



Enamel, Verdun Altar,
France, 1181

Week 5: The Queen of Sheba: ‘Something Greater is Here’

(2 Chronicles 9.1-12)

by Dr Ann Loades

Bible Reading

When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, she came to Jerusalem to test him with riddles, having a very great retinue and camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. When she came to Solomon, she discussed with him all that was on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from Solomon that he could not explain to her. When the queen of Sheba had observed the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, and their clothing, his valets, and their clothing, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, it took her breath away. So she said to the king, “The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw it. Not even half of the greatness of your wisdom had been told to me; you far surpass the report that I had heard. Happy are your people! Happy are these your servants who continually attend you and hear your wisdom!

Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king, for the Lord your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness.” Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty talents of gold, a very great quantity of spices, and precious stones; there were no spices such as those that the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. Moreover, the servants of Hiram and the servants of Solomon who brought gold from Ophir brought algum wood and precious stones. From the algum wood, the king made steps for the house of the Lord and for the king’s house, lyres also and harps for the singers; there never was seen the like of them before in the land of Judah. Meanwhile, King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed, well beyond what she had brought to the king. Then she returned to her own land with her servants.

Reflection

If we've heard of the Queen of Sheba at all it might be because we've heard the composer Handel's splendid eighteenth-century piece, 'the arrival of the Queen of Sheba' which prompt us to imagine a simply magnificent royal occasion. Like many others, Handel had enjoyed reading about her arrival to the court of King Solomon in two places in our Bibles: chapter ten in the first book of Kings (Kings 10.1-13) and chapter nine in the second book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 9.1-12).

Her visit will have taken place a few years after Solomon had survived the conflicts of the last years of his warrior father, King David, so ruling sometime after 960 B.C. Solomon was tough enough to establish his court in palatial buildings, was builder of a splendid temple, and was securing his country's boundaries. He was up-dating the army with horses and chariots, and even funding a merchant navy. Any neighbouring ruler sufficiently well-established would find him an ally in keeping empire-building competitors at bay, and in setting up trade with him. That is probably why he received an extraordinary visitor, from Sheba, somewhere in the South, quite possibly from what we know nowadays as Saba in the Yemen.

The texts we have about the visit of the Queen of Sheba make a point of stressing that her main interest in visiting was her interest in the God who had been so good to Solomon, so she had a lot to ask. In any event she arrived in great style with a great train of camels (indispensable in the desert) bearing packs of spices including frankincense and myrrh from a richly prosperous land, but also gold from her mines and precious stones brought via the trade routes which stretched far away to the east. She had found out in advance what would please Solomon!

And of course, she herself would have looked simply magnificent in what we might now call 'bling.' We can assume that neither she nor Solomon would be outdone in splendour. Down the ages therefore she has been a gift to artists of different kinds. Handel was far from unique in writing music to imagine her arrival, and unsurprisingly she has been a subject of fascination to painters and sculptors, metal workers who decorated the great doors of major churches, makers of stained-glass windows within such places of worship and other great architectural settings, and in our time film-sets reinventing such magnificence. Since she has been celebrated in poetry and legends, not least in the Middle East, but especially in Judaism and Islam, she is also found in many different cultures and traditions world-wide. And so long as Ethiopia was an Empire, its emperors claimed her as their ancestor.

What the biblical text indicates, however, is not only the magnificence of the Queen's visit, but their spiritual exchanges. As well as reading from Chronicles, look back into First Kings, chapter three (1 Kings 3.1-15), and find there Solomon's dream, in which God asks him what he wants from God and gives Solomon what he most desires, which is 'a wise and understanding heart'; then

in chapter four 'largeness of heart (1 Kings 4.29-34), even as the sand that is on the seashore'. So he becomes wiser and more learned than any of his contemporaries, a writer of proverbs and songs, knowledgeable about the natural world. No wonder then that he had great visitors like the Queen of Sheba.

She came on her own account to make her own judgement about his reputation for wisdom, confident that she herself is perfectly capable of taking him on. For we read right at the beginning of chapter 10 that she came to test him with hard questions, that she spoke with him about all that was in her heart, and that he gave to her all her desire, whatever he asked. Solomon was generous and informative. She made her own judgment of the splendour in which he reigned, perhaps even enough to be somewhat intimidated at one point we might say, because as the text puts it, her breath was taken away! But she finds the courage not merely to thank Solomon, but to exercise her own authority in blessing him by praising God:

'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king, for the Lord your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness'.

In her own way, therefore, she reminds Solomon of what he had asked for, and what God had given him before their final exchange of gifts, and her departure. This, however, is not the end of the story.

We have two more texts to look at, to follow up from the Queen of Sheba's visit, the first of which is Psalm 72. We can see that it is a plea that a king would reign as though with the wisdom of Solomon, with special care for the poor and needy. The psalm also as it were renews the memory of the visit of the Queen of Sheba and expresses hope for the continuation of exchanges between the king and her successors: 'the kings of Sheba and Saba shall offer gifts', to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba', (picked up in St Matthew's account of the visit of strangers from the East to the newborn Jesus and his family at Bethlehem).

But this psalm is above all a prayer which directs the ruler's attention to those who most need his wisdom, in particular, anyone who has no helper. Thus a ruler may be remembered as blessed by the Lord God, who fills the whole earth with his glory. And we find that Jesus of Nazareth in some sense knows himself to embody divine blessing (Mt.12.42; Luke 11. 31). As he said:

'The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!'

Jesus is another bearer – indeed an infinitely greater bearer - of royal wisdom and even more with a heart as vast as the sand on the seashore (Colossians 2.3).

Questions

- What does this story tell us about God's presence beyond the chosen people Israel?
- How important is wisdom in living life?
- How does Jesus embody God's wisdom for us as Colossians tells us he does?
- Looking at the picture above, what might a wisdom-filled Christian perspective on inclusion look like?

Hymn

The perfect Wisdom of our God

(Stuart Townend)

The perfect wisdom of our God
Revealed in all the universe:
All things created by His hand
And held together at His command.
He knows the mysteries of the seas,
The secrets of the stars are His;
He guides the planets on their way
And turns the earth through another day.

The matchless wisdom of His ways
That mark the path of righteousness;
His word a lamp unto my feet,
His Spirit teaching and guiding me.
And O the mystery of the cross,
That God should suffer for the lost,
So that the fool might shame the wise,
And all the glory might go to Christ!

O grant me wisdom from above,
To pray for peace and cling to love,
And teach me humbly to receive
The sun and rain of Your sovereignty.
Each strand of sorrow has a place
Within this tapestry of grace;
So through the trials I choose to say:
"Your perfect will in Your perfect way.

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/tune/the_perfect_wisdom_of_our_god_revealed_i

Online Version: <https://youtu.be/hSnzYnOe6kl>

Prayer

Eternal Wisdom of God,
Jesus Christ our Lord:
let your light shine in our hearts.
Fill us with the joy of your holy resurrection,
for you are the splendour of eternal light
and the radiance of the Father's glory,
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and
knowledge.
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
we glorify you,
now and forever.
Amen.

Dr Ann Loades RIP

Just a few days after submitting this reflection,
Dr Ann Loades died.

Ann was a wonderfully gifted scholar, and she will
be much missed.

We are indeed grateful for the benefit of her
wisdom shared with us in this Lent Course
May she rest in peace and rise in glory.