



INTRODUCTION TO THE SONG OF SONGS

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When we read the Song of Songs, we tend to think of it as some kind of exceptional book in the Hebrew Bible, as if the theme of love, whether physical or spiritual, is somehow uniquely confined to this book alone. And yet, love, in its many expressions and dimensions, is repeatedly to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, were this not the case, how could the Hebrew Bible speak to the fullest reality of human experience?

Think of the vocabulary of love: *Ahavah* (the love of passion but also of obligation and commitment); *chesed* (the love and loyalty between partners in a covenant); *rachum* (love expressed as compassion); *chanun* (grace, the love that expects nothing in return); *kin'ah* (passion, the exclusive kind of love that can change to jealousy and obsession); *patah* (to attract someone, to seduce, sometimes to betray); *davkah nefesh b...* (love that makes one soul cleave to another); *daber al lev* (empathy, love that speaks to the heart of the other).

Biblical stories tell of the many kinds of love, its purity, its distortions, its abuse, its transformations, its endurance, its renewal.

- The spontaneous love of Jacob for Rachel, that survived the years he laboured to win her, and the drama of their lives together (Genesis 29:10).
- The love of a father for a special child, Jacob's love for Joseph, with all its tragic consequences (Genesis 37:3).
- The love of a son for his mother: Isaac who was comforted for Sarah's death through his love for Rebecca (Genesis 24:67).
- Love that shares the suffering of the beloved: Elkanah's love for the childless Hannah, and his words of consolation 'Am I not better to you than ten sons?' (1 Samuel 1:5,8).
- Love that is really lust that turns to hatred when satisfied: Amnon's desire for Tamar (2 Samuel 13:15).
- But also lust that turns to enduring love: David comforting Bathsheba, after the death of their child (1 Samuel 12:24).
- Love between men: Jonathan's love for David (1 Samuel 18:1); a love that surpasses the love of women (David's love for Jonathan) (2 Samuel 1:26).
- Love that is for sale: Isaiah's song of the prostitute (Isaiah 23:16).
- Love that becomes bitter and vindictive when betrayed (Hosea 2:5).
- Love that is neurotic and suspicious: the ritual of the Sotah, the woman suspected of adultery by her husband (Numbers 5:14).
- Love that is narcissistic: Absalom's love for his own beauty (2 Samuel 14:25-26).
- Love that is figuratively and then literally blind: Samson's love for Delilah (Judges 16:4).
- Love that is mature and responsible, loyal to family traditions: the love of Ruth for Naomi, the love between Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 3:10).
- Love that is exploited and destroyed: Michal's love for David (1 Samuel 18:20; 2 Samuel 6:20).
- Love defeated by the brutal force of politics: Palti losing his wife Michal to David's ambitions (2 Samuel 3:16).
- The defiant love of a mother for her slain children: Rizpah guarding the bodies of her sons (2 Samuel 21:10).
- The loving behaviour that is commanded towards our neighbour and the stranger in our society (Leviticus 19:18).

All of these have their counterpart in the great love story that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible, the love of God for humanity, and God's repeatedly frustrated and humiliated love for Israel.

- That divine love is demanding: You shall love the Eternal your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- That love is exclusive: You shall have no other gods before Me (Exodus 20:3).
- That love is binding: I betroth you to Me forever. I betroth you to Me with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love. I betroth you to Me with faithfulness, and you will know the Eternal (Hosea 2:21-22).
- That love is sentimental: I remember the chesed, the faithful loyalty of your youth, the ahavah, the committed love, of your espousals, when you went after Me into the wilderness, to a land unsown (Jeremiah 2:2)
- That love is paternal: As a father has love (rachum) for his children, so the Eternal has love for those who revere Him (Psalm 103:13).
- That love is enduring: With eternal love have I loved you (Jeremiah 31:3).
- That love is ever-present, despite the pain caused by a disobedient child: Ephraim is My beloved son, no sooner do I speak of him that I remember him, and my feelings stir within Me and I love him again (Jeremiah 31:20).
- Sometimes that love is reciprocated: God, my God I seek You, my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land, without water (Psalm 63:2).
- That love is always available and waiting: When you call Me and come and pray to Me, I will hear you. When you seek Me, you will find Me, if you search for Me with all your heart. I shall let you find Me, says God (Jeremiah 29:12-14).
- But all too often that love is not reciprocated: I was willing to be sought by those who did not ask, willing to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said: 'Here I am, here I am' to a nation that did not call on My name (Isaiah 65:1).

God is the tragic figure in this love story at the heart of the Hebrew Bible. For God's love, like human love, cannot be imposed or it ceases to be love.

These many texts, like the Song of Songs itself, force us to recognise that love cannot be contained, controlled or guaranteed. Love is anarchic, it breaks through conventions, it challenges the formal structures we build to tame it. But the Song of Songs adds dimensions absent elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. It reminds us that love can also exist without duty or consequences; that love can be playful and absurd; that love takes risks; that love is also expressed in the fever of anticipation and in the pain of absence. So the Song itself can be playful and puzzling, joyous as only lovers can be joyous. To read it is to be aware of the experience of each moment in the presence or absence of the beloved, for that brief moment also contains the inevitability of parting, of loss, of transience, of death.

It is fitting to end this brief introduction with two passages from the Song. One is the rare moment when it seeks to define the power of love: For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a divine flame (Song of Songs 8:6). But the other is a warning to all of us as we embark upon its study, that the Book itself casts its own extraordinary spell upon us: I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! (Song of Songs 2:7).