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“The House That Love Builds: An Allegorical Interpretation of the Song of Songs”

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by

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Contents

Abbreviations

ANE	Ancient Near East
BDB	*The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon,* by F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996.
COS	*Context of Scripture.* William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., 3 vols (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003).
MT	Masoretic Text
NPNF	*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 1885. 14 vols. Reproduced in Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology, IVP Academic series edited by D.A. Carson.
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament by R. Laird Harris, Glean L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Poets and philosophers the world over, and in every age, have attempted to define love adequately. Romantic love is the subject most emphasized at weddings and anniversaries. It is the most popular topic in the songs we listen to, the movies we watch, and the books we read. In modern-day society, the definition of "love" has been complicated by moral subjectiveness and political strategy. For much of history, however, many looking for a definition of love have turned to the Song of Songs, where "love" as an abstract concept takes center stage in concrete form. But even there, interpreters have struggled to find common ground on what the book is communicating about "love".

As a poetic book, the Song of Songs by nature presents a challenge to interpreters. Its figurative language is sometimes obscure and confusing, at least to modern ears. Consisting entirely of dialogue, any message to be received must be gleaned from the words of the speakers. Exegetes have not always agreed on how many speakers there are, or even on the identity of the speakers. Throughout history, interpreters have also disagreed – sometimes vehemently – on whether the book should be understood as an allegory, with symbols standing for some deeper spiritual truth, or if it should just be taken at face value, with the man and woman simply being a symbolic or historical couple in love. Scholars have also been unable to agree on whether the Song is even a unified book with a unified message at all, or if it is simply an anthology of secular, ancient Hebrew love poems.

Those who understand the Song of Songs to be a sacred book must defend it amid troubling realities. Is it really about God's love for His people, even though "God" is not mentioned once? What do we make of the clear, sexual overtones in a book considered holy, inspired Scripture? Even more problematic is how we make God a character who participates in

such activity. And why is Solomon – the man whose spiritual and political downfall was his 700 wives and 300 concubines – a character in this book that appears to present an idealized picture of love? In addition, are we to take the Song as rooted in an actual historical event and/or people, or is it simply a piece of literature, perhaps along the lines of the Solomonic wisdom tradition?

Even amid all of these formidable questions, early interpreters clung to an allegorical interpretation of the Song, with the man symbolizing God and His love for His people (symbolized by the woman), and they were adamant that the book not be taken strictly in its plain, literal sense. In the prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen advised that it should be the last to be taught and studied of the books associated with Solomon, when a man "…has learnt to know the difference between things corruptible and things incorruptible; so that nothing in the metaphors used to describe and represent the love of the Bride for her celestial Bridegroom – that is, of the perfect soul for the Word of God – may cause him to stumble."[1] While early church fathers allegorized the Song to mean Christ's love for His Church, early Jewish interpreters, like Rabbis Akiva[2] and Rashi,[3] also allegorized the Song, but to communicate God's love for Israel. Interestingly, these allegorical interpreters on both sides did not always agree on what the detailed images within the Song represented in light of that bigger picture. For example, in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, Rabbi Berekhiah interprets the "little sister" mentioned in Song 8:8-10 as Abraham, the "wall" as the good deeds he would do, and "towers"

[1] Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R.P. Lawson, (New York, N.Y./Ramsey, N.J.: Newman Press, 1956), 44.

[2] See Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 158.

[3] See commentaries from Rashi and other early Jewish interpreters as translated by Rabbi A.J. Rosenberg in *The Five Megilloth, Volume 1: Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth: A New English Translation* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1992), 1-103.

meaning that he would raise up men after him in righteousness.[4] In the same collection, Rabbi Yohanan interprets the "little sister" as Sodom, and the battlements of silver as Israel, reaching into the accounts of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, whom God brought out of danger and into peace.[5] This kind of varied assignments to the details within the Song also occurred among early Christian interpreters. For example, Aponius interpreted the "little sister" to be the Jewish people, descended from Abraham, and matured in the Church,[6] while Theodoret of Cyrus believed the "little sister" stood for spiritual immaturity and the enforcements as those things that would strengthen her, such as instruction and reasoning.[7] Furthermore, Ambrose believed the "wall" in Song 8:10-11 to be the church, and the towers her priests,[8] while years later Martin Luther interpreted the "little sister" to be the kingdom of Israel in Solomon's time, with the day on which she is to be spoken for as looking forward to the preaching of the Gospel, the fortified wall representing the protection for the church against false doctrine, and the battlements the various ministries within the church.[9]

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[4] Song of Songs Rabbah CX:i.2, as translated in Jacob Neusner, *Israel's Love Affair with God: Song of Songs* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 99-100.

[5] Song of Songs Rabbah CXI:ii.1, as translated in Neusner, *Israel's Love Affair with God,* 101-102. As Neusner notes, Rabbi Yohanan thus found a way to link Abraham and Israel's experience in Babylon, and back to Israel, as the "little sister" is interpreted as those coming up from exile in the Second Temple period.

[6] Aponius, *Exposition of Song of Songs* 12:29 quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon,* eds. J. Robert Wright and Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 419.

[7] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 5.8.8 quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture,* 419.

[8] Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation* 6.8.49, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 419.

[9] As translated in "Lectures on the Song of Solomon: A Brief but Altogether Lucid Commentary on the Song of Songs by Dr. Martin Luther," trans. Ian Siggins in *Luther's Works, Volume 15: Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David,* eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis, MO: Concorida Publishing, 1972), 259-61.

Since the Enlightenment era, and most recently in the 19th and 20th centuries, more interpretations have favored a literal reading of human love as the main theme of the Song. In some ways, this method of reading was aimed at removing the arbitrary nature and the theological hurdles that allegorical methods faced. However, the conclusions were just as varied – if not more so as more critical, secularized views of the Song were brought to the fore. Some scholars, like Fox[10] and Keel[11] viewed the Song as a collection of secular love songs. Others, like Glickman,[12] concluded the Song is simply a picture of an ideal relationship, while others like Hess[13] and Duguid,[14] have attempted to build a bridge between sacred and secular by suggesting the Song indirectly points to divine love of which human love is simply a picture, or a glimpse. Still others, like Hamilton, have helped to re-promote an allegorical view based on the Song's Christological character.[15]

After such a long and rich interpretive history, questions remain about the Song. Perhaps they always will. Yet just as the man and woman in the Song continually seek after one another, so continues the bold search for meaning by both allegorical and literal interpreters of this poetic and mysterious book in the canon of Scripture. Their efforts have kept it in the limelight for at

[10] Michael V. Fox, "Rereading 'The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs' Thirty Years Later," *Die Welt des Orients,* 46:1 (2016), 13.

[11] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1994), 17.

[12] Craig Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Company, 2004), 14.

[13] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 35.

[14] Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 48.

[15] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.: Louisville, KY, 2015), 26.

least the last two millennia and have offered important insights. While ideas and methods have varied, readers have all sought to understand what the Song says about love. It is my belief that there is still much to consider. The lover and the beloved in the Song are still speaking today and inviting us to learn from them.

