

# Song of Songs

Richard S. Hess



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## Series Preface

AT THE END of the book of Ecclesiastes, a wise father warns his son concerning the multiplication of books: “Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned. There is no end to the making of many books!” (12:12). The Targum to this biblical book characteristically expands the thought and takes it in a different, even contradictory, direction: “My son, take care to make many books of wisdom without end.”

When applied to commentaries, both statements are true. The past twenty years have seen a significant increase in the number of commentaries available on each book of the Bible. On the other hand, for those interested in grappling seriously with the meaning of the text, such proliferation should be seen as a blessing rather than a curse. No single commentary can do it all. In the first place, commentaries reflect different theological and methodological perspectives. We can learn from others who have a different understanding of the origin and nature of the Bible, but we also want commentaries that share our fundamental beliefs about the biblical text. Second, commentaries are written with different audiences in mind. Some are addressed primarily to laypeople, others to clergy, and still others to fellow scholars. A third consideration, related to the previous two, is the subdisciplines the commentator chooses to draw from to shed light on the biblical text. The possibilities are numerous, including philology, textual criticism, genre/form criticism, redaction criticism, ancient Near Eastern background, literary conventions, and more. Finally, commentaries differ in how extensively they interact with secondary literature, that is, with what others have said about a given passage.

The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms has a definite audience in mind. We believe the primary users of com-

mentaries are scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible study leaders. Of these groups, we have most in mind clergy and future clergy, namely, seminary students. We have tried to make the commentary accessible to nonscholars by putting most of the technical discussion and interaction with secondary literature in the footnotes. We do not mean to suggest that such information is unimportant. We simply concede that, given the present state of the church, it is the rare layperson who will read such technical material with interest and profit. We hope we are wrong in this assessment and, if we are not, that the future will see a reverse in this trend. A healthy church is a church that nourishes itself with constant attention to God's words in Scripture, in all their glorious detail.

Since not all commentaries are alike, what are the features that characterize this series? The message of the biblical book is the primary focus of each commentary, and the commentators have labored to expose God's message for his people in the book they discuss. This series also distinguishes itself by restricting its coverage to one major portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely, the Psalms and Wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). These biblical books provide a distinctive contribution to the canon. Although we can no longer claim that they are neglected, their unique content makes them harder to fit into the development of redemptive history and requires more effort to hear their distinctive message.

The book of Psalms is the literary sanctuary. Like the physical sanctuary structures of the Old Testament, it offers a textual holy place where humans share their joys and struggles with brutal honesty in God's presence. The book of Proverbs describes wisdom, which on one level is skill for living, the ability to navigate life's actual and potential pitfalls; but on another level, this wisdom presents a pervasive and deeply theological message: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). Proverbs also raises a disturbing issue: the sages often motivate wise behavior by linking it to reward, but in reality, bad things happen to good people, the wise are not always rewarded as they expect. This raises the question of the justice of God. Both Job and Ecclesiastes struggle with the apparent disconnect between God's justice and our actual life experience. Finally, the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely a soul encased in a body but whole persons made in God's image.

Limiting the series to the Psalms and Wisdom books has allowed us to tailor our work to the distinctive nature of this portion of the canon. With some few exceptions in Job and Ecclesiastes, for instance, the

material in these biblical books is poetic and highly literary, and so the commentators have highlighted the significant poetic conventions employed in each book. After an introduction discussing important issues that affect the interpretation of the book (title, authorship, date, language, style, text, ancient Near Eastern background, genre, canonicity, theological message, connection to the New Testament, and structure), each commentary proceeds section-by-section through the biblical text. The authors provide their own translation, with explanatory notes when necessary, followed by a substantial interpretive section (titled “Interpretation”) and concluding with a section titled “Theological Implications.” In the interpretation section, the emphasis is on the meaning of the text in its original historical setting. In the theological implications section, connections with other parts of the canon, both Old and New Testament, are sketched out along with the continuing relevance of each passage for us today. The latter section is motivated by the recognition that, while it is important to understand the individual contribution and emphasis of each book, these books now find their place in a larger collection of writings, the canon as a whole, and it is within this broader context that the books must ultimately be interpreted.

No two commentators in this series see things in exactly the same way, though we all share similar convictions about the Bible as God’s Word and the belief that it must be appreciated not only as ancient literature but as God’s Word for today. It is our hope and prayer that these volumes will inform readers and, more importantly, stimulate reflection on and passion for these valuable books.

As one might imagine, to write a commentary in a series like this one requires a rare combination of skills. It calls for the technical expertise of a scholar of ancient language and culture as well as sensitivity as a reader of literature. Most important, however, this series demands scholars who are also passionate about God and his people. I am for this reason overjoyed that Rick Hess has written the commentary on the Song of Songs. Rick combines the skills of a proven scholar of the Bible and the ancient Near East as well as the literary and theological sensitivities necessary to explicate this intriguing and sometimes enigmatic book. This commentary has succeeded in doing what we expect all the contributions to this series to do. Like most commentaries, it can be read piecemeal with profit. But unlike most commentaries, it can also be read cover-to-cover. I turn you over now to Rick Hess. Enjoy and profit!

Tremper Longman III  
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies  
Westmont College

## Author's Preface

THE SONG OF Songs is an adult book. This has always been one of its difficulties when it comes to the public teaching and preaching of this text. Unless one moves immediately to allegory or in some other manner basically ignores the text, it seems that little can be interpreted literally for any audience that includes children. Perhaps one can go directly to the single didactic section of 8:5–7 and use it as a means to summarize the whole of the book. As valuable as such an approach may be for those verses, it loses the importance of the remainder of the book.

And yet the message of the Song needs to be heard more clearly and directly in this world than ever before. In a fallen world in which the first couple was expelled from the garden of Eden, this song offers the hope that couples today may find something of that garden again and may see in their love that which is beautiful and good, from the good God. The book avoids both extremes of the cheapening of sex into promiscuity and of the locking away of this gift, never to be mentioned or appreciated for what it is. It does this despite the insistence of proponents from both sides that the Song belongs to them. It joyfully celebrates physical love and a couple's committed relationship. It does this without concern for issues of theology, procreation, propriety, or even the announcement of marriage (although terminology creeps in throughout the Song). Ultimately, love and its enjoyment are what matter. Thus this amazing book has a wonderful place within the Bible, for the love in which it rejoices is a gift of creation.

Following the introduction, the commentary is presented in seven sections that recognize major divisions in the text. Each of the major sections begins with a translation. The interpretation of the text that follows considers each of the subsections. They are divided according to

the speaker. The interpretation of each subsection begins with a discussion of the structure. This then unfolds into verse-by-verse comments that seek to integrate the poetic forms with the images presented so as to understand as completely as possible the intent of the text. Where appropriate, I present theological and other practical notes regarding the implications of the poetic expressions. The poetic structure, at the level of the individual verses, is thus the determining factor in shaping the interpretation. Altogether, the themes and images recur and interweave in this structure so as to form a verbal symphony of beauty and joy. Footnotes deal with technical matters, especially Hebrew linguistics. Interested readers will find profit in the main text of the commentary, without the need for special training. Each of the major sections (except for the first one, which considers only the title verse) concludes with a paragraph or two that summarizes and discusses major theological implications for that part of the Song.

The content is my own and no one else's. The delightful task remains for me to express gratitude to the series editor, Tremper Longman, for entrusting me with this project and for reading the manuscript and providing important comments. I also thank Baker for bravely agreeing to publish it. Further, I thank my Hebrew Song of Songs class at Denver Seminary. The students shared their insights with me and enabled me to learn and to balance this commentary with a collective wisdom. I also express appreciation to Sister Timothea Elliott, who joined us early on and assisted in setting a clear and sensitive course in the understanding of this marvelous book.

While I was completing this manuscript, our two sons, Fraser and Greig, announced their engagements to their fiancées, Elizabeth and Jenna. As we look forward to the joy of two family weddings in the coming year, I gratefully dedicate this work to them and the joy of their marriages. I hope that they will know the same happiness of desire and its fulfillment as the lovers of the Song and as Jean and I know in our marriage.

