

Translation:Colloquy of the Queen of Sheba

Colloquy of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon (circa 800 C.E.)

by rabbinic literature, translated from Hebrew by David Ben-Abraham and Wikisource

Documentation for the TextInfo template.information about this edition.

(Translated from the original Hebrew and Aramaic)

Once, when King Solomon had bidden^[1] the neighbouring kings bordering upon his country to come up unto him, for to shew them his glory, and especially, to shew them his ability to talk to the animals and birds and creeping things, compelling them to dance before him and to do whatsoever he should bid,^[2] he obtained his desire. The kings of the east and west, north and south, soon gathered themselves together into his banqueting hall, and they all sat down to observe this great spectacle. When the king's scribes had called out to the animals by their names, they all entered the hall, one by one, without any man leading them, and without any of them being bound by fetters or restraints. While this was taking place, King Solomon noticed that the hoopoe bird^[3] was nowhere to be found among the birds, and so he bade his servants to bring unto him the bird, desiring to have him severely punished. When he was eventually brought before the king, the king enquired where he had been. The hoopoe replied that the king should not be wroth, for he had gone for days without food and drink, flying in the heavens, hoping withal to find a land or kingdom where Solomon's fame had not yet reached, and then to return unto the king, and duly report his findings to the king. After these entreaties, the bird proceeded to report on a kingdom which he had discovered afar off, governed by a queen, the queen of Sheba, from the castle Qitor. Their country, he said, was a good land, with trees and gardens watered by the rivers issuing forth from the Garden of Eden, and where there was gold and silver aplenty, and where the citizens of that country made no warlike manœuvres, and wore crowns upon their heads. At hearing this, King Solomon took up the hoopoe in his hands, and commanded his scribes to write a message to the queen of Sheba, which should then be bound unto the wing of the bird, and the bird sent back on his journey into the land of Sheba. The content of that message was this.

“From me, King Solomon: Greetings unto thee and greetings to thy servants. In order that you might know that God hath made me king over the wild beasts and fowl of the heavens, and that all the kings of the east and of the west, of the south and of the north, do come and salute me, so, too, if it likes^[4] thee, come thou unto me and pay homage unto me. Great honour attends^[5] thee, if thou wilt but come unto me. And thine would be the honour not given to other kings; But if you will have naught^[6] to do with me, neither wilt thou come and salute me, then know of a certainty that I will send unto thee kings and legions and horsemen for against thee a war to wage. Now if you shall ask within yourself who are these kings and legions and horsemen whom King Solomon hath to send, be apprised that the wild creatures they are the kings and legions and horsemen. And if you shall ask, moreover, which of these

creatures are the horsemen in this army, be apprised that the fowl of the air they are the horsemen. My troops are the spirits, whilst the demons and little she-devils[7] are the legions who will strangle you upon your beds in the midst of your houses. And the wild beasts shall kill you in the fields, while the birds of the heavens shall devour your flesh from your bodies!”

Now since the hoopoe bird was greatly desirous of being sent back to the land of Sheba with a message from the king, he was forthwith released with this message to bring to the queen of Sheba. Whereupon, he spread his wings aloft, cried out as he flew away, and was quickly joined by a large flock of birds incapable of being numbered. These all lighted upon the castle Qitor, in the land of Sheba, at the time when the queen of Sheba was going out in the morning to make her obeisance to the sun as it began to rise. But for the multitude of birds, the sun would have put forth its rays. On this day, the swarm of fluttering creatures blotted out the sun. The queen, being astonished[8] by such a sight, immediately rent her garment. At this token, the hoopoe bird suddenly descended in plain view of the queen, and she took notice that there was a letter bound to one of its wings. She took up the bird and untied the letter, reading what was written therein. Again, she could not withhold her alarm[9] and great surprise, and so she raised her hand a second time, and rent her garment. She then sent and called for the elders and great men of her kingdom, saying unto them, “Have ye not heard what King Solomon hath sent unto me?” They answered her, “We wot[10] not such a man as King Solomon; neither will we acknowledge his kingdom.” Yet, the queen was not satisfied with their counsel and rede,[11] and so quickly called and sent for all of her ships at sea, and commanded her sailors to load them with timbers of box-wood, and jewels and precious stones, and that all vessels should be fitted out to the deck’s brim with such things as they might stand in need of for a long and protracted voyage at sea. Camels were perforce[12] to be tethered and carried along, so as to permit hauling the burthens[13] once they had landed and gone ashore. She commanded also that six-thousand youth, some boys and some girls, should accompany her on this, her journey, children who were to make up the main core of her delegation, besides a great entourage of sailors and servants and attendants, and only those children who were born all in the same year, and in the same month, and on the selfsame day, and in the same hour, and all of them must needs have the exact same height or stature, and all of them must have the same barbed[14] hair, and all must be clad in tunics purple, so as to make it hard, at first sight, to tell betwixt[15] them, that is, lasses from lads.