History of Interpretation

Some of the earliest known interpretations of the Song of Songs comes from Jewish rabbis in the first centuries of the common era. In the tannaitic midrashim, Jewish religious leaders wrote of a typological interpretation in which the Song was a picture of Israel's redemptive history, from Sinai to the wilderness wanderings, as narrated in the Torah.[16] The relationship between God and Israel was seen as an ideal marriage relationship, based on "covenant fidelity."[17] This is a metaphor that was later explicitly used in the prophetic era, though in a much more negative light regarding Israel's infidelity to the covenant (Hos. 2:2-23; Jer. 2:23-5:19; Ezekiel 16; cf. Deut. 6:4-9).

The Targum explained the Song of Songs as a ten-song delineation of Israel's redemptive history from Adam to Solomon, and ending with a look to the future: "And the exiles are going to utter the tenth song when they go out from their places of exile…"[18] In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Saadia, a tenth-century Jewish leader in Babylon, wrote also of the Song as a

[16] As noted in Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs (*Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

[17] Ibid., 6

[18] Manuscript Paris Hebrew 110, translated by Andrew W. Litke, *Targum Song of Songs and Late Jewish Aramaic: Language, Lexicon, Text, and Translation* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 237.

history of the Jews; rather than high points in covenant fidelity, however, he focuses on Israel's historic failures, though alongside God's covenant faithfulness the journey ends in restoration.[19]

Song of Songs Rabbah also makes historical-allegorical, theological connections in the Song. God responds in love to Israel's faithfulness to the Torah (what makes them beautiful), and He remains faithful to His covenant oath with Israel, the people through whom He would accomplish His will in the world.[20] The Torah taught Israel about repentance and thus a path to restoration, to the Garden of Eden.[21] Parts of the Song are related to various parts of Israel's history or Israel's ongoing relationship with God. For example, in Song 2:6, the left and the right hand of the man embracing the woman were thought to refer to the tablets, phylacteries, reciting the Shema, prayer, tabernacle, and the future presence of God among the people, all representing Israel's intimacy with God.[22] The love poetry of the Songs, state the rabbis who are quoted in the Song of Songs Rabbah, must be understood by the whole of Scripture, which describes God's love for Israel, and Israel's love for God through obedience. Rabbi Aqiva is especially famous for his quote in this rabbinic corpus in which he defended the sacredness of the Song: "For the entire age is not so worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is holiest of all."[23]

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[19] As noted in Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven/London: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1977), 102.

[20] As summarized by Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture,* 147.

[21] As noted and cited in Neusner, 150

[22] As quoted and summarized by Neusner, 156-57

[23] Mishnah-tractate *Yadayim* 3.5, quoted and translated in Neusner, 158

Beginning at least in the 8th century, Jews began reading the Song, part of the Megilloth, during Passover celebrations.[24] The Song was understood as an historical allegory of Israel's redemption. The Exodus, as a type, represented their messianic hope of which the Song was an allegory.[25] Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) of the 11th century viewed the Song as Solomon's prophetic glimpse into Israel's future failures, as well as their eventual return to God. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Rashi wrote: "Hence Solomon produced this book by divine inspiration in the language of a woman saddened by a living widowhood, longing for her love."[26] This expectation is especially clear in Rashi's comments on Song 4:16-5:1, which he takes to refer to the culmination of Israel's faithfulness: "I command the north and south winds to blow on your garden so that your good fragrance should spread afar. And this figure of speech symbolizes the ingathering of the exiles and from all the nations they will bring [them] as an offering to Jerusalem and in the days of building [of the Temple], the Israelites will gather there for the festivals and for the pilgrimages, and Israel shall reply, 'Let my beloved come to His garden.'"[27]

In the Middle Ages, some Jewish leaders promoted more philosophical and Kabbalistic interpretations of the Song.[28] In the *Mishneh Torah,* Maimonides referenced Song 2:5 in relation

[24] Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 9

[25] As noted in Maud Kozodoy, "Messianic Interpretation of the Song of Songs in Late-Medieval Iberia" in *The Hebrew Bible in Fifteenth-Century Spain: Exegesis, Literature, Philosophy, and the Arts,* eds. Jonathan Decter and Arturo Prats (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 117-118.

[26] As quoted in Pope, *Song of Songs,* 102.

[27] Quoted and translated by Rabbi A.J. Rosenberg in *The Five Megilloth, Volume 1: Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth: A New English Translation* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1992), 54.

[28] As noted in Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 61-63.

to the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:5, saying that the wise will learn to obey the Torah out of love, not out of fear or desire for blessing: "This concept was implied by Solomon [Song of Songs 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: 'I am lovesick.' [Indeed], the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing [this love]."[29] Later, Don Isaac Abravanel (15th to 16th centuries) referred to the Song of Songs as a work according to King Solomon's superior metaphysical insight: "And it appears that he composed the majority of his songs [in reference to] the supernal [angelic] princes, each one receiving [its own song] in accordance with its providence over each nation … And he composed the book of Song of Songs in reference to the divine providence over the Assembly of Israel."[30] However, the majority view of the Song as a sacred song about God's love for Israel and Israel's love for God continued among Jewish interpreters into the 20th century. A 1977 commentary on the Songs of Songs by Rabbis Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman upheld the enduring historical allegorical view of this Jewish tradition.[31]

Whereas early Jewish interpretations saw the Song as a celebration and recognition of what God had done for Israel in the past, early Christian interpretations saw in the Song a proleptic picture of Christ and His love for His Church. One of the earliest and most influential interpreters of this view is Origen (third century C.E.). Origen gave nuptial imagery a primary place in Christian theology, and the Song of Songs was formative to that view.[32] Origen believed

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[29] "Mishneh Torah, Repentance, 1:1," https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.1.1?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en

[30] Quoted in Cedric Cohen-Skalli, *Don Isaac Abravanel: An Intellectual Biography,* trans. Avi Kallenbach (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2021), 193-94.

[31] Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz and Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *Shir Hashirim/Song of Songs: An Allegorical Translation Based upon Rashi, with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: ArtScroll/Mesorah, 2000).

[32] Origen explained the Song of Songs as the song that the Bride sings when she is mature and has received the fullness of all that was taught to her through the Law and Prophets, in Jesus Christ, her Bridegroom. Thus, "As the perfect Bride of the perfect Husband, then, she has received the words of perfect doctrine." *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies,* 47. See also Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of*

the woman, or Bride, of the Song to be both the individual soul and the Church, striving toward the perfect union with Christ still to come. He decried any sort of final interpretation that focused on the earthly and temporary, writing of the woman in the Song, "Let no one think that she loves anything belonging to the body or pertaining to the flesh, and let no stain be thought of in connection with her love."[33]

Origen was followed by many others, including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Cassion, Jerome, and Bernard of Clairvaux, who all upheld an allegorical interpretation of the Song, though often less focused on the Song's context and more on word associations that tied the Song to their understanding of Scripture elsewhere in the canon.[34] In a letter to John the Economus, Theodoret, bishop of Cyrus, connected Ephesians 5, Galatians 3, Romans 6:3 and 13:4, with Song 2:3 and 16, writing, "They who are blessed by the boons of God have learnt to know these passages and others like them, kindled with warm love for their bountiful Master, constantly carry on their lips this His dearest name and cry in the words of the Song of Songs 'My beloved is mine and I am his'; 'I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.'"[35] Jerome made reference to the "true Solomon," Jesus Christ, who would lead the one who desires wisdom into His chamber (Song 1:4).[36]

Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song (Oxford University Press, 2005), 4, who also recognizes that the Song of Songs was central to Origen's seeing the marriage metaphor of Christ and the Church/soul in the rest of Scripture.

