


'And God gave Solomon wisdom': Proficiency in ornithomancy

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The biblical text accords a great deal of attention to King Solomon's personal abilities and governmental power. Solomon was described as a judge, poet, constructor and the wisest of all people in the Ancient Near East and Egypt. The current study discusses the interpretation of the midrashim that show how Solomon's wisdom was manifested in his considerable knowledge of *ornithomancy*, that is, divination using birds, a practice that was considered as an important wisdom in the ancient world because of its practical applications, particularly in the military sphere. It seems that Solomon's portrayal as a magician is intended and aimed at emphasising his abilities and his impressive character. Moreover, it may have had the purpose of disproving the conception of Solomon as inferior to his surroundings in this respect and the idea that he or his kingdom could be controlled by nations that command this type of wisdom.

Introduction

The biblical text accords a great deal of attention to King Solomon's personal abilities and governmental power. He reigns in force over a kingdom that extends over a large area (1 Ki 5:1,4), he wields impressive economic and military force (1 Ki 2–3, 6–8) and he maintains an intricate system of commercial ties with countries near and far (1 Ki 22–25; 1 Ki 9:26–28; 1 Ki 10:22). Solomon is also responsible for construction enterprises, of which the most significant is the First Temple in Jerusalem (1 Ki, chap. 6). The biblical narrator depicts Solomon as the wisest of all people in the Ancient Near East and Egypt (1 Ki 4: 29–33), and it seems that the best known story of his wisdom is the Judgment of Solomon. King Solomon gave a ruling in the matter of two women who both claimed to be the mother of a certain child, and he resolved the dispute easily and creatively (1 Ki 3: 16–28; Montgomery & Gehman 1967:129–131).

Solomon is a biblical figure who achieved transcultural universal status, possibly more than any other. This status is portrayed in diverse late literary genres: midrash and legend, folklore, theological and philosophical treatises, and magical literature. Over the generations, Solomon was described in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures as having a multifaceted character (Verheyden 2013). One of his prevalent features, which attracted massive attention in Jewish literature, is his outstanding wisdom (Langer 2013:127–142).

The goal of the current study is to deal with interpretation of the midrashim that show how Solomon's wisdom was manifested in his considerable knowledge of ornithomancy, i.e. divination using birds.

The Wisdom of Solomon: The biblical text

According to the biblical narrator, Solomon was more knowledgeable than reputable wise men of the ancient world, and he was widely renowned for his wisdom. As a result, people sought his presence and came from afar to witness this prowess; for example, the Queen of Sheba (1 Ki 10:1–24). Solomon's wisdom is described in detail and it encompassed varied domains:

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ez'rahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Maḥol; and his fame was in all the nations round about. He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. (1 Ki 4: 29–33)¹

1.The English translation is from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

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Solomon's great wisdom is evident from the biblical verses, as reflected on three dimensions:

1. The relative dimension – his extensive knowledge in comparison to other wise men in the Ancient Near East. Benjamin Mazar contends that when comparing Solomon with other wise men it is evident that worldly knowledge was prevalent in Israel and particularly among the royal house in Jerusalem. Indeed, Mesopotamian literary works enjoyed an extensive distribution and were found in various sites, for example in Megiddo and Ugarit as well as in the al-Amarna archives (Mazar 1980:133).
2. The quantitative dimension – Solomon's impressive knowledge in the literary sphere included a tremendous wealth of parables and poetry.
3. The comprehensive dimension – Solomon's knowledge was extremely comprehensive. Use of the prepositions *min* [from] and *ve'ad* [to] for this purpose indicates an endless scope of knowledge that cannot be quantified, similar to literary knowledge (Ha-Reuveni 1985:275–288). Solomon ruled over all extant creatures. He was familiar with all species of flora – from the most highly developed, *Cedrus libani*, to the most inferior, *Majorana syriaca* (Feliks 1992:138). He also ruled over the various animal species, with their different characteristics.

