A Riddle, a Sword, and an Exotic Queen: An Intertextual Reading of the Judgment of Solomon (1Kings 3) and the Visit of the Queen of Sheba (1Kings 10)

Abstract:

The description of the reign of Solomon in the book of Kings is divided into two parts. The first section recounts the glory of Solomon, celebrating his successes and setting a positive and much-appreciated figure before the reader. The second is more critical, condemning Solomon and enumerating his failures. Scholars and exegetes have disagreed in their evaluations of chapter 10, the story of the queen of Sheba: is this part of the praise of Solomon or does it rather describe the beginning of his decline?

In this article I argue that the story of the queen of Sheba, in its final edited form, belongs to the strand that views Solomon as a problematic figure. The story also points to the reason for Solomon’s sins. I further claim that a careful reading of the narrative shows that it is written in an antithetical form to the story that opens the account of Solomon’s reign—his judgment of the two prostitutes. This parallelism highlights the decline of the king’s image, and of his conduct. The literary comparison of the two narratives examines the gap between the golden age of Solomon at the beginning of his reign and the dark period at its end. Comparison of the literary bookends framing the unit of chapters 3–10 brings to light Solomon’s dysfunction in chapter 10.

Introduction

The extensive narrative of Solomon’s reign in the book of Kings begins with a positive portrait and concludes with a condemnatory one. Readers have struggled to identify the point of transition between these two sections, with the debate focusing especially on the evaluation of the story of the queen of Sheba in chapter 10.[[1]](#footnote-1) The present proposal for resolving this controversy will also contribute to solving the riddle of the significance of the queen of Sheba narrative itself.

The description of the golden age of Solomon begins with a report of the king’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter as part of his political activity, ‘Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh’s daughter and brought her into the city of David’ (1Kgs 3:1).[[2]](#footnote-2) This is followed immediately by divine revelation to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon. The link between the marriage and the dream is the declaration ‘*Solomon loved the LORD*, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places’ (1Kgs 3:3). The context and formulation indicate that Solomon’s marriage to Pharoah’s daughter did not lead him astray from proper worship of God, nor did it have any deleterious effect on his devotion to God. On the contrary, as part of his worship of God, Solomon goes to sacrifice at the high place of Gibeon, and God appears to him there and promises him great success in his kingship.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The negative presentation of Solomon also contains information about the king’s marriage with Pharoah’s daughter, but in this case the report is augmented by alliances with many other women, and there is no mention of any political rationale. Instead, the text refers to Solomon’s personal love, ‘*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’ (1Kgs 11:1–2). In the current description, the women led Solomon’s heart 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’ (1Kgs 11:4–6). As a consequence of this behavior God again makes a pronouncement to Solomon. This time, it is not about wisdom, wealth and honor, but rather the opposite: ‘I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant’ (1Kgs 11:11).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Is it possible to pinpoint the moment of Solomon’s lapse, from ‘Solomon loved God’ in the beginning of his reign to ‘King Solomon loved many foreign women’? Can the text provide us with an in-depth explanation of why this happened?

Chapter 11 as an Opening to the Negative Description

Many have argued that the shift to negativity occurs only at the beginning of chapter 11. This position relies primarily on explicit statements in ch. 11 that declare that ‘Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord’ (1Kgs 11:6). It is reinforced by the fact that the story of the queen of Sheba in ch. 10 seems, at first reading, to present both Solomon and the queen in a positive light. 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 resembles that of two leaders concluding a particularly successful political summit. Further support for this view can be garnered from the textual block of chs. 3–10. These chapters form a unified literary structure that includes detailed description of two encounters with Solomon. (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). The two encounters are placed at the opening and closing of the unit, thereby creating an aesthetically neat frame.

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 (1Kgs 3:16–28). The second encounter is with the exotic queen who comes from a distant land to investigate the king, having heard rumors of Solomon’s extraordinary wisdom. On its surface, the aim of this second story appears to be to establish Solomon’s status as a world-renowned leader.[[5]](#footnote-5) The two stories not only share a focus on Solomon’s wisdom but also exhibit a particular concern with riddles. The first story features an overt riddle, which is to determine the identity of the mother of the surviving infant. Solomon solves this riddle, of course, and the readers are privy to both the riddle and its solution. The second story contains hidden riddles, as the reader is told that the queen ‘came to test him with hard questions (בחידות)’ (1Kgs 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 role as foils to highlight the figure of King Solomon.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, the encounters constitute a literary frame for the unit, unifying its structure, and directing the reader to see ch. 10 as its culmination and conclusion. Chapter 10 therefore belongs within this positive description of Solomon’s reign. [[7]](#footnote-7)

The Enigma of the Queen of Sheba’s Visit

The above proposal does not resolve a mystery that is found in the story of the queen’s visit. Although the text states that the queen of Sheba came to ‘test [Solomon] with riddles,’ it recounts neither the challenges themselves nor the king’s responses. It is true that the reader learns that the visit was successful: ‘Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. And the queen of Sheba observed all the wisdom of Solomon’ (1Kgs 10:3–4), but Scripture does not offer the reader any hint of the content of the questions or their solutions. Many legends have been associated with this visit, and we can say that it has itself become a great riddle, challenging generations of commentators, scholars, and homileticists.

