# A riddle, a sword, and an exotic queen. Reading the Queen of Sheba pericope (1 Kgs 10) in light of the judgment of Solomon (1 Kgs. 3)

# Abstract.

The description of the reign of Solomon in the Book of Kings is divided into two parts. The first, flattering section celebrates Solomon’s successes and presents the reader with a positive and much-appreciated figure. The second section, however, condemns Solomon and relates his failures. Scholars have debated whether the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10) is part of Solomon’s success or failures. This article argues that the story of the Queen of Sheba, in its final edited form and context, presents Solomon negatively. Furthermore, I demonstrate that this pericope serves as an inclusio for the opening story of Solomon’s reign, his judgment of the two prostitutes. I will show how the narrative of the Queen of Sheba both ends the section relating Solomon’s glory, highlighting his decline, and marks the intermediate point between the two halves of his reign.

**Keywords.**

# Introduction

The extensive narrative of Solomon’s reign in the book of Kings opens with a positive portrait and concludes with a condemnatory one. The golden age of Solomon begins with a report of the king’s political marriage with Pharaoh’s daughter (1 Kgs 3.1).[[1]](#footnote-1) Following this report, God appears to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon, framed by the narrator’s evaluation. “*Solomon loved the Lord*, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places” (1 Kgs 3.3). The context and formulation indicate that Solomon’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter did not lead him astray from the proper worship of, or devotion to, God. On the contrary, Solomon went to sacrifice to God at the high place of Gibeon and God appeared to him there and promised him immense success in his kingship.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Chapter 11 depicts Solomon in a decisively negative light. It references the king’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter as well, but with no political rationale. Instead, the text refers to Solomon’s affections. “*King Solomon loved many foreign women* along with the daughter of Pharaoh. Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women… Solomon clung to these in love” (1 Kgs 11.1–2). The text then goes on to describe how these women led Solomon astray, to the point that “when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God… So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kgs 11.4–6). Consequently, God again speaks to Solomon, though this time in anger. “…I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant” (1 Kgs 11.11).[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, the reign of Solomon commenced with faithfulness to God, where “Solomon loved God” (1 Kgs 3.3), and ended with “King Solomon loved many foreign women” (I Kgs 11.1). What critical point marks the beginning of Solomon’s decline?

Readers have struggled to identify the point of transition between the two sections of the Solomon narratives, with the debate focusing primarily on the evaluation of the story of the Queen of Sheba in chapter 10. Chapter 11 contains a clear expression of the author’s disapproval (v. 6), negative divine evaluation (v. 11), and negative prophetic evaluation (v. 33), but chapter 10 contains certain tropes that may be associated with both periods of Solomon’s reign; therefore, many scholars view chapters 1–10 as the ‘positive’ chapters and chapter 11 as the beginning of the negative ones.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet, certain scholars propose an alternative view. For example, Martin Noth suggested that chapters 1–8 constitute the positive unit, whereas chapters 9–11 constitute the negative critique.[[5]](#footnote-5) George Savran points to 1 Kgs 9.4 as the critical point,[[6]](#footnote-6) while Walsh posits that the transition from positive to negative evaluation occurs even earlier. He demonstrated that chapters 1-8.43 are formulated chiastically, and claims that a close comparison between the various sections consistently shows a positive evaluation of Solomon before the building of the Temple and negative evaluation after its dedication.[[7]](#footnote-7) Amos Frisch noted a discrepancy between the explicit evaluation of Solomon in 1 Kgs 9.10 and in an underlying implicit layer;[[8]](#footnote-10) and Marc Brettler offered a complex proposal in which the negative presentation of Solomon begins in 1 Kgs 9.25. Brettler suggests that chapter 10 was originally written as a positive chapter, but that over the course of its redaction and incorporation into the narrative sequence it became negatively charged due to its connection with the law of the king in the book of Deuteronomy.[[9]](#footnote-11) This article expands and buttresses Brettler’s argument through a literary comparison between the stories of the Queen of Sheba and the judgment of Solomon. Concomitantly, this analysis will also help clarify the significance of the Queen of Sheba narrative itself.

# Chapter 11 as the beginning of the end

Many scholars have argued, as mentioned above, that the negative evaluation of Solomon only begins in chapter 11. This position relies primarily on explicit statements such as “Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kgs 11.6). The story of the Queen of Sheba in chapter 10 initially seems to present both Solomon and the queen in a positive light, reinforcing this delineation. The queen is impressed by the king and by his wisdom, his people, and even his God. The king, for his part, is an exemplary host, and their parting implies a particularly successful political summit. This view may garner further support from chapters 3–10, which begin and conclude with interpersonal encounters, thus creating a strong narrative frame for this unit.[[10]](#footnote-12) The first encounter involves the two prostitutes, who are at the bottom rung of the social ladder. There, Solomon establishes his status as a judge and as a wise, attentive, and beneficent leader of the society for which he is responsible (1 Kgs 3.16–28). The second encounter is with the exotic queen who comes from a distant land to assess the king, having heard rumors of Solomon’s extraordinary wisdom. On the surface, this second story appears to establish Solomon’s status as a world-renowned leader.[[11]](#footnote-13) In this context, J.T. Walsh pointed out the motifs of wisdom, wealth, and honor—the three gifts that God granted Solomon—in both the opening and closing narratives of the frame. Thus, 1 Kgs 3.16–4.34 mirrors 1 Kgs 9.26–10.29, creating a neat frame for the positive period of Solomon’s reign.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 9.26–10.29 | 3.16–4.34 | GIFT |
| 10.1–10, 13 | 3.16–28 | A LISTENING MIND |
| 10.14–21  9.26–28; 10.11–12, 22  10.26–29 | 4.1–10  4.21–25  4.26–28 | RICHES  Domestic affairs  International affairs  Chariots and horses |
| 10.23–25 | 4.29–34 | HONOR |