אני לדודי ודודי לי (Song 6:3)

Richard S. Hess  
Denver, Colorado  
December 1, 2003

# Abbreviations

## Bibliographic and General

- AHw* *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, by W. von Soden, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1959–81)
- BHS* *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967–77)
- CAD* *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, ed. I. J. Gelb et al. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago Press, 1955–)
- CTU* *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*, ed. M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín (2nd enlarged ed. of *KTU*), *Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens* 8 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995)
- DCH* *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. D. J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–)
- Eng. English
- GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enl. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910)
- HAL* *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, by L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, 3rd ed., 5 vols. + supplement (Leiden: Brill, 1967–96)
- HALOT* *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, by L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000)
- Heb. Hebrew
- KAR* *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts*, ed. E. Ebeling, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915–23)
- KJV King James Version

<i>KTU</i>	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit: Einschließlich der keilalphabetischen Texte außerhalb Ugarits, vol. 1, Transkription,</i> ed. M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, <i>Alter Orient und Altes Testament 24</i> (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976)
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic (Hebrew) Text
NAB	New American Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
REB	Revised English Bible
v./vv.	verse/verses

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps.	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

## New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

## Other Jewish and Christian Writings

<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
<i>B. Bat.</i>	tractate <i>Baba Batra</i>
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
Jdt.	Judith
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah
<i>Sanh.</i>	tractate <i>Sanhedrin</i>
Sir.	Sirach
<i>t.</i>	Tosefta

# Introduction

## Authorship/Date/Setting

Although the first verse of the Song would appear to attribute the work to King Solomon, it is susceptible to alternative interpretations (see commentary). Indeed, the text does mention Solomon several additional times (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). He is spoken of as though he were alive. In addition, the place-names in the Song (Lebanon, Hermon, and Amana) suggest the kingdom at its greatest extent, as under Solomon.<sup>1</sup> However, he is never designated as one of the speakers.<sup>2</sup> Nor do the anonymous speakers address Solomon directly. Further, the place-names suggest prominent towns and landmarks, but they nowhere imply that these form part of the contemporary empire of Israel.

Solomonic authorship for the Song would date it to the tenth century BC. If the problems with such a conclusion are accepted, then the authorship may be suggested from other evidence. Often the language of the Song is used to identify a later date.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, early attributions are not unknown. Gerleman observes that the emphasis this book places on beauty and art implies a time of Egyptian influence such as that experienced by the Solomonic court.<sup>4</sup> However, this remains speculative because little is known about Solomon's reign beyond what may be found in the Bible. Such influence may come as easily during the Persian period or some other time in Israel's history. Nor can geo-

1. Goitein, "Song," 63.

2. Murphy, *Song*, 3.

3. For attempts to use the aromatics in the Song for dating, see the evaluation in the comments on 4:14.

4. Gerleman, *Hohelied*, 63–77.

graphical references such as Tirzah (6:4) be of assistance. Although this site served as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel before Omri moved it to Samaria in the early ninth century, such matters do not touch upon the purpose of the name as it occurs in the Song. The natural beauty of Tirzah could describe any period of time.<sup>5</sup> Again, attempts to date the text early according to appearance of Ugaritic cognates rest on the assumption that these terms cannot occur at a later date.<sup>6</sup> Young's arguments that the isoglosses between the Song and the early poem of Judg. 5 demonstrate archaic Hebrew are the most compelling presented on the subject of dating according to language.<sup>7</sup> However, even here the example of the letter *šîn* as a relative pronoun is more common in later Hebrew, and its usage in Judg. 5:7, if indeed it appears there (contrary to the vocalization), is not with a syntactic form parallel to that most common in the Song or later Hebrew. Nor are the possible appearances of the Greek *phoreion* (Song 3:9), the Persian *pardēs* (4:13), and other possibly late terms certain indications that the whole of the text is late.<sup>8</sup> De Paula Pedro and Nakanose ("Debajo") suggest a sociocultural context from the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. Garbini dates the Song to 69 BC.<sup>9</sup> Yet Müller ("Travestien") can find the Song echoing Amarna Egypt of the fourteenth century BC, as well as a Greco-Roman bucolic. A single word is a slight basis for dating a whole text, especially if one allows for the possibility of later editors and for other sources to originate the word.<sup>10</sup> The village life, the awareness of the "king" close by, the context of a fortified Jerusalem, and the active engagement and enjoyment of the luxury products of the trade routes—these all suggest an environment that is not far removed from the Israelite monarchy for much of the poem's content. Aspects of the language may suggest a postexilic date for the final composition, but the themes portray an earlier time.

For example, there is the question of the female's ability to run through the city streets in the middle of the night (3:1–5). Despite the various opinions of commentators, little is cited in the way of substantial evidence. Only Keel refers to the Middle Assyrian laws (12th/11th centuries BC) that require women to appear in public as veiled unless they are slaves or prostitutes.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this has no necessary relevance for Israel in the first millennium BC. In fact, a woman running through the city streets at night would have been unheard of and unaccept-

5. A possible derivation of the name Tirzah may be "lovely, pleasing."

6. Pope, *Song*; cf. Albright, "Archaic."

7. Young, *Diversity*, 161–65.

8. See summary in Murphy, *Song*, 4n10, and this commentary.

9. Garbini, "Significato"; idem, *Cantico*, 293–96.

10. Goitein, "Song," 62.

11. Keel, *Song*, 122.

able during the intertestamental period (Sir. 42:11), even if it is only a dream. However, in the earlier periods women could walk through a populated area alone at night, as Ruth did in her visit to the threshing floor (Ruth 3).<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, none of this is compelling, and the environment of the Song can be situated in a variety of possible times and places. This itself may betray the intention of the Song to speak more widely of love than a defined historical circumstance would allow. Even so, the springtime of the year, with an abundance of new life and vegetation, would be most suggestive for the setting of the Song. Perhaps this is one reason the book is traditionally read at Passover.<sup>13</sup>

The social roles presented in the Song deserve comment. Part of the logic behind the allegorization of the text may have been to reduce the implications of the lovers as truly free and independent individuals. The female in particular is the major character. She speaks first and last, and her words contain the most imperatives for her lover and for others. Indeed, it is she who both seeks his kisses (1:2) and commands him to be gone (8:14). Her feelings are freely shared, unlike those of her partner.<sup>14</sup> Given the female's dominant role as speaker and actor (e.g., she goes out in the night to search for her lover, 3:1–5), the full impact of this Song must include an equality and independence of the female as well as the male—what many traditional societies (to the present day) have been reluctant to recognize.

This then raises the question of a female author or composer behind the Song. Brenner, recalling the manner in which Miriam and Deborah may have composed Exod. 15 and Judg. 5, calculates that the female voice in the Song accounts for 53 percent of the text, while the male voice accounts for 34 percent.<sup>15</sup> This dramatic distinction may be coupled with the tradition that Israelite women could write (1 Kings 21:8–9; Esther 9:29) and the references to women's participation in the composition and performance of victory, lament, and harvest songs (Judg. 11:40; 21:21; 1 Sam. 2:1–10; 18:6–7; 2 Sam. 1:20, 24; Jer. 9:17, 20).<sup>16</sup> Various attempts, however, have not been successful to the point where it is possible to

12. So Keel, *Song*, 120, who also notes the rape law of Deut. 22:25–29.

13. In addition, later Jewish allegory associated the Song with Israel's exodus and the coming of the Messiah. Cf. Longman, *Song*, 2, although the attribution of the reading of the Song on the eighth day is not universal. The date has varied since its association with this festival, a phenomenon at least as early as the eighth century AD (Brenner, *Song*, 20).

14. Walsh, *Exquisite*, 106, goes further and notes that while the two are essentially equal in their appreciation for one another, "as desire travels through the levels of discourse, from flirtation to physical want to excitement, however, the man cannot keep up with the woman's desire."

15. Brenner, *Israelite*, 46–56.

16. Bekkenkamp and Van Dijk, "Canon"; Exum, "Developing," 226, 231.

be definite about the gender of the unspecified author of the Song.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this composition clearly provides a stronger female voice in the dialogue than does any other biblical book.

