

## Appearance and Reality in the Qur'an: Bilqis and Zulaykha

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In the Surat al-Naml there is an intriguing account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Sulayman, a man famous both as a king and a prophet. She is taken in by the construction of a large glass surface, thinking it is a lake of water, and as a result of this becomes a Muslim. Yet it is not clear why this should persuade her, or precisely what it was that persuaded her. We do not normally take the experience of being tricked as a reason to change religion. Her decision and attitude is compared with that of Zulaykha and her passionate relationship to Yusuf. Bilqis is calm and intelligent and takes the fact that she has been fooled by the artifice as an indication that she may be wrong about many things, and so needs to find something reliable to believe in. Zulaykha is constantly ruled by her passion, until she is close to death, and as a result is often lead awry in her actions. Bilqis represents the clever woman in charge of her emotions, Zulaykha the opposite. Both women are affected by something they take to be beautiful, thus introducing the issue of aesthetics very firmly into Islam.

Key words: Queen of Sheba, Religious Aesthetics.

One of the rather perplexing stories in the Qur'an is in the surat al-Naml.<sup>1</sup> Here the Queen of Sheba, Bilqis (although she is not given this name in the Qur'an), visits King Sulayman (Solomon) in a visit which is replete with symbolism. She represents the pagan world visiting the world of a prophet and eminently wise authority. The Queen enters the palace and comes across a floor which in fact is made of a reflective material, and so looks like water. She is so convinced it is water that she lifts her skirt, offending against social convention, and then the King tells her that it is only a *sarh*, an area paved with glass. She immediately admits her error and accepts the King's religion. There are lots of stories built around this incident,<sup>2</sup> some of which say that

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<sup>1</sup> 27/15-44.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

the purpose of the *sarh* was to prove to the King that the Queen really did not have hairy ankles! Presumably it would have defied social convention to have asked her. Clearly a central theme of the story is the overcoming of the power and wisdom of the world of *jahiliyya* by Islam, belief in the one God. In just the same way that the Queen was taken in by the appearance of water when there was no water, she was unable initially to see the truth of the one God who is the master of everything. She concluded perhaps that since Sulayman had the correct view of the world around us on an empirical level, he might well also have the correct view about what is behind the world. What is interesting about this incident is why we should believe that she came to the right interpretation of her experience. We do tend to be impressed by the judgments of those who are gifted in one particular area of life and conclude that perhaps their understanding extends over a much wider area. This is usually a mistake, though. There is no reason for example to think that a wonderful physicist is any good at knowing how to invest money, or that a leading logician has any better grasp of political affairs than anyone else.

So it is surprising that as soon as the Queen is tricked by an architectural detail, she submits to the new religion. Sulayman was famous for being able to get the jinn to make things for him, so a floor of reflective glass is not a difficult thing for him to have in his palace. The trick of the floor is only the last of a series of wonders which had impressed the Queen, according to the literature which has developed around the event, it is the last straw, as it were, but in itself it is not that amazing a construction, one might have thought. But the glass floor seems to have been a popular device in several palaces in the Islamic world<sup>5</sup> and was certainly a popular image in paintings and pictures. Later rulers found the temptation to emulate King Sulayman difficult to resist, and the very sophisticated glassware that was produced in the Islamic world would have meant that such constructions were quite feasible. In the story the Queen mistakes glass for water, and why should she not, given that they resemble each other, at least when constructed cleverly, as jinn tend to do. This is also not the only time that the Queen discovered that what she had taken to be one thing was in fact something else. Her reasoning presumably was that since she sometimes seemed to confuse what appeared to be the case with what really is the case, her religious ideas might

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<sup>5</sup> Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 28-33.

similarly be linked not with what is real but with what is only apparently real. This is a good characterization of idolatry from a monotheistic point of view. Physical objects look much more plausible as deities than does an invisible being, since the former unlike the latter can at least be seen. The problem is though that what they look like, i.e. strong, powerful, effective, is only an appearance on which no reality rests. Like the glass floor which resembles water, it is merely a resemblance. In fact the floor is dry, in fact the gods are powerless.

