

# THE STORY OF SULAIMAN (SOLOMON) AND BILQUIS (SHEBA): AFFINITIES IN QURANIC AND BIBLICAL VERSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*The story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) has been explored from a variety of angles. The studies have been mostly focused on a variety of ideas, ethical lessons, themes like power, obsessive pursuit of wealth, wisdom, submission, arrogance, ambition, and application of linguistic models for structural analysis at one hand, and juxtaposition of different versions on the other hand. Literary comparison may be another desirable perspective of the narrative. This article explores the extent to which affinities in two narrative versions (Qur'anic and Biblical) exist. An intertextual approach has been pivotal in tracing the explicit and implicit relations of both texts. The significance of this study lies in the fact that, the story of Sulaiman (Solomon) is equally important and perhaps a major subject of study for researchers from three major religions (Jews, Christians, and Muslims). The study confirms through tracing intertextual relation of the Qur'an and the Bible, maximum affinities in both versions of Solomon-Sheba story. It opens new avenues for comparative studies of the Qur'an and the Bible.*

**Keywords:** Qur'anic, Biblical, Sulaiman, Sheba, Intertextuality, Story

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba). It is a comparative study of two different versions of one story. The Qur'anic and Biblical adaptations of narrative description about Sulaiman's political endeavours through keeping in view intertextuality, a research model primarily introduced by Julia Kristeva, a French literary critic, and more popular in Comparative literature. An extensive research in recent years on textual comparison of Qur'an and Bible in general and narratives studies in particular has given rise to further studies in Comparative religion, Comparative literature, and Narratology (the study of nature, structure, and general impact of stories on human perception).

The stories of well-known prophets like Adam and Eve, Nuh (Noah) and the events of Deluge, Ibrahim (Abraham) and the intended sacrifice, Yusuf (Joseph) and his brothers in Egypt, Ilyas (Elijah), Yunus (Jonah) and his stay in the stomach of fish, Musa (Moses) and Firhon (Pharaoh), Dawood (David) and Zabur (the book of Psalms), and Sulaiman (Solomon) the prophet and king of Bani Israel etc. It is the story of Sulaiman (Solomon) which appears in great detail in the texts of the Qur'an and the Bible. In this way its readers must come from three major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and a point of common interest for literary critics, linguists, narrative writers, and researchers on narratology.

The purpose of stories in the text of the Holy Qur'an is to give moral lessons and thus the significance must lie in moral lesson instead of literary pleasure, form, and structure. So, the stories appear to be focused more on the moral importance of events than their logical order, narrative structure, and historical details. However, the events, persons, and historical evidence narrated through Biblical stories seem to be presented in logical order, appropriate narrative structure, and maintained higher literary standards. The events of life and special status of Sulaiman (Solomon) have been presented in a variety of Surahs and specific verses (ayat) of these chapters including, al-Anbya: 78-9, Sad: 30, and Saba: 12, but mostly in an-Naml. On the other hand, Solomon's life and reign is primarily narrated in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.

To comment comprehensively on existing research on the comparison of Qur'anic and Biblical narratives seems to be difficult. A conceptual survey of the works, comparatively more relevant to the story of Solomon and Sheba, may help to appreciate the nature of research based on comparing two apparently different versions of a scriptural narrative. Review of existing research on the subject may also open new avenues for exploring thematic similarities at one hand, and affinities in the way the events are narrated in two different versions of a story on the other hand. It may also confirm the validity and appropriateness of intertextuality as a technique to examine the extent to which both texts can be juxtaposed for tracing affinities.