The gift of wisdom is expressed at the beginning of the description of Solomon’s Golden Age through the story of the prostitutes, and at the end of this era through the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 3.16–28; 1 Kgs 10.1–10, 13).[[12]](#footnote-14)

These two stories share both a focus on Solomon’s wisdom and a particular concern with riddles. The first story features an unsolvable riddle: How to determine the identity of the mother of the live infant? Solomon solves this riddle, and the readers are privy to both the riddle and its solution.[[13]](#footnote-15) The second story also contains riddles (*ḥîdôt*, 1 Kgs 10.1), but Scripture does not record their content. In addition, both stories feature unnamed female figures whose primary significance lies in the social status that they represent and in their roles as foils who highlight the figure of King Solomon.[[14]](#footnote-16) Thus, the encounters constitute a unified literary frame for the unit, which encourages the reader to view chapter 10 as its culmination and conclusion.

Yet, a comparison between chapters 3 and 10 attests not only to similarities, but to contrasts as well. So, for example, while the anonymous female characters in chapter 3 are prostitutes, representing the bottom of the social hierarchy, in chapter 10 the nameless female character is a queen who represents the top social tier. Thus, we can say that chapter 10 not only concludes the section dedicated to glorifying Solomon, but also serves as the intermediate point between his glory and decline. It concludes the first half of Solomon’s reign by mirroring chapter 3, however, as it negatively portrays these parallels it simultaneously acts as the inchoate stage of Solomon’s fall. The duality of this narrative link reflects the ambiguity inherent in Solomon’s encounter with the Queen of Sheba, as discussed in the following section.

# Implicit criticism in the description of the Queen of Sheba’s visit

The story of the Queen of Sheba stands out as mysterious and curious by virtue of it recounting that a foreign woman, a queen, comes to ply the king with riddles and to form political ties with him. Female figures in the Hebrew Bible are usually involved with childbirth, motherhood, and rescue, or alternatively, with seduction and prostitution—mothers or harlots. A story about a female diplomatic leader stands out as exceptional as compared to other biblical stories. Moreover, female royalty, when prominently situated in a biblical narrative, is generally depicted negatively, such as stories concerning Jezebel and Athalya. Therefore, the reader is initially struck by the unfamiliar, even exotic nature of the encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Furthermore, the Queen does not fit the trope of the exotic, foreign woman. Foreign women in biblical narrative generally appear as seductresses. They often contrast Israelite identity with their otherness, underscoring the motif of Israel’s uniqueness. The most prominent of these foreign women are Rahab and Ruth. As opposed to these two women, who eventually join the people of Israel, the Queen of Sheba surprisingly returns to her land and remains Other.[[15]](#footnote-17)

The story also includes many expressions of hyperbole. For example, “With a very great retinue… and very much gold… all her questions [lit. all that was with her heart]… there was nothing hidden from the king” (1 Kgs 10.2-3). These exaggerations create the impression that the narrator somewhat ridicules the royal encounter and its participants.[[16]](#footnote-18) The Queen of Sheba reacts with radical excess to what she sees before her eyes and her words are a pastiche of overstated clichés. Then, following her extreme reaction, “there was no more spirit in her” (1 Kgs 10.5). Solomon, too, wildly outdoes himself and gives the queen “every desire that she expressed, as well as what he gave her out of Solomon’s royal bounty” (1 Kgs 10.13).

The text’s description of all the Queen of Sheba saw is also laden with undertones of criticism:

When the Queen of Sheba had observed all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings (*ôlâh*) that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her (1 Kgs 10.4–5).

She was primarily intrigued by Solomon’s intellectual capacities—“So she said to the king, ‘The report was true that I heard in my own land […] of your wisdom […] your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard’” (1 Kgs 10.6–7), however, the above description then adds additional items in descending order of importance. After his wisdom comes “the house,” without clarifying to readers whether this refers to the Temple or to Solomon’s personal palace; Solomon's food, his servants, his servants’ clothes, drinks, and—appearing only as the final item on the list(!)—the sacrifices Solomon offered at the Temple. Consequently, the reader understands that the previously-mentioned house was Solomon’s personal abode. Is this list arranged in order of importance from Solomon’s perspective? From the queen’s perspective? The narrator seems to be criticizing both the Queen’s and Solomon’s priorities. His food is more impressive, or important, than the burnt offerings he brings to God. His house is more impressive than visiting the house of God.