It is worth spending some time looking at the sort of event which took place in this story. The Qur'an has no difficulty in contemplating the existence of miracles, the Qur'an itself is the result of a miracle and its very nature is miraculous, on its own account. But what we have here in the story of the floor is not a miracle but a trick. When Musa participated in the miracle of turning his rod into a snake Pharaoh reacted by rejecting this as merely magic, but his magicians knew better and understood the event to be a clear sign of divine intervention in the course of nature. In fact, an *ifrit* or a learned man carries out a miracle in the surat al-Naml, Bilqis' throne, is brought to Sulayman and this is one of the tricks played on her in order to test her as to whether she recognizes it. She sort of does, but wonders what it is doing so far away from where it is supposed to be. Such an occurrence is perhaps more appropriate to change her mind than the experience of the *sarh*. This is very different from the case where Sulayman merely tricks Bilqis, and she swiftly succumbs to the trick by submitting herself to his faith. Was she right to do so? I see wonderful magicians perform marvelous tricks sometimes, but it does not occur to me to find out what their religious beliefs are and convert to them. It is because we know that magicians are magicians that we know that what they do has an explanation which is not supernatural. We would not normally see legerdemain as a source of spiritual acuity or religious authority. Why did Bilqis? Was she unusually naïve? Or was it the combination of the miraculous transport of the throne, and then the architectural trick?

There does not seem to be much in the way of an argument to get to the conclusion she reached. What we call a trick is precisely something which does not challenge our understanding of reality, but rather an event which we cannot understand given our present knowledge, yet which we are fairly sure is explicable were we to know how it was done. Once Bilqis established that what she had taken to be water was not water she knew that she was

mistaken in her interpretation of what was before her, but that was all. She did not have to conclude that her understanding of the nature of reality in a deeper sense was awry, she just made a simple error of judgment in a particular case, and once she found out why she had gone wrong she could just have smiled and determined not to be fooled like that again. We often mistake one thing for something else, and it is a feature of our world that almost everything is subject to various interpretations. In what circumstances when we discover we are wrong should we think seriously about whether our major ideas about the world are also wrong?

What made this feature of interior design so effective was that it was constructed in such a way that there was nothing there to tell the viewer where the imitated world ends and her own begins. There is no frame around the construction, as it were, to announce that what in fact we have here is a work of art. There is a short story by Guy de Maupassant in which Bel-Ami, the hero, was at a reception and saw at the end of the room a man standing in an area of water. This strikes him as strange until he realizes that it is in fact a picture of Jesus walking on the water. In talking about it to the guests the illusion is credited to the particularly realistic composition of the painting, but in fact Bel-Ami knew that it was because the frame had been obscured by tall plants that he was taken in. Had he not been a Christian already would that experience have led him to convert? Strangely enough, it might have. Stranger stories of what has led people to convert have been told, or indeed what has led people to lose their faith. Often the explanation is aesthetic. Here we touch on what is plausible about the notion of Bilqis' conversion. The episode with the floor was not the only thing to happen to her which made her re-examine her attitudes towards the one God and Sulayman.

A number of things had happened, and indeed her journey to see the King had in itself the flavour of spiritual quest. Sheba is often seen as being a particularly sublime realm, and Suhrawardi refers obliquely to the Qur'anic passage in his *Hikmat al-Ishraq*. He talks of a hoopoe bringing us greetings, our arriving at the Valley of the Ants (the sura in which the story is positioned is called the Ant), being told to shake our skirt and then to 'kill your woman'! The hoopoe is a wise bird, who brings a message of revelation, which explains how a mystical journey may start. The Valley of the Ants represents the carnal or physical realm, and shaking skirts and killing the woman means repressing our physicality in order to extend our spirituality. This is the real problem which Suhrawardi often argued that Ibn Sina had raised but not settled,

