

Bilqis, Queen of Sheba. A democratic queen

Whoever reads the Qur'an and dwells on the verses from the surah, The Ants, (*an-Naml*) may wonder why God offered the Queen of Sheba as an example? Historians have granted her the name of Bilqis¹ asserting that she ruled the people of Sheba, whose kingdom was located in modern day Yemen. The people of Sheba and its ruler were renowned for their idol worship, and history relates that Bilqis lived in a palace with three hundred and sixty windows to allow in the sunlight before which she prostrated herself every morning.²

One day, Bilqis received a missive from the prophet, not least King Solomon (Sulayman), requesting she submit herself to the world's Creator. What is interesting in the story recounted in the Qur'an is the description of this woman recited by God. Indeed, while the great majority of male kings and rulers mentioned by the Qur'an are despots, as illustrated by Pharaoh, Nero and others, the figure of Bilqis, a female ruler, is indeed that of a monarch, but a fair and enlightened one. The portrayal is accordingly that of a ruler apparently highly scrupulous on political principles of equity and justice. The Qur'anic verses are indeed clearly explicit on the governing style of this illustrious woman.

On receiving the message sent by Sulayman she immediately assembled a council of dignitaries, revealing the content of the letter and asking them to reflect on the political course to take. The Qur'an witnesses her as saying:

“She said, ‘Counsellors, give me your counsel in the matter I now face: I only ever decide on matters in your presence.’” Qur'an 27:32

Bilqis, a woman ruling one of the wealthier kingdoms of the era, took the trouble to *consult* the elected representatives of her people! Incidentally, these representatives made it quite

¹ Nowhere does the Qur'an mention the name of Bilqis.

² See *Le Noble Coran*, Muhammad Chiadmi, Editions Tawhid, 2004, surah 27, verse 23.

clear that the final decision was hers alone, but that she could rely on their physical and material strength:

“They replied, ‘We possess great force and power in war, but you are in command, so consider what orders to give us’.” Qur’an 27:33

The famous exegete Az-Zamakhshari³ explains in his commentary that the elected representatives consulted by Bilqis, while leaving the final choice to her, made a point of demonstrating their strength and power, suggesting that they rather favoured belligerent action. Yet, Bilqis apparently disagreed with this approach, proposing instead a peaceful solution as the first step, namely that of offering Sulayman a gift to test his reaction.

This level-headed political decision demonstrates the great wisdom of this queen who *in passing* made a pertinent remark on the *despotism* of kings. Considering that she was a queen herself, this was in the least an intriguing remark, but one can clearly detect in it her concern in avoiding such abuses commonly associated with any autocratic power:

“She said, ‘Whenever kings go into a city, they ruin it and humiliate its leaders – that is what they do – but I am going to send them a gift, then see what answer my envoys bring back.’”

Qur’an 27:34-35

A close reading of these verses shows us how much the queen’s observation turns out to be justified politically. The message she wanted to convey could not have been clearer. It is an acerbic critique of all despotisms that recur throughout the history of humankind, with their corollaries of humiliation and oppression suffered by the people, who as she finely articulates, lose their dignity under political authoritarian powers.

Her political analysis is incredibly apposite for one observing the current disastrous mishandling of politics in Muslim lands, and enlightens us – if need be – on the necessity for justice and equity of the Qur’anic message. This necessity undoubtedly constitutes the cornerstone of the moral and legal Islamic system. The first and widely renowned Muslim

³ Az-Zamakhshari, *Al Kashaf*, book 3, p. 375.

exegete Ibn ‘Abbas, also called the *interpreter* of the Qur’an, or *turjuman al Qur’an*, attributes the following verse: “*that is what they do*” to God Himself. In Ibn ‘Abbas’ analysis God is answering Bilqis’ commentary, thus confirming her earlier criticism of dictatorial political systems. Could there be any better testimony to illustrate the judgment and political perspicacity of this woman?

Bilqis was demonstrating both political wisdom and intellect: by presenting the gift to Solomon she was judiciously setting aside her advisers’ over-hasty proposal and in doing so avoiding an aimless war. By the same action, she was allowing herself time for reflection in order to study the king’s personality.

Bilqis, thereby, intended to test Sulayman and discover what lay behind the message exhorting her to submit to the *One God*. If the king accepted the gift, it meant that his message revealed a material ambition. By contrast, any refusal would mean that Sulayman’s motivation was deeper, in other words, of a spiritual nature ... a diplomatic strategy of great astuteness!