A comparison between the Queen of Sheba and Hiram provides additional criticism. This comparison, not surprisingly, hints at implicit eroticism in the relationship between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. The comparison itself is encouraged by a mention of Hiram within the Queen of Sheba narrative:

Then she [the Queen of Sheba] gave the king one hundred and 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.Moreover, the fleet of Hiram, which carried gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a great quantity of almug wood and precious stones. From the almug wood the king made supports for the house of the Lord, and for the king’s house, lyres also and harps for the singers; no such almug wood has come or been seen to this day.Meanwhile King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed. (1 Kgs 10.10–13)

Hiram’s placement in this list is unexpected. Moreover, the previous chapter enumerated a partial list of Hiram’s gifts, in which he also bestowed upon Solomon one hundred and twenty talents of gold (1 Kgs 9.14):

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| Item | The Queen of Sheba | Hiram |
| Gold - one hundred and twenty talents of Gold | 10.10 | 9.14 |
| Great quantities of local specialties | 10.10 (a great quantity of spices) | 10.11 (a great quantity of almug wood) |
| Precious Stones | 10.10 | 10.11 |
| Record quantities | 10.10 (never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon) | 10.12 (no such almug wood has come or been seen to this day) |



A comparison of their respective gifts shows a direct connection between the two. Both gave Solomon one hundred and twenty talents of gold, quantities ‘never again to be seen’ of their local specialties, and precious stones. The nearly identical lists seem to imply that these monarchs were competing for Solomon’s favor. However, in the case of Hiram, these gifts were used first for “the house of the Lord” and only after for “the king’s house” (1 Kgs 9.10), in contradistinction to the Queen of Sheba’s gift—the perfume—which was presumably used for Solomon’s personal and intimate purposes. Furthermore, the narrative conveys Hiram’s infatuation with Solomon, giving him “as much as he desired” (1 Kgs 9.11)—despite being offended by Solomon’s gift of twenty worthless cities. This expression repeats in the second narrative; however, there it is Solomon who grants the Queen of Sheba “every desire that she expressed” (1 Kgs 10.13).

This implied erotic atmosphere is heightened by the inclusion of riddles (*ḥîdôt*) in the Queen narrative, with neither the questions nor their solutions disclosed. Why are they mentioned? Is it only to underscore Solomon’s wisdom? A comparison with the relationship between Solomon and Hiram may help expose the erotic nature of the relationship between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.[[17]](#footnote-19) Riddles, or “dark sayings,” are by their very nature involved in erotic sequences: they are concealed in their disclosure, and are ultimately unveiled only by the worthy respondent. Riddles challenge the boundaries and structure of reality, on ontological, perceptive, sexual, and social levels. Riddles are inherently erotic. They connect the disconnected and their resolution culminates in a feeling of satisfaction and momentary relief.[[18]](#footnote-20) Riddles enable indirect discourse, a tension between covering and uncovering, anticipation and reprieve, and a lack of clarity which leads to mutual understanding. They belong to the genre of laughter and merriment but also include an element of challenge, not only of finding the solution but also in their ability to describe the familiar world in an unfamiliar manner, one which exposes its absurd facets and the loose relativity of our knowledge. Therefore, as demonstrated by broad comparative studies on culture, riddles played a central role in wedding celebrations.[[19]](#footnote-21) The Bible also depicts riddles prominently in courtship and wedding parties, as is seen in the Song of Songs and in the Samson story.[[20]](#footnote-22)

The realm of love was used from ancient times as an arena for riddles which insinuate erotic content, a knowledge shared only by the lovers. The unbridled and undefined reality presented in biblical riddles matches the ancient model present in love riddles. These riddles create a certain tension between the various senses of the word “knowledge,” as they connect between ‘knowing’ the solution and intimate ‘knowledge.’ It is only one who knows love who can know the solution; he poses his riddle from this standpoint, his love which none other share, even if they are proximal to its source. The distance, either spatial or chronological, between the speaker and his audience, is a metonym for the kind of knowledge and experience which they lack.

Riddles enable one to insinuate erotic content regarding the bride and groom in a playful manner. The riddle is posed at the wedding, an event which connects the couple and their families; its playfulness helps relieve the inherent socio-psychological tension, and perhaps the economic tension, between the families, as well as the sexual tension that exists between the bride and groom.[[21]](#footnote-23)

It seems that the mention of riddles within the context of the Queen of Sheba’s visit, the foreign and exotic woman, intensifies the erotic dimension of the encounter. The mention of riddle in this story gives the reader the impression of concealment, including underlying inappropriate sexual tension between Solomon and the Queen.

To understand this criticism inherent in the narrative, as well as the central problem it addresses, I will now compare the two stories which frame the first half of the Solomon narratives: the judgment of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba’s visit. I will first analyze the judgment story, while noting the important motif of dichotomy within it.

# The judgment of the prostitutes: A dichotomous world

The account of ‘Solomon’s Judgment’ is often understood as glorifying Solomon’s name. This story revolves around Solomon’s wisdom, his discerning mind, and the proper use of the gift he received from God: “Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you” (1 Kgs 3.12).[[22]](#footnote-24) The entire story is comprised of dichotomies, clear disagreements, and sharp divisions. It describes an encounter between “the king” (Solomon, whom throughout the story is designated solely by this epithet) and two members of the lowest status in society, the “female prostitutes” (*zônôt*), who remain anonymous; the reader knows nothing about them other than their social stratum.[[23]](#footnote-25) Through this stark contrast, the story highlights both the power and magnanimity of the king, who—despite his elevated status—is willing to rule on a case such as this.

