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The Queen of Sheba and African Matriarchal Precedence

To note the effects of Biblical interpretation with reference to Blacks in the Bible within cultures as it affects Biblical exegesis and exposition, theology, history, literature, art, society and identification of peoples.

—Charles B. Copher.

The preceding statement taken from the objectives of a popular course taught at the Interdenominational Theological Center by the distinguished "dean" of African American biblical scholars, Emeritus Professor of the Old Testament, Dr. Charles B. Copher, will serve as the motivation and undergirding principle of this discussion. I use it here because far too often in Christian history it has been biblical interpretation rather than the Bible that has created distortions and misunderstandings among the faithful. After the Enlightenment biblical interpretation fostered prejudice and sometimes racist presuppositions via Eurocentric/Caucasian biblical hermeneutics. Accordingly, Professor James Washington writes, "Hegemonic claims that one tradition or one interpretation

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of the Christian story is or ought to be normative forecloses the immense ingenuity of God's salvific vocation."¹

God's salvific vocation is critical in the Black Church and community where the Bible is the foundation and cornerstone of Black theology, Black preaching, Black being and Black hope. The Bible and its interpretations, then, must be studied and proclaimed in relation to the contemporary needs and aspirations of the Black community. Further, the Bible should be understood as affirming Black peoples' contributions in salvation history. The main obstacle to this task has been the flawed and sometimes racist methodology of biblical interpretation as practiced by European and Euro-American scholarship.

According to Felder, "European/Euro-American biblical scholars have asked questions and shaped answers within the framework of the racial, cultural, and gender presuppositions they hold in common."²

This Eurocentric slant or bias has created historical distortions and misunderstandings which have been detrimental to Black people's appropriation and understanding of the biblical story. I use the term detrimental to refer not only to some amorphous intellectual sleight of hand on the part of some White scholars, but as Copher points out "in no instance [has] . . . the Bible and interpretation of it led to such murder, whether physical, psychological, social or spiritual as in the case of Black peoples."³

In order to confront these interpretative distortions head-on and provide some much needed correctives to our understanding

¹As quoted in James O. Stallings, *Telling The Story* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988), p. 8.

²Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), p. xi.

³Charles B. Copher, "Three Hundred Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black People," *Journal of the ITC*, XIII (1986):225.

of the biblical text, this paper will analyze the Queen of Sheba narrative as found in 1 Kings 10:1-10, 13 and as edited in 2 Chronicles 9:1-12. My working premise is that in the pursuit of the truth about this mysterious queen, she must be understood as being both Black and African, as opposed to being Arabian or White, as suggested by some scholars.⁴ Of course, if this premise can be proven through research and critical scholarship, then we are well on the way to achieving Professor Copher's course objective as previously stated.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

Josephus called her "the Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia."

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

To the people of Tigre she was known as "Eteye of Azeb" or the Queen of the South.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

To the Arabs and Muslims she is recalled as "Bilgis (Belkis) and Balkis," legendary monarch.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

Herodotus called her Nitocris and the Portuguese Nicaula.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

⁴Among others, see Peter Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Francis Pinter, 1985), p.4ff; Gene Rice, *Nations Under God: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p.78ff; Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.131ff; James A. Montgomery and Henry Snyder Gehman, "The Book of Kings, in the *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), p. 215ff; David Buxton, *The Abyssinians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 34-35; Robert L. Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 31; Nabia Abbott, "Pre-Islamic Arab Queens," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature*, LVIII (January 1941):1-22; Simon J. DeVries, "1 Kings," *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 12 (Waco: Word Books, 1985), p. 221ff.

Some ancient Greeks even called her the Black Minerva or the Ethiopian Diana.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

In Ethiopia where an unbroken line of kings and queens have come to the throne by the queen of Sheba's love relationship with King Solomon, she is known as Maqueda.

"Maqueda"

In Post Wheeler's *The Golden Legend of Ethiopia*⁵ we find this encomium to the fabulous Queen Maqueda.

O more esteemed than twelve precious stones is the memory of your name, that is more fragrant than split myrrh, than flowers or sweet-smelling plants and gal banum!

We salute your face, holy and glorious!

We salute your whole lovely body! Your House-of-Life, that lies in ancient Axum with our Ark. Safe folded in the bosom of the earth, till the Concealer shall say "Come forth."

We salute your Pure Spirit, your availing prayer, your Golden Blessing!