[33] Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary,* 53.

[34] As noted in Garrett and House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* 66-67

[35] *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret* (NPNF, 3:320).

[36] *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works* 22 (NPNF, 6:23).

From the ninth to twelfth centuries, the Song was used to support a growing "Marian theology" in the church.[37] Christian commentators during this time interpreted the woman to be Mary and the man to be Jesus Christ, her son. Fulton notes that this interpretation was not founded on patristic exegesis but grew out of church liturgy.[38] Honorius Augustodunensis explained the Song tells the story of Mary's reunion with Jesus after her death and assumption, Rupert of Deutz that it was about the Incarnation, and Philip of Harvengt, that the Song was Solomon's prophecy about a virgin to be born in his line, who would be the chosen temple of God.[39]

During the Reformation, the historical-allegorical approach to the text began to wane, but there was still a widely held belief that the theology of the Song centered around God and His people as the Bridegroom and bride.[40] Luther rejected Origen's interpretation, but still took an allegorical approach, seeing the context as that of Solomon writing to praise the peace that was established under his rule. He wrote, "I think it is a song in which Solomon honors God with his praises; he gives Him thanks for his divinely established and confirmed kingdom and government; he prays for the preservation and extension of this his kingdom, and at the same time he encourages the inhabitants and citizens of his realm to be of good cheer in their trials and

[37] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 71

[38] Rachel Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs," *Viator,* Vol. 27 (1996), 86.

[39] Ibid., 93-96

[40] Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 37.

adversities and to trust in God, who is always ready to defend and rescue those who call upon Him."[41]

After the Enlightenment, literal/natural interpretations became the majority view among scholars, with a focus on literary elements in and behind the text, rather than spiritual or theological meaning and application,[42] but allegorical interpretations continued. Before this time, few commentators suggested anything other than allegorical and tropological interpretations of the Song.[43] Historical-allegorical interpretations continued into the 20th century among Catholic scholars like Raymond Tournay.[44] During and after the Enlightenment era, several well-known church leaders maintained an allegorical view of the Song, including John Wesley, Matthew Henry, E.W. Hengstenberg, and H.A. Ironside.[45] Wesley wrote: "The design of the book in general is to describe the love and happy marriage of two persons, but it is not to be understood concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter (although the occasion may be taken from that, or rather he makes an allusion to that) but concerning God, or Christ, and his church and people."[46]

Archaeological discoveries of ancient Near Eastern love songs, like the Chester Beatty and Harris papyri from Egypt[47] led to comparative studies and critical interpretations. This

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[41] Quoted in "Lectures on the Song of Solomon," 191.

[42] Longman, *Song of Songs,* 39

[43] One example of a literal interpretation was by Theodore of Mopsuestia (4th-5th century C.E.), who considered the Song to be Solomon's ode to his wife, Pharaoh's daughter, as noted in Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 8.

[44] Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Word of God, Song of Love: A Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989). See also Garrett and House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* 71; and Pope, *Song of Songs,* 179-83.

[45] As noted in J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1994), 28.

[46] John Wesley and G. Roger Schoenhals, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2003), 3379.

[47] John L. Foster, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry,* ed. Susan Tower Hollis (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 163-165.

included separating the Song into independent poems – though some scholars considered the possibility of a later redactor who stitched the poems together to form some sort of cohesive whole. Longman, for example, argues that the Song is an "anthology" of love poems, or an "erotic psalter."[48] Fox, finding the most similarities to secular Egyptian love songs, sees the Song as also a secular collection of Hebrew love poems, having been influenced by Egyptian literature.[49] Keel also argues that the Song is a collection of songs, with no overall structure; repetitions and order of the songs, he believes, could be the work of a redactor.[50] Those who view the Song of Songs as a collection of love songs, however, have not come to a consensus as to how many songs there are.[51] Others in the 20th century argued for a mythic/cultic interpretation of the Song. Meek contested that the Tammuz cult was part of Hebrew religion, as referenced in the prophetic corpus (Isa. 17:10; Jer. 22:18, Ezek. 8:14; Zech. 12:11), and that the Song was a fertility celebration of springtime.[52] Pope, also, advocated for a cultic interpretation of the Song: "In working through the Song word by word and verse by verse, and in reviewing the interpretations that have been imposed upon it, the impression has grown to conviction that the cultic interpretation, which has been vehemently resisted from its beginnings, is best able to account for the erotic imagery."[53]

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[48] Longman, *Song of Songs*, 44

[49] Michael V. Fox, "Rereading 'The Song of Songs'," 13.

[50] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 17

[51] As noted by Falk, who divides the Song into 31 poems. See Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of The Song of Songs,* Bible and Literature Series, ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982), 4, 9-51.

[52] Theophile James Meek, "Canticles and the Tammuz Cult," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures,* 39:1 (1922), 3.

[53] Pope, *Song of Songs,* 17

In the 19th and 20th centuries, some scholars argued for a dramatic interpretation, some to a two-character story of the man (Solomon) and woman – while others to a three-character story of the man and woman, with Solomon as a third (and negative) character. Christian D. Ginsburg interpreted the Song as a poetic narrative about a young girl who falls in love with a shepherd youth, and who King Solomon continuously tries to take for himself, though unsuccessfully because her love for the shepherd youth is strong and exclusive.[54] He calls the Song a record of "an example of virtue in a humble individual, who had passed successfully through unparalleled temptations."[55] Provan also reads the Song as a three-character drama of a man and woman in love, and Solomon as a violent collector of women who seeks to also tear her away from the man she loves.[56]

To Garrett and House, the Song is a two-character commentary about a woman losing her virginity.[57] Glickman interprets the Song as a picture of a couple's journey from courtship to marriage.[58] Duguid applies both a natural and spiritual interpretation to the Song, stating that the failures of a male-female relationship point readers to God/Christ, who alone can fulfill our desire for love.[59] The 19th century scholar Franz Delitzch also argued that the Song points to Christ, but typologically. Different from allegory, which requires one-to-one correspondence

[54] Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 5-7.

[55] Ibid., 12

[56] Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 205.

