



SONG OF SONGS: שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים – INTRODUCTORY NOTES

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The Superscription

Hebrew שִׁיר *shir* means ‘song’ or ‘poem’. שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים *shir ha-shirim* is the superlative form, so ‘most excellent song’.

אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה *asher li’Shlomo* ‘of Solomon’ may indicate authorship or style, the literary setting (cf. 3:7), or it may be a spurious claim to authority.

Although the superscription is found in ancient mss. and translations it is not integral to the text.

Structure of the Song

In printed Bibles the Song is divided into 8 chapters comprising 97 verses. Verse divisions are part of the Hebrew tradition of reading and are found in early manuscripts. The chapter divisions were introduced by Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 1228) to facilitate citation, and were widely adopted by Jews as well as Christians when printing was introduced; they do not always correspond with the natural divisions of the text.

Debate has long raged as to whether the book is a loose collection of songs (poems) and fragments, or whether it has a unifying structure. Some of the songs imply a male singer, some a female; this is most obvious in Hebrew, which is more strongly gendered than English or German. Other songs are collective, perhaps intended for a chorus.

Some commentators detect a single narrative linking the songs. S. M. Lehrman (a gifted storyteller himself) wrote:

Despite problems of authorship and interpretation, the story is briefly told. It describes the trials of a beautiful peasant maiden from Shunem, or Shulem, who was employed by her mother and brothers as a shepherdess to their flock of goats. She had fallen in love with a shepherd of the same village, but the brothers did not look with approval on the union. They, accordingly, transferred her services from the pasture to the vineyards, in the hope that there her meeting with her lover would not be possible. One day, as she was tending to the vines, she was seen by the servants of king Solomon, when he chanced to pass the village on his journey to his summer resort in Lebanon. Impressed by her beauty, they try to persuade her to accompany them. She refuses and is finally led away as captive to the king’s chambers. No sooner does the king behold her, when he, too, falls violently in love with her. He sings her beauty and uses all his endeavours to induce her to abandon her love for her shepherd for the love and wealth he can shower upon her. The ladies of the court also join in try-

ing to dislodge her love for her humble swain. Her heart, however, belongs to him and she remains steadfast. (Lehrman, x)

This is a charming recasting of the narrative favoured by nineteenth-century scholars such as S. R. Driver (*An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*: Edinburgh: Clark, 1891); however, it is an arbitrary construction dependent on errors such as a misreading of the references to Solomon in the Song.

Others have read the book, unconvincingly, as the script for some drama or ritual performance.

J. Cheryl Exum proposed a chiasmic ('X-shaped') structure. The pivot or focal point is the 'consummation' represented by the scene in the garden (4:16-5:1), standing for the transformation from virgin to wife which Exum sees as the hermeneutic key for interpretation of the book; either side of this the sections are arranged in 'mirror' order. Here is Duane Garrett's (32) summary:

Superscript (1:1)

- A I. Chorus and soprano: the entrance (1:2-4)
- B II. Soprano: the virgin's education I (1:5-6)
- C III. Soprano and Chorus: finding the beloved (1:7-8)
- D IV. Tenor, chorus and soprano: the first song of mutual love (1:9-2:7)
- E V. Soprano and tenor: the invitation to depart (2:8-17)
- F VI. Three wedding-night songs (3:1-5; 3:6-11; 4:1-15)
 - Fa a. Soprano: the bride's anxiety (3:1-5)
 - Fb b. Chorus: the bride comes to the groom (3:6-11)
 - Fc c. Tenor: the flawless bride I (4:1-15)
- G VII. Soprano, tenor and chorus: the consummation (4:16-5:1)
- F' VIII. Three wedding-night songs 5:2-16; 6:1-3; 6:4-10)
 - Fa' a. Soprano, tenor and chorus: the bride's pain (5:2-16)
 - Fb' b. Chorus and soprano: the bride recovers the groom (5:9-6:3)
 - Fc' c. Tenor and chorus: the flawless bride II (6:4-10)
- E' IX. Soprano, chorus and tenor: leaving girlhood behind (6:11-7:1)
- D' X. Tenor and soprano: the second song of mutual love (7:2-8:4)
- C' XI. Chorus and soprano: claiming the beloved (8:5-7)
- B' XII. Chorus and soprano: the virgin's education II (8:8-12)
- A' XIII. Tenor, chorus and soprano: the farewell (8:13-14)

If this, or anything like it, is correct, it means that the final redactor imposed a very tight literary structure on the material before him. It is certainly plausible to read 4:16-5:1 as the climax that the other sections look to or from, but the proposal as a whole remains speculative.