Miriam (2002) examines intuitive knowledge as a source of wisdom. For this purpose the character of Queen Sheba is used as a typical example. The author claims that the Queen of Sheba ruled a country that was known for the production of frankincense and myrrh. She sent one of her advisors to Solomon to negotiate and make arrangements to secure trade routes. However, the advisor, on returning back told stories of Solomon's wealth and unprecedented power and wisdom. She decided to visit king Solomon and prove him with hard questions. She wanted to learn from Solomon's knowledge and wisdom. The Biblical story of Solomon and Sheba is interpreted from a different perspective. The purpose of Sheba's journey according to the author is nothing but to learn wisdom. In this way, she declares the purpose of her journey in a strange way: Hear, O my people, and give your ear to my words, I desire wisdom, and my heart seeks to find understanding. The character of Sheba is transformed from that of a ruler to a bonafide disciple of a saint.

Ayaz (2004) examines the way a comparative study of Qur'anic and Biblical narrative can be more convincing for better understanding of both sources of information (Qur'an and Bible). For this purpose, he follows a variety of modern literary theories including modern narrative theories, particularly William Labov's model. He has focused on major Qur'anic and Biblical stories including, the story of intended sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael, the story of Yunus/Jonah, the story of Adam and Eve, and the story of Yusuf/Joseph. He analyses the stories beginning from short stories and gradually proceeds to the longest story (Yusuf/Joseph story). He regards the text of the Bible as normative, and Qur'an as derivative, and makes objective comparison without passing any judgement about superiority of form or style of any text. He offers literary tools to analyse the texts of Qur'an and the Bible.

Michael (2007) appraises the background and progress of biblical tradition and existing views of scholars, historians, literary critics, and the students of Bible studies about overall level of borrowings. The author evaluates different approaches followed by western writers whose work on the text of Qur'an is overwhelmingly appreciated. Their perception of Qur'anic narratives and their similarities with Biblical narratives. The extent to which the claim of borrowing material from the Biblical texts for the development of Qur'anic stories. He questions the assertion of writers who strongly believe in the view that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) remained influenced by the teachings of Judaism. Their claim seems to be based on textual similarities in the sacred books of both religions. He confirms new developments in scholarship

in recent years, and scholars although a few in numbers have been trying to develop more logical and positive attitudes to Quranic narrative. And that orientalist mindset is a major hurdle on the way to read and understand the message of Qur'an.

Elias (2009) believes that the story focusing on Solomon's meeting with Queen of Sheba is in line with other stories about prophets and other well-known figures in the history of mankind. Minimum level of information and lack of formal narrative structure shows that the stories are intended for the audience who already know much about the events of Qur'anic stories. Their source of knowledge may either be the texts of previously revealed books or literature based on Hebrew Bible. He raises two questions about the story. First, why it attracts the attention of early Muslims scholars? And secondly, what is its significance in Islamic society. The message of the story defines the link of gender and power in Muslim society. Elias highlights two concerns i.e., Solomon's complex status as a prophet and king, and impropriety of women rulers.

Isaac (2012) describes the status of King Solomon in Biblical literature. He states that Solomon makes major part of writings of Hebrew Bible which include, Chronicles (1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles 1-9, 1 Kings 1-11), Nehemiah (13,26), and poetic literature, specifically Psalms (72,1 and 127,1), the Song of Songs (1,1.5; 3,7-11; 8,11-12), and Proverbs(1,1;25,1). Through giving references to Biblical literature the author tries to explore different names associated to King Solomon. He also tries to find the impact of different names on the writings composed to pay tribute to Solomon's power, knowledge and wisdom.

Memari & Aghayi (2016) suggest that the story of Qarun narrated in the Qur'an and Bible is intended to give a lesson that arrogance, haughtiness, or self-centered pride leads to utmost level of destruction. Qarun, whose name is attached to obsessive pursuit of wealth. It was not primarily his wealth but his arrogance which did not allow him to submit before the God. He considered his wealth to be the outcome of his efforts, competence, and merit. It was followed by him forgetting kindness of God and all those who remained his well-wishers. His house and wealth were devoured by earth as part of God's torment. The tragic end of Qarun is similarly narrated in Qur'an and Bible. The authors have made comparison of both texts and found great similarity in both texts in describing the fate of Qarun.