Sayyid Qutb perceived through the figure of this queen, a woman appearing in all her femininity; a woman, who with her instinct and innate feminine intuition, refuses wars and conflicts, preferring peace and dialogue.⁴ Is it not said that woman epitomizes a measure, albeit a small one, of the infinite mercy or *rahma* of God on Earth? This quality that some interpret as a sign of weakness in women, is on the contrary symbolized by the Qur’an as a sign of intelligence and great moral strength. This woman queen is a sovereign who rules politically with both reason and wisdom, whilst retaining her female humanity as a gift from God. It is as if somehow, she was humanizing her political actions through this feminine sensitivity that draws her closer to people’s daily realities.

⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al Qur’an*, Surah An Naml. Needless to mention that this feminine intuition is not always obvious and that the feminine model is not necessarily a model of peace or tenderness. One simply needs to recall figures such as Margaret Thatcher, dubbed *the Iron Lady*, or more recently Condoleezza Rice, a cheerleader for *pre-emptive wars*!

The Qur'an's description of this female *head of state* is itself undeniable proof countering all allegations of the so-called *over-emotionalism* of women who supposedly reason less than men and, who according to the same logic, are unable to politically govern an entire people! This explanation is evident in the discourse of the vast majority of Muslim scholars, regardless of their era.

A woman is supposedly over-sensitive, excessively sentimental, and therefore emotionally vulnerable and as a result incapable of using her reason. And yet within the management of state affairs, no place either for feelings or emotions, only reason prevails.

However, advancing this type of analysis, which implies that woman *reasons less*, or that *her reason* is subjugated to her feelings, is tantamount to declaring that she is *less human*. Indeed, if one had to distinguish the human being from other earthly creatures, one would notice that it is precisely *reason*, this mainly *human* quality that distinguishes him from the rest of the divine creation. It also enables him to access the privileged human dimension with its powers of reasoning and judgement.

Assuming, therefore, that woman suffers *deficiencies* in this domain, one simply deprives her of a part of her reason and, thereby, of her humanity.

In Islamic literature validating these kinds of theses from a religious viewpoint has always been an easy task, given that such traditions are anchored in the popular imagination that stipulates the supremacy of man regardless of context or the social environment. Regarding political affairs and governance, man is supposedly stronger, less emotional and therefore more reasonable; he is undoubtedly more suited than a woman to manage these types of situations. One can readily observe, however, that this kind of male chauvinistic premise is not exclusive to Muslim peoples, far from it. They can be found within all societies, even those said to be the most advanced. In France, for example, the country of human rights and

the birthplace of *feminism*, 89% of parliament is composed of men, with women's struggle for political equality still having a long way to go.⁵

Nonetheless, it remains true that within a Muslim context, women's access to positions of political responsibility is frequently, if not always prohibited in the name of Islam. And it is equally striking to see how the so-called prohibition on women's access to the higher realms of political governance is Islamically justified by one single hadith – just one – that has become normative, or further still the sword of Damocles brandished each time the issue of women's political participation is raised in Muslim lands!

Admittedly, there is a story in the prophetic tradition that reportedly says, “*Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler*”.⁶

However, firstly, one should stress that the context in which this hadith was expressed has frequently been ignored, greatly severing the story from its true meaning. Indeed, it occurred when the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) had just learned that Chosroes II, the Persian emperor and inveterate enemy of Muslims, had died and that his daughter had seized the throne. At that time the Persian Empire was ruled with an iron grip by the reigning family, renowned for its devious despotism. Through these words, the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him), intended to denigrate the emperor's daughter because of both the prevailing state of war between the two peoples and the nature of this raging autocratic political regime. But he did not criticize the fact that she was a woman. We may here put the question differently: would the Prophet have glorified the seizing of the Persian Empire's throne if it had been Chosroes II's son and not his daughter who had succeeded him? Unquestionably not! The Prophet was criticizing both the nature of power and the entire political system of the Persian Empire. However, it is

⁵ The website of the French parliament states that there were 502 male and 75 female deputies in 2006. On this topic see Saint-Criq and Nathalie Prévost's, *Vol au-dessus d'un nid de machos*, (*One Flew over the macho's nest*) Albin Michel, 1993, Paris. The book relates the setbacks of women within the French political system.

⁶ Hadith transmitted by Abu Bakr, reported by Bukhari, Tirmidhi, an-Nasa'i and Imam Ahmad, but not listed by Muslim.

unfortunate to note that a deeply misogynistic religious reading has perceived, through this hadith, the absolute necessity of imposing the appointment of a man to any position of political responsibility.

It is interesting to recall here that the hadith's narrator Abu Bakr,⁷ initially evoked it in a historical context as specific as the one in which it was enunciated by the Prophet.

Indeed, the history of the tradition relates that Abu Bakr *recollected* this hadith during the famous Battle of the Camel in which the allies of 'A'isha were pitted against those of Ali ibn Abi Talib.⁸ Abu Bakr himself, an ally of the clan of 'A'isha, justified his refusal to participate in the battle because it was a woman who was directing this political action! Abu Bakr therefore drew a parallel between the hadith he had heard from the Prophet and the context of the conflict between 'A'isha and Imam Ali, which unfortunately ended tragically.⁹

Having interpreted this hadith literally, he considered participation in any action lead by a woman as illicit, even though in this case it was 'A'isha who, according to some Islamic sources,¹⁰ he held in high esteem.

