels and jinn. The success of contemporary artists, such as Farschian and Pacheco demonstrates that, although the golden ages of Islamic miniature-making in Shiraz and Istanbul may now be just a distant memory, the Islamic Solomon and his world continue to fascinate and inspire both artist and spectator in today's world.



Fig. 13: Solomon and Sheba (Ana Maria Pacheco, 2001)

³¹ Mahmoud Farshchian (1930–) is a key figure in contemporary Persian art. For his themes, he has been inspired by classic Persian literature such as Firdawi's *Shaname*. In his paintings has focused on archetypal Islamic figures such as Solomon, Abraham and Joseph.

³² For Pacheco's work, see Roberts, Ana Maria Pacheco.

³³ Pacheco's Artist's book is available online at: <http://www.prattcontemporaryart.co.uk/sheba-solomon-book>

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