Yes, to the Ethiopians she was, and still is, all these things and more. To African American Christians she has been historically, and still is. the eschatological figure whom our Lord

⁵Post Wheeler, *The Golden Legend of Ethiopia* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1976), pp. 182-183.

and Savior Jesus Christ called simply "the Queen of the South."

In this brief paper it is not possible to recount the numerous works that have debated the pros and cons of the color and place of origin of this royal personage. A few contemporary African American scholars mentioned here have put forth convincing arguments that clearly point to the Queen of Sheba as being both Black and African.⁶ Their arguments have been based on biblical texts, reports of ancient writers, archaeological discoveries, and historical and geographic evidence.

There is warrant for pursuing another line of approach in order to add support to the contention that the Queen of Sheba was Black and African. With this end in view I want to suggest a fresh perspective based on the cultural context of the United Monarchy. My argument is based on two distinct references in the text. First, it is clear that the Queen of Sheba is a sovereign queen. As such she is the first independent queen mentioned in biblical literature. My question is: If this queen, who lived during Solomon's reign, was sovereign what other Ancient Near Eastern countries could claim a precedence of queenship? South Arabia seems unlikely inasmuch as the text of 1 Kings 10:15b specifically reads in part "all the kings of Arabia."⁷ As Felder points out, the biblical writers "may be informing us that in the land that they understood as Arabia, kings ruled—not queens."⁸ Since it is likely that queenship patterns evolved from matriarchal, matrilineal, and matrifocal societies, then indeed we should be able to prove that

⁶See Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, chapter 2; William Leo Hansberry, *Pillars in Ethiopian History* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), chapter 1; and Charles S. Finch, *The African Background to Medical Science* (London: Karnak House, 1990), chapter 4, for a full discussion.

⁷Compare this text with 2 Chronicles 9:14 and Jeremiah 25:24.

⁸Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, p. 32.

these societies were much more likely to produce and respect a sovereign queen than patriarchal societies.

From ancient time there has been considerable debate over just who the Queen of Sheba was and the identity of her ethnic and geographical roots. Many modern scholars have suggested that she was of Semitic or Arabian descent and ruled somewhere in Yemen or South Arabia. It is my own contention, based on the cultural patterns of matriarchy and the socio-political precedence of queenship in Black African nations, that the illustrious Queen of the South was both Black and African. The first line of argument requires a survey of scholarly research and testimony. My purpose for this laborious investigation of the identity of the Queen of Sheba is to broaden and contribute to current scholarship surrounding her. Further, I hope to clarify biblical interpretation related to this question based on the cultural context of ancient times. At the very minimum, this paper is meant serve as an introductory springboard to further research and development. Thus, there is no need to procrastinate. We can, with integrity, immediately appropriate the Bible as a prime witness for the Afrocentric concerns and aspirations of today's Black church and community. If this can be accomplished we will fulfill Bishop Tanner's fond hope as stated so eloquently in his monograph:

To the rising scholars of the colored race

The writer dedicates this monograph with the hope that
the subject which it discusses; and others akin to it,
Will receive such treatment at their hands as will vindicate
the colored races of the Earth and save them from
the Delusion:

'The leading race in all history has been the white race.'⁹

⁹Benjamin T. Tanner, *The Color of Solomon—What?* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1895), dedication page.

Evidences of Matriarchy in the Ancient Near East

The following quotations from recognized authorities suggest the extent and cogency of positive statements supporting the thesis concerning matriarchy in the Near East.

(1). The African ancestry of the human race is generally accepted as fact. The first type of family was matriarchal since the role of the father in procreation was unknown.¹⁰

(2). Features of the constitution of Egyptian royalty ... are substantially identical with those ... in all other African kingdoms...Those features of ancient Egyptian social life differ all together from corresponding features of any ancient or modern patriarchal society, and present very clearly the essential outline of a social tradition in the highest degree matriarchal.¹¹

(3). The matriarchal system is the base of social organization in Egypt and throughout Black Africa.¹²

(4). Even the avowedly patriarchal pharaonic theocracy of Egypt felt the imprint, since the inheritance of the Egyptian throne was determined through the female line.¹³

In this discussion of the precedence of matriarchy in Black African kingdoms I do not mean to suggest a mere "patriarchy in

¹⁰John G. Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilization* (New York: University Books, 1970), pp. 51-52.

¹¹Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. II (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1927), p. 378.

¹²Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), p. 142.