[57] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* 112

[58] Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love*, 133

[59] Duguid, *The Song of Songs*, 51-52

between image and reference, he explains that the Song is a "shadow" of the mystery of Christ and His love for the Church.[60]

Others have argued for a more direct messianic interpretation of the Song, returning to figurative methods of early interpreters, yet also rooting it in historical reality. Hamilton and Sailhamer,[61] for instance, have both argued that the Song, via its references to Solomon, points to the promised messianic seed. Hamilton writes, "…the Song is about Israel's shepherd king, a descendant of David, who is treated as an ideal Israelite enjoying an ideal bride in a lush garden where the effects of the fall are reversed."[62]

More recently, some scholars have emphasized Solomon's associations with the Bible's wisdom literature, seeing the Song as part of that larger Hebrew wisdom tradition. Its inherent didactive nature, as well, leans toward this categorization.[63] As such, it is not rooted in history or a story, but is rather a text about human relationships (cf. Prov. 5:15-19).[64] However, some scholars have countered that the wisdom tradition often associated with Solomon need not be separated from Solomon the historical figure. Dell argues against earlier strict categories of "wisdom literature" in favor of a fresh category of the Solomonic corpus of wisdom, rooted in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and including the Song of Songs. Solomon's association with each of

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[60] Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes,* Keil and Delitzsch Commentaries on the Old Testament, trans. Rev. M.G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 3.

[61] John H. Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 360.

[62] James M. Hamilton Jr. "The Messianic Music of the Song of Songs: A Non-Allegorical Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal,* 68 (2006), 331.

[63] Rosalind Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs," *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature,* ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017, 105-06.

[64] Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 26.

these, she argues, opens the interpreter to wider intertextual considerations. For example, 1 Kings 1-11 links both Solomon the historical figure with his wisdom, be that through his building activities, intellectualism, or ability to rule justly.[65] Heereman also argues against the separation of the Old Testament wisdom literature from that of the law and prophets, a categorization which occurred in the 19th century. She sees the Song, centered around King Solomon, as ancient Near Eastern "royal ideology" that points to a divine-human relationship.[66] Thus, the allegorical interpretations of the early Jewish and Christian church leaders are slowly gaining ground once again.

Method

In chapter two, I will expound on the approach and method by which the dissertation will be argued, particularly in how I will arrive at concluding the Song is an historically-based allegory. Below is a brief description of how I will approach the Song.

In this dissertation, I will approach the text of Song of Songs canonically, with a focus on the unity of the final form of the text and with an understanding that it exists as inerrant, divinely-inspired Scripture for the edification and guidance of Christ's church. Though recognizing critical studies that have attempted to get behind the text and understand its compositional history, my focus will be on the text before us and point forward, rather than backward, to its theological value for life and worship. I will approach Song of Songs as a unified text with a unified theological message. This approach is grounded in the text's literary

[65] Katharine Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of 'Wisdom' and Its Influence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 15.

[66] Nina Sophie Heereman, "Where is Wisdom to be Found? Rethinking the Song of Songs' Solomonic Setting." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130:3 (2018), 422.

elements, such as continuity of characters (man, woman, daughters, Solomon, "mother"), and refrains (2:6, 8:3; 2:7, 3:5, 8:4; 2:16, 6:3, 7:10; and 2:17, 4:6)**.** I follow scholars such as Alter, Duguid, and Hess,[67] in seeing the Song not as a dramatic narrative, but simply a poetic, literary unity, and others who find within the text a loose chiastic structure.[68]

In addition to approaching the Song within its own context, a biblical-theological approach to Scripture will also support a better understanding of the individual text. The Bible contains motifs and themes that are woven throughout Scripture, allowing the reader to see unity in the diversity of the texts, from Old to New testaments. While each text has its unique historical and literary context, the Bible is one narrative, pointing to and culminating in redemption and restoration through Jesus Christ. I will study the Song also with this big-picture view in mind.

It is not necessary, in this dissertation, to take a firm stand on the authorship or date of the Song. The evidence within the text provides only clues as to its compositional history. However, the clues – such as the mention of Solomon and places in and around Israel – can provide insight into an historical context that is being addressed in the text and can serve as a guide in intertextual study. I will address those clues where they are helpful in making those connections.

Placing a text within a specific genre will also affect interpretation. I will assume the text contains wisdom and poetic elements, and I will approach the text through the rules of those genres as they present themselves.

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[67] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings* Ketuvim: *A Translation with Commentary* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 583; Duguid, *The Song of Songs,* 53; Hess, *Song of Songs,* 34.

[68] As recognized by Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love,* 232; and Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 31.

The various building, planting, and harvesting imagery throughout the Song provides a framework for interpretation. I will explore the Song through the lens of the ancient wisdom motif of housebuilding, largely guided by the work of Raymond Van Leeuwen[69] and John Walton.[70] Because the Song contains terms, imagery and motifs that are so different from our modern-day language, I will apply a method that Walton terms "cognitive environment criticism."[71] This involves comparative studies of ancient Near Eastern literature in an effort to obtain as much as possible an understanding of the Israelite perspective, which was rooted much more in that cultural and cognitive context than our western, modern context. This involves finding similarities in genres and how they worked, how the ancient people thought about or practiced religion, and how Israelite religion was distinct.[72]

More specifically, this dissertation will build upon Van Leeuwen's work in which he has recognized the connection of wisdom and building in ancient Near Eastern thought, as it had to do with aligning life to the divine, cosmic design. Van Leeuwen categorizes these spheres of order into cosmos, temple, and house. These categories form the framework for my study of the Song of Songs, in which I will bring to the fore the elements of "housebuilding" that the Song addresses in all three of these spheres.

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[69] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Building God's House: An Exploration in Wisdom," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke,* ed. J.I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund, 204-211. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000; "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, 399-421 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010); and "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed. Christopher R. Matthews, 67-90 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[70] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

[71] Ibid., 11

[72] Ibid., 13

In addition, I will apply at every level an intertextual study of the Song to the wider Old Testament canon, finding connections through literary analysis and allusions more generally. The mention of "Solomon" in the Song urges an intertextual study of both the wisdom literature to which he is often associated, as well as the narratives in which he is described. This leads to a more informed interpretation of the Song, its literary elements, and ultimately its theological message.

Thesis

This dissertation will argue that the Song of Songs is an allegory that communicates the meaning of God's covenant love as renewed through the Davidic covenant and the building and dedication of the Solomonic temple. The Song reworks the tradition of ancient secular love songs and pagan fertility myths to teach that, in every generation, security is found in relationship with Yahweh alone.

Summary

The Sphere of the Home

Chapter three will consider the first sphere of order in ancient Near Eastern thought as the most literal and basic message communicated by the Song of Songs. In the outer level of the Song's chiastic structure, the woman, through wisdom, seeks for security in a particular, committed relationship. The family home was the basic building block of society, and ancient people sought to order their homes and societies in a way that reflected the divine, cosmic design. The literal reading of the Song of Songs is about a man and woman in love, living in ancient Israelite society among the flora and fauna of the land, and seeking to build a safe, secure home together. This chapter will also take note of the gender distinctions of the lover and

beloved in the Song in light of the Hebrew wisdom tradition of picturing wisdom as a woman, and suggest reasons the woman is the prominent voice in the Song. In addition, this chapter will provide a brief study of similarities, as well as differences, between the Song and ancient Egyptian love poetry. Finally, the chapter will consider the limitations the Song places on human efforts to build a home in this local, earthly realm, and why the Song should not be viewed as a human couple in love and the beauty of human sexuality, but rather as an allegory of the relationship of God and His faithful covenant people.

