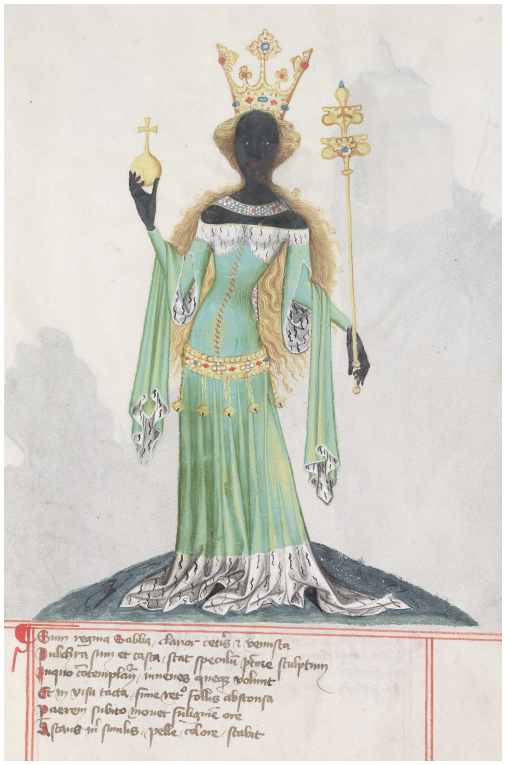
Jillian Stinchcomb

Legible Alterity: The Queen of Sheba between the Bible and the Kebra Nagast.



Bellifortis «Queen of Sheba»

During my time at the IAS, I will be working on my book, Legible Alterity: The Queen of Sheba between the Bible and the Kebra Nagast. The Queen of Sheba is a rare non-Israelite woman who appears in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Famous for visiting Solomon's court, she appears briefly in two parallel biblical narratives in 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9, is mentioned as "the Queen of the South who came to hear Solomon's wisdom," in parallel eschatological statements in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, and she again appears in a meeting with Solomon in the Qur'an's Surah al-Naml (27).

Prior to the seventh century CE, there is relatively little engagement with the Queen of Sheba, with the notable exceptions of the writings of Flavius Josephus and Origen of Alexandria. The Babylonian Talmud and Christian patristic sources make only passing comment on the Queen of Sheba that, in some cases, point tantalizingly to perhaps-lost sources. In general, we have remarkably scant evidence that the Queen of Sheba was the object of spirited interpretation.

Things change, however, from the ninth century CE onwards. A veritable cluster of traditions develop around this queen and her visit to Solomon's court. They span Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretive communities, and they take genre forms ranging

from riddle narratives to midrashic interpretation to historiography. Why does this interest in the Queen of Sheba burgeon during the late first millennium CE? To what extent was this interest "new"? And how does the Queen of Sheba become emblematic of early medieval reimaginations of the Solomonic past that cross traditional siloes of Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition?

Legible Alterity explores the formation of collective memories about the Queen of Sheba in the Solomonic past in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts from the Bible to the fourteenth-century Ethiopian epic known as the Kebra Nagast. Previous scholarship on the Queen of Sheba has treated Jewish traditions as always hermeneutically and historically prior to Muslim and Christian traditions. I argue instead that Jewish and Christian perceptions of the biblical and Solomonic past changed in the wake of the Qur'an.

Post-Qur'anic engagements with this figure reflect Jewish, Christian, and Muslim co-productions of the memory of the Queen's visit. Rather than treat these engagements as articulations of "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim" perspectives, my project shows how co-productions of the Solomonic past draw on shared literary features and genre tropes.

In tandem with this project, I will also produce a digital archive of primary sources on the Queen of Sheba before turning to my second book project, which will explore issues of monstrosity and temporality between the book of Kings and the Alphabet of Ben Sira. I am interested in the early reception of figures like Jezebel and Athaliya and the epistemological implications of later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim treatment of the Israelite and Judahite monarchy from the Second Temple period until the formation of the Masoretic text of the Bible in the ninth century CE.

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