¹³Finch, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

reverse." To do that would be intentionally disingenuous. Rather I wish to contend that matriarchy (matristic, matrifocal, and matrilineal) implies a vastly different orientation of social and cultural awareness. An awareness of an egalitarian community-wide consciousness based on maternal descent with blood and spiritual ties uniting all beings, born and unborn, living and dead.

One source of the position that points to the Queen of Sheba as being both Black and African is the cultural precedent of matriarchy and queenship in Africa—a practice never adopted by neighboring societies. According to Williams and Finch, both of whom have done extensive studies in the area of ancient queenship, matriarchy, probably the oldest form of social organization, appears to have evolved initially in Africa.¹⁴

Before getting into the matter of matriarchy and its ramifications for this study it is necessary to take a look at the cultural traditions that shaped Israel of the Old Testament and its neighbors in the Ancient Near East.

There is more than enough evidence in biblical literature to prove that males were the traditional heads of clans, tribes, and families. Indeed, the key religious figures in Hebrew history are the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁵ The biblical writers recorded genealogies in terms of male kinship.¹⁶ The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 that names Sheba in verse 7 and again in 28, is a good example, despite the fact that Sheba has two separate lineages.¹⁷

¹⁴Finch, op. cit., and Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1976).

¹⁵See, Genesis 12-36.

¹⁶A notable exception is Genesis 36 where we find Esau's generations listed in the female line. It is possible that the writer intends to alert the reader of the major differences between beloved Israel and the hated Edomites.

¹⁷Sheba is also listed in Genesis 25:3 with yet another heritage.

This practice of recording genealogy is instructive because each of these lists indiscriminately combines ethnic, geographical, and individual pedigrees. Cush appears to be the progenitor of both Shebas, and all his sons seem to be situated in Asia. Since Cush is located in Africa the writer no doubt believed Arabians were either of Black African descent, or were under the influence of African domination.

Birthright or primogeniture is another practice that sheds some light on the social and religious structure of the Ancient Near East. This practice ensured that all male children received a portion of their father's inheritance. The firstborn or eldest son, however, was entitled to a double share of the inheritance since he was the principal heir to both property and the family name.¹⁸ This pattern of patriarchy, with few exceptions, persisted to the reign of King Solomon when royal succession in the Southern Kingdom was determined exclusively by Davidic descent.¹⁹

With this strong sense of male superiority dominating the cultural patterns of ancient society, one is led to ask the inevitable question of what significant roles did women play in the Ancient Near East? Briffault tells us that "in the Semitic races we come upon peoples apparently organized from an old, on the most part, rigorously patriarchal line."²⁰ Consequently, those who claim that the Queen of Sheba was Semitic and Arab are obliged to explain this enormous aberration to an embedded societal pattern. In so doing, they must also take to task the work of W. Robertson Smith

¹⁸Numbers 27:8-11 prescribes the provision for distribution of property for a male who had no sons. Thereby, the inheritance of a male with no sons passes along first to his daughter, but in each succeeding case, property is bestowed on a male figure. A case in point is Sheshan (1 Chronicles 2:34-35) who had no sons, only daughters. One of the daughters married an Egyptian servant named Jarha who became, to all intents and purposes, a son; forming a logical bridge between Sheshan and the yet unborn grandson.

¹⁹See 2 Samuel 7, particularly verse 16.

²⁰Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

who writes, "In ancient Arabia a contract of marriage conveyed to the husband certain rights over the wife which were so far of the nature of property that they could be transferred by him to another and passed with the rest of a man's property to his heirs."²¹

As far as we can determine then, the Semitic and nomadic tribes of Israel and Arabia afforded very little context for a sovereign queen. There are some instances where we find females listed in biblical genealogy and more often than not they bring a historical rather than a functional bearing on the text and Genesis 36.²²

Although Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are cast in prominent roles as patriarchs in the Genesis narratives, we cannot ignore the significant theological import of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel. In each of the narratives the writer employs the "barren wife motif." That is to say, each time the line of succession is about to be broken because the wife is unable to reproduce, God miraculously intervenes and bestows a child in the barren wife's womb. In this way the writer lets us know that without great women of faith there could be no Salvation History. Nonetheless, God is repeatedly referred to as the God of our fathers!²³

Biblical evidence suggests that Israel never had a sovereign queen in its history, except for Athaliah (2 Kings 11:1) who seized the throne for seven years after her son Ahaziah died. And many scholars suggest that even her rule was illegitimate. Deborah, of course, was a judge before the United Kingdom which introduced Judean Monarchy. Queen Vashti and Queen Esther were more or less consorts to the Persian king and were forced to follow instructions in deference to the king (Esther 1:13-22).

