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Abstract

The story of the Queen of Sheba, known as Bilqis in the Islamic tradition, is a significant narrative in the Holy Qur'an with strong implications on the Qur'anic view of gender and leadership and the nature of femininity. Her story is also related in the Old Testament and was retold in many forms throughout the Near East and Africa. Few hadith in the Sunni or Shi'a canons give details about who Bilqis was as a person.

However, Shi'a hadith about the story of Bilqis take a distinctly Shi'a approach and use her story to demonstrate the supremacy of Ahl al-Bayt. In doing so, they reinforce the importance of the feminine in Shi'a spiritual cosmology and provide a model for female followers of the Imams to share in wilayah.

Keywords: Qur'an; Bilqis; Sheba; Saba'; women; wilayah; 'Ali ibn Abi Talib; hadith; Shi'ism.

Introduction

Introduction¹

One of the unique features of Shi'a hadith literature is how figures from pre-Islamic sacred history are integrated into the history of the Shi'a Imams in order to demonstrate the superiority of Ahl al-Bayt² over the preceding prophets.³ In some cases, such as the case of the Queen of Sheba, this emphasis overshadows any discussion of actual biography. Thus, while Shi'a hadith literature says little of substance about who the Queen of Sheba actually was as a person, by connecting her to this vast narrative sacred history, it grants her a stature unhindered by the discomfort over her womanhood that is found in some other Near Eastern writings, Islamic and otherwise.

These hadith also convey approval of her as an 'ordinary' – that is to say, non-infallible – woman who was an independent agent and active in the public sphere, thereby lending a counterpoint to Islamic texts (Shi'a and otherwise) which idealize women as passive and hidden⁴. Finally, by calling upon a non-infallible female to support the highest cause of Shi'ism – wilayah, or loyalty towards Ahl al-Bayt –

these texts reinforce the importance of the feminine in Shi'a spiritual cosmology and provide a model for female followers of the Imams to share in wilayah⁵.

The Queen Of Sheba In Scriptural Literature

The story of the Queen of Sheba – referred to in Sunni and Shi'a hadith as 'Bilqis' – and Sulayman is one of the lengthier narratives in the Qur'an, spanning 27:15 to 27:44. A separate surah, Surah Saba' (Surah 34), whose name literally means 'Sheba', continues this narrative by relating the death of Sulayman and the return of the people of Sheba to polytheism – presumably, after the time of Bilqis, who embraced monotheism – and their subsequent destruction. Were that not enough to grant it import, it is the only Qur'anic account of a female head of state, and is also the only Qur'anic narrative to explore methods of governance. Pre-Islamic Near Eastern and African historical sources, religious texts, and legends also speak of her⁶; in fact, since the Qur'an does not provide any introductory information about who the Queen of Sheba is and jumps directly to her story, it is generally held that the audience of the Qur'an was already familiar with her and hence did not require any sort of introduction⁷.

Since the story of Bilqis had already permeated the Near East prior to Islam, and since Jewish portrayals in particular appear to have influenced Sunni and at least one Shi'a hadith, it is worth comparing the Biblical, Jewish, and Qur'anic texts about her. One of the major scriptural sources to discuss the Queen of Sheba is the Old Testament⁸, which offers a brief account of her visit to Solomon's kingdom in 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9. In this narrative, her visit is described as a diplomatic mission, from one head of state to another. The narrative focuses on her immense wealth and her rich gifts to Solomon; unlike in the Qur'an, Solomon accepts her gifts but does not ask her to accept monotheism. There is also no mention of any romantic relationship between them⁹. Thus, the Old Testament presents her as an independent agent and public figure and does not offer any commentary regarding the ramifications of her being a woman.

However, later Jewish sources include more extensive accounts of the Queen of Sheba. These accounts highlight her gender and the perceived threat to the natural order that an independent, powerful woman would present. This is explored through many tropes involving gender confusion, such as Solomon asking the Queen of Sheba to distinguish between identically dressed boys and girls. The Queen of Sheba is portrayed as symbolically masculine by virtue of excessive body hair, and becomes symbolically feminine when – at Solomon's bequest – her body hair is removed, Solomon lies with her, and she loses her power and independence, thus falling under his dominance and restoring the natural order of things. In some accounts, she then bears a child – Nebuchadnezzar – who later destroys the temple in Jerusalem and sends the Jews into exile¹⁰. Thus, in contrast to the Old Testament story of the Queen of Sheba, these stories present the natural role for a woman as being submissive and strongly reinforce the danger of breaking from socially accepted gender roles¹¹.

In the Qur'anic account, Bilqis's gender does not go unnoticed; when Sulayman's scout, the hoopoe,

discovers her, he remarks on the unusualness of discovering such a powerful woman (Qur'an, 27:22). However, the Qur'an treats Bilqis's gender differently than the later Jewish sources. First, the Qur'an does not portray Bilqis as an aberration or a threat to the natural order due to her gender; instead, the main critique levied at her is that she was a sun-worshipper. Faith, not gender, is the primary concern. Second, like the Old Testament, the Qur'an does not allude to her sexuality or embark on any discussion of gender roles¹². Perhaps of most relevance to the modern Islamic discourse on women is that that Qur'an neither explicitly nor even implicitly condemns Bilqis, a woman, for taking on a position of political leadership.