This should be affirmed despite the attempts of Clines (“Why?”) to identify the Song as a male composition of soft pornography that was designed for men’s entertainment and allegorized (see “History of Interpretation” below) in order to preserve it within the canon.<sup>18</sup> Not only does this fail to deal seriously with its context within ancient Near Eastern love poetry; it also lacks acuity to distinguish erotic literature from pornography (with its brutality and oppressive caricature of women) and cannot explain the emphasis on the shared love and total commitment that the couple enjoys.

### Canon/Language/Text Criticism

The Song appears as the first of the five Megilloth, or “Scrolls,” in the Hebrew Bible. The others are Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, and Ruth. Its first appearance in this collection may be associated with its reading at Passover.<sup>19</sup> It forms part of the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings. The books that appear in this section are thought to have been added last to the canon of the OT and therefore the last to be accorded canonical status.

No doubt the Song’s canonical status was recognized because of its connection with Solomon (1:1) and its emphasis on human love.<sup>20</sup> It is the teaching of love that has preserved it as a book for the synagogue and the church. The question of the position of the Song of Songs seems to have been affirmed in Judaism. Rabbi Aqiba’s (died c. AD 135) famous quote from the Mishnah bears repeating, since it was explicitly intended to counter questions about the canonical status of the Song: “God forbid!—no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given

17. Bekkenkamp and Van Dijk, “Canon,” 107–8, argue that “the metaphorical language of women’s songs seems to be (1) more explicit as far as objects or locations from women’s life are concerned, (2) more implicit regarding bodily experiences, and (3) more individual.” Brenner, *Israelite*, 90, suggests that the dream sequences of 3:1–4 and 5:2–7 contain “conflicts, contents and symbols” that “are ‘typically female’ in terms of modern psychology.” She also finds less humor in the female lyrics. This all suggests that the composition has achieved an authentic female voice. However, that is not the same as demonstrating the presence of a female author.

18. On this subject, see Exum, “Developing,” 218–19, and the bibliography there.

19. Brenner, *Song*, 24.

20. Bergant, “Song.”

to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”<sup>21</sup>

Judaism thus accepted the canonicity of the book despite its unique form in comparison with the remainder of the Bible. The Song was read aloud during the Passover. In Christianity, the Song was recognized in an explicit manner as early as the list that Eusebius ascribed to Melito, the second-century AD bishop of Sardis.<sup>22</sup>

The female voice dominates this poem to a greater extent than any other book or text of comparable length in the Bible. Hence feminine forms occur frequently. However, there are occasions when the gender (or at times number) of the verb is unexpected. Thus 2:5 contains masculine plural imperatives spoken by the female, apparently to her female friends. The same is true of the masculine plural object in 2:7. Masculine forms where feminine were expected occur in 4:2; 5:8; 6:5, 8; and 8:4.<sup>23</sup> One may ask whether this does not suggest an epicene usage of characteristically masculine forms as either masculine or feminine, especially in contexts where only women are addressed or otherwise serve as referent. Elsewhere, number becomes unclear. For example, 1:17 refers to “our houses” (*bāttênû*), when the singular “house” is intended.

The Masoretic Hebrew text (MT) provides few problems and is used as the basis for the translation proposed here. The need for emendations and corrections is generally recognized in only a handful of places.<sup>24</sup> There are several fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls that relate passages of the Song. Thus, 6QCant includes parts of the first seven verses. It represents a proto-MT form and confirms the existence of this text at Qumran. The remaining three fragments come from cave 4. The fragments from this cave choose parts of the Song but are not identical with a continuous text.<sup>25</sup> They seem to have served a liturgical purpose or another intent distinct from the preservation of the Song itself. The LXX represents an attempt to translate a text that also resembles the MT. This is followed as well by the Syriac Peshitta, which in the opinion of some represents

21. Danby, *Mishnah*, 782; *m. Yadayim* 3.5. The reference to soiling the hands is used to describe those books considered sacred Scripture. Aqiba’s further endorsements of the Song are collected by Murphy, *Song*, 6n16. In the midrash *’Aggadat šir hašširim*, the scholar is reported to have said, “Had not the Torah been given, Canticles would have sufficed to guide the world.” See Urbach, “Homiletical,” 250. Better known is the statement ascribed to Aqiba in *t. Sanh.* 12.10, where he denies access to the world to come to any who sing the Song at a party or in an otherwise profane manner.

22. *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.12–14.

23. Murphy, *Song*, 132–33.

24. Cf., e.g., 3:11; 5:12; 7:10 (7:9 Eng.).

25. 4QCant<sup>a</sup> contains parts of 3:7–11; 4:1–7; 6:11?–12; 7:1–7; 4QCant<sup>b</sup> contains parts of 2:9–17; 3:1–2, 5, 9–10; 4:1–3, 8–11, 14–16; 5:1; 4QCant<sup>c</sup> contains a fragment of 3:7–8.

a stylistically more fluent rendering. Specific points of disagreement in the versions will be noted in the discussion below.<sup>26</sup>

## History of Interpretation

The most detailed and easily available summary of the history of interpretation of the Song may be found in Pope.<sup>27</sup> It is not the purpose of this study to repeat what has already been stated elsewhere. Instead, a few of the major highlights in the development of the Song's study will be noted.

An allegorical interpretation can be found as early as 2 Esdras/4 Ezra (5:24–26; 12:51; c. AD 100). Israel is described as a lily, a stream, a dove, and a bride; all are images found in the Song (2:2; 4:15; 2:14; 4:8). The even earlier *Life of Adam and Eve* 43.4 may contain an allegorical allusion to Song 4:14.<sup>28</sup> This type of interpretation made an equation of God or Christ with the male, and Israel or the church with the female. The Targum to the Song identified 1:2–3:6 with Israel's victory over Egypt and the wilderness wandering, while 3:7–5:1 became associated with Solomon's temple and the temple cult. Song 5:2–6:1 is considered as the Babylonian exile. Song 6:2–7:11 is allegorized to describe Jewish independence, with the Roman rule found in 7:12–13. Song 7:14–8:4 describes the coming Messiah, and the last ten verses describe the resurrection of the end times.<sup>29</sup>

Allegorical interpretation in the Christian church was stimulated by the suggestion of the marriage imagery in NT texts.<sup>30</sup> Hippolytus (c. AD 200) used the Song as an allegorical vehicle to affirm asceticism. Origen developed allegory in his commentary of five volumes in the third century. This was furthered by Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>31</sup> and Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>32</sup> Nor has the concept of an allegorical interpretation disappeared. Like Origen, Tournay (*Word*) would affirm both

26. See especially Garbini, *Cantico*. He provides the full texts of the MT, LXX, Old Latin, Vulgate, and Syriac Peshitta, along with text-critical apparatus and notes. Although he sometimes rearranges and emends the text without proper justification, his presentation of variants is without equal.

27. Pope, *Song*, 89–229.

28. See Robert, Tournay, and Feuillet, *Cantique*, 43; Audet, "Sens," 200; Elliott, *Literary*, 3.

29. See the summary of Bardski, "Swiatynia."

30. Matt. 9:15; 25:1–13; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:6–8; 21:9–11; 22:17. See Elliott, *Literary*, 4.

31. Gregory also recognized an erotic level of meaning as well as a marriage drama (in addition to the allegorical interpretation). See Dünzl, *Braut*.