The Sphere of the Temple

Chapter four will consider the second sphere of order in ancient thought – the temple – in the Song of Songs. Here, the woman is pictured as coming within grasping distance of the divine-human relationship through which security would be possible. The Song contains various royal terminology, including mention of King Solomon. The royal objects, people, places, cities, and structures within the Song point to a background setting of a sacred, temple city (most specifically, Jerusalem). In ancient Near Eastern thought, this is the sphere of order where the human and divine come together. The "wedding" of Solomon (3:11) will be considered in light of ancient sacred marriage texts. It will be argued that the imagery of incense offerings and precious materials are used as concrete vehicles to communicate the abstract concept of humans experiencing relationship with the divine. Finally, this chapter will consider the limitations to the allegorical man and woman's relationship that are found in this sphere of order as well.

The Sphere of the Cosmos

Chapter five will consider the third, and grandest, sphere of order in ancient Near Eastern thought as it appears in the Song of Songs. Culminating in the Song's chiastic climax, the beloved's embodiment of an enclosed and abundant garden represents cosmic order through the

divine-human relationship, and thus the security for which she longs. This sphere envelopes the spheres of home and temple since all of life was aimed at aligning with the divine order of creation. This chapter will consider the wild and domestic flora and fauna references in the Song and how these and other natural images help to distinguish the lovers' unique roles in the quest to establish security on the earth. A brief comparative study alongside ancient pagan fertility myths and their associated motifs and imagery will help to show that the love being described in the Song, allegorically between God (the man) and His faithful covenant partner (the woman), alone results in continual abundance and security.

Solomon's Temple as the Song's Historical Context

Chapter six will suggest a context for the Song of Songs: the Davidic covenant and Solomon's temple dedication. In this context, the three spheres of order in ANE thought come together. The building of a temple was considered a new beginning, or a new creation, as the deity came again to dwell among the people and bless them. The mention of King Solomon, Jerusalem, and the housebuilding motif that pervades the Song, invites the reader to consider intertextual biblical accounts surrounding the Davidic covenant and Solomon's dedication of the temple (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 5-10; 1 Chronicles 28—2 Chronicles 9). This chapter will also argue for viewing Solomon in the Song as separate from the lover, God, through a brief study of the royal Psalms of the sons of Korah and a study of the limited role of Solomon in the temple dedication. This chapter will also discuss the Song in light of the Feast of Tabernacles, with a comparative study of extant ANE fertility cult texts, concluding that the Song reworks the pagan tradition in order to teach that YHWH alone – not a human king or goddess – is the source of life and security on the earth.

The Sphere of the Heart

Chapter seven will seek to show that the relationship being developed, described, and celebrated in the Song is an illustration of the covenant love between God and His covenant people, with a special emphasis on the people's wholehearted devotion to the LORD. This is the sphere of order in which ultimate security is possible for the beloved. Included in this chapter will be a discussion of the refrains in the Song of Songs that are concerned with establishing a mutual and lasting relationship that was, and is, unique to God and His people. The Song directly seeks to teach that God's love alone is everlasting. As an allegory, the Song uses the character of the woman to represent God's people – His faithful covenant partner – who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and who urge future generations to do the same.

The Song is rooted in the cosmology of the ancient world, with its concerns about the divine-human connection necessary for survival and peace. However, the divine-human relationship described in the Song is unique. This relationship was not dependent upon human wisdom or a physical temple or rituals, but rather on God's grace. God was building a house – a place of safety in which they could dwell securely together. The king and the people – the receivers of God's gracious covenant – were urged to respond to Him in delight and thankfulness.

Chapter 2: Method

As delineated in Chapter 1, the Song of Songs has been interpreted in a myriad of ways throughout history in a search to understand this enigmatic text. None of those interpretations have been accepted wholesale among scholars. Even while literal interpretations have been more widely embraced in recent times, particularly since the Enlightenment, allegorical interpretations have continued as well. Unfortunately, the very nature of the Song as poetry keeps its meaning somewhat elusive – at least in comparison to straightforward narrative seen elsewhere in the Old Testament. However, that does not mean that we must conclude its meaning is hidden or subjective.

As already discussed, in more recent centuries literal, natural approaches to the Song have become predominant. In some sense, the movement has been refreshing because the previous, varied allegorical interpretations of each image in the Song were often fanciful and disconnected from the strict evidence found within the text itself.[1] No one – not even the allegorical interpreters – could deny that the Song pictured sexual longing of a couple for one another. But if that is all that is true, the question remained: Why was such a text in the canon of Scripture? Literal interpreters, particularly those who view the Song as a unified text, set out to defend its theological value from their perspective. Some argued that the Song simply illustrates ideals for fulfilling relationships[2] and "wise love"[3] as God created and intended, and that it

[1] As an example, see Chapter 1 for a list of Jewish and Christian interpretations on Song 8:8-10.

[2] Craig Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Company, 2004), 14.

[3] Jennifer L. Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs*, Oudtestamentische Studien 75 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 107.

speaks to the nature of love and human relationship[4] or the "emotional journey of a woman into marriage."[5] Some argued that the Song's picture of human marriage reflected the divine-human relationship,[6] others that Solomon's presence in the Song, in contrast, reflected the negative, male-dominated human relationship.[7] Duguid argued that the Song upholds the morality of committed, monogamous marriage, and through the difficulties the human couple faces, the Song points to a perfect union yet future in God's full presence, after death.[8] Hamilton interpreted the Song as messianic, stating that Solomon depicts the future realization of the messianic age through his present relationship with his wife.[9] While these interpreters' efforts to remain faithful to the literal presentation within the text are admirable, they tend to read into the text a narrative or theological conclusion that is not explicitly conveyed. This approach at times leads to strained attempts to make the text squeeze into their blueprint – not unlike the oft-criticized practice of early allegorists. One glaring weakness of this approach is in Provan's commentary on the Song, where he describes Song 3:6-11 as a picture of Solomon taking the

[4] Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 29, 35.

[5] Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 94.

[6] Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 63.

[7] Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 205.

[8] Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 41, 51.

[9] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.: Louisville, KY, 2015), 28.

woman against her will, showing his power to secure whatever he wants, yet he still does not find fulfillment. When Provan gets to 3:11, which speaks of the joy on Solomon's wedding day, he suggests that it may be in reference to a past wedding day, a time of joy that Solomon once experienced but was no longer a part of his life.[10] Looking at the Song as a drama that involves a battle between Solomon and the true lover for the beloved, Provan must find a way to make each verse fit within the dramatic framework.