However, this should not be taken to suggest that the Qur'an treats Bilqis like a man. Quite to the contrary; Bilqis presents a model of leadership that could most aptly be called feminine. 'Feminine' here is not a criticism since her rule is clearly effective since she has been 'given of every thing' (utiya min kulli shay', Qur'an, 27:23). In fact, in a prior verse (Qur'an, 27:16), before learning of Bilqis, Sulayman uses the same expression to describe himself; thus, the narrative implies an equity and even rivalry between them. Although a powerful monarch, Bilqis prefers diplomacy to warfare and consultation to autocratic rule – unlike Sulayman, who threatens to kill the hoopoe for its tardiness (Qur'an, 27:20–21)¹³.

Thematically, the narrative puts her feminine style of rule in contrast to Sulayman's masculine approach; for instance, in the prelude to the story, the ants are afraid that Sulayman's armies will destroy them (Qur'an, 27:18), whereas, later, Bilqis reminds her chieftains of the destructiveness of warfare (Qur'an, 27:34). When faced with the letter from Sulayman, Bilqis gives her chieftains the opportunity to express their views before coming to a decision; and although her chieftains are capable warriors, they defer to her judgment (Qur'an, 27:32–33).

Like the Old Testament, the Qur'an does not speak of Bilqis marrying or having any sort of romantic relationship with Sulayman. The main difference between the Biblical and Qur'anic accounts is thematic: while the Old Testament focuses on political diplomacy, the Qur'anic focuses on religious diplomacy and Sulayman's efforts to convert her to monotheism. In the Qur'an, although Sulayman invites her to worship the one God, Bilqis does not accept his invitation immediately; instead, she tests him through sending him gifts and coming to speak with him. When she sees that he is not interested in her wealth and witnesses the miracle of her throne being transported to Sulayman's palace, she is convinced that he is a prophet. Thus, she submits to Allah with Sulayman (Qur'an, 27:44).

'With' (ma'a) is worthy of emphasis; by saying 'I submit with Sulayman' instead of 'I submit to Sulayman', Bilqis retains her independence; rather than submitting to a man because that is the natural order of things, she acknowledges the supremacy of God as an independent monarch and as Sulayman's peer. Nonetheless, as in Jewish renditions of the story, in medieval Islamic retellings, 'with' is transmuted into a preposition of subservience, and Bilqis is portrayed as submitting to Sulayman – as a man – rather than with him¹⁴.

Similarly, Islamic accounts of her marriage to him are used to demonstrate her eventual subservience to

Sulayman and the restoration of the socially expected gender hierarchy¹⁵.

The Queen Of Sheba In The Sunni And Shi‘A Hadith Collections

Although Sunni prophetic narratives (qasas al–anbiya’ literature) discuss the story of Bilqis, the actual Sunni hadith collections are largely silent regarding Bilqis, and what is said can essentially be classified as minutiae – for instance, the question of whether Saba’ (Sheba) was the name of a person or a region¹⁶. One notable exception is a hadith related by Abu Hurayrah which asserts that Bilqis was born from a jinn¹⁷. This hadith is incorporated into some of the Sunni prophetic narratives and thus hadith serves to remove the challenge that Bilqis, as an independent woman, presents to the ‘natural’ social order¹⁸. Once she has been stripped of her humanity, she no longer provides a precedent for other, fully human women to follow in her stead and exert their own independence or authority¹⁹. Since Abu Hurayrah is eminently rejected as a reliable hadith narrator in the Shi‘a tradition²⁰, this hadith has no import in Shi‘a scholarship, and ‘Allamah al–Majlisi rejects the notion of Bilqis being of jinn–parentage as an ‘incredible’ story which is one of the isra’iliyat, or stories of Judaic origin which were falsely attributed to the Prophet (or Imams) as hadith²¹. Therefore, in the Shi‘a tradition, there is no question of whether Bilqis can be viewed as a full human being.

However, it should be noted that some authors feel that a similar phenomenon has occurred in the Shi‘a tradition whereby other significant women – especially Fatimah al–Zahra’ – have been uplifted so much that they are no longer relevant to the ordinary woman; if to err is human, then can one who does not err represent humanity?²² For this reason, the discussion of Bilqis as a non–infallible woman in the Shi‘a tradition is particularly relevant to the way that the Shi‘a textual tradition treats women in their full humanity, including their fallibility.

Not unlike the Sunni books, the Shi‘a Four Books²³ – which have come to be regarded by many Shi‘a scholars as the most reliable Shi‘a books of hadith – only contain two distinct narrations about Bilqis; and, of the Four Books, only al–Kafi and Man La Yahduruhu al–Faqih include these hadith. (Of course, since three out of the Four Books deal primarily with fiqh, it is not tremendously surprising that they do not have many hadith on Bilqis; it is perhaps more surprising that there are any hadith about her at all.)

The first hadith, which is about hoping for things beyond one’s hopes, will be discussed in the next section; it occurs thrice with slight differences in chain of narration and is attributed to Imam ‘Ali²⁴. The second hadith uses the story of the miraculous transport of the throne of Bilqis to discuss the miraculous knowledge and power of the Imams – in particular, in connection with the greatest name of Allah – and is found only in al–Kafi²⁵.