32. See, e.g., Bernard, *On the Song of Songs*, vols. 1 and 2.

the allegorical and the “literal” interpretation, with the latter necessary for proper understanding of the former. This is accomplished through double entendre, in which the poetry works at both levels. Maier (*Hohe-  
lied*) speaks of the outer meaning of a profane love poem and the inner meaning of a poem about the Messiah.<sup>33</sup> Both the figures of the male and female became images of the divine.<sup>34</sup> Allegory flourished in the centuries before the Reformation. Lobrichon (“Espaces”) notes how the laity, as well as the monastic tradition, gradually applied this book to their own lives by using it typologically and allegorically for the teaching of morals.<sup>35</sup> Phipps (“Plight”) reviews the allegorical interpretation of the Song from the patristic period through the nineteenth century, demonstrating the great lengths to which it went for the purpose of suppressing the erotic message lying at the heart of a literal interpretation. Among the major interpreters, only Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Calvin, Edmund Spenser, and J. G. von Herder attempted to appreciate the work as a description of physical love.<sup>36</sup> Elliott has criticized the allegorical approach on two accounts: there is no plot in the Song such as would be necessary for a successful allegory; and there is no explicit reference to an allegorical interpretation anywhere in the Song.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to allegory, the patristic period saw a wide variety of interpretations, including those nonreligious approaches as represented by Theodore of Mopsuestia (Auwers, “Lectures”). The identification of the Song as a drama may have occurred as early as the fourth-century AD. Codex Sinaiticus and the fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus are two of the three earliest complete Bibles (and complete editions of the Song). Both of these contain marginal notes identifying the various speakers and assigning parts to them. Nilus of Ancyra (*Commentaire*, c. AD 400), like other patristic writers, saw a dramatic element among the themes. For him the female was a prostitute who worshiped other deities. The Song describes the love that converted her. Perhaps as much as any other scholar of the last two centuries, Franz Delitzsch developed this interpretation.<sup>38</sup> For him, the drama consisted of Solomon and

33. Cf. also D. Carr, “Falling.”

34. D. Carr, *Erotic*, 127, notes how the beaten woman of 5:6–7 became an image of the crucifixion.

35. In addition, the Song was applied to devotion to Mary.

36. On the struggles of Herder to have his interpretation accepted and on its influence on others, especially Goethe, see Baildam, *Paradisal Love*.

37. Elliott, *Literary*, 6–7. Contrast the allegory on old age in Eccles. 12, which clearly identifies old age. Cf. Murphy, *Song*, 94, who refers to an absence of empirical evidence for this position. The allegorical interpretation continues in modern times. Cf. Joüon, *Cantique*; Krinetzki, *Hohe Lied*; Robert, Tournay, and Feuillet, *Cantique*; and Tournay, *Word*. The last relates the male lover to the church.

38. Delitzsch, *Song*.

the Shulammitte female (7:1 [6:13 Eng.]), who taught the king the true meaning of love. The young women of Jerusalem function in a manner similar to a Greek chorus. Scholars such as Ginsburg, Renan, Harper, and Provan expand the number of main characters to three.<sup>39</sup> They add a rustic young lad, who competes with Solomon and his wealth, power, and decadence for the love of the female. At one point its acceptance was so widespread that an OT introduction such as that of Driver could present the dramatic interpretation as the only one to be considered.<sup>40</sup> It remains an interpretation adopted by some.<sup>41</sup> However, despite the fact that the name of Solomon occurs some six times in the Song (see comments on 1:1), he stays in the background and never speaks. The theory of the drama of three characters presents Solomon as a lustful abductor, for which there is no evidence elsewhere. In fact, it would be odd for a poem with Solomon in the heading to portray him as a villain.<sup>42</sup> Further, the presentation of drama seems largely omitted from Hebrew literature, remaining abhorrent to Jewish culture until late into the Middle Ages.<sup>43</sup> Finally, there are no ancient Near Eastern parallels for drama such as is envisioned.<sup>44</sup>

A cultic and liturgical interpretation of the Song arose with the publication of Akkadian and, subsequently, Sumerian texts from Mesopotamia. These revealed the story of Dumuzi (later Tammuz), the shepherd and king, who seeks and is sought by his love, Inanna (later Ishtar). Their adventures take them into the underworld and include rituals of mourning associated with the dry season and its absence of vegetation. Meek used the Akkadian texts to associate vocabulary and themes with the Song; Kramer developed the historical person of Dumuzi and in the Sumerian texts found love songs that he compared with the biblical Song.<sup>45</sup> Pope connected the whole Song with the mourning (and celebration?) rites of the West Semitic institution of the *marzēah* ritual.<sup>46</sup> However,

39. Ginsburg, *Song*; Renan, *Cantique*; Harper, *Song*; Provan, *Song*.

40. S. Driver, *Introduction*; Elliott, *Literary*, 280n41.

41. See V. Sasson, "King," who sees the female as pharaoh's daughter in 1 Kings 11:1–2. Cf. also Provan, *Song*.

42. Webb, "Garment," 19.

43. Elliott, *Literary*, 13.

44. Phipps, "Plight," 83.

45. Meek, "Canticles"; idem, "Song of Songs"; idem, "Babylonian"; idem, "Song and Fertility"; Kramer, *Sacred*.

46. Pope, *Song*, 210–29. The discovery of further texts related to the *marzēah* has resulted in an awareness that much less is known about this practice than was recognized when Pope wrote. For the opposite view, which minimizes funerary associations with this banquet, see McLaughlin, *Marzēah*. Nevertheless, Pope's massive collection of evidence remains an essential starting point, and his analysis continues to convince on many points.

beyond the presence of similar vocabulary and themes (for which one may expect to locate even closer similarities with nonreligious Egyptian love poetry), it is difficult to identify a consistent liturgical form in the Song. It also is unlikely that religious texts based so overtly on foreign deities would have been acceptable to the rabbis in their consideration of retaining it in the canon.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the sheer speculative nature of this connection would find parallels with every love story. In his critical evaluation of Pope's theory, J. Sasson ("On Pope's *Song*") observed how the history of interpretation involved more a shift in "location" than one in actual method. It was not so much that the interpretations became less allegorical or more literal, but that the locus of activity and description moved from the synagogue or church to the palace (drama) and then finally to the temple (cultic).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a different type of interpretation of the Song.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, the Song lacked a satisfying analysis from the perspective of traditional literary criticism of the Bible.<sup>49</sup> The development of literary analysis emphasizing the unity of a literary piece (rather than its dissection into discrete and originally independent parts) has been combined with the emergence of rhetorical criticism and the application of both comparative Egyptian love poetry and techniques from the social sciences to the Song. All this has led to a rejection of earlier categories that themselves came from literatures later than, and foreign to, the Song itself. The recognition that the Song is poetry and that it should be studied first of all as poetry provided the basis for these new directions. In this light, Keel's observation on the Song as poetry is important: "The whole discussion has often overlooked the fact that poetry does not merely reflect reality—whether the reality of dreams or of conscious experience—but uses artistic means to create a reality of its own."<sup>50</sup>

Social science approaches to the interpretation of the Song have led in several directions. There is the psychological approach, championed by Landy,<sup>51</sup> which seeks to use psychological concepts to explore the

47. Elliott, *Literary*, 14–18.

48. The following section is dependent on *ibid.*, 18–32.

49. Meyers, "Gender," 198, expresses it well: "The critical tools honed and sharpened in the analysis of the pentateuchal, prophetic and historiographic literature of the Bible have been inadequate to deal with a biblical book that differs in essential ways from the rest of the scriptural corpus."

50. Keel, *Song*, 120, while discussing 3:1–5. However, the observation could also apply to the Song as a whole.

51. Landy, *Paradoxes*. Cf. Krinetzki, *Hohe Lied*; Boer, "Second"; Black, "Beauty"; and discussion by Longman, *Song*, 46–47.

underlying relationships expressed in the poetry. Not only is the subjective nature of such analysis problematic, but the use of a brief piece of literature distant in time and culture also creates enormous problems for scientific study. Elsewhere, Stadelmann (*Love*) has resurrected allegory but applied it to interpret the Song in terms of postexilic Judean and Persian politics.<sup>52</sup> Such highly speculative approaches remain unclear as to their interpretive value.

The basic decision about the nature of the poetry that the Song represents could be described as one of two alternatives. Does the Song represent poetry from diverse sources and origins, or does it represent a more unified whole, perhaps even the work of a single author? Within this latter category there remains the question: Does the Song describe a progression of thought, or is it rather a thematic whole that does not intend to take any action within it and to move that action forward in time?