Many individual songs in their original form may have been sung at weddings or other festivities, or perhaps served as courting songs or serenades. Fox (231) does not believe they formed part of a marriage ritual; he notes that the lovers are not married nor about to be, and that their behaviour in general is not that of newlyweds. However, the lyric of a song need not correspond precisely with the situation in which it is sung; the work or parts of it may have been performed at weddings simply as a celebration of true love, not as an accurate portrayal of bride and groom.

Egyptian Parallels

Egyptian love poems are known from the period of the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1080 BCE). Elements of these poems may have made their way into the general stock of Near Eastern poetry

before the individual Hebrew songs were composed, let alone before they were fashioned into the present work.

The Egyptian poems refer to the boy as ‘brother’ and the girl as ‘sister’; this happens several times in the Song, too, e.g. ‘I have come to my garden, My sister, my bride’ (5:1, translated in JPS as ‘My own, my bride’), or ‘If only it could be as with a brother, As if you had nursed at my mother’s breast’ (8:1). In the Song as well as in the Egyptian poems entry into the garden is an expression of sexual fulfilment. Here are more instances of similarity of phrasing, imagery and motifs:

Song	Egyptian
<i>Translation: Jewish Publication Society (JPS)</i>	<i>Translation: M. Lichtheim</i>
[Girl:] Hurry, my beloved, Swift as a gazelle or a young stag, To the hills of spices (8:14)	[Girl:] O that you come to your sister swiftly, Like a bounding gazelle in the wild (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim, 187)
<p>[Girl first:] I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks! ‘Let me in, my own, My darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, My locks with the damp of night.’ I had taken off my robe—Was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet—Was I to soil them again?</p> <p>My beloved took his hand off the latch, And my heart was stirred for him.</p> <p>I rose to let in my beloved; My hands dripped myrrh—My fingers, flowing myrrh—Upon the handles of the bolt.</p> <p>I opened the door for my beloved, But my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he had said.</p> <p>I sought, but found him not. I called, but he did not answer. (5:2-6)</p>	<p>[Girl:] My heart <i>flutters</i> hastily, When I think of my love of you; It lets me not act sensibly, It leaps (from) its place. It lets me not put on a dress, Nor wrap my scarf around me; I put no paint upon my eyes, I’m not even anointed. “don’t wait, go there,” it says to me, As often as I think of him; My heart, don’t act so stupidly, Why do you play the fool? Sit still, the brother comes to you, And many eyes as well!</p> <p>Let not the people say of me: “A woman fallen through love!”</p> <p>Be steady when you think of him, My heart, do not <i>flutter</i>!</p> <p>(Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim, 183-4)</p> <p>[Boy:] I passed by her house in the dark, I knocked and no one opened ... (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim, 188)</p>
[The boy:] The song of the turtledove Is heard in our land ... Arise, my darling, My fair one, come away! (2:12-13)	The voice of the dove is calling, It says: “It’s day! Where are you?” (Papyrus Harris 500. Lichtheim, 190)
<p>[The boy:] Ah you are fair, my darling ... Your eyes are like doves Behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats Streaming down Mount Gilead ... Your lips are like a crimson thread, Your mouth is lovely, Your brow behind your veil [Gleams] like a pomegranate split open. Your neck is like the Tower of David, Built to hold weapons ...</p> <p>Your breasts are like two fawns, Twins of a gazelle, Browsing among the lilies ... Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you. (4:1-7)</p>	<p>[The boy:] The One, the sister without peer ... Shining bright, fair of skin, Lovely the look of her eyes, Sweet the speech of her lips, She has not a word too much.</p> <p>Upright neck, shining breast, Hair true lapis lazuli; Arms surpassing gold, Fingers like lotus buds.</p> <p>Heavy thighs, narrow waist, Her legs parade her beauty; With graceful step she treads the ground ... (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim, 182)</p>