However, the narrative does not limit polarity to social class alone. Clearly, one of the seemingly identical two women is telling the truth while the other is lying. One is the mother of the living son, and one is the mother of the dead child. Dichotomies abound: between truth and falsehood, between life and death, between dawn and dusk, between men and women,[[24]](#footnote-26) and between the king’s divinely-endowed ability to judge the case and the helplessness of the commoners.[[25]](#footnote-27) These numerous binaries reflect a perception of reality in which the world is clearly defined and demarcated, with stable and rigid boundaries between oneself and others, between identity and otherness.[[26]](#footnote-28)

The central tension is that the story features a woman who is both a prostitute—which represents a sexuality that is not under the control of a husband or father—and a mother, one who cares for her child’s wellbeing. This combination of unbridled sexuality and maternal tenderness challenges the well-ordered reality of the world, which demands that a woman be either one or the other. As Esther Fuchs has argued, one aim of this story is to reinforce the patriarchal institution of motherhood and to show that extramarital childbearing is a situation fraught with hazards, one that may endanger the child’s life.[[27]](#footnote-29) Thus, the women’s public judicial appeal blurs social boundaries and the stability that they provide for those within them. The plaintiff claimed:

This woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast.[…]But the other woman said, “No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.” The first said, “No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” (1 Kgs 3.19–22)

The happy conclusion of the incident is the restoration of harmony and the establishment of a renewed order out of the chaos that threatened society. The narrative leaves the reader, who witnessed the entrance of two women—both prostitutes and both mothers—with two separate women who neatly divide the roles of sexuality and maternity. This is accomplished through the anonymity of these women. The reader does not know which one was willing to forfeit the boy in order to spare his life, and which one demanded ‘dividing’ the child. By the end of the story, one woman is elevated to motherhood, while the other remains a prostitute, thus resolving the uncomfortably ambiguous reality. Viewed this way, the story is a fitting continuation to Solomon’s request at Gibeon: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern *between good and evil*” (1 Kgs 3.9). Solomon, by structuring reality in a dichotomous form and resting his judgment on the plaintiff and defendant’s reactions to his proposal, “rejected complexity and ambiguity.”[[28]](#footnote-30)

One of the literary techniques that helps demonstrate this disordered world is the lack of an omniscient narrator. It is solely the quotations of the characters’ dialogue that convey the plot, while the narrator’s intervention is limited to introductory phrases like “she said” and “he said,” and the only noted action is that “they brought a sword before the king” (1 Kgs 3.24). The only one who can resolve the ambiguous nature of these events is Solomon, with his gift of divine wisdom; not even the narrator appears to know the truth.

This narrative style has many implications for reading the story, one of which is drawing the readers’ attention to the sword. This action is a dramatic pivotal moment situated at the center of the narrative. The sword draws the focus of all who are watching. What does it portend? Will it reveal the of truth? The sword bifurcates the story as it would the infant.[[29]](#footnote-31) It symbolically cuts the Gordian knot of the riddling reality, sharply dividing between right and wrong. The story emphasizes that this is the most stable, reliable, and effective way to look at the world and to relate to it.

This point is essential for understanding the story. The cruel and grotesque verdict which Solomon decrees reflects a world based purely on cold, dichotomous logic. This is so striking that Ann Althouse criticizes the king’s unequivocal judgment, accusing him of violently imposing his own values upon the unfortunate women. Her criticism may extend beyond what the text implies, but it effectively demonstrates that the story reflects a world of bifurcated reality with unambiguous divisions. [[30]](#footnote-32)

Solomon’s extraordinary solution to the unsolvable case led the people to view their king as both wise and understanding. He was able to detect the subtle differences in the content and intonation of the women’s seemingly identical claims, and correctly identified which of them was the mother of the living child. Moreover, the sword test showed that the biological mother, the truth-teller, was the sort of woman who is worthy of raising the child, while the other woman, the liar, was unworthy, as his wellbeing does not concern her at all. Thus, the conclusion of the story has rearranged reality entirely according to clear and sharp categories. Nature and nurture come together and create clear interrelated connections.[[31]](#footnote-33)

The reader emerges from the story with an unobstructed vision of reality. For one moment it had seemed as though reality was deceptive, where the two women were so similar as to preclude any distinction between them. It was the judicial proceedings which demonstrated clear boundaries between falsehood and truth, between good and bad, between wisdom and malice, and between life and death. Unsurprisingly, the verdict reflects a zero-sum game, where only one woman can have the child. There is no attempt to reach a compromise because no such thing exists.[[32]](#footnote-34)

Though the reader finds it difficult to identify the real mother, and feels confused by the women’s testimonies, King Solomon introduces the sword test and re-organizes reality for himself and for his subjects. The reader is amazed by the wise king who creates clarity and organization by resolving the complex situation. [[33]](#footnote-35)

We can now compare this story to that of the Queen of Sheba and demonstrate the differences between the two narratives.

# The visit of the Queen of Sheba: Blurred boundaries

As opposed to the story of the prostitutes, which is construed by unembodied speech and the one visual of brandishing the sword, the Queen of Sheba narrative focuses almost exclusively on the characters’ actions. This fact is quite noteworthy, for even when the figures do engage in dialogue, the narrator does not quote their speech, and readers are left to wonder about the content of these conversations. For example:

She came to test him with hard questions… when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her… King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed. (1 Kgs 10. 1–3, 13).