namely, how to move from this realm of generation and corruption to the highest level of spiritual knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In his *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* Ibn Sina was taken to have correctly identified the problem but did not provide a solution, a gap which Suhrawardi was only too ready to fill. This gap is actually a live issue in the controversy over Ibn Sina's 'eastern philosophy', where he is sometimes taken to have contrasted the limited scope of mashsha'i thought with the expansive nature of the mystical.<sup>5</sup> One reason for Ibn Sina's hesitancy, Suhrawardi suggests, is that the former did not appreciate the constitutive power of imagination, in the sense of the imaginal realm (*al-'alam al-khayali*). For the mashsha'i thinker, the important faculties of thought are the active intellect and the acquired intellect, the latter representing the highest form of reasoning which we can attain when our thought is perfected as far as it can be, but that is it. Imagination itself operates predominantly at a much lower level of knowledge, and although it can function to a degree in syllogisms and logical reasoning, on the whole it is most closely related to our sensuality and so should be treated with a degree of suspicion.

For Suhrawardi, though, imagination is far more significant than that, not when it is linked with the world of Platonic ideas (*muthul al-Aflatuni*) but when it is extended by the suspended ideas (*muthul al-mu'allaqa*). These are ideals, and as such they play a role in leading us intellectually to a higher level of knowledge than we can otherwise attain. If Ibn Sina is correct then aesthetics has to be limited to a peripheral role in our spiritual lives. If Suhrawardi is right then aesthetics is crucially important, and is far from merely an aspect of decoration. Aesthetics represents a direct route to the truth, and without it the scope for spiritual growth is bound to be restricted.

We can see now why the illusion set up by the King really had such a leading role to play in Bilqis' conversion. There is a well-known Buddhist parable which Rumi uses in the *Mathnawi* of the elephant which different people touch in a dark room. They each feel its trunk and all disagree as to what it is. Rumi concludes the passage by pointing out that if everyone were to hold a candle they would all have agreed.<sup>6</sup> That is, if they all had access

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<sup>4</sup> al-Suhrawardi, *Opera metaphysica et mystica II* (Tehran and Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1976), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Nicely discussed in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Ibn Sina's Oriental Philosophy", *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 247-51.

<sup>6</sup> Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1982), book 3, verses 1259-68.

to the truth then there would be no disagreement. That may be true but does not seem to be very relevant. Naturally if we are in the dark we do not see as clearly as if we are in the light, and in the case of Bilqis if we are tricked by an architectural feature then we are unaware of the real situation. But so what? This observation does not seem to have much to tell us about what the consequences of the confusion are, although Bilqis does draw dramatic consequences from it. We need here to take up the *ishraqi* point of imagination leading the intellect. Sometimes when we find that our ideas are misplaced in a single area, our imagination extends this idea and gets us to wonder whether our ideas are misplaced in general. To take an example, suppose we have a particular relationship with someone, or think we do, and he says something which makes us wonder whether we really have that sort of relationship with him. We use our imagination to reinterpret our experience of his actions and to extend it to the past and the future, even though our actual experience is limited to a far smaller extent. This is what Bilqis does, she realises that she has been wrong in what she believed to be the case about the surface of the floor, and extends the implications of that mistake to wonder whether she has been mistaken over a much wider area of her experience, including her religious beliefs. Is it rational to act in this way? It is difficult to answer this question since our general beliefs about the world do not really stand on anything except themselves. It seems perfectly acceptable for different people to have different views, and this is a familiar experience for us. Why should Bilqis not use her mistake to change her general views? It is one thing to argue quite rightly that the mistake does not oblige her to change her views, and yet the mistake makes her decision comprehensible.