On Interpreting Sacred Texts

Mediaeval Christians engaged in four levels of exegesis: literal; spiritual / allegorical (Christological); tropological (moral, ethical); anagogical (eschatological). From at least the twelfth century, Jews likewise classified their exegesis in four categories, summed up in the acronym **PaRDeS** (paradise): *peshat* (plain meaning); *derash* (homiletic); *remez* (moral); *sod* (mystical or philosophical interpretation).

We now possess considerable philological, archaeological and historical resources which were not available to traditional commentators. Although we will take stock of the traditions, we will also want to understand what the texts might have conveyed during the lengthy process of redaction, how they were understood by those who confirmed their canonical status, what their ritual or liturgical use signifies, and whether and how they can be meaningful for us today.

‘The Song was not written as an allegory of the love between Israel and God. Equality is the essence of the relationship between the young lovers in the Song, and this can hardly have been intended as a model for God’s relationship to Israel ... premarital courtship of equals such as we see in the Song ... is a poor correlative of the relationship between God the master and Israel his possession’ (Fox, 237).

How, then, did the book attain scriptural status? The ‘canonization’ (a Christian term) of scripture was not a process of selection and adoption, but a process of *rejection* of works deemed not to meet the criteria of divine inspiration. So we must reformulate the question: Why was the book not rejected by the rabbis or the early Church fathers? This was due partly to its fictitious attribution to king Solomon, and partly to the adoption of an allegorical interpretation.

Jewish Interpretation

The Mishnah, compiled early in the third century CE, indicates that the canonical status of Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes was still being called into question in the second century (paradoxically, the rabbis confirmed the sacred status of scrolls by decreeing that they would ‘defile the hands’; the holier something is the more it is liable to defilement):

All sacred Scriptures defile the hands. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes defile the hands ... Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai said, I have a tradition through the seventy-two elders that on the day they appointed Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah president of the assembly [they decided] that Song and Ecclesiastes defile the hands. Rabbi Aqiva said, Heaven forbid! No one ever questioned whether Song of Songs defiles the hands; the world was unworthy until the day the Song was revealed to Israel, for all the books are holy, but the Song is the holiest. If they questioned anything, it was Ecclesiastes. (Mishnah: *Yadayim* 3:5)

Aqiva (early second century) condemned those who degraded the Song to mere entertainment:

Rabbi Aqiva said, One who trills his voice over the Song of Songs at banquets and treats it like a [common] melody has no portion in the World to Come. (Tosefta ed. Zuckerman *Sanhedrin* 12:10; cf. Bavli *Sanhedrin* 101a)

We lack direct evidence as to how Rabbi Akiva interpreted the Song. However, by the third century rabbis were interpreting it, broadly speaking, as an allegory of the love between God and Israel, articulated through Torah.

Origen and Rabbi Joḥanan

Rabbi Joḥanan of Tiberias, also known as Joḥanan Nappaḥa (‘John the Smith—Aramaic *nappaḥa* means ‘smith’), was born in Sepphoris and studied under Judah Ha-Nasi and Oshaya Rabba. He taught for a time in Sepphoris but later opened his own academy at Tiberias, where he died c. 279.