King Solomon's wisdom according to the Jewish literature

Some midrashim describe Solomon as a powerful and influential magician who commanded demons for advantageous purposes, such as to build the temple in Jerusalem (Gittin 68a; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1885–1887:13; Flavius 1950:VIII 2, 5; Sasson 2007:37–53; Song of Songs Rabbah 1885–1887:42; Torijano 2002:41–87). Solomon was said to have been the author of magical compilations, i.e., *Tzava'at Shlomoh* [Testament of Solomon] and *Sefer Maphteah Shlomo* [Key of Solomon] (Alexander 1986:375–379; Duling 1983:956; Seligsohn 1901–1916:XI, 447).

He is described as a physician who has pharmacological knowledge, or as a magician who cures people by controlling demons (Duling 1985; Halperin 1982:269–292; Sasson 2007:46–50). Solomon is portrayed as a physician in Christian literature as well. Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 385/393 – c. 458/466 AD), the theologian of the School of Antioch, a biblical commentator and the bishop of Cyrrhus, mentions in his interpretation of 1 Kings 4:33 the existence of Solomon's medical books and commends him as the source of all medicinal knowledge. He stresses that Solomon's talent originated from his familiarity with the characters of plants and animals. For this reason he recommends using the bile of the hyena, the fat of the lion, the blood of the ox and the flesh of lizards for various diseases (McCown 1922a:10, 1922b:95; on Theodoret of Cyrus, see Pasztori-Kupan 2006).

Rabbinic sources stress that Solomon had a great mastery of the Torah and according to Hellenistic writers Solomon's wisdom included a considerable knowledge of science and

philosophy (Ginnzberg 1942:VI, 282). The Pesikta Rabbati, a late midrash dated to the period of the Geonim (approximately 10th century), describes Solomon as having impressive knowledge and superior proficiency in the constellations and astrology compared to other wise men (Ish Shalom 1880:59b).

Before discussing the issue of King Solomon as an expert in ornithomancy, I shall review the use of divination by birds in ancient times.

Ornithomancy: Historical background, modes and techniques

The practice of ornithomancy was common among civilisations and faiths in ancient times (Halliday 1967:246–247). Omens and signs were determined using a variety of animals; however bird omens held special significance among animal-based omens (Bodenheimer 1950:I, 146–148). Prophesying by means of birds was customary in ancient Egypt and in Mesopotamia (Boissier 1905–1906:73–109; Burkert 1992:42; Oppenheim 1977:219–220; Reiner 1995:86–87; Siculus 1933:I, 1, 7).

The omens and signs were determined using a variety of animals, such as ants, bees, snakes, scorpions, oryx, foxes, farm animals and so on (Herodotus 1926:I, 78; Plinius 1961:XI, 55). Although bird omens (Figure 1) held special significance compared to other animal-based omens, they were less valued than divination by reading the liver, heavenly bodies or drops of oil (Bodenheimer 1950:I, 146–148).

In classical times, when the midrashim began to emerge, divination and mantic practices occupied an important place in culture and religion (Berchman 1998:9–45; Bouché-Leclercq 1879:127–145; Burkert 1985:112; Luck 1985:250–251; Potter 1994:58–206). Ornithomancy was popular all over the Mediterranean area, and it was a practice used for both civil and military purposes (Cicero 1923:I, 41, 91; 42, 94). The success of a military campaign or course of action was determined by a diviner who preceded the army and signalled to the commanders whether to proceed or not



Source: Poulsen, F., 1922, *Etruscan Tomb paintings*, Oxford, viewed n.d., from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tomba_degli_Auguri.jpg

FIGURE 1: Etruscan wall painting from Tomba degli Auguri (c. 530 BCE) showing two augurs. The augur on the left is observing a bird.



Source: Wikipedia, n.d., Augur, viewed n.d., from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augur>

FIGURE 2: An augur holding a litmus, observing the behaviour of a hen eating grain.

based on the flight of the birds (*alites*) and their cries (*oscines*) (Halliday 1967:246–247; Pollard 1977:116–129; Potter 1994:152–154).