Bihar al–Anwar is substantially larger than any of the Four Books and is arguably the most influential Shi‘a hadith collection in the present era; it functions as an encyclopaedic repository of hadith²⁶. It contains fourteen hadith which purport to be about Bilqis since they have been included in the section entitled ‘Qissatuhu ‘alayhi al–salam ma‘a Bilqis’ (His [Sulayman’s] Story, Peace Be Upon Him, With

Bilqis)²⁷. However, only one of these hadith is about her personally. Of the remainder, eleven are about the greatest name of Allah and the miraculous transport of her throne, one is about Sulayman, and one is about hair removal. Three additional hadith in other volumes of Bihar mention her²⁸; all of these hadith are about the merits of Imam ‘Ali, and the latter one (in volume 89) is also attributed to Imam ‘Ali. Other references to her in Bihar are not of any substantive significance.

The Queen Of Sheba In The View Of Imam ‘Ali

Shi‘a hadith about the Queen of Sheba draw a strong connection not only between the Queen of Sheba and Ahl al-Bayt, but specifically between the Queen of Sheba and Imam ‘Ali: several hadith about her are used to support his position as the inheritor (wasi) of the Prophet (S), and some are also attributed to him personally. This connection is curious because of several misogynistic statements which have been attributed to Imam ‘Ali, in which he reportedly critiques women’s intellectual, spiritual, and ethical capabilities and declares that women are unfit for leadership²⁹.

Indeed, the only hadith in the Four Books which actually mentions Bilqis herself, as opposed to her throne, is attributed to Imam ‘Ali³⁰. In this hadith, Imam ‘Ali says that people should place more hope in Allah for the things which are beyond their hopes³¹, for Moses went out to find fire for his family and returned as a prophet, Bilqis went out and submitted (to Allah) with Sulayman, and Pharaoh’s magicians went out seeking honour for Pharaoh and returned as believers. Note that this hadith does not say what Bilqis went out to do, only that she ‘went out’ (kharajat).

Still, despite its brevity, this hadith implies several things about Bilqis. First and foremost, it is very favourable to Bilqis, in that it places her on par with other significant figures in sacred and Qur’anic history. Second, the positive outlook towards Bilqis’s ‘going out’ should not be overlooked given the stigma, and even religious legislation, which developed in the Islamic tradition regarding women going out from their homes³². However, apparently, in this narration, Imam ‘Ali did not find Bilqis’s ‘going out’ problematic.

This is all the more remarkable given Imam ‘Ali’s severe condemnation of ‘A’ishah for leaving her home to join those who became known as the Kharijites (lit. ‘those who went out’) and launch a battle against him³³. Third, this hadith maintains the spirit of the Qur’anic narrative by saying that Bilqis submitted with Sulayman – that is to say, as peers submitting together to Allah – as opposed to other Near Eastern retellings which portray Bilqis as submitting to Sulayman, in the sense of a woman submitting to a man.

Finally, al-Kulayni and al-Saduq both categorize this hadith in sections on earning a living; apparently, they felt this advice was particularly appropriate when going in search of a livelihood, and this too is noteworthy, given that earning an income is, shariah-wise, seen as a man’s responsibility³⁴. Therefore, in contrast to what is usually attributed to Imam ‘Ali, this hadith from Imam ‘Ali offers a positive view of women acting in the public sphere, as well as of Bilqis in general. Several other hadith about Bilqis are also attributed to Imam ‘Ali; they will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

The Queen Of Sheba And The Prophetic Inheritance

Bilqis's place in the overarching narrative of sacred history is elevated even more in this unusual hadith found in the section on the merits of Imam 'Ali (A) in Bihar. In this hadith, Bilqis becomes part of the chain of prophetic inheritance by temporarily possessing the famous sword of Imam 'Ali, known as the Dhu al-Fiqar³⁵. While Shi'a accounts traditionally say that Imam 'Ali was given the Dhu al-Fiqar during the Battle of Uhud, this hadith says that, in fact, the Dhu al-Fiqar descended from heaven at the time of Adam, and it was passed on from prophet to prophet until it – somehow – came into the possession of Bilqis, who presented it to Sulayman as one of her famed gifts to him. While, in the Qur'anic story, Sulayman refuses Bilqis's gifts because he is seeking her conversion, not her wealth, in this hadith, Sulayman presumably accepts this gift, because it is then passed on to Imam 'Ali³⁶.

The inclusion of Bilqis in this particular narrative is atypical, not only because she is a female but even more so because she is a non-infallible (neither a prophet nor an Imam) – and, according to the Qur'an (27:24), at that time was not even a monotheist. The inheritance of sacred objects, including the Dhu al-Fiqar, is considered to be one of the proofs of the imamate, in that one way the Imam demonstrates his legitimacy is by possessing certain sacred items³⁷. Since some of these items were passed on from Fatimah al-Zahra³⁸, there would be a slight precedent for a woman possessing them.

However, Fatimah al-Zahra is an exception in many ways, since, as the mother of the Imams, she also serves as the biological link between the Imams and the Prophet Muhammad; while both she and Imam 'Ali function as the spiritual links. Outside of that exceptional case, however, the line of inheritance is typically presented as being from father to son, and the theme of the patrilineal prophetic inheritance is common throughout Shi'a literature and is also expressed in a number of ritual Shi'a texts, such as the ziyarat recited to the Imams which refer to them as 'inheritors' of the prior (male) prophets³⁹.

However, there is certainly no precedent for a non-infallible to possess these items. Therefore, Bilqis's presence here is an unprecedented honour for her, and this hadith presents her in a particularly respectful light, since she is the one who returns the Dhu al-Fiqar to the prophetic line.