Among those in the first category who see in the Song an anthology of love poems, Horst identifies eight different types of poems and divides the text into relatively small units representing these forms.<sup>53</sup> Falk finds thirty-one different poems.<sup>54</sup> Publication of collections of Egyptian love poems furthered the sense that the Song is a similar collection.<sup>55</sup> The poems themselves were relatively short compared with the Song, and so a direct comparison led to the view that the latter consisted of a composition of originally independent poems.<sup>56</sup> However, Egyptian (and other) love poetry does not need to be limited in length. Indeed, the 117 verses of the Song do not make a long poem—not anything like, for example, an epic. If it is love poetry, then what determines length is not convention but the expression of the ardor and passion of the lovers. Lovers are nothing if not creative and independent, and the same is true for their poetry. In the case of the Song, unlike some love poetry, there is dialogue. This interaction heightens the passion. It also allows for a longer poem.

Egyptian and other comparative material can sometimes assist in the interpretation of the Song. However, many parallels that do exist

52. Weems, “Song,” argues for a less specific form of a political/sociological interpretation. She suggests that society, for unclear reasons, seeks to separate and keep apart the lovers. Texts such as 1:5–6, the hasty departures and escapes, and the repeated assertion by the female that her lover belongs to her alone (2:16; 6:3; 7:11 [7:10 Eng.]) contribute to a view of a disparity of the couple in terms of class and perhaps race.

53. Horst, “Formen.” Cf. Haupt, *Biblische*; Murphy, “Form-Critical”; idem, “Towards.”

54. Falk, *Love*.

55. Hermann, *Altägyptische*. More recent adherents of the Song as a collection include Soulen, “*Wasfs*,” 215; and Brenner, *Song*.

56. White, *Study*, 163.

do not provide much in the way of an exegetical payoff, and therefore the usage of comparative literature will be limited. The reason for this seems to be the universal nature of love poetry. Thus White comments:

Not only does the Song's rustic imagery betray a close association with the ways of expressing love in Egypt, but the commonality of love-language denotes archetypal vehicles through which human, sexual love was celebrated in the ancient world. Thus, it is not surprising that specific topoi be common to both Hebrew and Egyptian love literature. The fragrances, sight of the love partners, embracing and kissing, friends and enemies of the lovers, and even specific parallels (scent of garments, the mother figure, love under the trees, gazelles, etc.) denote the Song's participation in the world of human love expression.<sup>57</sup>

A promising direction in interpretation emerged with the acceptance of the Song as a unified collection of love poetry, designed to trace and develop themes but not to advance a particular plot. As Webb notes, the title suggests a single song or poem.<sup>58</sup> Landy represents this view in his study of the Song as a mystical love poem.<sup>59</sup> The lovers are both persons and archetypes. Further, love and death represent creative and destructive forces. He compares the whole poem with the Eden story of the opening chapters of Genesis. Tribble argues that the poem develops its motifs from Gen. 2–3.<sup>60</sup> As in the garden of Eden, so here all the senses are involved, plants are everywhere, harmony pervades, water is abundant, animals are suggestive of love, and (Tribble contends) sexual play and work are tied together in the Song. Certainly, and no more so than at 7:11 (7:10 Eng.), any conflict of the wills and domination of Gen. 3:16 is reversed in the Song.<sup>61</sup> However, this is not sufficient in itself to establish Gen. 2–3 as the key hermeneutical text. What brings the two texts close together is the intentionally similar reference to the judgment in Gen. 3:16, reversing it by the power of love in Song 7:11 (7:10 Eng.). Thus the woman

unties the bondage of the ancient curse, exactly as Isaiah invalidates the curse of "I [God] shall institute hostility" between man and serpent by letting a suckling play over a viper's son (Isa. 11:8). In truth, in the pages

57. *Ibid.*, 162.

58. Webb, "Garment," 22.

59. Landy, *Paradoxes*; *idem*, "Beauty," 36.

60. Tribble, "Love's"; cf. Landy, "Two"; Lys, *Plus beau*, 52.

61. See the affirming opinion of Pope, "Song."

of the Song we encounter a new relationship between the two sexes, a relationship of equality and amicable mutuality.<sup>62</sup>

Literary and structural analysis of the poem has in some quarters superseded the historical-critical approach as a means to identify the major themes and interpretations.<sup>63</sup> More than anyone else, Elliott (*Literary*) argues for a thorough unity to the Song, structured on the basis of literary, vocabulary, and phrase connections throughout.

Bloom brings the discussion full circle with his comment: “The question of literal versus allegorical reading of the Song of Songs should be set aside forever; the work is so strong, that it demands every mode that can be brought to it.”<sup>64</sup>

Phipps is correct when he rejects as anachronistic a view that the Song deals with free love and sexual experimentation.<sup>65</sup> Parallels with extrabiblical love poetry, especially Egyptian, do not in and of themselves demonstrate that the lovers are unmarried.<sup>66</sup> As will be noted, the use of “bride” (*kallā*) never occurs other than in contexts of legal marriages (unlike terms of kinship, such as “sister,” that can be used to describe a close friendship rather than a blood relationship) or as reference to a daughter-in-law.<sup>67</sup> The repeated appearance of “bride” in the Song’s heart (six times in 4:8–5:1) demonstrates a relationship that is one of marriage, whether in fantasy or reality. The language of commitment pervades the whole Song and provides one of the most important interpretive keys for understanding the work. Alter (*Art*) goes further and asserts that any attempt to identify an original setting for this poetry is misplaced. Not only is this true because of the mixture of pastoral, urban, and royal allusions, but also because the

62. Goitein, “Song,” 59; cf. Munro, *Spikenard*, 105–6. Exum, “Ten,” 30, represents the opposite view, denying any equality of the sexes in the poem. She argues that the male is elusive in his freedom to leap about on the hills, whereas the female does not have this freedom and has a greater constraint placed on her chastity. However, gender equality is not gender identity, nor is the man “always off bounding over the hills,” nor is the female unable to move from her place. Further, the text nowhere advocates promiscuity for the male.

63. Cf. Pelletier, “Cantique,” and most of the commentaries since 1990.

64. Bloom, *Song*, 1.

65. Phipps, “Plight,” 83–84.

66. White, *Study*, 81–82, 91–92, 163–64. The same uncertainty may be concluded regarding attempts to establish the Song as a wedding poem, using Egyptian parallels.

67. This disputes the assertion of LaCocque, *Romance*, 108, that the term signifies a bride-to-be. The use of “bride” in the Song is not contrary to usage in the OT and to the lexicons. In fact, the two examples that LaCocque cites to prove his point fail to do so. He refers to Gen. 38:24, which describes Tamar, hardly a bride-to-be. He also cites Hosea 4:13–14, where the term is explicitly used twice in parallel with “daughters.” Both of these passages clearly use the term in the sense of a daughter-in-law.

life setting is suppressed so as to provide a universal appeal for this love poetry.<sup>68</sup>

## Images/Structure/Theology

As Alter (*Art*) asserts, figurative language is used more prominently throughout the Song than anywhere else in the Bible. Furthermore, the lines of semantic distinction blur in the creative play of the imagery. This means that it is not always clear (from a structural standpoint) which image is the illustration and which is the referent.

Significant emphases occur in the repeated images that dominate the poem. The images include auditory and visual as well as taste, smell, and touch. These images serve as vehicles to define the intimacy of the relationship. The female is enclosed as a locked garden (4:12), a vineyard (1:6; 8:12), a palanquin (3:7–10), a locked room (5:5), and a walled city (8:9–10). She brings her lover into such an enclosure, the room of her mother (3:4). Around these images are scenes of protection: tenders of the vineyard (8:12), sixty warriors (3:7), sixty queens (6:8), watchmen and walls (5:7), lattice (2:9), locks (5:5), and towers (4:4; 7:5 [7:4 Eng.]; 8:9–10).

The vineyards and the gardens dominate the Song with emphasis on the sexuality of the female.<sup>69</sup> Walsh observes an important contrast between the male imagery of sexuality elsewhere in the Bible and that of the female as presented here.<sup>70</sup> Using Samson's metaphor for intimacy in Judg. 14:18, "plowed with my heifer," she demonstrates the extent to which male-oriented imagery emphasizes the farmer's working of the field (often the picture of the passive female) to produce a harvest of dry grains. In contrast, the female of the Song expresses sexual metaphors of moist and succulent fruit, which creates a quite different picture, one of fruitfulness and the many sensual pleasures of touch, taste, and aroma.