The Greeks attributed prediction of the future to 10 or 12 species of birds, the most prominent of which were the hawk, the falcon, the owl, the eagle, the cock (Figure 2) and the raven and in special cases also imaginary birds (Halliday 1967:270; Pollard 1977:126–127; Prichett 1979:107–108). For example, the caw of the raven (*Corvus* spp.) was considered an omen of disaster, death or the failure of royal campaigns. The flight of the raven was also meaningful, for instance whether it flew to the right or to the left (Dio 1924:VII, 58, 5; Tranquillus 1889:Dm 23).

Solomon as an expert in ornithomancy

Some midrashic sources cite King Solomon's expertise and pre-eminence in the field of ornithomancy. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, an amoraic midrash compiled in Eretz Israel beginning from the early 6th century CE, states:

So that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt [1 Kings 4:30

(RSV)]. And what was the wisdom of the ancients? That they were knowledgeable in the constellations and cunning in *tayyar*. (Mandelbaum 1962:60)

Similarly, Ecclesiastes Rabbah (1885–1887), a midrash compiled in Eretz Israel after the time of the Talmuds:

And what was the wisdom of the ancients? That they were knowledgeable in the constellations and utilized the magic of the birds and were proficient in *tayyar*. (p. 41)

The understanding of the midrashim that Solomon had expertise in ornithomancy is based on a combination of two details in the biblical text: (1) Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people; (2) Solomon ruled over the various animal species, including birds. The midrashim assume that 'speaking of birds' certainly includes the practical and important wisdom of ornithomancy (see below).

The word *tayyar* comes from Aramaic and it means 'bird, fowl', that is, in the midrash context – ornithomancy (Jastrow 1985:531; Moreshet 1980:179; Sokoloff 1990:II, 223). It should be noted that in Arabic as well bird ('fowl') is طائر (plural طيور; Milson 2012 entry طائر). The ancients were 'cunning' or 'proficient' in *tayyar*, that is, they specialised in the observation of birds. The term 'cunning' (*arumim*; singular *arum*) has a double meaning, both positive and negative: It denotes those who are wise and clever, who have a command of a domain that gives them an advantage, and also those who are adversely devious and shrewd (compare with Gn 3:1; Even-Shoshan 1975:V; 1999; 2006).

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana and Ecclesiastes Rabbah clearly perceive ornithomancy as a non-Jewish branch of magic, but they also describe Solomon as proficient in this field. If so, what was the purpose of creating such an image, particularly in light of the prohibition against engaging in these practices? Solomon's portrayal as a magician is undoubtedly aimed at emphasising his abilities and his impressive character. Moreover, it may have had the purpose of disproving the conception of Solomon as inferior to his surroundings in this respect and the idea that he or his kingdom could be controlled by nations that command this type of wisdom. Divination with birds is not a theoretical type of wisdom; rather it has practical applications, particularly in the military sphere (see previous section). Solomon's military power derived not merely from horses and chariots (1 Ki 5:6) but rather also from intelligence, such as ornithomancy, which played an important role in amassing confidential information about the enemy.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah distinguishes between the use of birds for purposes of sorcery (*kosmin be-ofot*) and their observation in order to receive hidden information (*beki'in be-tayyar*), that is, ornithomancy. However, it does not list the relevant magical usages. The renowned biblical commentator R. Moshe ben Nahman (Nachmanides, Spain and Eretz Israel, 13th century) suggests that a distinction be made between the 'knowledge' (*yedi'a*) and 'cunning' (*ha'arama*) ascribed to

the ancients, following the version of the midrash that appears in Numbers Rabbah 19:3. He states: 'And Solomon learned this among his other wisdoms. And knowledge is the chirping, and cunning is reaching an understanding from the spreading of the wings' (Nachmanides 1959:Dt 18:9). Namely, these are two different ways of observing birds – 'knowledge' means specialising in understanding the chirping of the birds, while 'cunning' means interpretation of their flight. However, as stated, ornithomancy was also based on additional aspects, such as their manner of eating and their location relative to the individual.