Meanwhile, the queen of Sheba sent back a message to King Solomon, begging leave of the king to come unto him in seven years’ time, considering the long voyage that had to be taken at sea. For such would be the time needed to fit out an expedition, and to set sail when the winds were favourable, and then to circumnavigate the entire continent,[16] docking at the various ports while en route, in order to rest and to replenish their stock, and again, to baulk[17] travelling the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean) in the midst of winter for fear of being shipwrecked. Howbeit, she added, if the king should pray to his God, perhaps she’d come unto him in only three years’ time. Now the men and sailors of Sheba, though skilful

at sea, knew not that had they embarked on their journey by foot, traversing the great and barren wastelands, they would have reached their destination in far less time.

At the end of three years, the queen of Sheba came with her entourage, a great train of servants and attendants, bearing in their camels' baggage precious stones, and gold and silver, and much spices, as well the Balsam of Mecca.[18] The king, having intelligence that they had arrived off shore, sent along Benaiah, the son of Yehoiada, to greet them and to bring them on their way[19] to Jerusalem. Now this man was of extraordinary beauty and grace, like the dawn when it breaks forth in the morning, and like the planet Venus which shines out brightly amongst the stars, and like a water lily[20] standing by the rivulets of water. So when the queen of Sheba saw him, she mistook him for being King Solomon, and so lighted off her camel. Benaiah, the son of Yehoiada, enquired why she had gotten herself down from her camel. She answered, "Art thou not King Solomon?" He returned an answer, saying that he was not the king, but rather one of his attendants who stood before him. At hearing this answer, she immediately turned aside her face, and made this proverb to her great men who came along with her in this journey. "If you have not seen for yourselves the lion, then come! Observe the place where he coucheth![21] If you have not yet seen King Solomon, then come! Observe the visage of a good man who standeth before him!"[22]

She and her great train were conducted apace by Benaiah, the son of Yehoiada, to Jerusalem, and when the king was told that the queen of Sheba had just arrived in the city, he stood up from his place and went to sit in his glass pavilion. The queen was brought before him, and when she saw the king sitting in his glass pavilion, she thought within herself that the king sat upon water, and so proceeded to draw up the hem of her dress so that she could pass over without getting wet. The king her legs then saw, being full of hair, and could not hide his displeasure. Whenas[23] her seat beside him she took, the king privily[24] unto her didst say, "Thy beauty is the beauty befitting women, but thy hairs are the hairs befitting men. Hair on a man's body is comely, but scarce becometh women."

Now the king greatly desired her beauty, but was taken aback by the hair upon her legs, and so it was that he contrived a way by which hairs could be removed, that is, by taking an admixture of lime and water and orpiment (arsenic trisulfide),[25] which the king himself invented and published abroad, calling it neskasir. When the queen had bathed herself that night in its brew, the hair upon her legs fell off, and she found favour in the eyes of the king, who then brought her into his bedchamber. Now while she yet sat in his glass pavilion, the king asked her, "What portends to thy coming, my fair queen? Hath the tokens of the hoopoe bird summoned thee unto me, which he didst carry in his wings aloft?" She answered, "Nay, my lord the king. Come I will or must, 'twas not merely tidings from thee which didst trouble me, for none there is who durst[26] look with contempt upon thy calling. But rather, we have heard it stated by our forekind[27] of old, even by Abraham who was married to Keturah, who bare him six sons, from whom came Sheba our ancestor, that Abraham's offspring would bring forth a ruler, even

the Messiah, who would exercise dominion in the world. For this is what was meant by the words, 'For as to the sons of the concubines belonging to Abraham, unto them gave Abraham gifts, and sent them away, etc.' (Gen.25:6); Those gifts meaning none other than the mystery of the earth's redemption, delivered unto us by our ancestor Abraham. I have fain[28] come, therefore, out of due respect to his great name, to wit, God's name, to know whether or not thou art this Messiah." Now Solomon knew not what to answer the woman at her words, being astonished at her great measure of faith. And so, not willing to disappoint the queen who had endangered herself to come unto him, he wisely evaded her question, and asked, "Who are these youths, my fair queen, who have come along with thee?" "My lord," she said, "if thou art so wise that even the wild beasts of the field and the birds of the air do heed thy call, then I shall yet make trial of this, thy wisdom; For I would prove[29] thy wisdom by words and by riddles, and by way of puzzling problems which I shall pose unto thee. Canst thou then distinguish between manchild and womankind, though they might seem alike to thee?"