Much talk, many riddles, several mysterious heart-to-heart conversations, but no direct quotes.[[34]](#footnote-36) While the story of the trial urged the reader to pay close attention to the women’s testimonies, and thus to solve their quandary, chapter 10 offers no such information. Rather, we find ourselves faced with a riddle wrapped in a mystery. What sort of riddles did the queen ask the king, and would the reader have been able to solve them?[[35]](#footnote-37) The sole excerpt of direct speech in the narrative is the Queen’s monologue which describe the purpose of her visit and, as such, become the focus and defining moment of the entire story:

The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. Not even half had been told me; your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard. Happy are your men![[36]](#footnote-38) Happy are these your servants, who continually attend you and hear your wisdom!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 10.6–9)

The author devotes four consecutive verses the Queen’s sense of wonder, while Solomon’s wise and impressive words remain shrouded in darkness. Her speech thus become the central axis around which the story revolves, and they attest more than anything else to that which is absent from the story: the content of the leaders’ verbal exchanges. If we also note the exaggerated expressions that suffuse the Queen’s speech, we can surmise that the purpose of the story—to demonstrate Solomon’s world-renowned wisdom—is problematic, and the reader questions its credibilityל. The story then becomes an inversion of the sword showcased in the previous story, that which convincingly demonstrated Solomon’s wisdom to the world.

The story of the Queen of Sheba stands as the antithesis to the story of Solomon’s judgment, not only with respect to the relationship between speech and action, but also in its attitude toward the accepted social order and its binaries. The Queen of Sheba, like the prostitutes, also threatens the conventional social order. She resists placement within the normative distinctions of social and cultural categories.[[37]](#footnote-39) She is a woman whose marital and maternal status do not define her. Her words revolve around wisdom, with no discernible hint of seduction or other stereotypically female practices.[[38]](#footnote-40) She glorifies God but there is no indication that she joined the people of Israel, and so she remains a foreigner. It can even be said that she is “a stranger among strangers” since, of the many rulers who came to Solomon to behold his wisdom (1 Kgs 5.10–14), she is the only woman. Furthermore, she functions in the public sphere as a leader, a role usually reserved for men, and is the only one who came not only to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but also to test it. On all these points, the Queen of Sheba challenges that which is familiar and known.

The nature of the relationship between the Queen and Solomon is shrouded in obscurity. While she does not explicitly seduce Solomon, she tells him “All that was on her mind (*lǝbābāh*).” As for Solomon, “there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her” (1 Kgs 10.2–3), and before parting he “gave to the Queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed, as well as what he gave her out of Solomon’s royal bounty” (1 Kgs 10.13). As shown above, the reader senses an intimacy, perhaps even erotic in nature, between the two leaders that goes beyond a dry diplomatic relationship; however, there is no explicit indication that any such thing took place.[[39]](#footnote-41)The mention of riddles in this context also lends the narrative an air of sexuality, as discussed above.

Finally, the words “for the name of the Lord” (1 Kgs 10.1) do not appear in the version of the story attested to in Chronicles, nor in the Targum of Kings. This conspicuous absence in these sources may suggests that the original story did not emphasize the role of God and that the redacted narrative in Kings may have added it, perhaps to blur the original context of the encounter between the sexes and monarchs.

We see that the separation and decisive division that characterized the beginning of Solomon’s reign have given way to blurring and ambiguity with respect to the purpose of the encounter, its nature, and the character of its protagonists. If we add to this the points raised earlier about the narrative’s critique of Solomon, we can conclude that Queen of Sheba’s visit perhaps explains why Solomon, who began his journey by walking in the ways of God, fell into decline and veered from the proper path. The literary analysis shows that at first Solomon knew how to distinguish and categorize, to cut and divide. As time passed, and his network of ties with neighboring and distant countries branched out and deepened, the cultural gaps which separated him from these foreigners began to diminish. The reciprocal ambiguity that developed in Solomon’s diplomatic ties inevitably spilled over to the personal, cultural, and theological domains as well. In this context we should revisit the riddle aspect of the Queen’s visit. Since riddles simultaneously hold multiple meanings, James Crenshaw, in his book on Samson, claims the following:

Essential to riddled is the setting of a trap. They endeavor to mislead by offering special language that masquerades as common language. Riddles therefore function to reinforce esoteric lore. Special groups or clans retain their uniqueness by use of ciphers known only to them. It follows that riddles establish worth or identity rather than native intelligence.[[40]](#footnote-42)

Following this observation, we can posit that when the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon share a “riddle conversation,” this may indicate a shared cultural identity. They have much in common, to the point of understanding hidden codes which pass through linguistic ciphers in the form of riddles. Within the context of the story, the narrator is hinting to those who understand the biblical code, and who are attentive to the context of this story, that Solomon and the Queen of Sheba became closer than was necessary. They understood each other on the deepest levels of language and culture, sharing an emotional and associative world.

Solomon’s reign began with a clear distinction between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, between male and female roles. Boundaries were not breached. The social order was maintained and the narrative at once preserved and affirmed it. The prostitutes came to the king only to get his ruling, and they naturally accepted his decree and his verdict. Solomon solved their legal riddle, and order prevailed.

By contrast, the story of the Queen of Sheba is permeated by a vague feeling, which gradually intensifies, that the poles are being drawn toward one another, compromising the binary structure.[[41]](#footnote-43) This poses a danger for identity formation, and the narrator presents it to us gently, when the first steps are taken.