In addition to being part of the sacred conception of the imamate, the concept of inheritance itself has strong polemical overtones, since the main argument of Shi'ism vis-à-vis Sunnism is that Imam 'Ali is the divinely appointed inheritor (wasi) of the Prophet Muhammad. From a Shi'a perspective, any mention of Sulayman and inheritance is also highly polemically charged because of the connection between Sulayman and Fadak. Fadak was an income-producing property that the Prophet Muhammad gifted to Fatimah al-Zahra during his lifetime; however, upon his death, Abu Bakr seized it on the grounds that prophets do not leave material inheritance to their children. In response, Fatimah al-Zahra gave her famous speech in defence of her right to Fadak and cited the Qur'anic precedent 'and Sulayman was David's heir' (Qur'an, 27: 16) as proof that she had the right to inherit from the Prophet Muhammad⁴⁰.

The dispute over Fadak, in turn, is not seen as a property dispute but rather as symbolic of the dispute

over who had the right to the caliphate after the Prophet, for the traditional Shi'a view is that if Abu Bakr had recognised the right of Fatimah al-Zahra to Fadak, he would have had to return the caliphate to Imam 'Ali⁴¹. The confiscation of Fadak by Abu Bakr is thus seen as the first oppression against the family of the Prophet that led to the schism between Sunnism and Shi'ism and so is central to Shi'a-Sunni polemics. Since the verse 'And Sulayman was David's heir' (Qur'an, 27:16) is used to support Fatimah al-Zahra's right to Fadak – and thus Imam 'Ali's right to the caliphate – it is unsurprising that the Qur'anic story of Sulayman and Bilqis would be cited to argue that Imam 'Ali is the wasi of the Prophet. However, since the Qur'anic story does not overtly mention Imam 'Ali, it might not be clear to the casual reader how the story supports the position of Imam 'Ali as the divinely appointed inheritor of the Prophet. Therefore, hadith such as the following explicitly make this connection clear⁴²:

... I [Abu Ibrahim] said to him [Imam 'Ali]: 'May I be your ransom, tell me, was the Prophet (S) the heir all of the prophets?'

He [Imam 'Ali] said: 'Yes.'

I said: 'From Adam until it [prophethood] ended with himself?'

He said: 'Allah did not appoint a prophet except that Muhammad was more knowledgeable than him.'

I said: 'Indeed, 'Isa ibn Maryam (A) used to revive the dead with the permission of Allah.'

He said: 'You speak the truth, and Sulayman ibn Dawud (A) used to understand the speech of birds, and the Messenger of Allah was able to do these things...'

Imam 'Ali continues by describing Sulayman's immense powers and explaining how the Prophet and his wasi (that is, Imam 'Ali) inherited all of those powers and more, for while Sulayman needed the hoopoe to find water, the Prophet and his wasi could do that through the Qur'an – presumably, referring to an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an, although the exoteric verses about Sulayman are woven throughout the explanation. Therefore, any extolment of Sulayman's powers automatically implies the subsequent superiority of the Prophet Muhammad and, by extension, the Imams.

The same relationship between Sulayman and the Prophet, whereby the Prophet – and, thereby, the Imams – inherits all of Sulayman's knowledge and powers and more – is also expressed through a discussion of Surat al-Fatihah, the first surah of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is generally understood to be a miracle given to the Prophet Muhammad. However, the Qur'an says that when Bilqis received Sulayman's letter, she found it began with the formula 'bism Allah al-rahman al-rahim' ('in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful'; here mentioned in Qur'an, 27:30). This phrase, known as the basmalah in the Islamic tradition, precedes all but one of the Qur'anic surahs and is also the first verse of the Qur'an. So, was the Qur'an truly an exclusive gift to the Prophet Muhammad, or did Sulayman share in any portion of the Qur'anic revelation? Sulayman is, after all, described as citing the most frequent Qur'anic verse⁴³.

Apparently this question must have arisen, since two Shi'a hadith clarify that the Qur'anic revelation was exclusively given to the Prophet Muhammad, except for the basmalah which was also given to

Sulayman. These hadith thus reinforce the superiority of the Prophet – and, by extension, the Imams – while at the same time reinforcing the special connection between Sulayman and the Prophet, as well as the special connection between Sulayman and the family of the Prophet⁴⁴.

In one of these hadith, again attributed to Imam ‘Ali, the connection between Sulayman, the basmalah, and the Ahl al-Bayt is made clearer. In this hadith, Imam ‘Ali explains that Allah honoured the Prophet with Surat al-Fatihah, except that He gave the basmalah to Sulayman as well; but whoever recites Surat al-Fatihah while believing in the divinely appointed authority (wilayah) of Muhammad and the family of Muhammad (al-i Muhammad) will receive a divine reward (hasanah) for each letter⁴⁵.