²¹W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1903), p. 129.

²²Gen. 11:29, 22:23, and Numbers 27:1-11 are examples.

²³See Gen. 11:30; 25:21, and 29:31.

We have attempted to show that any patterns of matriarchy or queenship in the Ancient Near East²⁴ prior to Solomon's reign are not recorded in biblical literature or extant texts. Further, specialists in the area of birthright have failed to produce convincing arguments for an Arabian precedence of queenship. On the other hand, it seem incontestable that Black Africa set the standard for queenship in the Ancient Near East in 1505 B.C., more than five centuries before the Queen of Sheba. Hatshepsut (1505-1485 B.C.), Clarke tells us, "mounted the throne and proclaimed herself Pharaoh of Egypt. And thus the first, and perhaps the greatest, female ruler of all time came to power in Egypt."²⁵

Upon close examination of biblical evidence, only two queens in the entire corpus of biblical literature ever ruled as sovereign monarchs of a nation. The first was the Queen of Sheba of 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9 who is the primary focus of this paper. The second queen was Candace, probably of Meroe, recorded in Acts 8:27. How interesting that the only two queens worthy of biblical reference shared African origins and a common Nubian/Cushite heritage? The reason for this is clear. Black Africans from the earliest of times are the only peoples who possessed a well-developed system of matriarchy and queenship.²⁶

Many scholars attribute the matrilineal development of society in ancient Black Africa to their agrarian lifestyle.²⁷ Agricultural producers were generally more stable and enjoyed a more holistic family setting where all family members contributed to the well-being of the whole family. Indeed women had to play a major

²⁴Egypt, which is actually in Africa, is the lone exception.

²⁵Ivan van Sertima, *Black Women in Antiquity* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), p. 124; see also, Finch, *op. cit.*

²⁶For more detailed discussion, see Finch, *op. cit.*, p. 93ff; Chancellor Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 120ff; Vulindlela Wobogo, "Diop's Two Cradle Theory and the Origin of White Racism," in *Black Books Bulletin* 4 (Winter 1976) pp. 20-29.

²⁷*Ibid.*, Diop adds that agriculture is thought to have been discovered by women, p. 143ff.

role in such societies because the men frequently left for extended periods on hunting and trading expeditions.

Wobago informs us that:

A matrilineal system resulted from the balanced economic input from men and women in agricultural society. The African wife was entrusted with inheritance rights because she remained at home and was therefore more stable than the man ... [who was] more exposed to physical and social risks; thus men and women had complementary equivalent roles in African agrarian society.²⁸

On the other hand, nomadic societies (i.e., the Hebrews and Arabs) required a much less role of its female members and developed strict patriarchalism. Queen and Haberstein write:

In the earliest times ... the Jews were nomadic desert groups ... legitimately described as patriarchal ... [where] great power was vested in the male head of each household. This was especially marked during the period of nomadic pastoral life, and under the circumstances then obtaining was quite necessary ... however, the traditions and customs of the patriarchy continued after settled agriculture had developed.²⁹

According to Cheikh Diop, the Senegalese multi-genius and Egyptologist, "the nomadic patriarchal family was the only

²⁸Wobago, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²⁹Stuart Queen and Robert Haberstein, *The Family in Various Cultures* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1967), pp. 139-140.

embryo of social organization. The patriarchal principle would rule the whole life of the Indo-European, from the Greeks and Romans to the Napoleonic Code, to our day."³⁰ Finch and Williams agree and the former adds, "even when patriarchy emerged and began to supplement the older social organization, matriarchal social forms in Africa have thrived . . . up to the present."³¹ Therefore, based on these authorities it is safe to say that the primacy of the patriarchy with male heads of household and women cast in subordinate roles formed the basis of the Old Testament social structure.

In taking this look at queenship in antiquity, we note that the matriarchal system served as a basis for social organization in Egypt and throughout Black Africa.³²

Briffault, who has compiled three volumes on the subject of matriarchy, reveals, "Egypt from time immemorial was a land of matriarchal right. Descent was reckoned through the mother and not through the father."³³ Of course, this social structure permeated the entire society for even "the functions of royalty in Ancient Egypt were regarded as being transmitted in the female line."³⁴

The same features of the ancient Egyptian model are substantially duplicated in other African societies.³⁵ Yet we find no proof, either archaeological or historical, of independent sovereign queens outside of Black Africa until well after Israel's United Monarchy. Indeed, no rulership is archaeologically documented in

³⁰Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization*, p. 113.