We are getting to an appreciation of the role of architecture in representing a religious attitude. The sort of architecture designed by Muslims often is intended to make the sort of imaginative leap which Bilqis took. The thing worth noticing about the *sarh* is that it must have been very beautiful, the skilful fusing together of pieces of glass or some similar reflective material must have been a staggering sight. It is that which we should notice about the story, not that Bilqis was fooled, but that she was fooled as a result of the beauty of the work. She quite naturally felt that whoever could create that was worthy of her attention, and the jinn who created it were instructed by the King. One assumes that much Islamic architecture and design had this sort of purpose, to impress, to captivate, to entrance. This is after all a familiar feature of sacred art. One does not have to be impressed, a good example

of someone who was not is Bel-Ami, in a very similar situation. He was annoyed when fooled by a visual illusion, Bilqis was impressed. But then he attended a party with an entirely different attitude from that of Bilqis who had come to see the King full of interest in what he had to show and offer her. Bel-Ami was annoyed at being tricked, whereas his attitude to what he saw could have been entirely different, had he been otherwise motivated.

It might be said that Bilqis also had the wrong attitude for an aesthetic judgment, it looks very much as though she had gone to the palace ready to be impressed, and so she had a practical end in mind which stands in the way of the sort of aesthetic distance necessary for a genuinely aesthetic response to the situation. In aesthetics there is a notion of detachment connected to what we take to be an aesthetic point of view, but it does not follow from the significance of this notion that the individual is not allowed to bring in her own ideas and feeling. Bilqis was obviously in the right frame of mind for the *sarh* to have an effect on her, she had after all been the witness of many other impressive events in the royal court she was visiting. She could have been determined to resist it, a bit like Bel-Ami, but this also would not have worked from an aesthetic point of view. The appropriate attitude for aesthetic judgment is to be open to the object and concentrate on its aesthetic features. One of the comments worth making about Bilqis is that she is represented as a very balanced and calm character. She reacts sensibly to Sulayman's initial suggestion that she become a Muslim, she is not offended when he rejects her gift and she comes to see what he has to show her. She is intrigued but not naive, and so it might be thought that she has exactly the right sort of attitude to make the decision which she ultimately does make.

Bilqis was impressed by what she saw and as a result made a decision about her life and her religion. But she could have been impressed and left it at that. There is nothing inevitable about the religious direction she subsequently followed. It is not as though the art had suddenly revealed the truth to her in a manner which made it undeniable. Even after she admired the object she still had options, and that is a crucial aspect of the story, for if she had had to submit then her submission would have been far less impressive. in the same way that there is no compulsion in religion, so there is no compulsion in aesthetics. She chose to regard her aesthetic experience as the basis for a decision about religion, and although that decision was not itself aesthetic, it could have been based on the aesthetic.

What comes to mind at the end of this extended discussion of a Qur'anic passage is how significant a role in the text art plays. Although we are often erroneously told how antagonistic Islam is to art, here we have the great King Sulayman, a man of extraordinary wisdom, engaging the services of jinn and others to construct beautiful objects. If there is something un-Islamic about art why was the King so intent on producing it? We also find in the story an important pagan embracing Islam because of her confrontation finally with a superb aesthetic object, the imaginary lake inside the palace. There is no hint that the creativity of the King's servants or the *sarh* are in any way objectionable, on the contrary they are entirely praiseworthy, and if they were not then Sulayman would hardly have used them.

One reason for not being critical of the trick that was played on the Queen is that really one could see all architectural devices as tricks. We obviously need buildings to shelter us from the elements, but their exact features are due far more to our desire to shape them in that way than to anything that we really need to do to them. This is particularly clear when we take account of the elaborate decoration and geometrical patterning so common in much Islamic architecture and design. We have already seen that some commentators explain these features as due to their source in basic metaphysical and mathematical realities, such as the relationship between the planets and their movement, and basic numerical proportions expressing harmony.