Falk provides some of the most helpful perspectives on contexts and themes presented in the Song.<sup>71</sup> There are four contexts where the scenes of the Song occur: the wild country with its destructive natural forces; the cultivated countryside portrayed as a return to paradise; indoors within the city, where a private and supportive world is found; outdoors in the city, where there is hostility and violence. Within these contexts occur five themes, three of which concern the beckoning of, banishment

68. This may also explain the absence of personal names given to the chief characters. See Exum, "Ten," 26.

69. E.g., Falk, *Love*, 101–4; Meyers, "Gender," 201.

70. Walsh, *Exquisite*, 81–94.

71. Falk, *Love*. See the summary in Webb, "Garment," 20–22.

of, and search for the beloved. The remaining two concern the evaluation of self in a hostile world and the praise of love. Within these major contexts and themes, the Song imagery may be construed.

For example, when Meyers (“Gender”) observes the architectural and military images applied to the female, these reflect the fourth theme of self-worth in Falk’s list. Thus in 4:1–4 her neck is a tower (cf. 7:5 [7:4 Eng.]) and her ornaments form layers (or a ziggurat). Shields form a protection for her. Whether or not the pools of Heshbon were designed for military defense, they certainly could have been used in such a context. The “house of the mother” (3:4; 8:2) contrasts with the “house of the father.” This traditional expression would describe the extended family, yet it is never mentioned. Instead, the “house of the mother” affirms the female presence and her dominance in the domestic sphere. Along with the male (2:9, 17; 4:1; 5:12; 8:14), she is associated with the more gentle and graceful doves (2:12; 6:9) and gazelles (4:5; 7:4 [7:3 Eng.]). However, only the female is associated with lions and leopards (4:8), an apparently unusual connection. More revealing is her simile with a mare let loose among pharaoh’s chariots (1:9). Meyers comments, “The female has a power of her own that can offset the mighty forces of a trained army.”<sup>72</sup> The effect of this imagery is to provide the female with the tools necessary to control her destiny and thus to choose her lover even as he chooses her.<sup>73</sup>

Alter (*Art*) finds a fusion of image and referent. In 2:8–9 the figure at the lattice is both a stag and the lover. The double entendre of the female’s body, which is described repeatedly as a garden, becomes a garden. There is a continuity of geographical landscape and the aesthetic reality of the female’s body. The two cannot be separated. Thus the imagery of the poem achieves more than a powerful description of the lovers and their love. It participates in that love by attracting all five senses into a heady acknowledgment of a matching relationship and a full correspondence between the poem and the world.<sup>74</sup>

As noted above, the Song is best understood as a structured whole. Elliott (*Literary*) finds the key to the structure in the refrains that are repeated, especially in 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4.<sup>75</sup> As represented by the ongoing dialogue throughout the poetry, the emphasis on the alternation between

72. “Gender,” 207.

73. Cf. LaCocque, *Romance*, 131, who notes 6:4 and 6:10, where he translates that the woman’s eyes are “terrible as an army with banners.”

74. Exum, “Ten,” 27–29, notes that the text is a literary construct and thus lacks reality. However, literature can strive to depict reality, and that is what the imagery appears to be doing by drawing the scenes and word pictures with such evocative images. Compare the comment of Ostriker, “Holy,” 46: “Nothing in the Song suggests that woman is the second sex.”

75. See Feuillet, “Drama.”

genders also becomes a key for understanding the basic structure.<sup>76</sup> This is the clearest distinction on a level that divides the text according to discourse. However, at a larger level one may identify a prologue (1:2–2:7), an epilogue (8:5–14), and four parts: 2:8–3:5; 3:6–5:1; 5:2–6:3; 6:4–8:4. Near the beginning and at almost every division (1:4; 2:4–7; 3:4–6; 5:1–2; 8:2–4) there occurs a series of key terms. Not all appear at each place, but a cluster appears: “come, enter” (*bwʿ*); either “house” (*byt*), “room” (*hḏr*), or “garden” (*gn*); “wine” (*yyn*); “embrace” (*hbq* at 2:6 and 8:3); and an adjuration to avoid “love” or “sleep.” Each new section begins with the lovers apart and concludes with them finding one another and coming together.

Scattered throughout the Song is a distinctive literary form that appears outside the book in modern Arab cultures. The Song contains three descriptions of the female’s body (4:1–7 [8]; 6:4–7; 7:2–8 [7:1–7 Eng.]) and one of the male’s body (5:10–16). These reflect a form known elsewhere to derive from an Arabic term for “description” (*waṣf*).<sup>77</sup> A *waṣf* is an Arabic love song in which the lover praises the physical attributes of his or her partner.<sup>78</sup> The argument that it is anachronistic to refer to these poems by a term known only from later Arabic sources cannot be sustained because (1) Arabic language and customs may predate the extant texts and (2) the appearance of a literary/oral form in a later period does not preclude its earlier existence. For another early example, see the *waṣf* for Sarah in the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran.<sup>79</sup> David Carr (“Gender”) compares the nonpublic love poetry sung predominantly by women in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies to argue that similar love poems were used for channeling emotions regarding love. The Song may therefore use well-known styles of discourses and create a literary artistry that makes these forms public.

The suggestion of a structural analysis recognizes the poem as a whole. Then the question arises: Does it have a central theme or a key theological emphasis? In terms of a theme, many emphasize the erotic nature of the love described here. In these cases the emphasis often lies upon freedom. Thus, the lovers describe and enjoy their bodies as

76. See, e.g., Fokkelman, *Reading*, 189–206, 224. The girl speaks thirty times, whereas the boy speaks eighteen times (200). Cf. Sonnet, “Cantique.”

77. The term will be rendered in this manner throughout.

78. In the nineteenth century, J. G. Wetzstein, “Syrische,” observed local weddings in Syria and the songs of the bride and groom that described the body of the other. He reported these to Delitzsch, who recorded them in an appendix to his commentary (*Song*, 162–76). See Soulen, “*Wasfs*,” 214; Longman, *Song*, 140–41. Thus began the study of *wasfs* and their relation to the Song of Songs.

79. Murphy, *Song*, 158. For more on this type of song, as well as Arab examples, see Falk, *Love*.

physically sensual parts of nature.<sup>80</sup> Walsh (*Exquisite*) has determined that the emphasis of the Song lies in the expression of desire between two lovers. It is not sexual consummation that is most important, but the desire itself that drives the lovers together. In this she distinguishes erotica from pornography. The latter is concerned only with sex, and in this it is qualitatively different from the Song. Here sex plays a secondary role to desire. Whether there is any sexual activity at all in the poem—and as a fantasy there may be no such reality here—the key to the Song remains with the desire that drives the reader to appreciate the time of waiting. Hebrew experience placed the greatest value on passion. Here, too, the point of the Song is not that desire should be controlled, but the opposite, that “loss of control is a given.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, there can only be the full realization of desire for the other that forms the expression of love (*ʾahăbâ*, from a root already occurring six times in 1:2–2:7) most powerful to render absolute commitment and loyalty. The passion of the text separates it from the traditional category of wisdom literature, in the eyes of some; however, the emphasis on commitment prevents a capitulation to promiscuity.<sup>82</sup> It is this emphasis that relates the text to Prov. 5:15–19:

Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well.  
Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in  
the public squares?  
Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.  
May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your  
youth.  
A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may  
you ever be captivated by her love. (NIV)

Some six or seven explicit verbal images relate this passage to the Song and render explicit the theme of exclusive commitment that is assumed in the love poetry.<sup>83</sup> Further, this and other examples of parallels to Israelite wisdom literature in the Song suggest that it has a place in wisdom literature. This is supported in a wider context by the presence of scribal and wisdom texts interspersed with Egyptian love poems.<sup>84</sup> The two are supplemental, not antithetical.

80. Viviers, “Rhetoricity,” identifies this as the “ecstatic body,” referring to Drew Leder’s typology of rhetoric used in describing the human body.