At these words, she nodded, and the children whom she brought along with her came forward in single file, passing whistly[30] before the king. Each child carried within his bosom a vessel laden with either gold or silver, and the best of the spices and incense that grew in their land. When each child reached the place where the king sat, he bowed down before the king, presenting his vessel to Benaiah, the son of Yehoiada, who stood before the king and queen, while Benaiah passed the same onto the king's chamberlain. When this procession came to an end, each child returned to his place within sight of the king, and the king answered.

"'Tis but a trial of character, it is; for the mannerisms of a lad are not as those of a maid. Call hither[31] my servants, and let them fill the floor of the room with parched grain and walnuts. Let each child take up into the borders of his skirt his fill, or as many as he can thereby hold, and I shall anon[32] tell thee who is male, and who is female."

No sooner had the word been spoken than the floor of the room was filled with roasted seeds and walnuts. At the given signal, the children began to fill up their garments, racing to outdo the other. The boys filled their garments by lifting up their skirts, exposing their legs without the slightest embarrassment or shame. The girls, however, bent over awry, and out of modesty would not expose their legs.

"Here, then, my dear queen, are thy menservants and here are thy maidservants!" quoth[33] Solomon, who rising up from his chair did signal with his hand to separate lasses[34] from lads, putting the one on his right side, and the other on his left side.

The queen, not yet convinced of the king's wisdom, answered. "My lord the king, this may have been but a silly[35] trial of character for thee, yet perchance[36] other questions and hard riddles will prove thy wisdom most consummately. Suffer[37] me, therefore, to ask thee three questions more, which if thou shalt rightly answer, disclosing the hidden meanings of my words, I shall know indeed that thou art a wise man of uncommon standing. Yet, if thou shalt fail, thou shalt be esteemed as other men of regal order. Tell me, if you can, since we have heard that thou art wise also in the natural sciences, what is like unto a wooden well, the contents of which are drawn up, as it were, by a bucket of iron; that thing taken up no more than stones, which forthwith are irrigated by water?"

Answered the king, "The reed container or vial which carrieth the black antimony known as stibium,[38] which stone when crushed is used by women in painting their eyelids, and by men as a remedy in eye ailments, and which they apply to themselves by wetting the iron pin with their spittle." [39]

"Right you are!" says the queen, and then proceeded to ask the king another question, saying, "What is like dust, in that it cometh forth from the earth? Yet, when it cometh forth, its food becomes the earth upon which we stand. It is spilt as water, and causes the house to be seen?" Answered the king, "Naphtha!" [40]

"Right!" says the queen, and then propounded an even harder riddle to ask the king, saying, "Whenever there is a strong gale, this thing is still[41] at the forefront. It maketh a great and bitter shout, and boweth down its head as a bulrush.[42] It is a thing spoken of highly by the rich and wealthy, yet loathed by the poor; a thing of praise to the dead, yet strongly disliked by the living. It is the happiness of birds, yet the grief of all fishes. What is it?"

Answered the king, "Flax linen! [43] For a strong gale can only mean that it is used in making sails for ships, which billowing sails are driven by strong winds. Now these linen stalks, after retting, are first scutched and hackled to expose the good fibres, hence the great and bitter shout it makes. And, like bulrushes, the seed heads of its stalks are rippled, favouring[44] to bow down. The rich will speak of it highly, because they can afford the softest and most fine linen produced, whilst the poor cannot afford to buy it, and settle for a poorer sort, which to them causes great discomfort, that is to say, until the fabric of the linen cloth is first broken in by long wear. Moreover, when men die, only the rich can coloured shrouds afford to buy to bury withal their dead, whilst the poor cannot afford it. [45] A dead man who is wrapped in a burial shroud findeth praise from men, but woe unto the living man whose burial shroud his habit[46] be! Birds eat the flax seeds and make their nests from its fibres, and they are made happy thereby. But fish are caught in nets made of linen cords, and are grieved thereby."

The queen of Sheba, not being able to conceal her maze[47] at the ease with which the king answered her questions, propensed to ask him yet other questions, saying, "Seven are departing. Nine are entering in. Two are giving drink, but only one is drinking. What are they?"