John & Younus (2018) highlight several biblical figures in the Quranic text. The book comprises nearly fifty chapters discusses maximum figures from the Bible with reference to their links in the text of Holy Qur'an. They present similarities and differences in the characters of both texts. In Chapter No. 46 (pages 160-162), Solomon/Sulaiman is introduced as a prophet and king of Bani-Israel. His name is mentioned in detail in different chapters of the Qur'an (21:78–82; 27:15–44; 34:10–14; 38:30–40). In chapter 43 (pages 152-153) Queen of Sheba and her visit to Solomon/Sulaiman is narrated in the Qur'an (27:20–44). However, it differs slightly from the Biblical description (1 Kgs 10:1–13). In both texts her name and location of her country are not identified.

Latrofa (2019) examines the prophetic functions of Solomon a Biblical figure of the Hebrew Bible in the Qur'anic story (Surah 27:15-44). Where he is mentioned with other prophets like Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Job Jesus etc. However, his role is distinguished from others in the narrative about Solomon's kingly meeting with the Queen of Sheba. Latrofa highlights Solomon's prophetic functions. At first, he performs miracles, and calls the people back to worship of one God. He successfully converts the Queen of Sheba suddenly because of his prophetic effectiveness even in the presence of strong opposition by the people at the top positions. Latrofa argues that Solomon, with the passage of time, begins to be self-centred and thus he begins to rely more on the Jinn. It has a negative impact on his righteousness and ultimately his position is weakened. The Qur'anic text, however, does not support the claim of interpreters. The story narrates Solomon's political role through prophetic actions.

The story of Solomon-Sheba has been interpreted from a variety of angles. All discussions have been made in specific logical background and their conclusions appear to be significant for the audience they have composed for. Scholarly writings on the story, beginning with knowledge based wisdom to critical evaluation of Solomon's character have greatly added to existing knowledge on narratology. However, the need to analyse the theological story from a comparative literary approach still exists. *The Story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba): Affinities in Quranic and Biblical Versions* is an effort to meet that need.

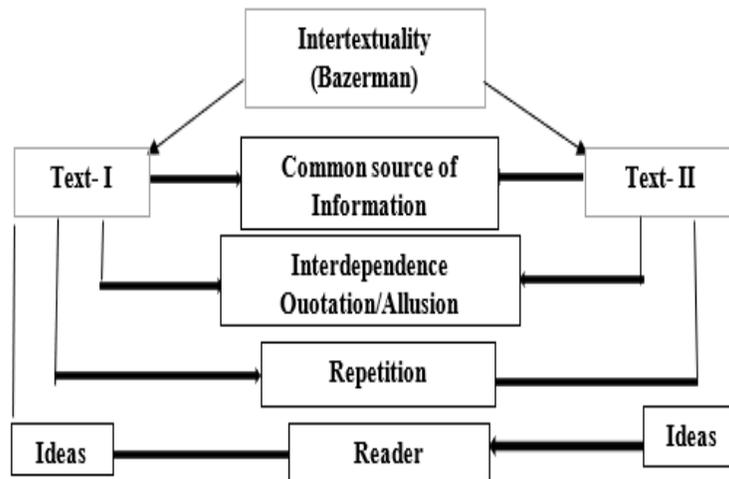
### **Comparative Analysis**

The comparison of Qur'anic and Biblical versions of the story focused on the meeting of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) to trace major affinities, needs intertextual analysis. For this purpose, the model based on intertextuality developed by Charles Bazerman seems to be more relevant. This model provides necessary framework for establishing link of Qur'anic and Biblical versions of Solomon-Sheba story. Intertextuality according to Bazerman is "the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has, to prior, contemporary, and potential future texts. Through such relations a text evokes a representation of the discourse situation, the textual resources that bear on the situation, and how the current text positions itself and draws on other texts"(2004). It helps the reader to look for reliable clues of common sources of information for both forms of texts without caring much for their conceptual similarity.