81. Walsh, *Exquisite*, 162.

82. See LaCocque, *Romance*, 8, who, however, insists that “free love” is the chord of the text.

83. So Webb, “Garment,” 29–30.

84. Specifically, White, *Study*, 81, refers to the Harper Song between the second and third sections of love poems found on Papyrus Harris 500.

Within the biblical context this positive theme of physical love contrasts strongly with the persistent negative statements on adultery, promiscuity, and the images of Israel as an unfaithful wife as found in the prophets. Hunter (“Song of Protest”) argues that this book is a form of protest literature in which human nakedness and sexuality are appreciated and praised. This counters the negative associations of these things with sin as developed in the prophets. It also provides a counterpoint to the institutionalized patriarchalism of much of Israelite society by giving the female lover the dominant voice in the dialogue.

These are love poems whose use of language embraces the erotic but also points beyond this to a greater love.<sup>85</sup> Knight and Golka (*Revelation*) find in the Song a focus on God’s redemptive plan for the world. Burns (“Human Love”) is not troubled by the absence of God’s name in the Song (see, however, comments on 8:6 below), but finds here the manner in which human love achieves a sanctity that grows from God’s presence and love. On the other hand, Abécassis (“Espaces”) suggests that the Song’s central message has to do with personal identity that is defined in relation with others, whether God or people. This relational aspect is examined by Linafelt (“Biblical”), who emphasizes distinctiveness and unity, and the manner in which the Song bridges the connection between God and people. In so doing, he reaffirms the impact of some of the allegorical approaches.

Nor is this love far removed from the same *ʾahābâ* occurring in contexts such as Deuteronomy. The covenantal love clearly embraced commitment. That same commitment may be found in a text such as the Song. Here it is not directly to God but to the lover. The *ʾahābâ* of Deuteronomy also embraced a person’s emotions.<sup>86</sup> This is because the emotions cannot be separated from the mind and will of the individual. Thus the love of the Song is not unlike the love for God that the community experiences as it joins with God in the fulfillment of its mission.

However, physical love remains the focus of the Song, and this must never be lost in any identification of the major theme.<sup>87</sup> It is this unbridled desire, with its exclusive commitment, that forms the basis for the confession of 8:6–7: “Love is as strong as death” (NIV). This connection of passion with death is not accidental. There is a connection of love with death in which both open the door to the unknown and uncontrolled. Passion, like death, cannot be bought or sold; it is beyond the human economy. Instead, it demonstrates the power of those parts of our being

85. Cogently argued by Murphy, “History.”

86. Lapsley, “Feeling.”

87. Contrast Webb, “Garment,” 23, who asserts that the true consummation of love is in the relationship rather than sex. The Song does not recognize a dichotomy between the two. The same criticism must be directed at allegorical and other interpretations that fail to give proper emphasis to the physical side of love in the Song.

that can lie on the very edge of full encounter with God. Love for God here transcends covenantal fidelity alone and achieves an arousal and joy that is never consummated fully in this life. The saints of Christianity sometimes understood this, and so for them there was no discontinuity between the Song and their passion for God. These two expressions of desire welled up from the same center of their being. For them, then, it became the closest experience this side of the grave of the transcendent knowledge of the living God. As passion was a shortcut to knowing God in this life, so death itself became the door to that eternal knowledge.

## How (Not) to Read the Song

The Song is not a drama or a sequential narrative.<sup>88</sup> It is not an allegory. It is not an anthology of diverse erotic poetry. The Song represents a poetic unity, expressing in its pages a most sublime love poetry. It closely resembles love poetry among the various genres of ancient Near Eastern literature. In its imagery and subtlety of metaphor, it is most similar to Egyptian love poetry. As is often the case with love poetry, and is certainly true with the published forms of Egyptian love poetry, the Song does not review a historical event but celebrates a loving relationship. The structural divisions outlined by the refrains repeatedly portray the couple apart and then reunited. Beyond this, the Song explores the passion of desire in more and more ways throughout its stanzas. As a result the reader comes to better understand the meaning of love and the loving relationship that exists between the couple.

The metaphor of the Song is the richest of any book in the Bible. It is, however, not intended to provide a simple one-to-one correspondence. In fact, interpreters are most likely to go astray into absurdities when they attempt to match things up where they are not explicit. The parade example is where the woman's breasts are made to represent the OT and NT (1:13). However, one also wonders about the recent attempts in which the common word for "navel" becomes a symbol of the woman's vagina (7:3 [7:2 Eng.]). The best interpretation is to remain sensitive to the language of imagery and attempt to follow its contours without imposing too much demand on specifics of interpretation.<sup>89</sup>

88. Munro, *Spikenard*, 121: "Moreover the ever-shifting perspectives compel the reader to give up the task of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, the actual and the hoped for, for it becomes apparent that the lovers are capable of experiencing past, present and future with equal intensity."

89. Fox, *Song*, 298: "Sexual desire pervades the songs, and sexual pleasure is happily widespread in them. But their eroticism is not concentrated where commentators most often seek it: in specific allusions to genitalia and coitus." Exum, "In the Eye," 80.

The Song is not a manifesto for free love, nor is it a description of a married relationship. The Song does not entertain its readers with prurient expositions nor educate them as a sex manual.<sup>90</sup> Instead, the Song is a fantasy that explores the commitment of an erotic love affair. For the Israelites who first read it, as for the Bible readers of later periods, it may presume a sexual relationship within marriage. However, this is never made explicit. Instead, the absolute commitment of the two lovers (and the repeated term “bride” in the center of the text) suggests that this was an expectation of the society in which they lived (or at least for the couple themselves). Although anticipated and sometimes almost achieved, it is not possible to find a clear and certain description of coitus having taken place.<sup>91</sup> Whether as a fantasy of desire or a concatenation of images and words expressing the rapture of physical love, the Song pulls its readers along to teach them first and foremost about erotic love and the desire and joy that come with it.

The Song is unique in the Bible, but that does not mean it has no place there. The Bible takes the reader from the consequences of primeval rebellion and the discipline of the Torah to the unconditional delights of love. There is more to life, and by experiencing this we come to understand why love is so important for the covenantal God. The Song contrasts the abuse of sex in the treaty alliances of the kings of Israel and Judah and the terrible descriptions of rape in the narrative sections of the Bible with the beauty and appreciation of sex as a gift from God. It further enables the reader to appreciate that, while the prophets condemned sex in the service of the worship of gods and goddesses and equated such behavior with adultery, this is not the whole story. The Song fills a necessary vacuum in the Scriptures because it endorses sex and celebrates it beyond all expectation. Although abuse is possible and to be avoided, sex is not inherently evil, nor is it limited to a procreative function. Instead, sex enables an experience of love whose intensity has no parallel in this cosmos and serves as a signpost to point to the greater love that lies beyond it.

## Outline

### **I. Title (1:1)**

### **II. Prologue: First coming together and intimacy (1:2–2:7)**

#### **A. Female: Longing for her lover (1:2–7)**

90. Cf. Webb, “Garment,” 18.

91. Cf. Exum, “Developing,” 247: “The Song is immediate in another sense: the love is always present, and the lovers just about to take their pleasure.”