Now the king paused, musing with himself how that no man will speak upon a matter but that which is closest to him in his heart. So, too, this woman will ask naught but what is in her heart, and a woman's heart is mostly on child bearing and children, on jewellery, perfumes, cosmetics of rouge, and of coiffure and clothing bedecked. So the king answered her.

"The seven of whom thou hast spoken as departing are the seven days of a woman's separation from her husband when she is unclean by reason of her natural purgation.[48] Yet, while she entereth into her nine months of pregnancy, the seven days of uncleanness are not to be found with her, inasmuch as she remaineth clean for that entire duration of time. Thus, the seven being departed, the nine cometh in. Whilst the two whom thou sayest are giving drink, these are the two breasts giving milk to the newborn babe. However, the only one actually drinking from those breasts is the babe himself!"

She then sayeth to him: "There is a courtyard having ten opening doors. At what time one door is ajar,[49] nine others are shut. But when nine are open, one there be that is shut. What may this be?" He answered: "This courtyard is a woman's womb. The ten doors are the ten orifices in the foetus; his eyes, his ears, his nostrils, his mouth, his bowels, his privy member, and the umbilical cord. When the babe is within his mother's womb, the umbilical cord is open, whilst the child's orifices are closed. But when the child goeth forth into the world, the umbilical cord is closed, and the nine orifices are then opened."

She continued: "This thing, at first, goeth upon four. Then it goeth upon two. At last, it goeth upon three. What is it?"

The king replied. "When a child is born, he first crawls upon four. When he learns to walk, he walketh upon twain.[50] When the child becomes old, and is waxen[51] in years, he is holpen[52] by the cane – hence, he goes upon three."

Again, she asked the king: "Tell me, if wot thou,[53] where are the waters that have never fallen down, neither have they flowed from the brow[54] of heaven, nor from the rocks and bubbling springs and brooks, but are betimes sweeter than honey and are betimes more bitter than wormwood, even though they proceed from the very same source?" Answered Solomon: "The tear doth not[55] come from the

brow of heaven, neither from the rock will it gush forth upon the cheeks; when man's heart is happy, the tears are sweet to his eyes, but when in pain and in trouble, they are seven times more bitter!"

She asked furthermore, "A woman once said to her son, 'Thy father is my father. Thy grandsire[56] is my husband. Thou art my son, and I am thy sister.' Who can this be?" The king, reflecting, said, "This can be none other than one of the two daughters of Lot.[57] They alone could have said this."

Then she said: "Be not wroth, my lord, but let me conjure you to answer me once more. Without movement while living, it moveth when its head is cut off. What might this be?" Pausing for a moment, he answered: "This can, for sooth,[58] be none other but a tree, which, when its top is removed, can be made into a passing ship at sea."

The queen, realising the wisdom with which King Solomon had been endowed by his God, left off asking him riddles, and so sought answers to those long-standing questions which she had long ago asked herself in her own land, but could find no answers. She enquired of King Solomon concerning the snake bones used by men against three types of sorceries, and how the snakes were caught, since she stood in need of those snakes. Now Ashmodai, the prince of the demons, had taught Solomon the art of craft and sorcery. When the queen had heard about these matters, she was satisfied and made note of the things. And when King Solomon had entertained her a great while, and had bestowed upon her a largesse to take back into her own country, and had shewn her his house, and the great feats of engineering used by him in constructing the house of the forest of Lebanon, as well the splendour of his table so replete, and the orderly manner of his attendants and their fine apparel, as also the ascent by which he would go up unto the Temple of GOD, with its impregnable walls, she resolved to ask him one last question, saying, "My lord and Sovereign, at thy behest[59] I have come unto thee, traversing yon[60] land and sea, and taking the entire Government along with me, to hear this, thy wisdom. And, indeed, it was but a small report that I heard in mine own land concerning thee, until I came here to see and hear it for myself. Thy wisdom far exceedeth that which was told to me by my servants. And even then, I could not believe it until I had seen it with mine own eyes! Happy are the men who serve thee, and blest is the God who delightest in thee to make thee a king of his people! Art thou then the Messiah who is wont[61] to come into the world?"

Answered the king, "Let not thy countenance be distraught, O fair queen, that God hath chosen to impart wisdom unto his subjects; For he is the God who made heaven and earth, and we are his people. Is it not then commensurable with his excellence to make me a king of his people? Yet, even so, I am not he whom thou seekest."

Thus she repaired[62] again unto her own land, leaving behind her a great reputation for one who sought after virtue. EN