Bilqis exercises her right to make a leap of faith, to embrace Islam because a Muslim has impressed her. In fact, we know that this is a potent source of conversion both in the past and in the present, and it is part of the methodology of *jidat bi'l-lati hiya ahsan* as recommended in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> It might be argued that one of the interesting differences between Islam and many other religions is that Islam often represents conversion as a rather easy activity, a natural choice to make as it were.<sup>8</sup>

One of the features of Bilqis worth noting is her equanimity throughout. When she receives a message from Sulayman inviting her to embrace Islam, a message which could be taken to be threatening, her advisors tell her that they have sufficient force to deal with an interloper and invader. She responds with the point that invasions tend to cause great harm even if they are overcome.<sup>9</sup> When her gift to the King is rejected and sent back she comes

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<sup>7</sup> al-Nahl 16/125.

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult for example to think of an Islamic Kierkegaard!

<sup>9</sup> al-Naml 27/34.



to visit him, she is not insulted at his behaviour and does not respond to it as the ruler of a great territory confronting a potential foe. She realises, according to the text, that what she is called on to do is to change her beliefs in such a way as to acquire understanding of how the world really works, how the one God operates. This is knowledge that the King to a degree has, and she wants to have it also. Her stepping on the *sarh*, that symbol of something that is other than it appears to be, is the final straw that encourages her to adopt the new faith.

The Sufis have a saying that *al-majazu qantaratu'l-haqiqa*, the apparent is a bridge to the truth. Sufism does not regard the ordinary world as illusive or imaginary, on the contrary there is nothing unreal about this world. But it should not be taken as the only form of reality which exists, since this world is only an indication of the nature of another and deeper level of reality. In his commentary on Jami's poem about Yusuf and Zulaykha, Pendlebury points out that one definition of idolatry is confusing the relative with the absolute,<sup>10</sup> and this is something that Zulaykha does throughout the story. Not only does she worship idols, but she is obsessed with Yusuf, and not with him as a person but with him as a physical being. She acts as though that (relative) factor about him was absolutely the most important, as though his material beauty did not hide a much more significant spiritual form of beauty. Once she learns that physical beauty is only an idol, and she manages to shatter it, her physical beauty is restored to her and she finally attains the object of her whole life, to live harmoniously with Yusuf. In his commentary Pendlebury suggests that this is a case of her abandoning the self, of coming to the truth and finally attaining peace.

How we interpret symbols is important. The Queen of Sheba was confused by the *sarh*, the glass floor in the palace, and she decided that her error there was an indication of a much wider error, and so she determined to abandon idolatry and accept the King's religion. Zulaykha also abandons idolatry in the end, recognizing that the mistake she made earlier, confusing physical with spiritual beauty, had made her life chaotic and meaningless. Like the Queen of Sheba she came to realize that her view of the world was only partial, and she exchanged it for what she took to be a more comprehensive and accurate view. What these stories share is an interpretation of a

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<sup>10</sup> Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaykha: An Allegorical Romance*, ed. and trans. David Pendlebury (London: Octagon Press, 1980), 171.

symbol, a recognition that some feature of the world which both women took to be real is in fact only a symbol of something which is genuinely real. But they also share the idea that discovering the real is a long and difficult process, requiring many different stages and trials. We need to bear this in mind, for without sophistication in linking the symbolic with the real we are likely to carry out the process in far too hamfisted a manner. When Zulaykha hears of Yusuf's death in Jami's poem she is distraught, collapsing, tearing her cheeks and hair, and eventually pulling out her eyes and throwing them on the ground! She has not really managed to abandon her passionate nature, and there is no tranquility in her response to tragedy, despite Yusuf's hope that tranquility would give her strength to bear his loss. She dies with her nose in the earth, just above Yusuf's body, and Jami reflects how lucky the lover is who dies in the aroma of union with the loved one, a bold statement given that shortly before this point Jibril had given Yusuf an apple from the garden of paradise so that he died with the smell of the celestial perfume in his nostrils. As a symbol of passion finally brought to book, as it were, Zulaykha is not an entirely satisfactory character from a religious point of view in the poem, and even in the Qur'an her readiness to act without thinking contrasts her with the calm and collected Queen of Sheba.

