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## THE SONG OF SONGS: A MERCURIAL WONDER

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The text of this week, the Song of Songs, is the fla/eshiest book of the Bible. But how do I spell the word fla/eshy? With an a or with an e? What a surprise: both options hit the mark. The Song is fleshy (with an e) because this poetry of desire focuses on the body of the beloved, and at the same time the Song offers a dazzling series of quick flashes (with an a). It is the only Bible book which is a dialogue, and is so entirely.

All of us think that the Song is about love, but today I want to propose that we should get more precise. The Song is not about love, but about falling in love and that is rather different:

- falling in love happens quickly; love, on the other hand, is never in a hurry
- falling in love can be rather frequent, love prefers to take its time
- falling in love is impulsive and is prone to be mistaken; love is patient.

Love is a long-term project; it does not focus on the imperfections of the partner but includes awareness of our own imperfections. Romeo and Juliet never got that far, neither did Tristan and Isolde.

The Song of Songs comes even more into focus when we realize all the things that are not there. There is no king or priest, no temple and no palace. There is no cult and no liturgy. Do I dare to say ‘good riddance’? We will find no theology and no religion, and God himself is notoriously absent.<sup>1</sup> How refreshing ... And of course, this is exceptional for a week of Bible study! The Song, then, is a secular work of art; it is altogether love lyrics. Therefore let us try to emulate the poet’s exclusive focus instead of going astray and loosing ourselves in lofty, abstract exercises of the mind. Let’s get fleshy (with an e)!

The very first strophe of the book sets the tone by involving all the senses. The girl speaks to her boyfriend, so that seeing and hearing are already implied, but the other three senses – touch, taste and smell – are very active in this couple of bipartite verses:

*Oh, that he’d kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
Yes, your caresses are better than wine!  
The fragrance of your oils is good,  
oil poured out is your name.*

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1 In ch.8 there is one unexpected syllable *yah*, added at the end of the word *shalhevet*; it might be taken as the shortened form of *yahu*, which itself is a short form of God’s proper name; if that is true, one could translate it with ‘divine flame’.

Rightaway, alliterations are in place, *shemen ... sh<sup>e</sup>manèka ... sh<sup>e</sup>mèka*. They produce a case of synaesthesia because the consonants mem and shin offer a merger of the aural (the sounds) and the tactile (the slickness of his oil). Listen how the boy performs in 4:11, with *nófet tittófná siftotajik*, 'your lips drip syrup'. Sometimes the two compete in style and beautiful phrasing, for example in this elegant to-and-fro:

*Like a lily among thistles,  
so is my friend among girls.* (he, in 2:2)

*Like an apricot tree among the trees of the thicket,  
so is my lover among boys –  
In his shade I delight to sit,  
and his fruit is sweet to my palate.* (she, in 2:3)

There is no end to praising the partner, as there is no end to rapture. As a consequence, the Song is full of metaphors and similes. Some of them sound quite odd to us people, conditioned as we are by European aesthetics.

The poet situates himself squarely in the mainstream of excellent classical verse. One sign of this is the length of the full poetic line. Normally, it is either bi- or tripartite, and accordingly is called the bicolon or the tricolon. In the biggest collection of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, the Psalter, the great majority of verses is bicolic, some 87 %, and the remaining 13 % is tricolonic. The figures for the Song are practically the same. Which means that the poet fully belongs.

In my count, the Song has exactly 198 verses. Does the composition as a whole have a clear structure? Because it is purely lyrical, we cannot expect progress in action. There is no narrative development at all and we won't get the support of a plot. No exposition for a start, no denouement at the end. The poet throws us *in medias res*: we are rightaway in the middle of unstoppable admiration, excitement and delight. How, then, can this stream be regulated? There are two answers that provide a lead. But let me first share with you a funny observation which gave me the conviction that it is justified to look for cohesion.

Some 35 to 40 verses before and after the centre of the composition [in 3:6-10 and in 6:8-10] we find a group of people who are involved in a kind of parade or procession. In 3:7 a palanquin or couch is shown – and now I quote – “and around it sixty warriors, the bravest of Israel; each of them holding his sword on his thigh, against the terror of the night.” In ch.6 we meet a group of women who extol the girl because she is unique, and v.8 says “sixty queens there are.” Such an odd doubling of the specific number 60 and the symmetry of their location have incited me to search for more figures of balance.

We do find the articulation or structure of the Song when we study the conspicuous forms of repetition with an eye on their location and also watch how the verses are distributed over the two main speakers. But first we should discern their voices. Older commentaries labeled them as bride and bridegroom, but this pair can be put in the dustbin. It expressed petty bourgeois embarrassment about the frank language of sexual excitement, and tried to sell us a wedding, but there is none. Recent translations apply the right labels and write them as indexes in the margin: he versus she, or boy and girl, or the capitals M and W for man and woman. That is sober and correct.