Even prior to the riddles themselves, the text raises a preliminary riddle; namely, the purpose of the visit. The stated reason in the text is that the queen wished to test Solomon with questions. However, it seems rather odd that a queen would undertake an arduous journey from a distant land only in order to see with her own eyes whether rumors about the wisdom of a far-off king are true. One of the possibilities raised in scholarship is that the visit came about because of competition between the queendom of Sheba and the kingdom of Tyre over alliance with Solomon, with each seeking to be granted exclusive access to desirable—and highly lucrative—trade routes.[[8]](#footnote-8) It may be reasonably presumed that there was an unstated rivalry between the two rulers, Hiram and the queen of Sheba, for King Solomon’s allegiance and ties.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Some evidence of this tight rivalry between the two rulers can be found in the text itself. In ch. 9 it is said that Hiram brought 120 gold talents (1Kgs 9:10). This same number is emphasized in the list of gifts brought by the queen, where it is stated that ‘she gave the king 120 talents of gold’ (1Kgs 10:10). Only, perhaps in order to gain a diplomatic advantage, the queen of Sheba supplemented this gold with ‘a great quantity of spices, and precious stones’ (ibid.). Immediately after this description, the story of the queen’s visit is disrupted by verse 11, which thrusts Hiram back into the picture, as the narrator emphasizes that ‘moreover, the fleet of Hiram, which carried gold from Ophir, brought from Ophir a great quantity of almug wood and precious stones.’ The expression ‘a great quantity’ recurs in both descriptions, thereby adding to the sense of tension between the two royal figures and the competition that pervades their interactions with Solomon. The parallels between them are striking: they both bring gifts of 120 talents of gold; immediately after the description of the queen’s addition of ‘a great quantity of spices and precious stones,’ the text has Hiram jump in and augment his gift. Corresponding to her ‘great quantity of spices’ he brings ‘a great quantity of almug wood,’ and corresponding to her gift of precious stones he also brings precious stones. To these details may be added the expression ‘has not come’ (לא בא כ...), that appears both in the description of queen of Sheba’s gift (‘never again did spices come in such quantity’) and of Hiram’s (‘no such almug wood has come’). Thus, 1Kgs 10:11–12 constitutes a parenthetical statement that calls attention to the comparison between the two royal figures. If it is the case, as we explained above, that the queen of Sheba and Hiram stood before Solomon as two alternative candidates for a political and economic alliance, and Solomon had to choose between them,[[10]](#footnote-10) then the declaration at the end of the queen’s visit indicates her success in the competition: ‘Meanwhile King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed, as well as what he gave her out of Solomon’s royal bounty. Then she returned to her own land, with her servants’ (1Kgs 10:13). This shows that Solomon accepted the queen’s request and acceded to her proposal to reserve the land route as a preferential trade route.

However, if this was so, then it is very surprising to read later in the chapter, that ‘the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks’ (1Kgs 10:22). This indicates that sea trade continued as well. What, then, did King Solomon discontinue? Which side did he choose?[[11]](#footnote-11)

For the reader (and perhaps also for the figures in the narrative), it is not clear whether the king made a choice and, if so, what that choice was. Is it possible that he deliberately left his intentions vague, so that each side could construe their own victory?  
If the story of the queen of Sheba is in fact positive towards both King Solomon and the queen, then readers are witness to the king’s sophisticated *Realpolitik*, which enabled him to successfully ‘walk between the drops,’ and between leaders, to give each one what they sought, thereby maintaining good relations with all the states in the region. As we will see, it is possible that the vagueness has an additional significance, which is critical for understanding the story.

Implicit Criticism in the Description of the Queen of Sheba’s Visit

A close comparison between ch. 3 and ch. 10, and a careful reading of the story of the queen of Sheba, will show that ch. 10 is not actually favorable to Solomon but rather criticizes him and even offers an explanation of the root of the problem that led him to veer off the proper path. Despite the possibility of competition between Sheba and Tyre, and of Solomon’s political machinations in that context—which seem at first glance to be clever and sophisticated, and even despite the literary framework formed by the two chapters, as noted above, comparison between ch. 3 and ch. 10 actually points to an emphasis on difference. It highlights Solomon’s process of transformation from a valued figure to a problematic one whose conduct deserves criticism.