Literal interpreters who see the Song not as a drama but simply as poetry, face the same difficulty of fitting the Song's overall literal message into their predetermined theological framework. For instance, Duguid argues that the Song is "primarily a lyric or poetic unity rather than that of a strict, chronological narrative."[11] He argues against the Song having a chiastic structure, though he does see a turning point in the poem at 3:6 to 5:1, which he believes describes the lovers' wedding. Before and after that section, the Song, he argues, describes different aspects of their relationship – before the wedding and after the wedding.[12] He interprets 5:2-8 to be about the woman whose love grows cold toward her husband after their marriage and consummation. He applies to the watchmen the role of guarding against illicit sexual encounters, and here they punish her for being unwilling to pursue a lawful sexual encounter with her husband.[13] To make his presupposition of the Song's structure work, he must give explanations like this that are not explicitly clear in the text. In addition, in an attempt to argue for the Song's theological value, he applies a spiritual interpretation. He writes that humans, if left to

[10] Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* 255

[11] Duguid, *The Song of Songs,* 53

[12] Ibid., 53-54

[13] Ibid., 128-29.

themselves, grow cold to the Spirit; but God continues to search (especially shown in Christ) and will always be waiting if we return to Him.[14] While this is true, in light of the teaching of the rest of Scripture, his attempt at literal and spiritual interpretation requires that he read into the text his theological beliefs as well as his conviction that the Song is strictly about human love. He finds a way to incorporate God, but only by way of analogy – an analogy that is not explicit in the text.

This kind of theological interpretation is typical in contemporary conservative literal interpretations. Hess, for instance, who clearly believes the Song's message is strictly about physical, human love, attempts to purport its theological value by labeling it "a fantasy that explores the commitment of an erotic love affair," and that the joys within that affair point to God, "the greater love that lies beyond it."[15] But where and how can one be certain that the text communicates this theological conclusion? Exum comes to the Song from a different angle, but similarly makes conclusions based on her presuppositions. She focuses on its literary presentation and concludes that it is a secular love poem that communicates a particular kind of love – one that is mutual. She supports this conclusion based on the equal dialogue and initiatives toward union as described within the Song. However, she reads into the text her belief that the Song communicates Israel's unique worldview on romance – one that was more egalitarian.[16] Based on this conclusion, she argues that it is at best a challenge to read any sort of theological, allegorical meaning to the text, asking if the Song teaches equality of man and

[14]Duguid, *The Song of Songs*, 130

[15] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 33-35 .

[16] Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminister/John Knox, 2005), 68-69.

woman, then how could the man be God?[17] In each of these cases, assumptions rule the theological conclusions.

A better, conservative, and faithful method for interpreting the Song is needed. I propose a return to an allegorical interpretation that allows the text to speak as much as possible for itself and is illuminated by ancient Near Eastern thought and biblical theology. This method begins with the presupposition that there is a deeper meaning to the Song, which goes beyond the literal picture of a romantic relationship between the man and the woman, or the wedding of Solomon. This method does not deny the literal meaning; it simply understands the literal meaning to stand for something else. Similarly, the early Jewish and Christian interpreters, some of whom are outlined in Chapter 1, did not ignore the literal sense, but understood there to be a spiritual meaning behind the literal words on the page. So, the Song does not mention God (or Christ), because He is represented by a symbolic character within the text. For example, Origen concluded that the Song was a mystical allegory, with a one-to-one correspondence of the man and woman to Christ and His Church, or the Word of God to the human soul.[18] At the literal level, he admitted, the Song of Songs is a "simple song" of a bride betrothed to a bridegroom, who delays his coming, but the "inner meaning" is regarding the corporate church, who has been given betrothal gifts – the Law and the Prophets – to stir within her love and longing for Christ's coming.[19] Origen interprets the spiritual meaning of Song 1:2 to be the soul that no longer is

[17] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 77

[18] Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies,* trans. R.P. Lawson, (New York, N.Y./Ramsey, N.J.: Newman Press, 1956), 58.

[19] Ibid., 59-60

satisfied with mediators of God's love, but desires the Word of God, which are "kisses of the Spouse Himself."[20]

Seeking a deeper meaning in the Song is understandable. The early Christian interpreters did so for more reasons than just attempting to defend the Song's inclusion in the canon of Scripture. The often-enigmatic, riddle-like details of the Song, presented in a poetic genre, challenge readers to consider a meaning that goes beyond the surface. For example, the Song begins without establishing an official setting or making introductions and never provides official names or identities for the lover or beloved. The distant metaphors the couple uses to describe each other do not provide a coherent picture of their physical appearance. Also, the movement within the Song is almost dreamlike at times (ex. Song 3:1-5 and 5:2-9). Allegorical interpreters throughout history understood that the Song was communicating something more than a simple, straightforward picture, or story, of a human couple and their love.

While I recognize that any allegorical interpretation requires an interpretive leap of some sort from the explicit presentation of the text, the allegorical approach I will take to interpret the Song remains carefully tethered to what is presented on the page and is balanced via consideration of shared ancient Near Eastern thought and literature as well as the wider biblical narrative that centers around God's direct dealings with humanity. Early Christian and Jewish interpreters often attempted to assign allegorical meaning to every detail within the Song. However, I believe it is better to consider more generally the Song's overarching, extended metaphor and what that is trying to teach the reader. Rather than focus on one-to-one correspondences for every image, I follow the way the Song develops the motif of housebuilding within the allegory of the lover and his beloved. In this way, repeated images like vineyards and

[20] Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary*, 61

gardens, walls and towers, and houses represented metonymically by beds, beams, windows, and doors, become key to understanding the Song's major "storyline" of the couple's search and longing for a secure, abundant home where they can dwell together.

I also recognize the text's allusions and connections to historical realities that inform a bigger backdrop and point to intertextual study that can illuminate the Song's theological message. Some early interpreters did attempt to understand the Song as a commentary on history. The Targum, for example, saw in the Song a history of Israel, beginning with the revelation of God on Sinai (Song 1:2-4), and ending with the promise of the Messiah still to come (Song 8). The historical-allegorical approach that I am proposing involves a more conservative search for clues that echo texts outside of the Song. This includes finding the most probable connections to biblical texts. For example, the mention of "King Solomon" as a character, and the mention of Jerusalem, which is pictured at a time of great wealth and peace, connects to the Solomonic narratives. In addition, the Bible's wisdom literature becomes a source for intertextual study at the mention of Solomon in the Song's ascription, along with the Song's use of similar motifs and even exact wording at times. When these allusions are suspected, comparative studies are conducted to determine how the Song may be communicating something similar or unique. Through this kind of careful and conservative canonical approach, Scripture can be used to interpret Scripture.

In addition to biblical intertextual connections to the Song, the Song can also be compared with ancient Near Eastern pagan texts of its day. I offer a study into the comparisons and contrasts between the Song and ancient Egyptian love poetry and Mesopotamian sacred marriage myths – both which share common ideas or language with the text of the Song. The

similarities are too similar to ignore, while the contrasts offer enlightening interpretive possibilities for the Song's unique theological message.