Discussion: Speaking of birds, speaking with birds and divining through birds

While according to the simple meaning of the verses in 1 Kings 4: 29–33, it appears that Solomon's wisdom was reflected in his knowledge of the qualities and features of birds and other animals, according to the midrashim we presented, Solomon controlled the mechanism of disclosing hidden knowledge through the cries and flight of the birds. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana and Ecclesiastes Rabbah (see previous section) cite this as a fact and it is necessary to find out whether Solomon's performance of such activities is mentioned in literary sources.

Beginning from the Early Middle Ages, Jewish, Muslim and other sources describe Solomon not merely as observing or passively listening to the cries of the birds and deriving necessary information from their behaviour but rather as an active partner in creating a two-way dialogue with the birds. The phenomenon of human discourse with animals is fairly extensively represented in Jewish literature. This is an ancient element that first appears in the Bible in the story of the Garden of Eden, where the serpent (assuming that it is not a mythological creature) tempts Eve and convinces her to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (Gen 3:1–6). This element has a conspicuous place in the story of Balaam and his donkey, where in the course of their conversation the donkey protests to its master for beating it unjustifiably (Nm 22:28–31).

In rabbinic literature both divining through animals (Lieberman 1955:27; Sanhedrin 65b–66a; compare with Weiss 1862:90b) and talking to them for various reasons are widely documented. In the midrashic literature this was expanded to include other biblical figures, such as Noah, whom the raven accuses of sending it to check the water level in order to arrange for its demise and claim its mate for himself (Sanhedrin 108b). In the Talmudic literature, Jewish sages also benefit from divining and conversing with animals, for example the story of Ilish, who is told by the raven and the dove that he must flee his prison (Gittin 45a). In any case, there is no doubt that in post-biblical literature, both Jewish and Muslim, the person most identified with control of birds, their utilisation for obtaining practical information for the purpose of fulfilling his goals and knowledge of their language is King Solomon (Figure 3).



Source: Asian and African studies blog, n.d., *The Pentateuch, Five Scrolls, Haftarat accompanied by masorah magna, Coburg, Germany, 1390–1396 (British Library Add MS 19776, f. 54v)*, viewed n.d., from <http://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/11/digital-hebrew-treasures-from-the-british-library-collections.html>

FIGURE 3: King Solomon seated on a throne. At his feet there are several animals, hinting at his ability to converse with the animals.

The basic meaning of the term 'divination' (in Hebrew, *nihush*) is to reveal something unknown or to prophesy the future, and birds can provide hidden details or reveal the future by occult means (Bos 2017; Oppenheim 1978:VI, 421–426). In the next lines, I shall provide several examples of Solomon's interactions with birds, and following this definition I shall explore whether elements of divination and of disclosing hidden information through birds can be identified.

A story originating from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 68a–b, relates that when Solomon built the Temple he captured Ashmedai, king of the demons, in order to utilise his knowledge in locating the mythical shamir, capable of splitting the stones to build the Temple. In this story Solomon not only controls the king of the demons but also makes use of secret knowledge held by the wild rooster, identified as the hoopoe, who has possession of the shamir. The hoopoe is described as a bird that managed to make the wilderness bloom. For this purpose the hoopoe asked the angel of the sea for the shamir, which was capable of cutting through any material, and swore to take good care of it. The hoopoe's method was to arrive at distant uninhabited places, place the shamir on a mountain and split the rock; then it would bring seeds and sow them in the cracks formed in the rock. Solomon cunningly managed to convince Ashmedai to reveal the location of the hoopoe's nest and to take possession of the shamir (on this legend and its versions, see Kaminka 1922–1933:221–224; Kushelevsky 2009:II, 85–111; Schwartz 2010:384). In this story, Solomon is revealed as a magician who controls the demons, but he has no direct 'discourse' with the hoopoe nor does he divine based on the bird's flight. His wisdom is manifested in managing to decipher the unknown location of the shamir and to reap benefit from creatures with whom normal people do not converse (demons and birds).