The story of the queen of Sheba stands out as strange and mysterious, curious from the outset, by virtue of the extraordinary fact that it is a story about a foreign woman, a queen, who comes to ply the king with riddles and to form political ties with him.[[12]](#footnote-12) Female figures in the Hebrew Bible are usually involved with childbirth, motherhood, rescue, and giving life or, alternatively, with seduction and prostitution. A story about a female diplomatic leader stands out as exceptional as compared to other biblical stories. Moreover, when royalty appears in biblical narrative, it is generally depicted negatively. Thus, for example, Jezebel and Athalya. Therefore, a reader who is confronted by the figure of the queen of Sheba senses something unfamiliar in the story, demanding special attention. The further one advances in the story, the more one recognizes numerous expressions of hyperbole (such as ‘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’ in 1Kgs 10:2-3, and many more). These exaggerations produce the impression that the narrator takes an ironic view of the royal meeting and its participants. 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,’ 1Kgs 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’ (1Kgs 10:13).

Moreover, even though we noted the competition between Hiram and the queen of Sheba, and saw that they both brought 120 loaves of gold and precious stones, and that the queen of Sheba additionally brought large amounts of spices and Hiram brought a correspondingly large amount of almug wood, nevertheless, there is a substantial difference between the two figures. In the case of Hiram’s unique gifts Scripture emphasizes that Solomon used them to prepare practical things for his house and for the house of the Lord: ‘From the almug wood the king made supports for the house of the Lord, and for the king’s house’ (1Kgs 10:12; note that the house of the Lord has precedence). In contrast, with regard to the rare gifts brought by the queen of Sheba, the spices, there is no mention of what Solomon prepared from these, or the purpose to which he put them. One gets the impression of a more personal and intimate tribute—and thus, in our context, more problematic.

Another fact that leads readers to hear undertones of criticism of King Solomon is the text’s description of the things that the queen of Sheba saw: ‘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 that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her’ (1Kgs 10:4–5). The description seems to proceed from the most impressive item on the list, which is Solomon’s wisdom, towards gradually detailing additional items in descending order of importance. So, after his wisdom comes ‘the house’ (without clarifying to readers whether this is the Temple or Solomon’s personal palace), Solomon's food, his servants, his servants’ clothes, drinks—and only as the final item on the list(!) do Solomon’s sacrificial Temple offerings appear. It then becomes clear to the reader that the previously mentioned house was the house of Solomon. Is the list arranged in order of importance from Solomon’s perspective? From the queen’s perspective? It seems that the narrator conveys implicit criticism of the encounter and its participants, of their priorities and the things that they find impressive. Solomon’s food is considered greater than bringing an *olah* sacrifice to God. Solomon’s house is more impressive than visiting the house of God.

The Judgment of the Prostitutes—A Dichotomous World

We have established that the precise textual details in 1Kgs 10 evoke a sense of the discomfort and unease of the story with the general atmosphere of the encounter between Solomon and the queen of Sheba and with the fact that it occurred altogether. To understand the reason for this critical tone and what essential problem is posed by the story, we proceed to a comparison between the two framing stories, the story of the queen of Sheba and the story of the trial of the prostitutes before Solomon. First, we will solve the puzzle of the first story, and this will enable us to move forward towards solving the complex puzzle of the second story.

Most readers of the story of ‘Solomon’s Judgment’ have taken it to be a story glorifying Solomon’s name. At the center of this story stand Solomon’s wisdom, his discerning mind, and his 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’ (1Kgs 3:12). Even those who have tried to discern criticism of Solomon in this story cannot deny a fascinating literary phenomenon. The entire story is made up of dichotomies, clear disagreements, and sharp cuts. The story sets the highest role—‘the king’ (in fact, throughout the story, Solomon is designated solely by this epithet, simply, ‘the king’), opposite the lowest status in society—‘prostitute women’ who live in a single home (and they do not even have names; the reader knows nothing about them other than their social stratum).[[13]](#footnote-13) By means of this gap and antithesis, the story sketches the power of the king, who even from the height of his elevated status sees down to the bottom of the social ladder and provides aid to those in distress. The stark divisions in the narrative are not limited to the matter of social classes. In the plot, it is very clear that one of the seemingly identical two women is telling the truth and one of them is lying. One is the mother of the living son and one is the mother of the dead son. Dichotomies appear again and again: between the highest class (the king) and the lowest class (the prostitutes); between truth and falsehood; between life and death; between night and morning light; between men and women;[[14]](#footnote-14)

between the divinely-endowed ability of the ruler/judge to understand reality and the incapacity of the commoners.[[15]](#footnote-15) These numerous binaries, piled up one upon the other, reflect a perception of reality in which the world is clearly defined and demarcated, with stable and rigid boundaries between me and you, between mine and yours, and between my identity and your identity.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The great tension in the story is that a woman who engages in prostitution, and thus represents sexuality that is not under the control of a husband or father, tries to challenge the (ostensible) well-ordered reality of the world. This is a reality in which a child belongs to its mother, and the mother cares for the child’s well-being. The woman’s judicial appeal blurs social boundaries and the stability that they provide for those within them. Under cover of darkness, she switched the infants (or, at least, so claims the plaintiff. Alternatively, it is of course possible that one of the women, whose son had died, is trying her luck at court, and initiating a claim of possession upon a child that is not hers). The happy ending of the incident is the restoration of order, and the establishment of a renewed organization out of the chaos threatening society.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In this way, the story of the trial is of course a fitting continuation of Solomon’s request in the dream at Gibeon, ‘Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil’ (1Kgs 3:9).