Now look at the figures. Out of the 198 verses, the girl gets 105, the boy 69, and “the daughters of Jerusalem” who act as a choir get 17 verses out of 21.<sup>2</sup> Here is the division in seven sections and the distribution of verses:

section	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
in	1:2-2:7	2:8-3:5	3:6-5:1	5:2-6:3	6:4-7:6	7:7-8:4	8:5-14
girl:	24	20	5	28	0	15	13
boy:	7	8	26	2	21	4	1

The most important feature of each part is the amount of verses given to each of the two main speakers. Speaking 53 % of all the verses, the girl clearly is in the majority. The boy gets no more than 35 % from the poet. What is even more relevant, however, is the way how majority and minority alternate in the seven sections. Without any effort we notice that the girl dominates the first two and the last two sections, and that the broad centre (sections 3-4-5) is different. There, the boy is two times in the majority. His sections 3 and 5 are in a symmetrical position, flanking the middlemost part which again falls to the girl.

Is this division in seven parts correct? Several of their boundaries are clearly marked, and there is a network of repetitions that do a double job: they distinguish the parts and at the same time establish connections, so that the integrity of Song is warranted.

The strongest sign that points at boundaries is in the service of the sections with which the girl opens and closes the composition, i.e. first two and the last two. It is a powerful refrain with an exceptional content and a unique tone. We find it in 2:7 and 3:5, so that the sections 1 and 2 receive a parallel ending, and it recurs at the end of section 6, so that the start of section 7 is beyond doubt as well. This is what the girl says, in the rendering by Cheryl Exum:

*I place you under oath, daughters of Jerusalem,  
by the gazelles or the does of the open field,  
not to rouse or awaken love  
until it wishes.*

That is strong language, with overtones of Wisdom (the genre). The girl has added reflection to rapture, and the fact that she does so three times lends authority to this so-called adjuration. It is a warning! Suddenly, we have left the level of the sensual and are ourselves forced to reflect. Why? I will come back to this later.

The broad centre (i.e. the sections 3-4-5) is a threesome held together by trios. First of all, we find in each section an instance of the so-called *wasf*. The *wasf* is an Arabic term that denotes a quite specific genre: it is a song of description that praises the body of the beloved and does so by mentioning the body parts from top to toe, or in the opposite direction. In her own section, the fourth, the young lady sings a long one, no less than twelve verses. In the adjacent sections, the only times when the male voice is dominant, the boy sings 12 plus 6 verses in praise of the girl's body.<sup>3</sup>

The next trio evokes a luscious garden. Its verses are evenly spread over the three sections, and again the alternation of speakers is boy-girl-boy. By the end of section 3 we find a peak of figurative language. There are many kinds of plants and fruits, so vegetation is *the* source of metaphoric inspiration for the poet. In 4:12 the boy starts all this:

<sup>2</sup> The four verses in 8:8-9 can be allotted to a male 'choir', the brothers of the young lady.

<sup>3</sup> The *wasf* by the girl is in 5:10-16; the boys sings the first *wasf* in 4:1-7 and the third one in 6:4-7 (short and partly identical).

*An enclosed garden is my sister, my bride,  
a hidden well, a sealed spring*

... and these words make us wonder whether he will drink from it. Seven verses later comes the answer, in two verses:

*I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride,  
I have gathered my myrrh and my spices;  
I have eaten from the honeycomb,  
I have drunk my milk and my wine.* (5:1)

These lines imply the consummation of love, and it is no coincidence that they are the ending as well as the climax of section 3. I see them as the pivot of the entire composition.<sup>44</sup> Suddenly there is a choir in the wings that encourages the couple with the words “eat, friends / drink yourselves drunk on caresses!”

The end of the next section is a good follow-up. It is the girl’s turn to pursue the vegetative. She picks up the garden metaphor and says,

*My beloved has gone down to his garden,  
to the beds of spices,  
To graze in the gardens  
and to gather lilies.* (6:2)

The third occurrence of the garden is in 6:11, where the boy reports, “I went down to the walnut garden / to see the blossoms of the valley.” We may conclude that paradise is not a one-time episode in a distant past; the Garden of Eden is here, open to everyone who understands the invitation from our poet.