Song of Songs Rabbah, a Land of Israel midrash compiled after the time of the Talmuds, describes a nocturnal vision experienced by Solomon at Gibeon, in which he asks God for wisdom instead of money, property or the lives of his enemies:

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, Ask what I shall give you [*I Kings 3:5 (RSV)*]. Said Solomon: If I were to ask for silver and gold and jewels and gems He would give them to me, but I will ask for wisdom [...]. The Holy One Blessed be He said to him: Solomon, you asked for wisdom and you did not ask for wealth and property and the life of your enemies. For this you will receive wisdom and knowledge [...]. Immediately: 'Then Solomon awoke – and he realized it had been a dream'. R. Itzhak said: The dream came true, donkeys would bray and he understood their bray, birds would chirp and he understood their chirping. (Song of Songs Rabbah 1885–1887:4)²

According to the midrash, the dream was verified and the request for wisdom was realised promptly. Immediately after awakening from his dream Solomon is aware of understanding the language of the animals. He hears a donkey braying and understands the meaning of the braying as well as the meaning of the birds' chirping. This midrash leads to two insights. One is that the height of wisdom is evident in understanding the meaning of animal speech. The second is the understanding that the language of the animals is itself completely legitimate and does not necessarily involve the prohibition against divination, although the magician acts in a way that is indecipherable by normal people. In fact, this source does not refer to the meaning of the sounds Solomon heard or whether they involved any revelation of hidden information.

The Second Targum (*Targum scheni*) of the Scroll of Esther is a homiletic translation that consists of considerable aggadic material influenced by Palestinian Aramaic. Some think that it was redacted no earlier than the 6th century CE, and others date its redaction to the late 8th century. Nevertheless, it undoubtedly includes traces of ancient exegetical and midrashic material. This translation contains a tradition consisting of an incident in which Solomon sends the 'wild rooster', identified by some traditional commentators as the hoopoe (Rashi on Lv 11:19), on a mission.

In this story, in contrast to the previous stories, Solomon frightens the bird, controls it and even maintains a complex conversation with it. Solomon holds a big feast, to which he invites all the sages of the East and West in the vicinity of the Land of Israel, and seats them in his temple. Then he orders that music be played before him using musical instruments and he also orders that the birds of the sky, beasts of the field, insects of the Earth, demons and spirits be brought before him to dance and to prove his greatness to all the kings seated there (David 1898:8–10).

At that time the wild rooster is sought among the birds but cannot be found. The king is angry, and he commands that

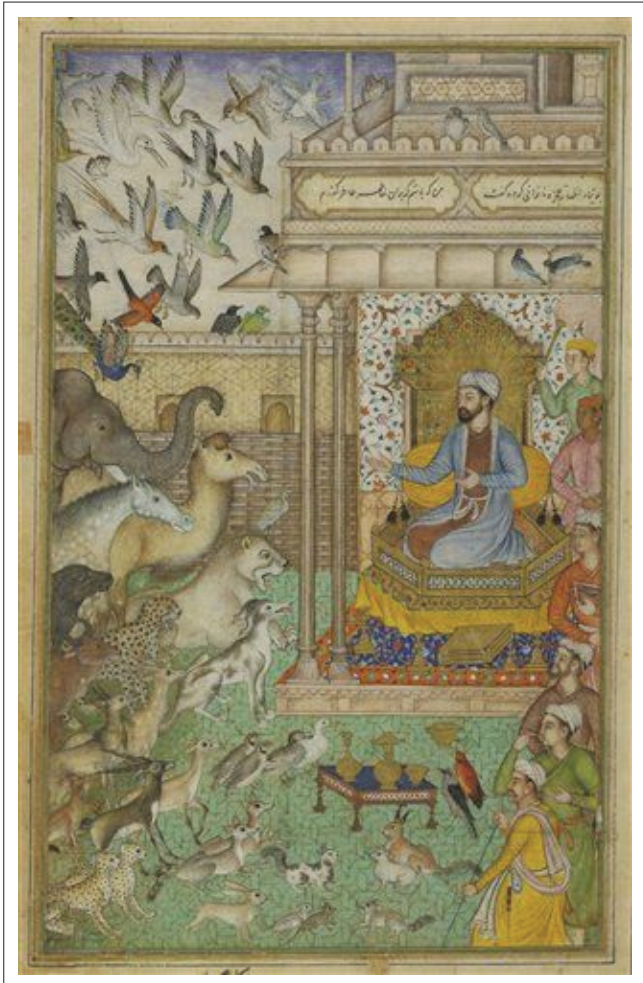
²This description was also brought in similar words in other midrashim (see Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1885–1887:1; Yalkut Shimoni 1960:1 Ki 175).