One of the literary techniques that enables the identification of this content in the story is the fact that the whole plot is conveyed through quotations of the characters dialogue, while the narrator’s intervention is limited to introductory phrases like ‘she said’ and ‘he said’ and the only action that appears is ‘and they brought a sword before the king’(1Kgs 3:24).

This narrative style has many implications for reading the story, one of them being to draw attention to the act of bringing the sword. This is a dramatic and singular moment of action and it stands at the center of the narrative. All eyes are upon it, wondering about its purpose and whether it will succeed. The sword cuts the story in two, as it portended to do to the child.[[18]](#footnote-18) The sword symbolizes the possibility of cutting and dividing reality, as has been done up to this point, and also represents the ability to sharply distinguish what is right and what is proper. The story emphasizes that this is the safest, most reliable and effective way to look at the world and to relate to it.

Following the success of the act of bringing the sword, the people saw that they were led by a wise and understanding king, who posed an extraordinary solution or test. The king knew how to distinguish between two seemingly identical options, to detect subtle differences (either from the women’s speech, or by means of the reaction to the sword) or even to create them in reality, and he thereby recognized which woman was the mother of the living child. Moreover, the sword test proved that there is a correlation aligning the biological mother, the truth-teller, with the sort of mother who is worthy of raising the child, in that his welfare is the highest priority for her. A parallel correlation has been demonstrated aligning the lying mother with a woman who is not worthy to raise the child, since his well-being does not concern her at all. At the conclusion of the story, then, the reality has been arranged entirely according to clear and sharp categories. Nature and education and culture all come together and create clear inter-related connections.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The reader, who has watched a detective’s mystery play out before their astonished eyes, emerges from the experience with a clear solution. For one moment, it had seemed as though reality was deceptive, and the two women were so similar to one another that it would be impossible to distinguish between them. Then, the judicial proceedings proved beyond a doubt that there is a conspicuous gap between falsehood and truth, between good and bad, between wisdom and malice, and between life and death, and clear boundaries separate and distinguish them. We will not be surprised to discover that this sort of world is one of all or nothing. Either ‘It shall be neither mine nor yours’ or ‘give her the living boy’ (1Kgs 3:26). There is no attempt to reach a compromise because no such thing exists.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Even though the reader finds it difficult to keep track of the real mother and is left confused at the end of the women’s narrative, King Solomon himself chooses the sword test and thereby endeavors to re-organize reality afresh for himself and also for his subjects. The reader remains in a fog, but is amazed by the figure of Solomon, who is presented as somebody who understands the importance of a clearly defined and organized world and is determined to resolve the complex situation come what may.

The Visit of the Queen of Sheba—Blurred Boundaries:

Opposite this story stands the story of the encounter between Solomon and the queen of Sheba. While the story of the prostitutes is built, as we have shown, upon dialogue and direct speech, and the sole visual act in the narrative is the bringing of the sword, which symbolizes the possibility of sharply cutting reality, in the story of the queen of Sheba, conversely, the narrative focuses almost exclusively on actions performed by the figures involved. This fact is doubly interesting, for even when the figures do engage in dialogue, the narrator does not quote what they said and readers are left with many questions about the content of the conversations between the queen and the king. 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’ (1Kgs 10: 1–3, 13).

Lots of talk, lots of riddles, lots of mysterious heart-to-heart conversations, but no direct quotations of what exactly was said there.[[21]](#footnote-21) If, in the story of the trial, the riddle standing before the reader required keeping track of the testimonies and trying to get at the solution through the women’s words, in ch. 10, there is no way for the reader even to try, like Solomon, to solve the riddle. We rather find ourselves within a riddle that is a pre-riddle: what was said there? What sort of riddles did the queen ask the king and would the reader have known their solutions?[[22]](#footnote-22) The sole quotation in the narrative is one speech by the queen of Sheba. These words are cited in the center of the story and as such they become the focus of the description and the defining moment in the entire story. (This mirrors the bringing of the sword in ch. 3, which functioned as the focus of the story in the trial of the prostitutes):

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![[23]](#footnote-23) 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. (1Kgs 10:6–9)

Four consecutive verses are devoted to the astonishment of the queen of Sheba, while the actual wise and impressive words of the king remain hidden in shadow and we do not know how exactly he succeeded in eliciting the admiration of the exotic queen. The queen’s sentences 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. They underscore the fact that other than these words, there is no information about the content of the leaders’ verbal exchanges. If we add to this the literary fact that we noted earlier, that the queen’s speech (like other details in the story) is filled with exaggerated expressions, then the essence of the story becomes problematic and the reader becomes skeptical of its credibility.