[The Throne Of The Queen Of Sheba](#)

Another major polemical theme that emerges in the hadith on Bilqis is the instantaneous transportation of her throne to Sulayman’s palace in ‘a blink of an eye’ (Qur’an, 27:39–40); these two verses are typically cited to prove the possibility of the Imams possessing miraculous powers, for if a mere servant of Sulayman could transport the throne, the divinely appointed Imam should have even greater powers⁴⁶. While the transportation of the throne is cited to support the miraculous powers of all the Imams, again, here, it is cited with reference to Imam ‘Ali:

[Imam al-Sadiq said:] O Aban, how do people dislike what the Commander of the Faithful (A) said when he said: ‘If I willed, I would have raised this leg of mine and, with it, struck the chest of Ibn Abi Sufyan [Mu‘awiyah] in Syria and toppled him from his throne’ – but they do not dislike Asif, the wasi [inheritor] of Sulayman, transporting the throne of Bilqis and bringing it to Sulayman in the blink of an eye? Is not our prophet (S) the most excellent of prophets, and his wasi the most excellent of awsiya? Did he not make him [Imam ‘Ali] like the wasi of Sulayman (A)? May Allah judge between us and those who deny our right and hate our merits⁴⁷.

Again, the theme of inheritance runs through this hadith. In fact, this aspect of the story of Bilqis continues to be the most commonly discussed aspect of the Qur’anic story about her among Shi’a today, in lieu of other notable aspects of her story, such as her approach to governance.

The hadith explaining the implications of the transport of the throne are actually substantially important to the tafsir of verses 27:29– 39, which read:

Said an afreet (‘ifrit)⁴⁸ of the jinn: ‘I will bring it [Bilqis’s throne] to you before you rise from your council: indeed I have full strength for the purpose, and may be trusted.’

Said one who had knowledge of the Book: ‘I will bring it to you in the blink of an eye.’

Then when he [Sulayman] saw it placed firmly before him, he said: ‘This is by the grace of my Lord, to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful; and if any is grateful, truly his gratitude is for his own soul; but if any is ungrateful, truly my Lord is free of all need, supreme in honour .’ (Qur’an, 29:39–40)

Taken on their own, without any explanation in hadith, these verses raise more questions than they

answer. For instance, it is not clear why it would be necessary for someone to transport the throne in the blink of an eye, or what ‘knowledge of the Book’ is. Indeed, given that the Qur’an tends to be sparse on narrative detail, it is not clear why the discussion of how the throne was transported would be mentioned at all. Thus, it is natural that hadith would have been transmitted in explanation of these verses. In particular, as the only other hadith to mention Bilqis in the Four Books says, ‘knowledge of the Book’ here refers to knowledge of one of the seventy-three letters of the ‘greatest name of Allah’ (ism Allah al-‘zam), which was used to transport the throne; the hadith concludes with the Imam saying that ‘we have, of this greatest name, seventy-two of these letters, and Allah has kept one letter with Himself among the knowledge of the unseen.’⁴⁹ Thus, again, the story of the throne of Bilqis is used to reinforce the superiority of the Ahl al-Bayt over their predecessors with regards to their supernatural powers and spiritual knowledge.

Bilqis The Woman

It should be clear by now that, implicitly or explicitly, most hadith about Bilqis use her story to prove the merits of Ahl al-Bayt. However, there is one hadith which is actually about her – or, more precisely, her womanhood. This hadith, found in Bihar where it is quoted from Tafsir ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim, is strikingly different to the Qur’anic narrative and the hadith from Imam ‘Ali about hoping for what is beyond one’s hopes, since both of these describe her as an independent agent and do not address her femaleness.

However, this hadith is very similar to Jewish and Sunni retellings of the story in its focus on her sexuality and her ultimate subordination to Sulayman as a man (rather than as a prophet). For instance, while the Qur’an says that Bilqis was ‘given of every thing’ (Qur’an, 27:23), this hadith clarifies that this verse is ‘general in wording but specific in meaning’, since Bilqis did not actually have ‘every thing’; among the things that she lacked were ‘a male organ and a beard’. (It is hard to imagine a similar statement being made about males lacking a womb!)

This observation clearly defines maleness as normative and femaleness as deficient. Like in non-scriptural Jewish and Islamic renditions, there is disproportionate focus on Bilqis’s unsightly body hair. Sulayman orders the jinn to ‘do something about it’, and so they prepare baths and a hair remover for her, at which time he marries her, and she dissolves into her proper submissive, feminine role; the removal of Bilqis’s body hair is said to symbolize her transformation from masculinity and dominance to femininity and submission.⁵⁰

Thus, this one hadith which is about Bilqis herself is in sharp contrast with the other Shi’a hadith about her. Thematically, it is also in sharp contrast with the Qur’anic narrative (as well as the Old Testament). Instead, it much more resembles the later Jewish retellings. Given these discrepancies as well as the general questions surrounding the authorship of Tafsir al-Imam al-‘Askari⁵¹, the case could be made that this hadith is another example of isra’iliyat, like the Sunni hadith (mentioned above) in which Abu Hurayrah claims that Bilqis was part jinn.

However, Majlisi himself not only appears to have accepted it but even reinforces it, for in the section on the story of Sulayman and Bilqis, he includes another hadith that has absolutely nothing to do with Bilqis; namely, a hadith on using hair remover (nurah)⁵². (This particular hadith is also included in al-Kafi but, rather than being in a section on Bilqis, it is put in a section on – surprisingly – removing hair.) While the inclusion of this hadith in this section reinforces this sexualized portrayal of Bilqis, in fact, the hadith itself seems to contradict the symbolism of the removal of her hair, for the hadith itself appears to be addressed to men, not women, who are applying hair remover.