In this dissertation, I also follow a literary method that looks for understanding within the chiastic structure of the Song. As a literary device, a chiasm builds, with parallel sections, to the central climax, where the main point of the story or teaching is unveiled. My own view is that the Song's chiastic structure moves from the outward level of 1:1-2:17 and 6:1-8:14, to the inward level of 3:1-11 and 5:2-16, and climaxes at 4:1 to 5:1. The couple's consummation in the metaphorical garden is thus the main picture to which the Song points. Faithful interpreters can then ask "why" and seek both inner and intertextual evidence to shed light on what that picture might mean and why it is so important.

My method will also include consideration of how ancients thought, conceptually, about the world and their place within it. Because the Song is centered on relationship and security (as I will show in more detail in subsequent chapters), it is helpful to know, as much as is possible, how ancient Near Eastern peoples, including Israel, viewed love and life. How might the Song's couple, through their words and actions, share the same concerns or have the same needs or goals as was common in their cultural context? Where might the Song support or challenge such a worldview? To answer these questions, I apply a framework based on the work of Van Leeuwen. He explained the common ancient conceptual view of order through categories of cosmos, temple, and house.[21] The cosmos was understood to be the heavenly realm, or home, of the divine, and the temple was the god's house on earth. In their everyday lives and in the operations

[21] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, 399-421 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010); and "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed. Christopher R. Matthews, 67-90 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

of the temple, the people aimed to imitate the cosmic realm and thus maintain order and blessing on earth. Through this conceptual lens, the interpreter can discover if, where, and how the Song addresses these concerns through the portrayal of the characters, their situations, and especially through their expressions and desires. This practice can be beneficial in grounding the mystical couple and enigmatic images of the Song in reality, revealing the author's real-life concerns and the message that is being conveyed through the text. To that end, the next three chapters of this dissertation will investigate the Song through the lens of those three conceptual categories. Chapters six and seven will then take the insight gleaned from those studies and propose both an historical context for the Song and its theological message.

Chapter 3: The Sphere of the Home

The home is the most intimate center of life. It is where we learn, grow, and rejuvenate. It is the place where we seek safety, sustenance, and shelter in the day-to-day. The couple in the Song of Songs also seeks a home where they can fully love and enjoy each other and the blessings that their love brings.

In ancient Near Eastern thought, security and blessing in the home was possible only by ordering life according to the divine design of the wider cosmos. Society was ordered as literal households,[1] but life was also understood cognitively or metaphorically as a "house," as "the cosmo-social order comprising god(s) and humans."[2] They understood society to be a microcosm of the macrocosmic "house" of the world with all its fields, waters, and the activities that occurred within it.[3]

Humanity followed the creative pattern of deity by seeking to build their personal houses, or lives, in the same way. In Israel, this sort of pattern was evident in the practice of the Sabbath, which reminded the people of Israel that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Ex. 20:8-11), and perhaps even in the timing at which life began again after the Flood (Gen. 8:13) and for the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:2, 17) – the first day of the first month, a nod toward the beginning of creation as new beginnings once again were set into motion

[1] As Nielsen notes, the "house of the father" was not just a physical house but a concept that gave a person their identity in the wider culture. "The house as a structure therefore became the physical locus of all the values and desires that defined the family: the continuation and replication of the paternal line from father to son over successive generations." John P. Nielsen, "The Family in the Ancient Near East," *A Companion to the Ancient Near East,* ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 114.

[2] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 400.

[3] Ibid., 399

through God's covenant acts.[4] Van Leeuwen describes this creative pattern as a two-fold process of house building and house filling.[5] Building involved design, preparation of materials and workers, construction and completion, as well as filling and provisioning the house with inhabitants, furnishings, and "all that makes life in the house abundant and rich, including agriculture, fertility, food and drink, and the acquisition of material goods."[6] The building provided the basic need for shelter, while the filling provided the abundance that would sustain life.

People were not primarily concerned with following legislative order, but rather maintaining the cosmological order, in all that they did. As Walton writes, "Citizens understood their obligations by means of living in society and being taught customs and traditions in the home."[7] Ideally, order in the home – the most local level of life – was to mirror the divine order in the cosmos. That ideal is implied in the preview to the Code of Hammurabi, where Hammurabi writes that the gods Anu and Bel assigned Marduk dominion over the earth, with a house in Babylon, "whose foundations are laid so solidly as those of heaven and earth."[8]

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[4] See Ed Noort, "The Creation of Light in Genesis 1:1-5: Remarks on the Function of Light and Darkness in the Opening Verses of the Hebrew Bible," in *Creation of Heaven and Earth: Reinterpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics,* ed. George H. van Kooten (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 4.

[5] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed. Christopher R. Matthews (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 68.

[6] Ibid.

[7] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 279.

[8] Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, the Avalon Project, "The Code of Hammurabi," https:Avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp.

Hammurabi then claims that Anu and Bel also called him, "the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind." He later claims that when Marduk appointed him "to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land, I did right and righteousness in …, and brought about the well-being of the oppressed." The codes that follow the introduction address the maintenance of order and justice on the earth among the people. In addition, an ancient Egyptian text communicates the belief that the creator, in creating, brought order, but that order was pictured in "the relation of people to nature and one another."[9] The creator had established justice and equality, thus bringing order to the universe. Disorder was the result of humans failing to align with that creation order: "I did not decree that they do disorder," the text says. "It is their hearts that break what I said."[10]

By carefully following the cosmic pattern, one could expect not just good provisions for an individual household to enjoy, but an abundance of good things in the world around them.[11] In Israel, this idea was rooted in the Genesis account of creation (Gen. 1:1-2:3). The cosmos was God's house (cf. Isa. 66:1-2; 1 Kgs. 8:27). It was "formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). Out of that uninhabitable void, God constructed an orderly, life-sustaining universe and then filled it with plants, animals, and humans. He then commanded humans to follow that same pattern by being fruitful and filling the earth (Gen. 1:28). Humans

[9] "From Coffin Texts Spell 1130," *COS* 1.17:26-27.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia,* 68

needed to understand their place and role within the cosmos, ruled and sustained by the divine, given to them to maintain, in order to obtain the blessings that came through that divine order.

Ancient Near Eastern cultures understood that this kind of ordering and building required wisdom. In fact, "wisdom" was seen as a mediator between the divine and human realms, providing humanity with instruction on how to build on earth (Prov. 8:22-31; 24:3-4). In the prologue of Egypt's "Instruction of Amenemope," the belief that certain wisdom is necessary for securing blessing in life is evident: "Beginning of the teaching for life, The instructions for well-being, Every rule for relations with elders, For conduct toward magistrates; Knowing how to answer one who speaks, To reply to one who sends a message. So as to direct him on the paths of life, To make him prosper upon earth; To let his heart enter its shrine, Steering clear of evil…" (1:1-1.10).[12] Not only is the instruction aimed at securing practical, outward prosperity, then, there is also a moral or sacred component that begins inwardly. In chapter one of the "Instruction," the text states that by listening and following these teachings, "You will find [life] a success; You will find my words a storehouse for life, Your being will prosper upon earth."[13]

Ancient Near Eastern literature conveys the ancient belief that wisdom came from gods and was only given to kings and other elites for the purpose of building temples or ordering society.[14] Hebrew wisdom literature, however, teaches that wisdom was something available to all people and not just for building temples, but for constructing their daily lives according to the

[12] "Instruction of Amenemope," *COS* 1.47:115-122

[13] Ibid.