The story of the queen of Sheba stands as an antithesis to the story of the judgment, not only with respect to the relationship between speech and action, but also in its attitude to the accepted social order and to binariness. I maintain that the surprising appearance of the queen of Sheba contains a threat to the conventional social order. She resists placement within the usual categories of social and cultural definitions and her existence challenges accepted distinctions.[[24]](#footnote-24) She is a woman who is not defined by being a mother, or even as a life-saving figure. Her words revolve around wisdom and there is no discernible act of seduction or other stereotypically female practices.[[25]](#footnote-25) She does glorify God but there is no indication that she joined the people of Israel, or that she becomes part of the family, and so she remains a foreigner. It can even be said that she is ‘a stranger among strangers’ since against the background of the number of the many rulers who came to Solomon to see his wisdom (1Kgs 5:10–14) she is the only woman. Furthermore, she functions in the public sphere in a leadership 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.[[26]](#footnote-26) In all these points, the story of the queen of Sheba challenges that which is familiar and known.

The relationship between the queen and Solomon is also not very clear and remains shrouded in problematic vagueness. It is true that the queen of Sheba does not openly and explicitly seduce Solomon, but she tells him ‘all that was with her heart.’ Solomon does not take her, but ‘there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her’, and at the end of the meeting 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.’ The reader senses an intimacy between them that goes beyond a matter-of-fact diplomatic connection, but finds no explicit indication that any such thing took place.[[27]](#footnote-27)

We see that the capacity for separation and decisive division that characterized the stories of the beginning of Solomon’s reign have given way to blurring and ambiguity with respect to the purposes of the encounter and its nature, and also to the character of its protagonists. If we join these insights to the points raised earlier about the narrative’s critique of Solomon, we can conclude that the narrative of the visit of the queen of Sheba suggests an answer to the question of why Solomon, who began his journey by walking in the ways of God, fell into decline and veered from the proper path. From the literary analysis it emerges that at first Solomon knew how to distinguish and categorize, to cut and divide. The more time passed, and the more his network of ties with neighboring and distant countries branched out and deepened—so, accordingly, did the cultural gaps separating him from them begin to erode. Too many points of interface and connection came into being. The ambiguity that Solomon tried to generate in diplomatic spheres[[28]](#footnote-28) inevitably spilled over to the personal, cultural and theological domains as well.

At the beginning of Solomon’s reign there was a clear distinction between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between male and female roles, between night and day. Borders were not breached. The social order was maintained and the narrative at once preserved and affirmed it. The prostitutes came to the king only in order to to get his ruling, and of course they accepted his decree and his verdict.

On the other hand, in the story of the queen of Sheba, there is a vague feeling, which gradually intensifies, that the binary is being compromised and that the poles are being drawn towards one another and being woven together.[[29]](#footnote-29) This is a dangerous situation in terms of 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 below the surface. These voices place a question mark on King Solomon’s ability to protect the social boundaries that prevailed up until this time. 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.[[30]](#footnote-30)

This reality will of course be intensified in the subsequent chapter in which we once again meet Pharaoh’s daughter, but this time with an explicitly negative connotation, since Solomon is confronted with the cultural challenge that she poses, and he does not meet it successfully. King Solomon symbolizes the danger that lies in mixing with the stranger, in blurring separate domains. He models, and even embodies, how this matter takes place in a gradual process, escaping notice. There is an elusive moment that is hard to put a finger on and pinpoint in time. The reader considers the visit of the queen of Sheba and does not understand what might be problematic about it, but after reading ch. 11, and returning to re-read ch. 10, one can pick up the erosion that began even then.

The story of the queen of Sheba thus closes the golden age of Solomon’s reign in a framing story that interacts with the story of Solomon’s Judgment. The conclusion of the literary unit actually hints at the decline that is anticipated in the introduction and particularly to the factors that brought Solomon toward his downfall. We can therefore conclude that ch. 10, in its current editorial form and its placement in the sequence of chapters in the book of Kings, functions as a literary transition point between Solomon’s period of glory and the era of his fall. On the surface, it still belongs to the positive literary unit, but a deeper analysis reveals many ambivalences and problems. These countercurrents may also have given rise to the negative attitudes towards the queen of Sheba and what she represents that are found in later exegesis since already in her visit the sensitive reader begins to feel the trembling of the earth and the opening of an abyss under his feet and under the feet of Solomon’s kingdom.