Although the narrative of the Queen of Sheba seems to be a story of political success, other voices are audible immediately below the surface. These voices question King Solomon’s ability to protect the social boundaries that prevailed up until then. The story criticizes the king by describing how the pursuit of diplomatic ties, which began as political, can spin off in other dangerous directions - personal, cultural, and emotional.[[42]](#footnote-44)

This reality is intensified in the following chapter, which once again mentions Pharaoh’s daughter. This second reference is charged with an explicitly negative connotation, when Solomon failes to successfully meet the cultural challenge that she poses. King Solomon symbolizes the danger that lies in exogamous relations, in blurring separate domains. He models, and even embodies, the way in which such a decline is a gradual process, escaping notice. There is an elusive moment that is hard to pinpoint. The reader considers the visit of the Queen of Sheba and does not understand the danger it poses; but after reading chapter 11, in retrospect, the inchoate erosion is clearly detectable in her visit and in the beguiling riddles left unspoken.

Thus, the story of the Queen of Sheba concludes the golden age of Solomon’s reign, which began with the story of his judgment. The conclusion of this literary unit hints at the decline, which the introduction foreshadows, and particularly to the factors that brought Solomon toward his downfall. It may therefore be surmised that chapter 10, in its current editorial form and its placement within the sequence of chapters in the book of Kings, concludes the narrative of Solomon’s glory years, while it also functions as a literary transition point between this period and the era of his downfall. On the surface, the story seems to belong to the positive depiction of the king, but a deeper analysis reveals many ambiguities and complications. These countercurrents may also have given rise to the negative attitudes towards the Queen of Sheba as expressed in later exegesis. Her visit signals to the sensitive reader an erosion of the well-established binary structure which eventually leads to the disintegration of Solomon’s kingdom.

This reading grants deeper meaning to the fact that the turning points of this plot are unclear. The vagueness is the central axis that runs through Solomon’s stories, making it impossible to clearly detect the change when it occurs. It is only in retrospect that one can read chapter 10 and understand that the seeds of calamity were already planted there; even in that seemingly impressive and positive encounter, the question of Solomon’s religious-national-cultural-gender identity was put to the test, and he failed. It is for this reason that the final redactor of this set of stories saw this encounter as so threatening.[[43]](#footnote-45)

This is a fine example of redaction. The transition point between the positive evaluation section and the negative one is left unclear, a literary device which in itself embodies the notion that the blurring of boundaries did not happen at once; rather, it was the outcome of some indistinct moment within the narrated spectrum of time. The beginning and end points are marked, however, the critical tipping point toward Solomon’s decline is difficult to identify. It is a slippery moment, much as the lost identity of King Solomon himself.

