

ANOTHER REPRESENTATION OF SOLOMON IN POPULAR ISLAM

Alexander Fodor

Budapest

In a former article published several years ago in *The Arabist* I already had the occasion to deal with a representation of King Solomon¹. As for the contents and message of the picture, I tried to show the presence of a complicated system of symbols suggesting that, apart from being a piece of decoration, it must fulfil the purpose of an amulet as an apotropaic device (Fodor 1988:50f). In connection with the outer appearance of the representation I emphasized the Mamlūk reminiscences in the artist's archaizing efforts (*ibid.*, 48f), and referred to the technique of the traditional *Hinterglasmalerei* which might have influenced the artist's style (*ibid.*, 44).

This time I wish to present another picture of Solomon which I had the chance to buy in Aswan about four years ago. The coloured print measuring 320mm x 220mm was published by the *Matba'at al-Gindī* in Cairo. According to a signature on the picture, it was drawn by a certain Midḥat. The present publication is justified by at least two facts.

Firstly, this kind of popular representations seem to have lost their traditional places of occurrence, so they have completely disappeared from Egypt². The reason for this might lie in the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalist forces which may look with disdain at any form of popular pietism. In this respect, they must certainly disapprove of the use of pictures with religious subjects which, in their view, infringe the Islamic ban on figural representations (Fodor 1988:51, n. 3). This expla-

¹ See Fodor 1988.

² Another case of disappearance: the once so popular pictures of Ali in Iraq have been banned by the authorities for political reasons in recent years. For this, see Fodor in print:123.

nation can be supported by the phenomenon that an overflow of Koranic quotations presented in a wide variety of wall-hangings has submerged popular markets replacing such formerly favourite pictures as the Burāq, the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, Ali and his sons, the tomb of the Prophet in Medina etc. Naturally, a change in the taste of people, a kind of "modernization" of habits might also have played a part in the emergence of the new forms.

Secondly, the content of the new acquisition is also worth preserving as a document for research. Describing the scene on the picture we must start with the written text which has an integral role in expressing the basic idea of the whole representation and in this way stresses a characteristic trait which is usually found in Christian icons (Fodor 1988:46). The main title in bold letters reads as follows: *Sayyidunā Sulaymān - 'alayhi s-salām* ("Our Lord Solomon - Peace be upon Him!") and serves to introduce the most important figure who of course must be easily recognizable by any onlooker.

The sentence inscribed above in the right corner is a Koran verse (Sūra 27,22): *wa-ġi'tuka min Saba' bi-naba' yaqīn* ("And I have come to thee From Saba' with tidings true.")³. This text here has a special and independent function since it is not destined to complement a certain part of the pictorial representation. As a real dramatic prelude it helps us to understand the events that unfold around Solomon. According to the different legends, Solomon and his armies of men, jinns, devils, birds and beasts were on their way to Yemen when the King suddenly discovered that his guide, the hoopoe whose main task was to find water for his ritual ablutions before prayer, disappeared⁴. When the bird finally arrived, he informed Solomon that he had just come from Saba' where he had found a queen who with her people was worshipping the Sun prostrating themselves at sunrise and sunset. The circle in the upper

³ I used the translation by Abdulla Yusuf Ali.

⁴ For the stories of the different episodes represented on our picture, see especially at-Ta'ālabī, *al-'Arā'is* 346-355. Cf. also al-Kisā'ī, *Vita* II, 289-292 and Ibn Kaṭīr, *Qiṣaṣ* II 288-294. For an English version of the different legends, see J. Knappert 1985 I, 138, 142f.

right corner of the picture shows figures in the course of such an act in front of the Sun.

Upon hearing this news, Solomon sent his famous letter in which after the *basmala* he called upon Bilqīs, the Queen of Saba' and her people to become Muslims⁵. The hoopoe was instructed to forward the message to the Queen and, obeying the King's order he took the letter in his beak and flew to Saba'. This scene is indicated by the figure of the colourful hoopoe under the Koranic verse.