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1. Chapter 11 contains a clear expression of the author’s disapproval (v. 6). In addition to this explicit note, v. 11 reflects a negative divine evaluation, and v. 33 a negative prophetic one. This has led a majority of scholars to propose categorizing chs. 1–10 as the positive chapters and taking ch. 11 as the opening of the negative description. See Montgomery and Gehman 1951, 231; Porten 1967: 97, 128; Viviano 1997; Jobling 1991; Frisch 1991; Fox 1995; Frisch 1986: 72. Frisch (1986: 55) notes that there is a discrepancy between the evaluation of Solomon in the surface layer of 1Kgs 9:10 and in an underlying implicit layer. I view this as a very important point, to which I will return at the end of the discussion. Noth [1981 (1957)] suggested that chs. 1–8 are the positive unit, whereas chs. 9–11 constitute the negative critique. Additional scholars who take ch. 10 as anti-Solomon include Stuart 1995 and Parker 1992.

   Brettler (1991) put forth a complex proposal in which the negative presentation of Solomon begins in 1Kgs 9:25. He claims that ch. 10 was originally written as a positive chapter, but that in 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. See also the engagement with his lengthy and important discussion proposal 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 the perspective of intertextuality between the book of Proverbs and the Solomonic narrative. In the current study, I aim to extend Brettler’s line of reasoning, and to reinforce it through a literary analysis of the story of the queen of Sheba and comparison of this narrative with the story of the judgment of Solomon. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Biblical quotations here and throughout are based on the NRSV translation, with minor adjustments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grossman has put forth a complex proposal, suggesting that through repeated readings a reader might be able to sense implicit judgment beneath the surface of these verses. See Grossman 2006: 252–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Frisch 1986: 237–38. 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 with regard to content, it indicates the clear contrast between them.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is so whether the focus of the story is Solomon’s wisdom (as maintained by Porten 1967, for example) or his wealth (as per, for example, Brettler 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is important to bear in mind that demonstrating parallels between the two stories will not necessarily answer the question of whether the resemblance indicates similarity (i.e., that both stories tell Solomon’s praise), or contrast (i.e., that the story of the queen of Sheba reflects criticism of Solomon, which emerges precisely through its oppositional placement vis à vis the story of the prostitutes’ judgment). Particularly important to our discussion is 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. The current article argues the opposite proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this context, Walsh demonstrated the appearance of 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, 1Kgs 3:16–4:34 stands opposite 1Kgs 9:26–10:29. In this way, the Book of Kings arranges a neat frame for the positive period of Solomon’s frame. Walsh placed the chapters in a table as follows:

   |  |  |  |
   | --- | --- | --- |
   | 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 of the heart comes to expression at the beginning of the description of Solomon’s Golden Age by means of the story of the trial of the prostitutes. At the end of the description of the Golden Age, this wisdom is found in the story of the visit of the queen of Sheba (1Kgs 3:16–28 vis à vis 1Kgs 10:1–10, 13). See Walsh 1993; 1996: 130-32.