Nevertheless, the situation of our couple is not a bed of roses. It is high time to mention the counterforces which threaten their meetings. The society they live in is repressive and free love is a perilous enterprise. In ch.3 the girl is “going about the city, in the streets and in the squares”, she is seeking her partner but cannot find him. She turns to “the watchmen, those who go the rounds of the city” and asks them where the boy is. This time she gets away with it, but in ch.5 we get a more realistic report. The girl dreams her lover is at her side, but when she awakes he is not there. Once more, she goes out in the streets, looking for him, but then, v.7, “the watchmen found me / as they went about the city. They beat me, they bruised me.”

Free love is out of the question. The dark of the night is dangerous. Yet, the couple can profit from the dark, using it as a cover for their meetings. We find this when we read 2:17 and explain it with the help of 8:14, the very last verse of the song.

Let me skip the details of the beautiful springtime poetry that I have printed here for once in full, and focus on the structure of this unit.

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4 This passage contains two verses of arrival in the garden (*bo'*, coming): in 4:16 the girl says “let my lover come into his garden” and in 5:1 the boy answers rightaway with “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride”. Strikingly, these two lines are the verses 99 and 100 of the Song, the precise middle. The fourth section is also characterised by the word *dod*, ‘love, caress’, from the root *d-w-d* that also produces the proper name David.

			strophe
<b>she</b>			
2:8	<i>The voice of my beloved ... leaping over the mountains,</i>	<i>there he is, bounding over the hills.</i>	1
v.9	<i>My beloved is like a gazelle there he stands peering in through the windows,</i>	<i>or a young stag; behind our wall, peeking through the lattice.</i>	2
v.10	<i>My beloved spoke and said to me:</i>		
<b>he</b>	<i>"Rise up, my friend,</i>	<i>my beautiful, and come away!</i>	3
v.11	<i>For look, the winter is past,</i>	<i>the rains are over and gone.</i>	
v.12	<i>Blossoms are seen in the land, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.</i>	<i>the time of singing has arrived</i>	4
v.13ab	<i>The fig tree ripens its young fruit,</i>	<i>the vines in bloom give off fragrance.</i>	
<b>he</b>			
v.13cd	<i>Rise up, my friend,</i>	<i>my beautiful, and come away,</i>	5
v.14ab	<i>My dove in the clefts of the rock,</i>	<i>in the covert of the cliff.</i>	
v.14cd	<i>Let me see your form,</i>	<i>let me hear your voice,</i>	6
v.14ef	<i>for your voice is sweet</i>	<i>and your form is lovely."</i>	
<b>both?</b>			
v.15	<i>Catch us foxes, that raid our vineyards</i>	<i>the little foxes now when our vines are in bloom!</i>	7
<b>she</b>			
v.16	<i>My beloved is mine and I am his</i>	<i>who grazes among the lilies.</i>	8
v.17	<i>Before the day breathes turn, my love, or a young stag</i>	<i>and the shadows flee, and be like a gazelle upon the cleft mountains.</i>	

I count 20 verses in eight strophes. Vers 10a is a single line, a monocolon, and v.12 is the only tripartite verse. The strophic units are mostly short, that is, they contain two verses. Look at the alternation of the speakers. The girl speaks the first two and the last two strophes. Verse 10a is a single line, but its function is striking. The words are a standard clause, a quotation formula, but their impact is far-reaching. The girl gives the floor to her partner. He is the speaker of four units in the centre, but these verses (numbers 10 to 14) have the status of a quotation. They are embedded texts, surrounded by her words; all of which means that she is in control. The structure is compelling: four pairs of strophes in the symmetrical order AB–B'A'. The chiasmic form expresses how the female voice embraces the male one.

Verse 15 brings an ominous interruption. Foxes are rooting up the well-trimmed vineyard. When we take this metaphorically, the garden of love is under threat of disrupting factors. Moreover, there is the night, in the final verse. Our couple has enjoyed a meeting under the cover of darkness, but now she says 'turn!' Does she mean turning away? Let us see the last strophe in ch.8. In verse 14 the poet makes her finish the Song with the words,

<i>Take flight, my love, or a young stag</i>	<i>and be like a gazelle on the mountains of spices.</i>
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The imperative 'turn' has got a striking substitute, fleeing. The boy must leave before daylight, and the song has got an open ending.