the bird be brought and punished. The wild rooster explains to the king that for 3 months he has been roaming the world in search of a country or government that did not obey Solomon's bidding. Thus, he discovered a rich and flourishing country ruled by a woman named the Queen of Sheba. The hoopoe asks the king's permission to go to that country and bring its rulers to the palace. The king agrees and the king's scribes are called to the palace and write a letter to the Queen of Sheba, which they tie to the bird's wings. The hoopoe flies off, accompanied by many birds, to the Queen of Sheba. As related, the hoopoe encounters the Queen of Sheba in the morning, when she comes out to bow to the sun and is surprised to see the sky darkened by the many birds sent by Solomon. The queen sees the letter tied to the hoopoe's wings and upon reading it she discovers that the king insists that she come to his palace with her servants or else he will send the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky and the spirits and demons to inflict harm on her people. The Queen of Sheba relents and comes to Solomon's palace in Jerusalem, where she discovers his might and wealth (David 1898:8–10).

According to this version, the hoopoe saves itself by providing the king with hidden knowledge about a kingdom previously unknown to him. Moreover, it proves that its absence was not in vain but rather in order to enrich Solomon's knowledge of the world's nations, while even serving his interest in knowing which distant nations had not submitted to him. Solomon's dominion over many nations is described in the verses of the Bible and this story was undoubtedly aimed at emphasising the extent of his rule (1 Ki 5:1–4).

In order to prove its words, the hoopoe departs on a mission, together with many other birds also controlled by Solomon, and they convey to the Queen of Sheba Solomon's demand that she come to Jerusalem. Throughout the story Solomon speaks to the hoopoe and, as stated, the bird reveals to him hidden information about the kingdom with its riches of gold and silver, its military faults and the ruling queen. Based on the definition presented above, this includes an element of 'divination', as in its chirping the bird reveals hidden information.

The Jewish tradition concerning Solomon, the Queen of Sheba and the wild rooster appears in the Quran with several changes, and here too the bird is shown to reveal hidden information to the king. The phenomenon of Jewish traditions in the Quran has been discussed in the research literature and debated repeatedly (Reeves 2003; Tisdall 1905; Torrey 1967; Tottoli 2002). According to the Quranic story, Solomon learned the language of the birds and this was a blessing to him. One day all of Solomon's troops, which included demons, humans and birds, gathered and passed before him (Figures 4 and 5). In contrast to the Second Targum, which describes the discovery of the hoopoe's disappearance during the feast held by Solomon, the Quran does not mention this event but rather speaks of a type of census that the ruler holds of his subjects. Solomon counts the creatures



Source: Pinterst, n.d., *The court of Solomon with Jinns, Angels, Animals and Birds (Mughal Miniature)*, viewed n.d., from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/355925176776508751/?p=true>

FIGURE 4: King Solomon and the animals. The *Light of Canopus (Anvar-i suhayli)*, a compilation of fables and stories with a long tradition in the Islamic world (c. 1595, India).

under his rule and notices that the hoopoe (hudhud, *أَلْهُذْهُذُ*; Figure 6) is missing. In *Sūrat an-Naml* (سورة النمل, The Ant) the Quran writes:

And he [Solomon] took a muster of the Birds; and he said: 'Why is it I see not the Hoopoe? Or is he among the absentees?' 'I will certainly punish him with a severe penalty, or execute him, unless he bring me a clear reason (for absence)'. But the Hoopoe tarried not far: he (came up and) said: 'I have compassed (territory) which thou hast not compassed, and I have come to thee from Saba with tidings true'. 'I found (there) a woman ruling over them and provided with every requisite; and she has a magnificent throne'. 'I found her and her people worshipping the sun besides Allah'. (Quran 27:20–24 [Abdullah 1938])