³¹Finch, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³²Diop, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

³³Briffault, *The Mothers*, p. 379.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 378.

³⁵See Daryll Forde, *African Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 196, for a full discussion.

South Arabia earlier than 800 B.C., nearly two centuries after Solomon's and the Queen of Sheba's reign.³⁶ Even scholars who make the argument that the Queen of Sheba originated in Southern Arabia invariably turn the other cheek and admit that no extant inscriptions or testimony can verify their claims. Witness Werner Keller, who begins with a convincing argument for the Queen of Sheba's location as Arabia, but ends by remarking, "any non-biblical indication of a scientifically reliable nation of a ruling princess during the time of Solomon has been denied us in Southern Arabia."³⁷

Ullendorff, who renders an in-depth, though unsympathetic, Ethiopian account of the Queen Maqueda states that "no South Arabian inscriptions have hitherto been discovered which either refer to this Queen or indeed any Sabaeen ruler earlier than 800 B.C."³⁸

DeVries' commentary in a recent volume concludes, "there is no attestation to a queen in Arabia in Solomon's time"³⁹ though all his previous arguments point to Arabia.

Finally, the venerated scholar and archaeologist Albright declares, "thanks to two exact synchronisms between the earliest known group of Sabaeen rulers ... we can date the oldest known rules of Saba ... in the eighth century B.C."⁴⁰ Note that he says "earliest known rulers" not queens are in evidence 200 years after the fact. With this evidence in mind scholars should first prove

³⁶Wendell Phillips, *Qataban and Sheba* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p. 107.

³⁷Werner Keller, *The Bible as History* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 230.

³⁸Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, p. 134.

³⁹Simon J. DeVries, "1 Kings," p. 221.

⁴⁰William F. Albright, review of *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings*, by James A. Montgomery, in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 248.

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queenship in Arabia before discounting the preponderance of evidence that supports the thesis of established queenships in Black Africa where the Queen of Sheba, demonstrably, came to power.

Conclusion

We began this discussion by noting how post-Eniightenment biblical hermeneutics has cast Black biblical characters in a racially biased light unfamiliar to the biblical writers. Because these interpretations are believed to be scientific and, therefore, above repudiation by the average Bible reader, it is necessary for today's Black Bible scholars to produce evidence witnessing to a positive role of Black people and the Black and African presence in salvation history. We are constantly reminded, however, to pursue an evenhanded approach to hermeneutical methodology so as not to produce skewed interpretations, thus repeating the error of some of our White counterparts.

With that important condition in mind I have attempted, researching acknowledged authorities in the field, to illustrate how the Queen of Sheba was Cushite/Black/African and not Semitic/Arabian, based on the precedence of matriarchy found almost exclusively in Black African nations during antiquity. Further, with the mention of "all the Kings of Arabia" in our text and parallel biblical literature, I concur with Felder's assessment that biblical writers were tipping their hand by letting us know that there were no queens in Arabia.

I am not claiming the presence of matriarchy in Black African kingdoms is conclusive "proof" that the Queen of Sheba was African. However, coupled with the evidence of Ullendorff, Hansberry, Felder, and Finch concerning geography, the earlier interpretations by Josephus and Origen, provide additional evidence that the Queen of Sheba was, in all likelihood, Black and Beautiful. This paper, however, cannot be concluded here. For we

are only beginning the task of unraveling one of the most complex, yet most misunderstood characters in the Old Testament.

The task that lies ahead should include tracing the development of Cush's and Ham's sons in Arabia. Based on literature I have engaged, it would seem that if both Cush and Ham were understood by biblical writers to be Black then certainly their sons and grandsons (including Sheba) would also be of Black ethnic origins.

Another approach would be to trace the patterns of queenship in Africa/Ethiopia/Egypt/Cush more closely—beginning with Hatshepsut—to see if queenship patterns were also unique to Black African nations. I mentioned above how the only two independently sovereign queens cited in the entire biblical corpus appear to have originated in Africa.

Finally, there are numerous other cultural features of the United Monarchy period that would appear to be unique to this age and time and lend support to our thesis as stated. The main point I am driving at in this brief discussion is that southern Arabia should be able to prove a pre-existing model for queenship rather than suddenly producing the most famous queen of this biblical period. The worst part for me is that Bible scholarship has allowed Arabia this luxury, even without proving kingship in Arabia prior to 800 B.C. My Lord, what a task lies ahead!