It is important to note in relation to this political episode that Abu Bakr's justification was not adopted by any of those amongst the Prophet's great companions of the time, who for other reasons also abstained from participating in the Battle of the Camel.

While the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) criticized a form of political representation because of its authoritarianism, Abu Bakr understood – like most of the subsequent scholars – that any form of political representation headed by women should be forbidden.

⁷ Of his real name, Nafi' Ibn al-Harith, he was re-named Abu Bakr after his conversion to Islam.

⁸ Dr Asmaa Muhammad Zyada, *Dawr al mar'a assiyasi fi 'ahdi annabi wa al khulafa arrashidin*, p. 485, Editions Dar Assalam, 2001, in Arabic.

⁹ See the details of this battle in our essay, *Áisha épouse du Prophète ou l'islam au féminin*, Editions Tawhid.

¹⁰ See the full commentaries concerning Abu Bakr in the collection of Al Haytami, *Majmaa azawa'id wa manba' al fawâ'id*, vol. 5, p.209.

Later generations of scholars ended up by *including* this hadith within a framework of recommendations in support of a ban on all forms of political participation by women even though the Prophet himself made no single utterance on the matter. He was merely assessing the political situation in Persia at that time. The total instrumentalisation of this hadith was carried out in the margins of its original context, with the proven aim of rejecting any form of female political participation.¹¹

On the other hand, some thinkers – most notably contemporary ones – assert that this hadith being viewed merely as a *hadith ahad* (a hadith reported by a single narrator), should not logically be used as the sole source for legislation.¹²

The interpretation of this hadith, as we know, had a flourishing future, with its corollary of *justifications*, the most popular of which remains the *biological weakness* of women. Scholars have barred women from accessing any form of political responsibility as a result of this supposed *physical weakness* that is blamed for their moral and intellectual inability to manage state affairs! Women are said to be *weaker* because of their physical constitution and their natural biological propensity to conceive everything solely on an emotional level and as a result they are most often seen as *irrational*. Here, it is evident that emotional predisposition is being confused with intellectual abilities. Yet, there is a colossal difference between stating that a woman is more inclined towards sensitivity and feelings – which in any case is not a defect – and claiming that she is handicapped by it! Would a female neurosurgeon be incapable of controlling her so-called *over-emotionalism* in the political arena while she is easily capable of doing so when removing brain tumours at the operating table every morning?

¹¹ For more details see Fatima Mernissi: *Le harem Politique, Le Prophète et les femmes*. See the chapter, *The Investigation of a Misogynistic Hadith and its Author, Abu Bakra*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1987.

¹² *Women & The Interpretation of Islamic Sources*, Heba Raouf Ezaat <http://www.crescentlife.com>

All these assertions, as well as being erroneous and unjustified are in flagrant contradiction with Qur'anic principles. The Qur'an has never attributed a specific *weakness* to women and at no point does it stipulate that man is blessed with greater reason or that woman is more deficient, or even devoid of rationality. Nowhere! By contrast, the Qur'an has specified that the *human being* in general is *weak*:

“[...] man was created weak”. Qur'an 4:28

The weakness that the Qur'an refers to here is an intrinsic human deficiency that transcends gender and which is linked to the human being's inability to control its negative impulses.

Moreover, through the example of Bilqis the Qur'an refutes those presumptions intent on disparaging women and excluding them, politically speaking, by presenting a woman as the height of wisdom and as a democratic political ruler, both fair and clever. She ultimately turns out to be infinitely wiser than the men she consults, probably her people's pre-eminent dignitaries. However, it is deplorable to observe how certain ancient Muslim commentators have strongly criticized the character of Bilqis. While the Qur'an speaks of this woman in laudatory, respectful and unambiguous terms, many exegetes take a highly pernicious stance towards her; some even entangling themselves in long, arduous and sometimes very discourteous commentaries!

Those who read the various works of *tafsir* (exegesis) will perceive the embarrassment, often the reluctance, or even the hostility of certain exegetes towards a female character governing on a *magnificent throne*,¹³ and who, moreover, displays both intelligence and wisdom. It is the Qur'an itself that describes the throne, the emblem of her power, as magnificent; Bilqis' intellectual ability to run a vast and wealthy kingdom with dexterity and *savoir faire* is truly undeniable!

¹³ “*Walaha mulkun 'azim*”; she had a magnificent throne, which is how the Qur'an describes her.