This biographical hadith from Tafsir al-Imam al-‘Askari is the only hadith in Bihar to assert that Sulayman married (or had a relationship with) Bilqis, a belief which – as discussed above – is common throughout the Near East but found neither in the Old Testament nor the Qur’an. However, another citation in Bihar supports the story of Sulayman marrying Bilqis and reinforces the trope of Sulayman’s dominance by engaging in a comparison between Sulayman and Imam ‘Ali – or, rather, Bilqis and Fatimah al-Zahra – by saying that Fatimah al-Zahra was married to Imam ‘Ali by choice, whereas Bilqis was married to Sulayman by force (‘unf)⁵³. In doing so, this hadith continues the trend of calling upon Bilqis to demonstrate the superiority of Imam ‘Ali.

Conclusion

Altogether, al-Kafi, Man La Yahdurhu al-Faqih, and Bihar al-Anwar contain about twenty hadith pertaining to the story of Sulayman and Bilqis. Most of these hadith take a uniquely Shi’a approach by using her story to demonstrate the supremacy of Ahl al-Bayt and, in particular, Imam ‘Ali. Most frequently, the miraculous transport of Bilqis’s throne to Sulayman’s palace is cited in support of the miraculous powers of the Imams. Explicit comparisons are also made between Sulayman and Imam ‘Ali. In addition, Bilqis is included in the chain of prophetic history. Throughout most of the hadith, Bilqis herself is portrayed in a respectful manner and there is tacit approval of her as an independent woman acting in the public sphere. Most of the hadith do not engage in any discussion of her gender.

While these portrayals are generally positive, they do reflect an obvious gap in the Shi’a (and Sunni) hadith literature on Bilqis: a discussion of the actual biography of Bilqis in her own right. Given that governance, warfare, and diplomacy are primary themes in the Qur’anic narrative of Bilqis, one would also expect them to be discussed in the hadith on Bilqis. However, hadith on these subjects are entirely absent. If these type of hadith did once exist, they have not been passed down to us; and, in the absence of any evidence, it is not possible to speculate whether this discussion was omitted because she was a woman, or because polemical concerns were more immediate, or for some other reason.

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². The family of the Prophet, in this context used to refer to the twelve Shi’a Imams (A) and Fatimah al-Zahra (A).

³. Examples of the use of other figures in pre-Islamic sacred history to demonstrate the superiority of Ahl al-Bayt include but are not limited to Adam and Eve (Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XI (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Wafa’, 1993),

164), Yusuf (Muhammad ibn Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kulayni, al-Kafi I (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1388 AH), 232), and Jesus (al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 320). For more discussion on the relationship between pre-Islamic figures and Ahl al-Bayt in Shi'a spiritual cosmology, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris: 2011), 143–152; Sayyid Abbas Husaini, Mahdi Muntazir Qa'im, and Muhammad Legenhausen, 'The Gospel of the Shi'ah of 'Ali ('a)' in *Al-Tawhid: A Journal of Islamic Thought*, vol. 3, no. 4:

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol13-no3/words-word-god-jesus-christ...> [2] Accessed on 26 September 2012; and Mary Thurlkill, *Chosen Among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 84–85.

4. For a discussion of Islamic views towards women in the Sunni and Shi'a traditions, respectively, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. (New Haven: Yale University, 1992) and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1999). For a short discussion and translation of a Shi'a text on this topic, see Amineh Mahallati, 'Women in traditional Shari'a: a list of differences between men and women in Islamic tradition', in *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1, (2010), 1–9.

5. It goes without saying that the woman who is most central to Shi'a spiritual cosmology is Fatimah al-Zahra (A), the daughter of the Prophet; for examples of discussion on her place in Shi'a spiritual cosmology, see Christopher Clohessy, *Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, trans. D. Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 30–31, 40, 57, 85; George Warner, 'Tragedy, History and the Sacred: The Hujjah of Fatimat al-Zahra', in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2011), 147–162; and R. Rowe, *Lady of the Women of the Worlds: Exploring Shi'i Piety Through a Consideration of Fatimah al-Zahra*. MA thesis. University of Arizona, 2008.

Marissa Dakake explores the question whether the community of wilayah during the time of the Imams was primarily for men, or whether women had a position in it in Marissa Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 213–236. Of course, the Queen of Sheba significantly predates all of these figures; however, since, from the Shi'a view, all of the prophets acknowledged the wilayah of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and are seen to share the same contemporaneous 'spiritual space', this historical gap presents no problem.

6. The Queen of Sheba is, in particular, claimed by both Yemeni and Ethiopian legend since stories in both regions say that she lived there. Hadith and the Islamic tradition in general say that Sheba (Saba') was in Yemen.

7. J. Lassner remarks on this point as well as the need to try to understand the narrative that was known to the Qur'anic audience in *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 42–43.

8. Like the Qur'an, the Old Testament does not provide her personal name.

9. 1 Kings 10:2 is sometimes taken to imply a relationship. The relevant portion of this verse reads in the King James version of the Bible as 'when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart', whereas in the New International Version of the Bible, it reads as '...she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind'. The question, therefore, is whether the final word – Hebrew 'lev' – refers to the emotions (heart) of the Queen of Sheba, or her intellectual inquiry (mind); the word itself can mean either. In that regard, it is similar in implication to the Arabic qalb, which literally means 'heart' but is also used in the classical tradition to refer to the seat of the intellect. However, it should be noted that, generally, these verses are not interpreted to mean that the Queen of Sheba engaged in a romantic relationship with Solomon.

10. See J. Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 23. Note that this story of Nebuchadnezzar's parentage is not derived from the Old Testament account.