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1. Biblical quotes are based on the NRSV translation with minor adjustments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Grossman has suggested that through repeated readings a reader might be able to sense implicit judgment beneath the surface of these verses. See Grossman, 2006: 252–257. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Frisch, 1986: 237–238. Frisch posits a contrastive purpose to the connection between the verses at the beginning of Solomon’s reign and the description of its conclusion. He emphasizes that this “points to difference and not to similarity… The likeness in the motifs serves to create the associative link and the parallelism that connects them, but regarding content, it indicates the clear contrast between them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Fox, 1995; Frisch, 1986: 72; Frisch, 1991; Gehman and Montgomery, 1951: 231; Jobling, 1991; Porten, 1967: 97, 128; Viviano, 1997: 336–347; Halpern, 1988: 144-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Noth, 1981. Additional scholars who view chapter 10 as a negative portrayal of Solomon include Lasine, 1995;, and Parker, 1988, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Savran, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Walsh, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frisch, 1986: 55. This is an especially key point, to which I will return at the end of the discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
9. Brettler 1991. See also the lengthy and important discussion in Camp, 2000. Camp’s proposal is based upon an intertextual and sociohistorical reading (see ch. 4). She suggests reading the story of the Queen of Sheba from an intertextual perspective between the Book of Proverbs and the Solomonic narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
10. Contrast, for example, the case of Hiram, the king of Tyre, who sends messengers to Solomon but does not personally meet with the king himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
11. This is true whether the focus of the story is upon Solomon’s wisdom (as maintained by Porten, 1967, for example), or upon his wealth (as per, for example, Brettler, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. See Walsh, 1993; and Walsh, 1996: 130-32. Walsh maintains that the dissimilarity between the two stories is striking. In the first part, the story of the prostitutes, Solomon uses his knowledge and wisdom to benefit his people; and, indeed, he gains the people’s appreciation. In the second section, a moment before the decline, Solomon’s wisdom leads to the acquisition of riches, as emphasized by the queen of Sheba’s visit. This use of Solomon’s wisdom, as opposed to its function in the distribution of justice, does not seem to contribute to the welfare of the people. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. For judicial stories and their motif of riddles see Crenshaw, 1978: 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. Demonstrating parallels between the two stories will not necessarily prove that both stories are laudatory of Solomon, as in Reinhartz’s claim that the two stories should be read side by side because both reflect positively upon Solomon’s character. See Reinhartz, 1994: 53. Parallels between the two stories also cannot prove that they are meant to be contrasted, as Walsh argues, positing that the story of the Queen of Sheba reflects criticism of Solomon, in contrast to his judgment of the prostitutes. See Walsh, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
15. On the fascinating comparison between Rahab and the queen of Sheba, see Gillmayr-Bucher, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. It should be noted that the repeated use of the word “much” (*rav*) is reminiscent of the Deuteronomy 17.16–17, which warns the king to not amass too many horses, wives, or gold. Thus, we may detect a clandestine critique of Solomon in this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
17. While the relationship between Solomon and Hiram is mentioned several times over the previous chapters, within various contexts, riddles are conspicuously absent. This absence, as well as the attempt to blur the appearance of the riddles within the Queen narrative, is noted by Josephus. According to Shalit, YEAR: 281: “The king of Tyre also sent Solomon wisdom and riddles and requested that he solve them… And Solomon was a sharp and wise man, who was not lacking in any of these, and with his intellect solved all these [problems].” Minendarus, who translated Tyrian documents from Phoenician into Greek, also mentions riddles in the Hiram story; as does Deos. See Tur-Sinai, 1950: 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
18. See Hazan-Rokem, 1988: 531-547. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
19. Crenshaw, 1978: 102-105. See also Noy, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
20. See Yadin, 2005: 14–18, 212–221. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
21. See Noy, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
22. See Deurloo, 1989. He emphasizes that the judgment story proves that Solomon was completely dependent upon God—his wisdom being divine wisdom—which lends the story its importance. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
23. See Althouse, 1992: 2. She writes, “Our male character is so famous that he needs no name. Our female characters are such nonentities that they too need no names”. Furthermore, they are presented as almost identical women, who work in the same profession and have identical children. This would extend the argument, ultimately derived from folklore, that both women are widowed from the same man. See Fontaine, 1986: 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
24. The Solomon problem juxtaposes male power and female behavior: man as the judge and woman as the judged. The female behavior seen here sets up two distinct and familiar stereotypes of the good and bad woman: the self-sacrificing, honest woman and the self-interested, lying woman. See Althouse, 1992: 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
25. See Lasine, 1987. Lasine emphasizes that the purpose of the story is to show Solomon’s understanding of human nature, and this is the focus of the story at hand. He states that “[t]he boundary explored in the judgment story is that which separates immediate divine knowledge of the human heart, from the inability of ordinary human beings to fathom the true character of their fellows” (Lasine, 1987: 247). So too, in Lasine, 1989. Likewise, see Sternberg, 1985: 167–169. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
26. Camp offers a sophisticated reading of this story, wherein the prostitute threatens the social order while simultaneously affirms it by clearly indicating the proper way to behave. The prostitute thereby becomes an important liminal figure. See Camp, 2000: 166. Bird adds that the complexity is even greater in our story. See Bird, 1989. According to Bird, Solomon’s judicial task is complicated precisely because the plaintiffs are both mothers *and* harlots. Since the ruling stereotype of a harlot is “a Woman of smooth and self-serving speech” from whom one does not “expect truth,” and the audience also expects these harlots to be self-motivated liars. But, Bird argues, the audience also expects mothers to be women who are connected “by the deepest emotional bonds” to the fruit of their womb. Since the account concludes with a lying harlot and a selfless mother, the resolution of Solomon’s judicial dilemma reinforces—rather than challenges—both stereotypes. See also Schearing, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. See Fuchs, 1985: 131. Furthermore, in accordance with patriarchal ideology, the only individual who can resolve the knotty problem and impose order upon the messed-up world of the two women is a man—in this case, King Solomon, who stands in for the role of the husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
28. Ashe, 1991: 87. Also, see Beuken, 1989: 6, in which the role of the wise woman is emphasized: “In this paroxysm of mortal danger, life prevails after all, and that through the power of a mother’s affection. When the real mother takes the step to give up her son to the other woman, she offers him in fact to life. This gesture is so convincing that the king no longer needs a witness. Motherhood and life bear witness for one another.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