The bird reports that Sheba is ruled by a powerful and wealthy Queen named Bilqis who has a magnificent throne. However, they worship the sun, which disturbs Solomon. Solomon sends the hoopoe back to the Queen with a letter (Figure 7), inviting her and her people to the worship of the one true God. Ultimately, Queen Sheba renounces idolatry and joins Solomon in worshipping God (on this story, see Lassner 1993:47–63; Tisdall 1901:24–32).



Source: Pinterst, n.d., *The court of Solomon with Jinns, Angels, Animals and Birds (Mughal Miniature)*, viewed n.d., from <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/488640628298567416/>

FIGURE 5: The court of Solomon with jinns, angels, animals and birds.

The Muslim version, too, depicts the animals as committed to Solomon, where the hoopoe serves as his agent for uncovering hidden information. The hoopoe provides Solomon with information about a distant kingdom whose queen and residents worship idols. While in the Second Targum the Queen of Sheba (whose name is not mentioned) arrives at an understanding of Solomon's power and might, according to the story in the Quran Solomon eventually brings Queen Bilqis to believe in God and to cease her worship of the sun. Hence, the gift of wisdom that God granted Solomon leads to increased faith in him even among distant nations who did not previously know of him. It is not impossible that the narrative in the Quran wished to identify Solomon with Muhammad, who also attempts to spread faith in the One God among the idolaters.

It is important to note that the motif of the hoopoe as a 'messenger of the world invisible' has a prominent place in the Islamic world. One example of this motif is the Persian poem 'The Conference of the Birds' (*Mantiq-ut-Tayr*, *الطير منطق*), written by Farīd ud-Dīn al-Attār (فريد الدين العطار), a poet and Sufi mystic who lived in north-east Iran in the 12th century. The poet casts the hoopoe as a guide of the birds of



Source: Pinterst, n.d., *King Solomon and the hoopoe*, viewed n.d., from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/48617772246971203/?lp=true>

FIGURE 6: King Solomon and the hoopoe.

the world who are gathering together to seek a king. They are told by the hoopoe that they have a king – the Simorgh – but that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous (Attar 1984).

Conclusion

The belief that animals in general and birds in particular convey messages, omens and signs that predict the future appears in both Jewish and non-Jewish ancient sources. Ornithomancy is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible; however it has diverse representations in post-biblical literature, such as in midrashic literature on King Solomon's abilities.

Jewish sages perceived the practice of ornithomancy as a type of wisdom, although they expressed reservations because it is contrary to Jewish law. According to the midrash, not only non-Jewish clever men engaged in this craft but also King Solomon, who was proficient in the practice and was considered even more knowledgeable than other wise men of his time. Describing Solomon as an augur skilled in ornithomancy is probably intended to demonstrate his abilities and masterfulness. In ancient times, divination with fowls was a useful practice, especially for military goals. As stated above, the success of a military campaign or course of action was dependent on a diviner who observed the flight of the birds and their cries. The military power of Solomon's army derived not merely from his soldiers and arms but also from intelligence, which is achieved through birds. However, no source reports on Solomon's usage of ornithomancy.



Source: LinkedIn, n.d., *Bilqis reclining in a garden. On the right side, the hoopoe with a letter from King Solomon.*

Persian miniature (c. 1595), tinted drawing on paper, viewed n.d., from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/universal-meaning-solomon-sheba-d-d>

FIGURE 7: Bilqis reclining in a garden. On the right side, the hoopoe with a letter from King Solomon. Persian miniature (c. 1595), tinted drawing on paper.

The sources on Solomon's conversations with birds do not perceive his conduct as a type of divination but rather present it as a manifestation of his excessive wisdom. Notably, it is not the aspect of observing the birds' flight that is evident in the sources we brought but rather the vocal communication. The ancients might have considered the complex discourse with the birds as a more powerful manifestation of Solomon's abilities.

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