When Bilqīs received the letter, she decided to send gifts to the King and to test his wisdom. The central event in the picture shows Solomon listening to the Queen's messenger. The King, seated on his famous throne is wearing a long, loose, pale lilac-coloured robe and above it a pale, greenish mantle embellished with hexagrams. His bearded head with long hair falling on his shoulders is decorated with a crown which differs in shape from the one seen on our former picture. Curiously enough, the crown bears the inscription *Allāh akbar* and is topped with the figure of a crescent. In his left hand, Solomon is grasping his rod decorated with a hexagram.

Another hexagram painted in blue is shining over the throne while on its two sides two columns resembling Muslim tombstones covered with shrouds can be seen. The words *Allāh* and *akbar* are inscribed on their poles which are crowned by crescents. Apart from these motifs, we can recognize some details in the representation of the throne which reveal several characteristics of the traditional Muslim descriptions⁶. In accordance with these, the back of the royal chair seems to have enrustments. Reference is also made to four palm-trees surrounding the throne and to a pair of lions which stand guard on either side. From the trees we can discover the trunks of only two, but we can see three pairs

⁵ It seems to be quite natural to at-Ta'labī to speak about the people of Solomon as real Muslims (*al-'Arā'is* 233f). He even goes as far as claiming that the *ṣahāda* was inscribed on the King's famous ring which was presented to him by Gabriel (*ibid.*, 361).

⁶ See e.g. at-Ta'labī, *al-'Arā'is* 340f.

of lions. Among the birds e.g. a peacock, a pigeon, a raven, an owl, an eagle etc. are easily identifiable.

Solomon's attendants who draw up behind Bilqīs' messenger wear tunic-like robes, sandals made of strips of leather and are armed with spears and shields. On these the inscription *Allāh akbar* and the sign of the hexagram can be observed. In contrast to their general appearance which may even evoke the atmosphere of Biblical times⁷, the daggers in the belts of the warriors look rather like the typical Yemeni *ḡambiyas*. Behind the armed men a big, green flag adorned with the words *Allāh akbar* and a figure of the crescent is hoisted. Another crescent appears also on the pole of the flag.

The army of the animals is represented by an elephant, a lion, a giraffe, a camel, a horse and a calf (?).

The figures of the jinns to the right of the throne look completely different from the devils of our previous picture. Their bodies are painted in dark brown, while the colour of their eyes and long teeth is red. In place of the usual horns, they are provided with exceptionally long ears. The tails which end in an arrowlike shape are familiar from the former representation. In a somewhat strange way, the jinns seem to hold flags traditionally made of bulrush and used as fans or to whisk away flies. As a matter of fact, the axes with which they are armed on our first picture would have better fitted their frightening character.

From the aforesaid it has become clear that the artist collected different episodes from the legends about Solomon which all were destined to transmit the general message of the whole representation: "Islam is triumphant". The occurrence of the hexagram and the Islamic symbols together is not necessarily meant to express the victory of Islam over Judaism. On the contrary, it serves to demonstrate in the spirit of the Islamic legends (especially those preserved by at-Ta'labī) that Solomon and his people were in reality Muslims. Imitating the function of a

⁷ The Old Testament refers to spears and shields as the customary weaponry (see e.g. 2 Kings 11,12).

Christian icon, the basic task of this picture can be discovered in strengthening the believer in his or her faith.

Compared to the style of the previously published print, the artist this time seems to be more modern in realizing his work. Probably in consequence of this, his figures appear more faithful to the Biblical epoch. This is not in contradiction with the fact that one of his main concerns lies in the simultaneous presentation of the typical symbols of Judaism and Islam. Of course, he is totally unaware of a mistake: not only are the Islamic references completely anachronistic but so is the hexagram which as the "Shield of David" has only become the symbol of Judaism in relatively recent times⁸. Taking all these traits into consideration, we are tempted to suggest that the picture was drawn in the first decades of our century definitely before the foundation of Israel since no artist in Egypt or elsewhere in the Arab world would have thought of introducing the Jewish symbol in such a friendly setting after the first Arab-Israeli war.

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⁸ For this, see Trachtenberg 1939:141.

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