In the *Mathnawi* Rumi tells us of a competition between the Chinese and the Greeks over the most beautiful screen that could be painted.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese take over the side of a room and got to work on it, using the King's 'hundred colours' and working on it steadily. But the Greeks concealed what they did, although they seemed to be polishing away at an equal rate as the Chinese were painting. When the Chinese were finished they displayed an extraordinarily beautiful painting, but the Greeks produced a burnished mirror, which then magnified the beauty of the Chinese painting. They were said to have won, and they won because they stuck to essentials. Colour is linked by Rumi to the clouds, it conceals and confuses, while colourlessness is related to the moon, and we are told that whatever illumination arrives in the clouds comes originally from the moon and higher celestial bodies. So colour is a physical property of which we should remain cautious, what is significant is our ability to get in touch with what is higher than us, with what is real, and this the Greeks manage to do. On the other hand, when we examine the story more closely it is not so clear that this is what happens. They manage

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<sup>11</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book I, verses 3465-85.

to reproduce the Chinese picture and make it even more radiant than it is originally. Anyone who has ever seen Persian miniatures will appreciate the Persian ability to incorporate an enormous amount of light into their pictures, even on what are after all the pages of books. But what the Greeks do is to make what the Chinese do a bit brighter, that is all, and if Rumi is a bit critical of the colours that the Chinese use, then he should be even more critical of the Greeks, since they make the colours brighter.

On the other hand, the meaning of the story might be something very different. It may not be critical of colour at all, but rather of the idea that we can do anything significant artistically. The Chinese thought they could, and what they accomplished was impressive, but not as impressive as the impact of nothing more than light and reflection on their work. The Greeks could be seen as modest, only working to increase the ability of light to illuminate what already exists, while the Chinese presumptuously seek to out do the glories of nature. Of course, it is ironic that an attack on art should appear in a very skillfully organized poem, but then so many attacks on art do use art to make their point. In one version of the story the Greeks are said to have won the competition and their reward is a pile of money, which is given to the Chinese artists. All the Greeks get is the reflection of the money!

The Greeks won because they produced the most staggering picture. They produced the most staggering picture (when the King saw the Chinese picture Rumi said it was as though he had lost his mind, when he saw the reflection his eyes almost dropped out of their sockets) through indirect action. They trusted in God to supply them with an adequate image to reflect, and they doubted their ability to produce the image directly. In a sense, of course, it is God who produces everything, and so the artist is only successful if he follows God and works with God in his creative endeavours. But what does this mean? We do not know what the Chinese drew, apart from the fact that it was very colourful, but we can assume from the structure of the competition itself that they were confident of their ability to create, and we may worry about the acceptability of that from a religious point of view. The Greeks seemed only confident of their ability to copy, a far milder form of action, and one which respects the notion of significant action as stemming from elsewhere. Yet it has to be said that as artists the Chinese were superior, since they actually had the skill and energy to make something new, all the Greeks could do was copy it, and plagiarism is hardly an aesthetic or any other sort of virtue. Perhaps Rumi is hinting here at the way in which

the creativity of the artist to a degree mimics the creativity of God, and may seem to go too far when it is complacent about its accomplishments. What we need is a sense of balance, that sense of balance which is often taken to repose in Islamic art, and which serves as the theme of so much of Rumi's work.