   Walsh maintains that the dissimilarity between the two stories is striking. In the first part, in the story of the judgment, Solomon uses his knowledge and wisdom in order to benefit his people, and indeed all of the people appreciate him for this and understand that they stand to gain considerably from the generous application of his wisdom in their daily lives. In the second section, a moment before the decline, the outcome of Solomon’s wisdom is simply more and more gold. There is very strong emphasis on the possessions that Solomon amasses thanks to the queen of Sheba’s visit. The abundance of gold and the rest of the treasures do not contribute at all to the welfare of the people and the improvement of their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Ben Shem 1976. It is presumed that the inhabitants of Sheba migrated in camel caravans from the Arabian peninsula through the land of Israel and from there to the north and east in order to conduct trade in their luxury wares. Israel was positioned at a major commercial junction—both on the south/north axis (from Africa and the Arabian peninsula to Lebanon) and the west/east (from the Mediterranean sea eastward). Solomon’s mighty kingdom oversaw the main trade routes, and the queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem because of her vested interest in free passage on these routes. The chapter preceding the story of the queen of Sheba recounts that Hiram the king of Tyre, together with King Solomon, began to send ships along a new sea route. Hiram sought to gain a foothold in the southern seas and to open a sea route to the Far East. Up to that point, Egyptians had monopolized the maritime trade and the Phoenicians had no access there. The opening of this sea route to transport goods from India and southern Arabia severely damaged the desert inhabitants and could have deprived them of their principle livelihood. The queen of Sheba, who apparently came from a kingdom in the region of the Arabian Peninsula, represented the land routes and came to lobby King Solomon to continue to use them. Until then, merchandise had been transported through the desert on camels, and this was a fundamental economic branch for Arab tribes. In his article, Ben-Shem explained why David, who was also associated with Hiram, had not opened a sea route with him, and why Solomon put this off until the twenty-fourth year of his reign. According to his explanation, the reason lies in the change of dynasty in Egypt. The 21st dynasty, which was friendly towards Solomon, was overthrown and in 945 BCE the 22nd dynasty came to power, headed by Shishak who was hostile to Solomon because of his marital ties with the previous dynasty. If so, then only at this juncture did it become possible for Solomon to execute the plan of establishing a line of ships with Hiram king of Tyre, for they thereby declared a competitive coalition against the Egyptian empire. See Ben Shem 1976. On the literary resemblances as well as differences between the queen of Sheba and Hiram king of Tyre, see Reinhartz 1994: 49–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Josephus Flavius, *Against Apion* 1:17 states that King Solomon and Hiram, king of Lebanon, used to send one another riddles to solve: “What drew them together in friendship most of all was their love of wisdom: they used to send each other problems, demanding a solution, and Solomon was better in such matters, being generally wiser.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is an interesting similarity between the story of the two prostitutes and the account of the queen of Sheba, Hiram, and Solomon. In the beginning of his reign, Solomon stood before two rivalrous women of low status. Now, on the eve of his decline, the king stands between two rivalrous strong leaders. In both stories, Solomon stands before figures who ask him to decide between them, and both stories reveal his great wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Given the ambiguity of v. 13, many commentators have understood the text to refer only to gifts that Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba, and to his hospitality during his visit, and have refrained from reading any additional political and economic meaning into the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. References to foreign women in biblical narrative generally occur in contexts of seduction. They are introduced in order to contrast Israelite identity with their Otherness, and thereby to convey the motif of uniqueness and foreignness that exists in the people of Israel. See Gillmayr-Bucher 2007). The most prominent of these are Rahab and Ruth. A comparison between them will highlight the strangeness of the encounter with the queen of Sheba as the two women mentioned above eventually join the people of Israel, while the queen of Sheba surprisingly, despite her excited words, returns to her land. On the fascinating comparison between Rehav and the queen of Sheba, see Gillmayr-Bucher S 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Althouse 1992. 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’ (Althouse 1992: 2.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Fuchs states that one of the aims of the story is to reinforce the patriarchal institution of motherhood and to show that extramarital childbearing is a situation fraught with hazards that is even liable to endanger the life of the child. In accordance with patriarchal ideology, the only individual who is capable of resolving the knotty problem and imposing 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. See Fuchs 1985: 131.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-14)
15. 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 in front of us. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Camp puts forth a complex proposal regarding this story. She states that at the same time that the prostitute threatens the social order, she simultaneously affirms it in that she clearly outlines how it is proper to behave in this framework. The prostitute thereby becomes an important liminal figure. See Camp 2000: 166. Bird (1989) adds that the complexity is even greater in our story. 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,’ 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 of these stereotypes. See also Schearing 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Ashe 1991. Ashe notes that Solomon here ‘rejected complexity and ambiguity,’ simplifying the task of judgment by structuring it in the form of ‘bipolar oppositions’ as well as by drastically limiting the basis for the judgment to the reaction to the proposed killing of the child (Ashe [1991]: 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Althouse 1992 criticizes the king’s sharp unequivocal judgment, his dichotomous view of the world, his unwillingness to attempt to empathize and listen more deeply to the women in their distress, and his insistence upon violently imposing his own world values upon the unfortunate women. Her criticism may extend beyond what is warranted by the text, but it effectively demonstrates that the story reflects a world of black-and-white reality, and of unambiguous separations and divisions. In my view, this point is essential for understanding the story. I will also note that bringing the sword at a critical moment raises the question of whether the king needed the sword in order to arrive at the answer to the riddle, or whether he had already solved it and bringing the sword was intended to serve as a public performance that would prove to everyone, all the spectators and all who would hear about the incident later—that the king was right in his verdict. See Abarbanel’s commentary on 1Kgs 3. Abarbanel claims that the plaintiff who speaks at length is the true mother. Other commentators have followed Abarbanel and thought that Solomon identified the true mother even before the test of the sword. In their view, the test of the sword was meaningful only for the audience. Thus, e.g., R. Joseph Caro in his commentary on the chapter, and in a slightly different vein, Levin 1983. Levin argues that it would have been possible to distinguish between the two children, as there was a difference of three days between their births. See Leibowitz and Leibowitz 1989. They too, like the commentators who base their claim against the plaintiff, believe that Solomon knew the matter even before the test of the sword, from his careful attention to the words of the complainant, but they think that the real mother is the defendant. In contrast, other commentators claim that the sword assisted Solomon in solving the riddle. Thus, *Brit ‘Olam.* So too, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 8:26-34.

    This is the direction taken by Rendsburg 1998. He claims, however, that the defendant was the mother of the child and that Solomon came to recognize this by means of the test of the sword. An additional opinion along similar lines claims that the narrative deliberately blurs the identity of the true mother. The reader finds it difficult to keep track of the mother and know who she is, because the focus of the story is the wisdom of Solomon’s judgment, and not the women or the question of which one of them is speaking truth and which is the kidnapper and imposter. Solomon arrives at his solution by executing the trick of the sword test, and this is the proof of his wisdom. This is the direction taken by Lasine 1987; Lasine S 1989; Reinhartz 1994.