The beginning and the end of the Song share another repetition that helps to appreciate the cohesion of the whole. In 1:6 the girl complains that her brothers were angry at her, and (I quote)

“they made me keeper of the vineyards. I have not kept my own vineyard (*karmi shelli*).” By the end of the song she has found a wonderful answer to this problem. In 8:11 she refers to a big vineyard owned by king Solomon.<sup>5</sup> It is looked after by many guards, who earn one thousand pieces of silver. Now the girl has this strophe to say in v.12:

*My own vineyard (karmi shelli) is before me.  
The thousand is yours, Solomon!<sup>5</sup>  
And two hundred for the keepers of its fruit.*

After so much seeking for her lover, the young lady is at ease, she finally has come home. The words *karmi shelli* are striking because this usage of the possessive pronoun is exceptional in biblical Hebrew, but the common form in present-day Hebrew. Saying ‘my own vineyard’, and repeating the specific word ‘keeper’ (*notera, not<sup>e</sup>rim*), the girl supports the cohesion of the Song with a form of inclusion. In this way she brilliantly winds up the composition as a whole and reminds us what the heart of the matter is: love can be the Garden of Eden.

The contribution of the young lady goes further than her friend’s. I presume you have been waiting for ch.8 verse 6. There she seems to say: “Love is strong as death, passion is fierce as the grave.” This traditional rendering is being used countless times by pastors and priests when they perform the consecration of a wedding. But is this translation correct? I doubt it, the sugary tone of ‘love as strong as death’ makes me suspicious.

First of all, we should realize how utterly strange it is to compare love with death. In biblical Israel life expectancy was more than two times less than ours. Some people got old, most died early, from drought or failing harvests, from pestilence or a simple infection, from war etc. The Israelites had no antibiotics, neither any concept or doctrine of an afterlife. Surely death is the great and omnipotent enemy of life, not to mention love.

Next, let me have a closer look at the verse and read it; in the original Hebrew the two lines have a completely regular meter (3 + 3 stresses) because they are totally iambic:

*‘azza kammawt ‘ahbá // qashá kish’ól qin’á*

The half-verses are an obvious case of synonymous parallelism that is based on three wordpairs: love and passion (or jealousy) are the feminine subjects, and death and Sheol (the netherworld) refer to the same thing. Up front is the predicate, both times an adjective. And here is my problem: these two words, ‘azza and *qasha*, rarely mean ‘strong’ in a straight or simple sense. In many occurrences they have negative undertones, connotations that are definitely uncomfortable.<sup>6</sup> Sensationally, there is one more verse in the Bible that employs the same adjectives, and there the two are notoriously repulsive. It is in Genesis ch.49, where Jacob reminds us of criminal behavior by his sons Simeon and Levi. The old man calls his sons’ fury ‘azza and *qasha*: fierce and remorseless. His words are a formal and veritable curse.

So how shall we render this wordpair on the last page of the Song? Have your pick: fierce or harsh, ferocious or virulent, relentless or violent, tough or hard? Rude, grim or cruel? What predicates does the girl apply? After a lot of pondering, my version is this: “Love is as fierce as death, passion is as virulent as the grave.”

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5 King Solomon? The historical person has evolved (in the Song which was composed some six centuries later) into a figurehead: an emblem of luxury and richness, a proverbial entity. The name is used mainly for euphonic reasons, it fits well in the series Sh<sup>l</sup>omo – Shulammit – J<sup>r</sup>ushalayim – *motzet shalom* (in 8:10d: a fem. sing. participle Hiph’il from the root y-tz-’).

6 Some examples: see Deut. 28:50, Jud. 14:14, 18, Isaiah 19:9, 25:3 and 56:11, Ezek. 7:24, Dan. 8:23, Psalm 18:18, Prov.18:23 and 21:14.

Gone is the sugary tone. For the intimate relations between Eros and Thanatos, ask Freud. The verse in 8:6 is a peak, the end result of the girl's labour of reflection, and with it, she makes us understand that love is an indomitable and sometimes dangerous force that has to be handled with care, with the utmost caution. And these qualities of love are the deeper reason why she warns her peers three times on key moments: "I adjure you, Jerusalem girls, not to rouse or awaken love until it wishes."

Let me finish with an image of embrace. It is what the girl shows in words and sounds when she expresses that she and her lover cannot possibly be separated:

*dodi li wa<sup>a</sup>ni lo:*            my lover is mine and I am his            (2:16)

*<sup>a</sup>ni l<sup>e</sup>dodi w<sup>e</sup>dodi li:*        I am my lover's and my lover is mine        (6:3)

Each line is itself a chiasm. At the same time, each line turns the other one inside out, so that the two lines form a higher level chiasm: in 2:16 the boy surrounds 'me', while the girl (the first person in 6:3) surrounds him.

The Song of Songs is a revolutionary text. Right now there are still millions of men on this continent who would grumble when we say to them: women are equal to men, they have the same rights. Our poet put the woman in a leading position. And he was audacious enough to develop a view of Eros that is stunning because it is amoral!! The Song foregoes and surpasses judgmental thinking, it is beyond ethics.

### **A few bibliographical data**

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