29. Bringing the sword at a critical moment raises the question of whether the king needed the sword to arrive at the answer to the riddle, or whether he had already solved it, and bringing the sword was only intended for dramatic display, one which verified the king’s correct judgment. In Abarbanel’s commentary on 1 Kgs 3, he claims that the plaintiff who speaks at length is the true mother. Other commentators have followed Abarbanel and posited that Solomon identified the true mother even before the test of the sword. In their view, sword drama was meaningful only for the audience, see Levin, YEAR;” Leibowitz and Leibowitz, 1989-90. In contrast, other commentators claim that the sword assisted Solomon in solving the riddle: Solomon arrives at his solution by executing the sword test, thus demonstrating his wisdom. This is the direction taken by Lasine, 1987;” Lasine, 1989; Reinhartz, 1994; Rendsburg, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
30. Althouse, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
31. “The ‘true mother’ reveals herself in her biology as well as in her comporting words—she is ‘mother’ by nature as well as by culture… She is the ‘natural,’ the ‘real,’ the ‘true’ mother. And, by implication, in a culture in which motherhood was the obligation of every woman, she is the true ‘woman’” (Ashe, “Abortion of Narrative,” pp. 86–87). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
32. See Ashe, 1991: 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
33. Many scholars hold the view that neither the reader (nor Solomon) have any way of assessing who the real mother is. There is a good deal of confusion in the presentation of the story, which makes it impossible to consistently follow one of the women and mark her as the mother of the living child. A variation of this view is adopted by Sternberg, 1985: 166–70; and Van Wolde, 1995. They argue that the author does not at any stage intend to provide readers with the ability to discern who the real mother is since the focus of the story is Solomon’s wisdom. Garsiel goes even further, explaining how the author disrupts and confounds our assumptions and conclusions at every stage of the story up to its conclusion. See Garsiel, 2002, 2003. Concerning Solomon’s abilities, Theodore Perry writes: “But if his ability is to be explained as intuition or skill in questioning witnesses, he may qualify as a good judge but one hardly worth a trip from the Queen of Sheba” (Perry, 2014: 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
34. Furthermore, the few quotations that do occur in the story give a sense of equality between the queen of Sheba and Solomon. The narrator sets the voice of the queen opposite the narrator’s voice rather than in relation to explicit quotations of Solomon’s words. See Gillmayr-Bucher, 2007: 128, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
35. Perhaps because of this, most legends about the relationship between Solomon and the Queen deal with sexual tension and seduction rather than wisdom or in-depth conversations, perceiving the riddles as a code for the tension that typifies intimate relationships. See Ullendorff, 1963. So, for example, in 1 Kgs 10.8, the text of the LXX has the queen of Sheba say, “happy are your wives” rather than “happy are your men” as in the MT, and insinuates that the queen of Sheba found King Solomon attractive beyond his wisdom and wealth. The reference to the queen of Sheba in the New Testament may also imply a relationship that extended beyond diplomacy, though differently. She appears in both Matthew and Luke, where the context is most likely her conversion. See also Bellis, 1994–95: 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
36. NRSV reads “your wives,” following LXX. See the previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
37. See Lassner, 1994. In his view, later traditions perceived her impressive and unusual appearance as a threat, leading them to paint the Queen of Sheba in negative colors. An interesting discussion about this story as a power struggle between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ can be found in Bellis (1994–95). She claims, following Warner, that “…When female gender is defined as other than normal, women are forced into an impossible choice: to be female or to be normal” (Bellis, 1994-95: 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
38. Also, as noted by Gillmayr-Bucher (2007: 136), 1 Kgs 10.1–10, 13 belongs to the wisdom stories in the Solomon tradition. Like King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba is presented as wise, a well-known representation of monarchs in that era. Setting riddles is a genre in the wisdom tradition as well. See Camp, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
39. See Camp, 2000: 176; Gillmayr-Bucher, 2007: 138. On the various traditions in Jewish, Arabic, and Ethiopian traditions, see Pennacchietti, 2000; Ullendorff, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
40. Crenshaw,1978: 100. See also Perdue, YEAR: 534-535. The wise man views his task as one of comparing and relating in order to discover one common feature which will give what appear to be incomparable subjects an essence of unity or sameness. such a quest for unity is apparent in riddle formulation [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
41. The possibility of this interpretation, which sees the described reality moving into a state of undefined boundaries, explains and illuminates several prominent directions in post-biblical traditions regarding the significance of the Queen’s visit. Thus, for example, this possibility explains the Muslim tradition wherein the Queen exposed her thighs, and Solomon saw that her legs were hairy, for she was the queen of the demons. This tradition, which sees the Queen of Sheba as a demoness, or a mysterious figure with hairy legs, expresses the liminal nature of the figure of the Queen and the covert threat that she posed to the natural order. Is she a woman or a demoness? In the Second Targum of Esther (dated to c. 500 C.E), after Solomon sends the Queen a depilatory substance to remove the hair from her body, they engage in sexual intercourse, thereby conceiving Nebuchadnezzar. For a comprehensive discussion, see Lassner, 1994: 9–35, 161–67; Bellis, 1994-95: 18–20. This proposal also explains the tradition that Solomon impregnated the Queen of Sheba who then returned home with their fetus in her womb, thereby representing the dangerous cultural connection that was formed, for example, in the Ethiopian national epic *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*). Along these lines, there is an additional implied link inviting a comparison between the stories of the Queen of Sheba and the judgment of Solomon. In both, Solomon bestows life and gives a woman a child. Bellis asks, “Why is it so hard for us to imagine a man and a woman intellectually sparring without turning the woman into a demon or a sex object or into one who is converted to the man’s way of worship?” (Bellis, 1994-95: 27). Various midrashic stories and later literature which detailed the substance of the riddles also connect to the theme of challenging boundaries and identities. See Stein, 1993. The content of the riddles, as delineated by the various literary traditions, seem to challenge the orderly division of the world into distinct categories. According to the midrash, it is Solomon’s solutions which strive to return the world to its cultural order (as we noted that had occurred in the prostitute story). On this topic see Rosenberg, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
42. These observations follow the interpretive line suggested by Gillmayr-Bucher, 2007, and reinforce it through the comparison with the story of the prostitutes and through the investigation of the critical stance towards Solomon. Gillmayr-Bucher argues that the entire story of the Queen of Sheba is a dualistic story, with the primary and fundamental duality inhering in the figure of the Queen herself. She writes: “The queen of Sheba is portrayed as an iridescent person in a vivid dialogue of different images. On the one hand, she remains the foreign queen and she alludes to the strange woman. On the other hand, she is presented as a wise woman, who can evaluate Solomon’s kingdom not only according to secular matters, but also with reference to Solomon’s deity” (Gillmayr-Bucher, 2007: 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
43. Interestingly, the Chronicles’ version of these events does not include Solomon’s judgment, while the story of the Queen of Sheba is interpreted in a more positive and much less threatening manner. Likewise, the decline of Solomon is not mentioned at all. Perhaps the encounter with a different culture is not perceived as a threat to the post-exilic authors of Chronicles, but rather as an opportunity for growth and opportunity. Concerning the universal element in Chronicles, see Japhet, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)