- B. Male: Response with invitation and praise (1:8–11)
  - C. Female: Her lover as fragrance (1:12–14)
  - D. Male: Praise of beauty (1:15)
  - E. Female: Love in paradise (1:16–2:1)
  - F. Male: My love is like a flower (2:2)
  - G. Female: A pastoral scene (2:3–7)
- III. Lovers joined and separated (2:8–3:5)**
- A. Female: Her lover pursues her (2:8–9)
  - B. Male: Invitation to come away (2:10–14)
  - C. Couple: Protect our love (2:15)
  - D. Female: Love affirmed, gratification delayed (2:16–17)
  - E. Female: Search and seizure (3:1–5)
- IV. Love and marriage at the heart of the Song (3:6–5:1)**
- A. Male: Marriage scene (3:6–11)
  - B. Male: First *wasf* and call to come along (4:1–8)
  - C. Male: A walk in the garden (4:9–15)
  - D. Female: Invitation to her garden (4:16)
  - E. Male: Tasting the garden (5:1a)
  - F. Chorus: Enjoy! (5:1b)
- V. Search and reunion (5:2–6:3)**
- A. Female: A second search at night for her dream lover (5:2–8)
  - B. Chorus: Challenge to compare the male lover (5:9)
  - C. Female: *Wasf* for the male (5:10–16)
  - D. Chorus: Inquiry for the male (6:1)
  - E. Female: Reunites with her lover (6:2–3)
- VI. Desire for the female and love in the country (6:4–8:4)**
- A. Male: Second *wasf* for the female (6:4–10)
  - B. Female: Lingering in the groves (6:11–12)
  - C. Chorus: Call to return (7:1 [6:13 Eng.])
  - D. Male: Third *wasf* for the female (7:2–10a [7:1–9a Eng.])
  - E. Female: Springtime and love (7:10b–8:4 [7:9b–8:4 Eng.])
- VII. Epilogue: The power of love (8:5–14)**
- A. Chorus: Search for the couple (8:5a)
  - B. Female: The power of love (8:5b–7)
  - C. Brothers (quoted by the female?): Their younger sister (8:8–9)
  - D. Female: Her defense (8:10)
  - E. Female: Solomon's vineyard (8:11–12)
  - F. Male: Listening (8:13)
  - G. Female: Departure (8:14)

# I. Title (1:1)



## Translation

<sup>a</sup>The Song of Songs that concerns<sup>a</sup> Solomon.

## Interpretation

**1:1.** The first verse forms the title for the book. It places the expression *šîr haššîrîm* first and thereby gives it emphasis as the key to the text. The construction may be translated “Song of Songs.” *Šîr* (song) occurs as a noun some 166 times in the Hebrew Bible, mostly in the book of Psalms. However, it appears only here in the Song of Songs. Although the noun occurs elsewhere alongside the same root used as a verbal form (1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Chron. 29:28; Isa. 26:1), here the form used is unique to this text.<sup>1</sup> This form implies a superlative statement: The Best Song. It may seem surprising that this text should be designated the best song, given the wide variety of poetry in the Bible. Would not one of the great hymns of praise (e.g., Pss. 19; 100) be a better choice as the best song? This text barely mentions God. None of the customary designations for the God of Israel is present (*ʿĕlōhîm*, *ʿĕl*, *ʿĕlôah*, *yhwh*), and the focus of the song seems to involve physical love between a man and a woman. Who would define this song as the best? The answer lies in a careful study of the song and an understanding of the physical love praised here as sharing in the greater love of God, which he created for all those in his image

a. Goitein (“Song,” 65) follows Nahum Halevi in vocalizing the word as *ʿāšîr*, “I shall sing.” While possible, this vocalization is not followed by the versions.

1. The nouns are in construct, with a definite article, “the song of songs.”

to enjoy.<sup>2</sup> If the physical love praised in this book is merely a detached symbol separate from the greater spiritual love, then either the title is misleading or its author valued the carnal pleasures of sex above anything else (an example of ancient advertising, propaganda, and seduction). It will be argued here that neither of these alternatives is correct (despite the intense eroticism of the poem). Instead, all the words and desires of the lovers point toward an understanding of love in which this song shares. The apostle may have reflected on such a knowledge when he concluded, “The greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13 NIV).

The LXX renders the Hebrew *šîr* (song) by *asma*, a term that denotes more of a secular lay or ode than a religious hymn. It is clear from the title that the composition was thought by the author of this verse to constitute a single unified whole. Murphy contrasts this with the book of Proverbs, where the use of the plural term “sayings, proverbs” (1:1; 10:1; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1) implies a diverse collection of material (cf. also Amos 1:1).<sup>3</sup>

The expression “that concerns” (*ʾāšer lē*) occurs some 221 times in the Bible, always to denote the owner of some sort of property (e.g., Ruth 2:21; 4:3, 9). Although an abbreviated construction could communicate this, there are three reasons why this longer form may be preferred.<sup>4</sup> The first is the desire to provide an unequivocal statement that the psalm is inextricably attached to Solomon. This may mean authorship, or it may refer to the commitment of another author to write along the lines and experience of the king.<sup>5</sup> The formation is never used in the titles of the psalms elsewhere

2. Gen. 1:26–28. Cf. the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, in which God shares loves among the three persons of the Deity.

3. Murphy, *Song*, 120.

4. The shorter and more common form (cf. the titles to the Psalms) would be the *lamed* preposition by itself. Note that in the Song the relative *ʾāšer* occurs only here. Elsewhere the relative is designated some 32 times by *še*. Of the 142 times that the relative appears in the Bible, it occurs some 70 times in the book of Ecclesiastes. Because this latter book is dated as a postexilic work, the appearance of this relative is used as an argument that the Song is postexilic. Further, the appearance of the relative *ʾāšer* in 1:1 is used to argue that this verse was added by an author/editor different from the writer of the book. However, such a form would suggest that the one who added the title did so earlier than the book that follows the title! An argument of deliberate archaizing would seem odd: Surely the author of the title with such a motive would have intentionally wished the form there to resemble the rest of the Song. Hence the author would have either altered the relatives in at least some places in the Song or avoided using *ʾāšer* in the title. Further, it is not certain that the usage of *še* must indicate a postexilic (late) text. Judges 5:7 appears to use this particle in a poem widely recognized as one of the earliest preexilic texts in terms of its language (see the comments on dating in the introduction). For these reasons, we look elsewhere for the rationale for this construction in Song 1:1.

5. Murphy, *Song*, 119, notes both biblical (1 Chron. 24:20) and Ugaritic (*CTU* 1.6.i 1) examples where the *lamed* is used with a proper noun to introduce a topic.

in the Hebrew Bible. It therefore suggests an authorial style different from such titles, perhaps also implying a different purpose.

The second reason for the longer construction may have to do with the repetitive sound of the opening words in the book. The four words of the title (v. 1) as well as the first two words of the poem (v. 2) all contain a *šîn* (שׁ), creating a *sh* sound.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the first word of the book (and only that word in the opening two verses) begins with a *šîn*, signaling the importance of this sound. Further, the first three words each contain a *šîn* followed by a *rêš* (ר, an *r* sound), repeating the *šîr/šer* sound.<sup>7</sup> In poetry, the sound repetition is significant. The *šîr/šer* sound would emphasize the word for “song” three times at the beginning of the book, because it sounds like *šîr* (song). The repetition of the letter *šîn* ties the title “Song of Songs” together with Solomon. Thus the value of the song as the best of songs is enhanced by its association with the key figure of wisdom in the Bible as well as someone whose reputation for marriages exceeds any king or commoner (1 Kings 3:4–28; 11:3). Again, the appearance of the *šîn* sound in the first two words of Song 1:2 (*yîššāqēnî minnēšîqôt*, let him kiss me with the kisses of) ties the theme of physical love, here in the form of passionate kisses, with the title and thus indicates the direction of this best song and of the association with Solomon. This association suggests the attribution in 1 Kings 5:12 (4:32 Eng.): “He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five” (NIV).

This association with Solomon provides an anchor for the Song in the biblical wisdom tradition and relates to this material in the canon. No longer separated from the Bible as a collection of love songs, the book takes on a unified significance that cannot be reduced to secular humanism. Nor can its imagery within the context of physical love be ignored and give way to purely allegorical interpretation. The connection to Solomon places the book within a historical wisdom tradition of literature recognized by the church as possessing divine inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

A third and final reason may have to do with the nature of the literature that follows: love poetry that is rich in metaphor and imagery. In this context the extended means of referring to Solomon may intentionally separate this notice from those of authorship or reference elsewhere in poems of the Bible. Here Solomon, as the king and symbol of wisdom and love, becomes an image for the male lover in the poem. Thus the female speaker, who dominates the poem, dedicates it to her Solomon, a figure who embodies her greatest desires for the fulfillment of love.

6. This sound is represented here in transliteration as *š*.

7. So also J. Sasson, “On Pope’s *Song*,” 190–91.

8. See Childs, *Introduction*, 573–79.