    Another school of thought in the interpretation of the narrative is concerned with the question of whether the reader has the ability to discern which of the women is the real mother. A large group of 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 manner in which the story is presented, 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 1987: 166–70 and by 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 the wisdom of Solomon. 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 2003; Garsiel 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘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 wich motherhood was the obligation of every woman, she is true “woman” (Ashe [1991]: 86–87). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Ashe 1991: 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 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-21)
22. Perhaps because of this, many legends have been associated with the relationship between Solomon and the Queen, and most of them deal with sexual tension and seduction rather than wisdom and in-depth conversations. In this way, the riddles were viewed as a code for the tension that typifies intimate relationships. So, for example, in 1Kgs 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 MT. This is a hint that the queen of Sheba found King Solomon attractive in the manner that went beyond his wisdom and wealth. The reference to the queen of Sheba in the New Testament can also be seen to imply ties and relationships that extend beyond diplomacy, though differently. She appears in both Matthew and Luke, and the context is most likely her conversion. See also Bellis 1994–1995: 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. NRSV reads ‘your wives,’ following LXX. See previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Lassner 1994. In his view, the threat that is embedded in her impressive and unusual appearance led later traditions to paint the queen of Sheba in negative colors. An interesting discussion about the story of the queen of Sheba as a power struggle between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ can be found in Bellis (1994–1995). 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 [1994–1995]: 25) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Also, as noted by Gillmayr-Bucher (2007: 136), 1Kgs 10:1–10, 13 belongs to the wisdom stories in the Solomon tradition. Like King Solomon, the queen of Sheba is shown as a wise monarch. As wisdom was considered to be an ideal feature for a monarch, the portrait of the queen of Sheba follows a well-known representation. Setting riddles is a genre in the wisdom tradition. See Camp 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gillmayr-Bucher 2007: 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Camp 2000: 176; Gillmayr-Bucher 2007: 138. On the various traditions in Jewish, Arabic, and Ethiopian traditions, see Pennacchietti 2000. The reference to the riddles also plays a role in hinting at an intimate connection between Solomon and the queen of Sheba, for riddles are known to have played a prominent role at wedding parties, and also in courtship, as is seen in the Song of Songs and in Samson’s riddle. See Zakovitch 2005: 14–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See above, 000. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The possibility of this interpretation, which sees the described reality moving into a state of undefined boundaries, explains and illuminates a number of prominent directions in post-biblical traditions about the significance of the visit of the queen of Sheba. Thus, for example, this possibility explains the Muslim tradition that tells of the queen of Sheba exposing her thighs, so that 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? See the Surah of the Ant in the Q’uran and the commentary of al-Tabari. The emphasis there is on the religious tension and indeed the queen of Sheba recognizes that she errs in worshiping the son. So too in the Second Targum of Esther (dated to c. 500 C.E), and in the Toldot Ben Sira and pseudo-Ben Sira (popularly known as the Alphabet of Ben Sira), in which Solomon and the queen of Sheba engage in sexual intercourse, after Solomon sends the Queen a depilatory substance to remove the hair from her body, and Nebuchadnezzar is conceived in this liaison. For a comprehensive discussion, see Lassner 1994: 9–35, 161–67; Bellis 1994–1995: 18–20.  
    This proposal also explains the tradition that the queen of Sheba became pregnant by King Solomon and returned home with their common fetus in her womb, thereby representing the dangerous cultural connection that was formed. Thus, for example, in the Ethiopian national epic, *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*)`. In this tradition, Menelik is the offspring born from this encounter. Menelik is the king of Ethiopia, traditionally believed to be the true heir to the kingdom of Israel; also in *Toldot Ben Sira*, p. 217, where the offspring is Nebuchadnezzar, the destroyer of the First Temple. Along these lines, there is an additional implied link inviting comparison between the story of the queen of Sheba and the judgment of Solomon. In both, Solomon bestows life and gives a woman a child. In the Christian tradition, the story of the queen of Sheba became a type for the submission of, first, the gentiles and later the Church, the bride of Christ, to Christ. See Bellis 1994–1995 on the afterlife of the story of the queen of Sheba in ancient exegesis and in multiple traditions from around the world—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and that of a variety of other cultures continuing into later modern literature, including African-American writings. This tradition returns the queen of Sheba to traditional female gender roles—as both seductress and mother, thereby aiming to restore the accepted social order, which had been disrupted by the appearance of a foreign woman who fills a leadership position and engages in ‘man to man’ conversation with Solomon. Bellis (1994–1995: 27) 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?’ Similar motifs are found as well in rabbinic midrashim. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. These observations follow the interpretive line suggested by Gillmayr-Bucher 2007 and reinforces it by means of the comparison with the story of the judgment 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 chief and fundamental duality inhering in the figure of the queen of Sheba. 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 is able to evaluate Solomon’s kingdom not only according to secular matters, but also with reference to Solomon’s deity’ (Gillmayr-Bucher 2007:141). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)