11. J. Lassner explores this issue in depth in *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*.

12. For discussion of the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'an and its ramifications on the Qur'anic views of women see Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 40–42.

13. One Shi'a hadith gives an explanation for Sulayman's seemingly excessive attitude towards the hoopoe by saying that Sulayman desperately needed the hoopoe to find water for him; see al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XIV*, 112.

14. Of course, since Sulayman is a prophet, Bilqis would be expected to acknowledge his prophetic authority just like any man would be expected to; however, this is a different issue that, at least on the surface, does not involve gender.

- [15.](#) Jacob Lassner explores this theme in depth throughout Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*. Perhaps the main difference of significance between the Jewish and Islamic descriptions of the relationship between Sulayman and Bilqis is that, in the Islamic sources, the two are said to be married (as opposed to simply having a relationship); this is probably reflective of the fact that, in the Islamic tradition, it would be considered inappropriate for a prophet to have a relationship which was not sanctioned by divine law. The question of whether Shi'a hadith support the story of Sulayman and Bilqis marrying will be discussed towards the end of this paper.
- [16.](#) Abu Dawud Sulayman ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abi Dawud II* (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr li al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1990), 246; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad I* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadir, n.d.), 216.
- [17.](#) 'Ali ibn al-Hasan Ibn 'Asakir, *Tarikh Madinat Dimishq LXIX* (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr li al-Nashr wa al-Tiba'ah, 1998), 67; al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, *Kanz al-'Ummal II* (n.p.: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1979), 9.
- [18.](#) See Tha'labi cited in Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 269; Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 77, 87.
- [19.](#) 'Allamah Tabataba'i rejects the notion that Bilqis was born from a jinn as an 'incredible' narration that is among the *isra'iliyyat*. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an XV* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alami lil Matbu'at, 1997), 370–371.
- [20.](#) 'Abd al-Hadi al-Fadli, *Introduction to Hadith*, trans. N. Virjee (London: ICAS Press, 2011), 155–157.
- [21.](#) al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar LX*, 313.
- [22.](#) The tendency for medieval Christians to uplift the Virgin Mary to the degree that she is no longer relevant to the ordinary female as well, and the similarity between the two women in this regard, is explored in *Mary Thurlkill, Chosen Among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007). Marissa Dakake also expresses this viewpoint regarding Fatimah al-Zahra in *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 2007), p. 215.
- [23.](#) For the purposes of this brief survey, the Shi'a Four Books as well as *Bihar al-Anwar* will be examined since these are arguably the most prominent and influential extant books of Shi'a hadith; and *Bihar al-Anwar*, with its 110 volumes (Beirut edition), is arguably the most comprehensive. The Four Books are comprised of *Kitab al-Kafi* by Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni (d. 329 AH), *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih* by Muhammad ibn Babawayh (also known as al-Shaykh al-Saduq, d. 381 AH); and *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* and *al-Istisbar* by Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi (d. 460 AH).
- [24.](#) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi V*, 83; Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih* (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin fi al-Hawzah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.) III, 165; and Muhammad ibn Babawayh, *al-Faqih IV*, 399.
- [25.](#) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi I*, 230.
- [26.](#) Rasul Jafariyan, 'The Encyclopaedic Nature of *Bihar al-Anwar* (Part I)' in the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2008), 1–17.
- [27.](#) This section spans al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XIV*, 109–130.
- [28.](#) al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XL*, 58; *LXX*, 60; and *LXXXIX*, 228.
- [29.](#) There is a famous sermon attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib wherein he expounds on the defects of women. Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib [al-Sharif al-Radi (ed.)], *Nahj al-Balaghah*, trans. S. Reza (Potomac, MD: Ahlul-Bayt Assembly of America, 1996), 43. According to some scholars and commentators, these words were meant for 'A'ishah bint Abi Bakr on account of her instigation of civil war; others take these words to have a more general meaning. For discussions of the implications and authenticity or inauthenticity of this sermon, see Marissa Dakake, *The Charismatic Community*, 224; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, 226; Mahdi Mhrizi, 'Ta'ammuli dar Ahadith Nuqsan-i 'Aql-i Zanan', in *'Ulum-i Hadith* (n.p.: n.d.), 81–99.; Ayatullah al-Uzma Hajj Shaykh Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Commentary on Nahjul Balagha I Sermon 80 – The "Deficiencies" in Women*, trans. S. Bhimji (n.p.: Al-Fath Al-Mubin Publications, 2012) http://www.al-mubin.org/attachments/590_The-Deficiencies-of-Women-in-the-Eyes-of-Imam-Ali-in-Nahjul-Balagha.pdf [sic]. Accessed 26 September 2012. Authentic or not, these statements have had a strong influence on the development Shi'a views regarding women.
- [30.](#) This is of particular import since the Four Books are nowadays considered to be the most authentic books of hadith in the Shi'a tradition. Muhammad ibn Babawayh, *al-Faqih III*, 165; Muhammad ibn Babawayh, *al-Faqih IV*, 399; al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi V*, 83.