Among his contemporaries was the Church father Origen (d. 254), who lived in Caesarea. Both commented on the biblical Song of Songs; both interpreted it as allegory. For Origen, it stands for God, or Christ and his 'bride,' the Church; for Joḥanan, it is an allegory of the love between God and his people Israel. Reuven Kimelman (1980) listed five consistent differences between them, corresponding to five major issues that divided Christians and Jews:

1. Origen writes of a covenant *mediated* by Moses between God and Israel; that is, an *indirect* contact between the two, contrasted with the *direct* presence of Christ. Joḥanan, on the other hand, refers to the Covenant as *negotiated* by Moses, hence received by Israel *direct* from God, as 'the kisses of his mouth' (Song of Songs 1:2). Joḥanan emphasizes the closeness and love between God and Israel, whereas Origen sets a distance between them.
2. According to Origen the Hebrew scripture was 'completed,' or 'superseded,' by the New Testament. According to Joḥanan scripture is 'completed' by the Oral Torah.
3. To Origen, Christ is the central figure, replacing Abraham and completing the reversal of Adam's sin. To Joḥanan, Abraham remains in place and Torah is the 'antidote' to sin.
4. To Origen, Jerusalem is a symbol, a 'heavenly city.' To Joḥanan, the earthly Jerusalem retains its status as the link between Heaven and Earth, the place where God's presence will again be manifest.
5. Origen sees the sufferings of Israel as the proof of its repudiation by God; Joḥanan accepts the suffering as the loving chastisement and discipline of a forgiving father.

Targum

The Talmud and early midrashim contain disconnected interpretations of individual verses (*Midrash Shir haShirim* is a late mediaeval compilation). The earliest running 'commentary' in the rabbinic tradition is the seventh-century Aramaic Targum (translation):

	Translation: Jewish Publication Society (JPS)	Translation of Targum
5:10	My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, Preeminent among ten thousand.	Then did the congregation of Israel begin to praise the Master of the Universe, and this is what they said: I desire to praise this God, who by day is clothed in a robe white as snow, and the glorious radiance of His countenance shines like fire with great wisdom and understanding as He daily generates new teachings that He will declare to His people on the great day; His instruction is to the ten thousands of ten thousands of angels who serve before Him.
5:11	His head is finest gold, His locks are curled And black as a raven	His Torah is more desirable than fine gold; the interpretation of its words, and its numerous reasons and commandments, are white as snow to those who observe them, but to those who flout them they are black as the raven.

5:12	His eyes are like doves By watercourses, Bathed in milk, Set by a brimming pool.	His eyes look constantly to Jerusalem to do good to it and to bless it from beginning to end of the year, just as doves that watch for the outpouring of water, on account of the Sanhedrin who study the Torah and illuminate the law making it smooth as milk, and are cautious in judgement to pronounce innocent or guilty.
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Other Pre-Modern Jewish Interpretations

Commentators such as Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra analyse the plain meaning of text while interpreting its ‘message’ as a historical allegory of Israel’s relationship with God. To philosophers such as Maimonides (*Guide* 3:51) the Song symbolizes the ideal relationship between God and Man; kabbalists extend sexual imagery to the inner workings of the divine.

Liturgical Use

Since the Middle Ages the Song has been grouped with Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Lamentations as one of the Five *Megillot* (scrolls). This grouping is not reflected in the order in which the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Batra* 14b) sets the biblical books, nor in most mediaeval manuscripts, but corresponds to the post-talmudic custom which added to the reading of Esther on Purim the reading of the Song on Passover, Ruth on Shavuot, Lamentations on the Fast of Ab and Ecclesiastes on Tabernacles. The Song is probably associated with Passover because of its spring setting.

On the basis that the Song contains all the commandments and all of history until the coming ‘Sabbath of the Lord’ (*Zohar* 2:143-146), Kabbalists introduced the custom of reading it on Fridays just before the Sabbath begins.

In Conclusion

‘The language of the song is at once voluptuous and reticent’ (Bloch, 14). It is a dream, expressed in beautiful poetry. I cannot better the summary of Bloch and Bloch:

The Song of Songs is a poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover. In a series of subtly articulated scenes, the two meet in an idealized landscape of fertility and abundance—a kind of Eden—where they discover the pleasures of love. The passage from innocence to experience is a subject of the Eden story, too, but there the loss of innocence is fraught with consequences. The Song looks at the same border-crossing and sees only the joy of discovery. (Bloch, 3)

That this provided a vocabulary for mystics to rhapsodize on the love of God need not distract the modern reader, any more than it prevented its earliest audiences, from discerning in its words the ideal of human love.

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