Before we examine how he develops this point, it is worth considering the idea of the mirror as used in religious thought, also an originally Buddhist concept. The Sufis make much of the verse "What they were earning was overshadowing their hearts",<sup>12</sup> which they interpret as the mirror of the heart being overwhelmed by the rust of evil actions and thoughts. What is required is that the individual polishes his mirror by constant recollection of God so that the heart can reflect the divine light and avoid being contaminated by dust or rusty accretions. Some Sufis go so far as to suggest that even breathing on the mirror of the heart, i.e. speaking, is to interfere with its purity. There is a hadith "The believer is the believer's mirror"<sup>13</sup> which suggests that each Muslim is responsible for the evil deeds, and also the good deeds, of everyone else in the umma. It also suggests that if one sees a negative characteristic in someone else, then it is probably in the viewer also. This is presumably not true of God, who in another hadith refers to himself as a hidden treasure who wants to be discovered. He created the world as a mirror in order to contemplate his own beauty, and the best way to acknowledge the beauty of something is merely to look at it. Rumi reproduces this idea in the *Mathnawi* when he talks of bringing a gift to Yusuf, the exemplar of perfect beauty, and the only appropriate gift is a mirror so that he can contemplate himself.<sup>14</sup> If something is already perfect, then nothing more can be done for it, and this is one of the chief problems with explaining the creation of the world. Why would a perfect being create something which is not perfect, why would he feel that this is something worth doing? As this is expressed in the language of Neoplatonism, why would something perfectly One lead to the creation of the many? Why would God think about anything other than himself? These issues were problematic for the Islamic philosophers, and the last issue came strongly into their approach to divine knowledge. Many philosophers such as Ibn Sina argued that it is inappropriate to think of God having knowledge of the individual and changing matters of the world of generation

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<sup>12</sup> al-Mutaffifin 83/14.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Dawud, *al-Sunan*, "al-'Adab" 49.

<sup>14</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book I, verse 3171.

and corruption.<sup>15</sup> There is a good theological reason for denying such knowledge to God, since if he had as objects of his thought items in our world then he would have changing objects in his mind, and this would imply that he changes. Yet he is supposed to be unchanging. There is another reason, this time more aesthetic, and this stems from Aristotle's suggestion that there are some things which it is better for God not to know. Why should he concern himself directly with anything which is not himself, since everything which is not himself is impure? If God feels any emotions, *nostalgie de la boue* is certainly not among them.

Zulaykha wanted to unite with the object of her love, Yusuf, just as the person in love wants to unite with the object of her love. She is attracted to that object, while the object is itself unmoved by those that are in love with it. One of the interesting aspects of the story of Yusuf is that he never appears to change during all the things which happen to him on the Qur'anic account. Even when he is in prison and he has the opportunity to leave it, at the command of the ruler, he remains where he is until he is entirely satisfied that the ruler is certain about the innocence of the prisoner. He just tries to preserve his integrity, and the rest of the world revolves around him, like the planets around Aristotle's unmoved mover. Aristotle characterizes that relationship as one where those who are in love with the mover do things in response to that love while the mover remains unmoved, everything else just moves around him in response to his being, not to anything he does. Some of the Persian illustrations of the story of Yusuf show him pursuing Zulaykha, and yet the Qur'anic story does not have this in it. Towards the end of the account he marries her, but this is at the stage where she has rejected idolatry, become reconciled to her fate as lying in the hands of God and where she engages in prayer. In the narrative, she is now old, and has white hair, but once he acknowledges the sincerity of her feelings, and prays on her behalf, her beauty is returned to her. That is, she can participate in his beauty, since she has become his mirror, she has accepted in her heart what has always existed in his heart, belief in God. So when he looks at her he for the first time sees a reflection of himself, albeit a partial reflection, and this is

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<sup>15</sup> Oliver Leaman, "God's knowledge of the future in the philosophy of al-Farabi," *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies*, 1 (1986), 23-29. See also the discussions of divine knowledge throughout Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Polity, 1999).

the appropriate time for them to be united in marriage. After all, they have now become the same sort of person, for a mirror to be able to reflect it must be appropriately structured to carry out that function.