- [31.](#) The theme of hoping for more than one's hopes from Allah is found in a number of Shi'a prayers and hadith; for instance, in the well-known Shi'a prayer called Du'a al- Iftitah, or hadith about husn al-zann (having a hopeful opinion of Allah), such as in al- Kulayni, al-Kafi I, 61.
- [32.](#) For instance, according to some Sunni fuqaha', it is not permissible for a woman to travel without a male relative (mahram). In both Sunni and Shi'a fiqh, the traditional view is that it is not permissible for a wife to leave her house without her husband's permission; of course, it could be argued that this was not the case with Bilqis since she was not thought to be married at the time when she travelled to visit Sulayman.
- [33.](#) Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, Nahj al-Balaghah, 201.
- [34.](#) The traditional view in Sunni and Shi'a jurisprudence is that it is a father's responsibility to financially provide for his children, including his adult unmarried daughters and it is a husband's responsibility to provide for his wife (that is, a woman should not have to earn an income). The traditional explanation in jurisprudence is that marriage is a practical contract in which the man provides financial maintenance to the woman, and the woman provides spousal rights to her husband. The case of an unmarried adult woman without a husband or male breadwinners to provide for her is generally neglected. The nuances and origins of this view are explored by Kecia Ali in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 1–26.
- [35.](#) For a discussion of the importance of the chain of prophetic inheritance – of which the Imams are a part – in the Shi'i tradition, and, in particular, the Dhu al-Fiqar as part of this chain of inheritance, see Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 73–75, 129–130; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, 177, 310, 360.
- [36.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 42, p. 58.
- [37.](#) Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 73–75, 129–130; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, 177, 310, 360.
- [38.](#) Andrew J. Newan, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism*, 72–75, 119; Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford, Oneworld: 2003), 17–21.
- [39.](#) For instance, see Ziyarat al-Warith and Ziyarat al-Nahiyah al-Muqaddasah, both of which are ritual texts frequently recited in commemoration of Imam Husayn ibn 'Ali.
- [40.](#) Referred to in al-Tabataba'i, al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an XV, 371. Sources for this are also listed in Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, 102.
- [41.](#) See Shaheed Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, *Fadak in History*, trans. A. al-Shaheen, ed. A. Sharara (Qum: Ansariyan, 2006); Jean Calmard, 'Fatema, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica IX* (London: Encyclopaedia Iranica, 1999), 400–404. . Accessed 26 September 2012.
- [42.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 112. This hadith also occurs in al-Kafi (al-Kulayni, al- Kafi I, p 262) but since al-Kulayni does not attempt to connect it to Bilqis, it was not mentioned above. However, since in Bihar it is categorized under the section of 'His [Sulayman's], Peace Be Upon Him, Story with Bilqis', it is included here as being relevant to Bilqis even though it does not mention her directly. The same use of categorization to convey the implications of a hadith about this story recurs in Bihar wherein a hadith about Sulayman's caliphate over the jinn in a section entitled 'Imam 'Ali's khilafah over the jinn', thus implying that Sulayman's rule of the jinn proves Imam 'Ali's merit. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar LXX, 60. In both cases it is inclusion of the hadith under a specific chapter heading which makes it more relevant.
- [43.](#) This very literal understanding which presumes that Sulayman literally started his letter with the exact words 'bism Allah al-rahman al-rahim' (as opposed to something with essentially that meaning) also brings up the question of what language Sulayman would have written to Bilqis in, since he could not have written the exact words 'bism Allah al-rahman al-rahim' in a language other than Arabic.
- Sulayman's language of choice is actually addressed in a Shi'a hadith which says that Sulayman knew all languages (it is also generally held in the Shi'a tradition that the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve Imams also knew all languages), but at times of war, Sulayman spoke Farsi; when speaking with his workers and people in his kingdom, he spoke Latin (lit. 'Rumiyyah', which may also have been meant to refer to Greek); when he was with his women, he spoke Syriac and Nabataean; when he stood in his mihrab to pray, he spoke Arabic; and when he sat with delegations and with his enemies, he spoke Hebrew. The implications of this hadith with regards to racial and historical views are, of course, complicated.

However, since the Queen of Sheba is seen in the Islamic tradition to have been living in Yemen, the choice to pen a letter to her in Arabic would make sense, although Yemen has also historically been home to other languages as well. al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 110–111.

[44.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar XIV, 128; LXXX, 288.

[45.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar LXXX, 228.

[46.](#) For instance, in the Shi'a tradition, it is said that by using these supernatural abilities, the Imams travelled across vast distances or emerged from prison in order to bury his father, for an imam only buries another imam. For more information on this belief, see Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 86, 89, 210 n. 36.

[47.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 115–116.

[48.](#) An 'ifrit is said to be one of the types of jinn. The word is naturalized in English as 'afreet'. The Qur'an says that the jinn were put in the service of Sulayman (Qur'an 27:17).

[49.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi I, 230.

[50.](#) J. Lassner, Demonizing the Queen of Sheba, 20, 23. Of course, there is no reason why the marriage had to result in her submission and could not have been a marriage of two powerful equals, but that is not how it is portrayed.

[51.](#) Baqir Sharif Qurashi, The Life of Imam Al-Hasan Al-Askari: Study and Analysis (Qum: Ansariyan, 2007), 77–86. This is not to say that the other Shi'a hadith about Bilqis are or are not reliable, only to say that this one has a particularly strong question mark.

[52.](#) al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 109.

[53.](#) The premise that Sulayman married Bilqis by force would seem to contradict the Shi'a view that all prophets were infallible, since such an action would be sinful. However, this is not explored in the text here which simply presents it as a merit for Imam 'Ali. al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XXXIX, 71.

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