Bazerman (ibid, 86-88) suggests practical guidelines to establish conceptual relationship of one text to a similar text. The guiding rules and modalities promoted by Bazerman can be summarized in a more simplified way. These strategies can be highlighted in a logical order. First, "The text may draw on prior texts as a source of meanings to be used at face value. This occurs whenever one text takes statements from another source as authoritative and then repeats that authoritative information or statement for the purposes of the new text"(ibid,86) The meanings of first text suggest the rules and set specific criteria for interpreting the meanings of second text. In this way, the textual interdependence is established, and conceptual relevance is confirmed.

Secondly, "the text may rely on beliefs, issues, ideas, statements generally circulated and likely familiar to the readers, whether they would attribute the material to a specific source or would just understand as common knowledge." ibid, (87) In this case, the reader's position in becomes more significant. If the readers' academic, social, and cultural backgrounds are alike, their interpretation of same text would be naturally same. Similarly, it is the reader's perception through which the nature of common knowledge is decided. In such cases, common knowledge gives identical meanings to two or more texts.

Thirdly, "a text relies on the available resources of language without calling particular attention to the intertext. Every text, all the time, relies on the available language of the period, and is part of the cultural world of the times."(ibid, 88) The second text relies on the language of first text. The writer of second text mostly derives information from the first text through language of that text. Dependence of second text on the first, is conditioned with the gap or length of period between two texts. With the passage of time the language is changed and the link or reliance of second text is minimized. The points that can be derived from Bazerman's statements may be summarized in the form of diagram as follows:



**FIGURE 1**  
**BAZERMAN'S STATEMENTS**

Bazerman's suggestions seem to provide a logical strategy for looking into the texts of the Qur'an and the Bible for discovering intertextual relations. In this way, it can be assumed that the text of Qur'an (revealed at the later stage) may endorse the information disseminated through Bible, the text previously composed. It can be safely suggested that to trace intertextual relation of both texts, the source of information may be common, interdependence through allusion for direct reference through quotation, repetition of same idea, and the readers' ability to interpret same ideas in the texts with completely different social backgrounds. For example, the readers of Qur'an were familiar to ideas, discussed in the Holy Qur'an as a part of their biblical knowledge. The language of Qur'anic version is Arabic (spoken by Palestinians/Cananians) seems to be developed from the language of the Bible (primarily Hebrew) spoken by the people of Palestine (Cananians).

The results of such an investigative exercise may help to trace and declare that biblical information about the story of Solomon and Sheba is complemented by the Qur'anic version, and that, the affinities of both versions are remarkable. In this way, a comparative study of both versions of one story (the story of Solomon and Sheba) helps to establish intertextual relations of both texts (Qur'an and Bible) as presented in the following passages:

### Major Characters

There are several characters in the story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba). The characters of hoopoe, the advisors of Sheba, and the Jinn play important role in the development of Sulaiman's narrative. However, the events of story are focused on two major characters, i.e., Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba). The end of story decides the fate of both characters. At one hand, Sulaiman's success is appreciated, while on the other hand, Sheba's realization of truth is her own great success. The acceptance of Sheba's decision by the people of her country without raising any question reflects the worth of her character.

### Sulaiman (Solomon)

Sulaiman (Solomon) appears to be the man of knowledge, wisdom, immaculate character, and an individual with extraordinary capacity of sound judgement in social, political, and

religious affairs. One whose kingdom is unprecedented. The Qur'anic text reveals that, "And remember David and Solomon, when they gave judgment in the matter of the field into which the sheep of certain people had strayed by night: We did witness their judgment. To Solomon We inspired the (right) understanding of the matter: to each (of them) We gave Judgment and Knowledge; it was Our power that made the hills, and the birds celebrate Our praises, with David: it was We Who did (all these things)" (Abdullah, 2007).

Similarly, the Bible introduces Solomon as a man of integrity, uprightness, the true vicegerent of God, whose kingdom is strongest in the human history. Bible says, "And if thou wilt walk before Me as David thy father walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded thee, and wilt keep My statutes and My judgments. Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, 'There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel'" (The Holy Bible, 1994).