The world can represent the beauty of God, to a degree, since it consists of objects which are very beautiful. Similarly, Zulaykha can represent the beauty of Yusuf, the paradigm of beauty, once she becomes spiritually purer. When her thoughts of Yusuf were material and sexual he could find nothing of himself reflected in her, and so he turned away from her and tried to evade her. Once she became more like him, she became attractive to him and it is worth pointing out how unlike ordinary human attraction this intellectual and moral form of attraction might seem to be. We are notoriously attracted to that which rejects us. The more Yusuf rejects Zulaykha, the more she wants him, and it is a theme of romances that nothing puts off a fervent lover so much as a fervent positive response. The language of love is often structured in the form of a hunter and the hunted, a pursuer and the pursued, a man and a woman, and certainly was in much of the literature of the Islamic world, and still is. In the illustrations of the story of Yusuf lust is rarely far from the surface, the lust of Zulaykha for Yusuf, of her friends for him, and so on. When Zulaykha dreams of him, for instance, she often adopts a very unmaidenly posture, it is clear that what she has in mind is something very physical. His rejection of her merely makes her want him even more. That is because the relationship which she is trying to establish is built on a misunderstanding, she is after a physical relationship while he is interested in a spiritual relationship, one in which physicality would enter but not as its prime motive. When he looks at her he does not find a reflection of his inner beauty, since her heart is not acting as a mirror. When she looks at him his heart does not act as a mirror to her feelings, since he is not interested in a merely carnal relationship with her. This makes her more excited, but does not stimulate him at all. Both hearts are like mirrors covered in dust, since they are unable to find anything in what they are asked to reflect which accords with their wishes. Zulaykha is not interested in his real feelings, she is overcome with lust, and so her heart really is clouded over by her emotions. When she becomes old the dust is blown off, since for the first time she can appreciate her relationships with others in a calm and collected manner, and then, paradoxically, she reaches a state where she can really get a response from Yusuf that is passionate. So this form of love is not so different from the notions of love and attraction with which we are normally

acquainted. Harmony is finally attained when both people come to share the same views, but their route to this end was not smooth, and despite the sufferings which they both had to endure, they might conclude that it was better to suffer in that way than to reach that end automatically. That is perhaps why the angels were instructed to bow to Adam, not because Adam was more perfect than them but because he and his successors had the opportunity, denied to the angels, of trying to work out how to live and establish relationships with others in the world of generation and corruption.

The story of Yusuf and Zulaykha is presented time and time again pictorially, and with its heady mixture of passion, desire, violence and ultimate redemption and death it is clearly the stuff of soap opera and spiritual instruction. Quite a few of the illustrations are very humorous, we should not assume that just because this is a religious story it has to be treated with great solemnity throughout. By contrast, the pictures of Bilqis at the court of Sulayman are invariably serious and reflect the calmness of the main characters' personalities and their corresponding actions. It might be thought that their calmness makes them very appropriate Muslims, and the conversion of Bilqis is hardly surprising given her predisposition to assess situations in a cool and collected manner, on the Qur'an's account. A comparison of Bilqis and Zulaykha is useful in bringing out the complexity of the Qur'an's treatment of the links between appearance and reality.

One of the themes here is the significance of knowledge of the unseen, it being a characteristic of the *kaafir* that he or she does not possess this knowledge. We tend to think that knowledge of the unseen is something very deep and mysterious, only made available to special people after considerable effort on their part. The Qur'an debunks this idea in its account of Sulayman's death. After his death the jinn are hard at work under his apparent gaze, we are told in the thirty-fourth sura, but a small creature eats away at the wood of his staff, and he eventually collapses to the ground. Then the jinn know they have been working for nothing, since Sulayman was not looking at them at all. The insect knew this, the much more advanced jinn did not. Bilqis realized that there was something significant behind what was in front of her, and she made a judgment about the unseen based on the seen. It has been the argument here that her judgment was not inevitable, but nonetheless reasonable, and making that judgment owed a lot not so much to her intellect as to her character.