Some Muslim scholars circumvent the main point, namely this sovereign's tremendous personality as described in the Qur'an, as well as her political abilities, to offer a very reductive, not to say, truly derogatory approach. One great theologian from the dawning of Islam, for example, has described her in a particularly pejorative way as an *'iljatu* meaning "she-ass" or "miscreant", an expression frequently used to insult non-believers. This scholar is astonished to see men *submitting themselves to the rule* of an *'iljatu*, who as a woman is allegedly weak and lacking reason, but who reveals herself - to his utter disappointment - as more intelligent than these so-called wise men surrounding her! His derision extends to inappropriately criticizing her female physical appearance.¹⁴ One might wonder the exact relation between her external appearance and her political decisions - her physical nature being the result of divine creation. And how is it possible to vilify and defame her entire character on the sole basis that she is a woman?

Other scholars go further by granting this poor queen a Djinn lineage. According to some, Bilqis' mother was a Djinn, if not the patron of all Djinn!¹⁵ By thus stripping her of her humanity, the commentators can reassure themselves: if she is only half-human, then, no reason to ever cite her as an example! Reading the commentaries attributed to the story of Bilqis one remains astounded by all the speculation and implausible stories that distract the reader from the truly instructive dimension of the narrative.

At the end of his commentary, Ibn Kathir almost apologises for having to relate so many legends and escapades concerning Bilqis. He recognizes the highly unlikely nature of a great number of narratives and inappropriate interpretations that conflict with the marks of respect and the sobriety of the Qur'an's description.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Dar Al Koutoub Al Ilmya, p. 339, 2007, Lebanon. The scholar in question is Hasan Al Basri quoted by Ibn Kathir.

¹⁵ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, related by Kutada, Zuhayr Ibn Muhammad, as well as in the Qur'anic commentary of al-Qurtubi.

¹⁶ See towards the end of Ibn Kathir's commentary in his *tafsir*.

We are entitled to contemplate and attempt to understand the reasons for this denigration, especially when God Himself in the Qur'an mentions Bilqis with delicacy and respect. Indeed, even in relation to her idol worship, God refuses to label her as a disbeliever or impious, depicting her instead as submitting to her people's religious creed – somewhat in spite of herself – as she belongs to an unbelieving people:

“She was prevented by what she worshipped instead of God, for she came from a disbelieving people.” Qur'an 27:43

By carefully re-reading the verses related to Bilqis one is surprised at seeing the enormous gulf between the Qur'anic verses replete with consideration for her character and the implausible interpretations found in the classical books of exegesis. God, in His Holy Qur'an, repeatedly *valorizes* the image of this woman as queen, non-believer, sage and an advocate of the values of justice. One also perceives, in her portrayal by the sacred Text and throughout the divine narration, the emotional and spiritual aptitude of this woman who was acutely receptive to Prophet Sulayman's message. She almost certainly detected in his message the seeds of this Truth long sought after in the depths of her soul. God had intentionally embellished the image of this female disbeliever so that we could further appreciate her once she had converted to the faith of the One God!

Moreover, the Qur'anic message relating her story is extremely clear in stressing the importance of consulting with those being governed, as well as the values of ethics and justice that the ruler must demonstrate. Bilqis, queen and woman, perfectly symbolized this figure as head of state who is diametrically opposed to the despotic powers that the Qur'an repeatedly denounces throughout its message. It can be noted in passing that these authoritarian powers described by the Qur'an are symbolized, in most cases, by male dictators. It further appears that she is the only political character blessed with such authority and who, strictly speaking, was erected as *a model* in the Holy Qur'an. She is, therefore, an example of good political

governance to all men and women. It is also interesting to point out the strength of this woman's personality who, once convinced of the sincerity and truthfulness of Sulayman's message, solemnly announces with great humility and dignity her submission to the Creator. Indeed, the Qur'an relates her words:

“[...] she said, ‘My Lord, I have wronged myself: I devote myself, with Solomon, to God, the Lords of the Worlds.’” Qur'an 27:44

It is with Sulayman – and not for him – that she submits herself to the God of the Universe! She says “with him”, so that the devotion to God is performed with the most spontaneous *equality* and the greatest *freedom*. She was, admittedly, fascinated by King Solomon's magical powers and his amazing abilities, but she was conscious that his aptitudes were gifts from God, and in truth it was rather the prophet and his spiritual message that had won her heart.

It is related that Sulayman and Bilqis did marry¹⁷ although nothing can confirm it. It surely would have provided a fitting conclusion as it would have been unsurprising that these two beings had admired each other! Did they both not long for the values of justice and probity? Was it not the submission before the world's Creator that united them? The Qur'an provides us here with a beautiful lesson of love and intelligence through this female figure, who shares nothing in common with what numerous exegetes have, unfortunately, relayed to us.

¹⁷ This is a deeply controversial opinion, as according to At-Tabari, it was rather Sulayman who married her to a notable.