### **Bilquis (Sheba)**

Bilquis (Sheba) is introduced as a woman with practical wisdom who can fish in the troubled waters intelligently. Her diplomatic approach shows her level of quick sightedness. She is neither arrogant nor eager to pick an issue for the war. She has democratic mindset who is willing to make any decision through collective wisdom to safeguard the life and interests of her people. The Holy narrates, "(The Queen) said: Ye chiefs! Here is-delivered to me - A letter worthy of respect. It is from Solomon, and is: In the name Of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. She said: Ye chiefs! Advise me in (this) my affair: no affair Have I decided Except in your presence. She said: Kings, when they Enter a country, despoil it, and make the noblest Of its people its meanest: Thus do they behave"( Abdullah, 2007).

The Biblical description of Sheba is also like that of the Qur'anic description. She is introduced as a Queen with all powers and ruling a nation with practical wisdom. Although her introduction is not much in details as is the Qur'anic version but the message, she conveys has greater affinity. The Bible says, "And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions." Gary (1994) The character of Sheba is presented in almost similar way.

An overall comparison of both characters i.e., Solomon and Sheba give a clear picture of both versions. Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) appear to be similar characters in both texts (Qur'an and Bible). The reader may judge this affinity from Bazerman's perspective and assert it either a textual interdependence or common knowledge. Sulaiman (Solomon) is either prophet or king, a man with upright character, follows right path (of God), intends to work for the welfare of all creatures of God. Sheba is on the other hand, unnamed in both versions, a woman who stands for wisdom, quest for knowledge, and realization for human weakness.

### **The Arrival of Bilquis (Sheba)**

The arrival of Bilquis (Sheba) is described in detail in the Qur'anic text more than it is narrated in the Bible. Her arrival seems to be more dramatic than mere arrival of a queen. Her throne is already shifted from her country to Jerusalem at more than two thousand miles. She is surprised to see the throne almost like her own. The Qur'anic version says, "So when she arrived, it was said [to her], is your throne like this? She said, [It is] as though it was it. [Solomon said], And we were given knowledge before her, and we have been Muslims (in submission to Allah)"(Abdullah 2007)

In the Bible, the arrival scene is briefly narrated without specific details. However, the general description gives the impression that even a slight reference to the events of story can sufficiently help to understand the meaning of untold story. The Bible says, "And she came to

Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bore spices and very much gold and precious stones; and when she had come to Solomon, she communed with him about all that was in her heart.” Gary (1994) here all in her heart gives impression of details mentioned in the Qur’an. Her arrival in Solomon’s palace is presented in similar way. Both texts confirm the nature of meeting between Solomon and Sheba. She seems to be impressed by Solomon’s power and wisdom which is a clear indication of her possible submission to Solomon.

### **Sheba’s Submission**

The end of any story is usually regarded as its essence. The story of Queen Bilquis (Sheba) and her visit to the palace of Sulaiman (Solomon) has been narrated extensively in the books of literature with reference to its sources in the texts of the Qur’an and the Bible. In both versions the end of this story has been extremely beautiful. According to Qur’anic version it is a success story for the followers of the right path. Sulaiman (Solomon) successfully converted her to the right path from the people who had no faith. She declares: “O my Lord! I have indeed wronged My soul: I do (now) Submit (in Islam), with Solomon, To the Lord of the Worlds” (Abdullah 2007).

Similarly, the ending of Biblical narrative of Solomon and Sheba appears to be highly inspiring. She confesses her ignorance and weakness through professing the worth of Solomon’s kingdom. Her total submission seems to be a great victory on the part of Solomon and his companions. Her confessions as narrated in the Bible as, “I believed not the words until I came and mine eyes had seen it; and behold, the half had not told me. Thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. Happy are thy men, happy are these servants, who stand continually before thee and who hear thy wisdom. Blessed be the LORD thy God, who delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king to do judgment and justice.” Gary (1994) her total submission gives impression of her weakness as a female ruler at one hand and a virtuous human being on the other hand. Both versions of story show greater affinity on successful end on the part of Solomon.

### **Annotation**

The story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) covers a sizeable part of both texts (Qur’an and Bible). The characters of Solomon, Sheba, and their advisors have been clearly described in both texts. The Queen of Sheba is unnamed both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Qur’an. The names like Bilquis or Sheba have been given to her by the interpreters. There is a greater affinity in both texts on Sheba’s journey from her own country to Solomon (Jerusalem). Her realization of Solomon’s worth, power, knowledge, wisdom, and high moral standing is also narrated in both texts almost in a similar way. Her declaration and conversion to the right path along with Solomon is also confirmed from the textual information from the Qur’an and the Bible.

However, some of the textual information in the Qur’an does not seem to be confirmed in the Biblical version of the story. The character of Sulaiman (Solomon) in the Qur’anic version is that of a Prophet. In the Biblical version Solomon is only a King. The character of hoopoe bird (hoodhood) as narrated in the Qur’anic text along with Sulaiman (Solomon). “And he took attendance of the birds and said, “Why do I not see the hoopoe – or is he among the absent? I will surely punish him with a severe punishment or slaughter him unless he brings me clear authorization.” Abdullah (2007) It does not appear in the biblical version. Similarly, the letter from Sulaiman (Solomon) to Bilquis (Sheba) in the Qur’anic version is not mentioned in the

biblical version. (The Queen) said: “Ye chiefs! Here is delivered to me - A letter worthy of respect. It is from Solomon, and is: In the name Of God, Most Gracious, and Most Merciful.”(Abdullah, 2007)

Another part of the Qur’anic version of the story is missing in its Biblical version. In the palace of Sulaiman (Solomon) the floor was made of shining glass on the sand which looked like pure water in a lake. The queen thought it could be water, and to save herself from getting wet, she lifted her skirts, but Sulaiman (Solomon) talked about its reality as mentioned in the Qur’an: “She was asked to enter that lofty Palace: but when she saw it, she Thought it was a lake of water, and she (tucked up her skirts), uncovering her legs. He said: This is but a palace paved Smooth with slabs of glass.”(Abdullah 2007)

## CONCLUSION

The story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) has been a popular narrative for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Main events of the story have been narrated in Surah-27 of the Holy Qur’an and 1 Kings 10 of the Bible. Through juxtaposing the Qur’anic and the Biblical versions in accordance with the principles of intertextuality, thematic affinities have been explored. For this purpose, English translation of the Holy Qur’an by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and the Holy Bible, 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James Version has been followed. The principles of intertextuality suggested by Charles Bazerman provided necessary framework to be followed in making comparison of both versions of Solomon-Sheba story.

Through comparison of both versions, it has been revealed that on major points of Solomon-Sheba story a total agreement exists. The points on which maximum similarity exists include, the characters of Sulaiman (Solomon), Bilquis (Sheba), Sheba’s arrival at Solomon’s palace, her recognition of Solomon’s power, immaculate character, and wisdom. Sheba’s submission to Solomon and beautiful ending of story with great success on the part of Solomon, is the point on which maximum affinity can be noticed.

It can be safely concluded that, despite noteworthy differences on several points, the story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Bilquis (Sheba) shows maximum similarities in both versions. It helps to confirm notable affinities in the Qur’anic and Biblical versions of Solomon-Sheba story. It also helps to generalize intertextuality as a model of comparative research in literature, religion, history, humanities, and social sciences. It also opens new avenues for comparative research on other parables in the Qur’an and the Bible.

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**Received:** 02-May-2022, Manuscript No. JLERI-22-11959; **Editor assigned:** 04-May-2022, PreQC No. JLERI-22-11959 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 16-May-2022, QC No. JLERI-22-11959; **Revised:** 20-May-2022, Manuscript No. JLERI-22-11959 (R); **Published:** 26-May-2022