[14] See, for example, The Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature, "Enki and the World Order: Translation," https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr113.htm. Enki and the World Order celebrates Enki, the god of wisdom whose house was in the Abzu, "the great mooring-post of heaven and earth" (lines 1-16), from where he ordered time, culture and destiny throughout the earth. Enki assigns spheres of order to the various gods. In addition, as Van Leeuwen notes, kings in the ancient world showed their wisdom and divine favor through large building projects; see Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia,* 73.

will of YHWH. It was by wisdom that the LORD created and set the world into motion (Prov. 3:19-20), and so following that pattern, a person needed to order their daily life by wisdom, which was rooted in the "fear of the LORD" (Prov. 1:7, et. al.)[15] and evidenced by skill in "housebuilding" that resulted in blessing (Prov. 8:21). This wisdom applied to even the most mundane activities (ex. Prov. 31:10-31). It all was done with recognition of one's existence within the wider cosmological realm. "Hebrew wisdom is not just about activities like sewing, farming, building, or reasoning on their own. It is about how all such activities find their meaning in the whole of God's created order."[16]

In Mesopotamia, people believed that creation was violent apart from order, and could be threatened at any time by theomachy, so order had to be sought continually if humans were to flourish.[17] In contrast, Israel understood that God alone ordered and built the world by wisdom, and humans in turn build houses by that same wisdom that He alone gives when they obey and fear Him (Prov. 2:1-6).[18] Rather than live in fear of chaos, humans live on mission to continue the "good" that God had made (Gen. 1:28).

The word חָכְמָה is used in various "house building" and "house filling" contexts throughout the Old Testament. חָכְמָה was behind the skill to construct a physical building like the tabernacle (Exodus 28, 31, 35-36), or the temple (1 Kgs 7:14). It was the ingredient necessary to

[15] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New American Standard Bible* (Anaheim, California: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1995).

[16] Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 24.

[17] Ibid., 41. For example, see *Epic of Creation* (*Enuma Elish*), *COS* 1.111:390-402. See also *Atra-Hasis*, *COS* 1.130:450-452. There, the creation of humans was for the purpose of doing the manual labor of and feeding the gods. When humanity's population, and thus noise, increased, the gods argued amongst themselves about whether humanity should survive. The god Enki, against the will of Enlil, rescues Atra-Hasis in a similar story as the Bible's account of Noah.

[18] Bartholomew and O'Dowd, 42 and 266

judge and rule effectively, thus building society in an orderly manner (Deut. 34:9; 1 Kgs. 2:6, 3:28). It was intellect or discernment about the way the world works – as God constructed it (2 Chron. 9; Dan. 1:17, 20) – and thus learning how one is to build his or her life properly within that world and its complexities (Job; Psalm 90; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes). And it was the ability to see God as the one who restores and rebuilds versus those who think their worldly wisdom is enough (Isaiah 11:12, 47:10; Jer. 9:23; 10:12; 51:15). Thus, wisdom is guidance on how to build a proper foundation in deference to the transcendent LORD for all of one's earthly pursuits. This kind of focus on seeking to build one's house, or life, by wisdom, is also the main thrust of the Song of Songs, where wisdom and housebuilding motifs abound within a picture of intimate relationship.

Seeking Home

The man and woman in the Song openly express their desire to be together. While there are undeniably references or at least innuendos to a sexual union of the couple in the Song, the broader thematic picture is that of the man and woman seeking a home where they can experience a union full of every good blessing. Their desires supersede a simple tryst for sexual satisfaction, for they speak of finding rest in each other's presence (1:7; 2:6; 8:3); of the lack of rest when they are apart (3:1-5; 5:2-8); of sharing a well-built home with surrounding fields, vineyards, and a garden with abundant provisions for life (1:16-17; 2:15; 4:16-5:1; 7:11-13); and of an exclusive, committed love that is as strong as death (8:6). They do not conceive of a life apart from one another – at least not a good life. They do not dream of satisfaction in a home where they exist solitarily. Every time they are alone, they are longing for each other's presence or are looking for signs of life in the surrounding fields and their vineyards (2:12-13, 15; 6:11;

7:12). As these passages and the overall movement of the Song shows, the couple illustrates the importance of relationship in wise housebuilding.

The Song opens and closes with the woman's words of desire for union with her lover. She desires the most intimate of kisses (1:2), and that her lover would pursue her (8:14; cf. 2:17). The woman longs to know where her lover is so she can go to him (1:7), finding the security that she does not have currently in her exposed (1:5-6) and nomadic experience (1:8). She pictures their bed and the beams and rafters of their houses (1:16b-17). She is concerned about tending her vineyard (1:6, 2:15, 8:12). The "garden" in the Song is a place of abundance, where they enjoy the fruits of their relationship freely, openly, and without hindrance (5:1). Their love seems to bring life to the land all around them, and within their home is "every delicacy" which she had stored up for him (7:13). Thus, the goal throughout the Song is to build and fill a house where they are together, secure and at rest.

A home like the one desired by the lover and beloved in the Song is built with wisdom, which requires ongoing work. The woman keeps seeking, the man keeps calling, and they both remain focused on the vineyards and gardens that represent their lives and their love. Proverbs 24:3-4 states, "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches." The direct associations between housebuilding and wisdom, according to ancient thought, make clear that the concept of housebuilding was not primarily concerned with an external physical structure; rather, housebuilding was foundationally concerned with an internal orientation of the housebuilders to the divine design. In the Song, the man and woman openly express their inner desires and commitment to one another (1:2, 4; 2:10, 14, 16, 17; 6:3; 7:10; 8:6) in their effort to be in each other's presence, enjoying abundant provisions (4:12-5:1; 7:11-13). All of their expressions and

actions lead to each other's presence, a shared love that forms the foundation of their "home." Thus, an overarching theme in the Song is a journey toward love, and as will be noted later, a particular kind of love.

The Language of "Love"

Not much imagination is needed to deduce the Song of Songs is about a man and woman in love. The very first words out of the woman's mouth convey her desire for intimate physical union with the object of her love (1:2). Throughout the Song, the reader is pulled into her journey of seeking and finding, and seeking again, as she strives for that secure union with the man she sees as the only one worthy of loving (5:10-16). But she is not the only one seeking, as though the relationship depends only on her effort. The man describes her through his eyes as the most beautiful woman, the only object of his desire (1:15; 2:2; 4:1-7; 6:4-9a; 7:1-9a), and he is pictured as coming to her and calling to her to "arise" and "open" to him so that they can be together and enjoy the blessings of love (2:10-14; 5:2). His actions are a perfect response to her request that he continue to pursue her (2:17; 4:6; 8:14). They individually understand that their housebuilding and house filling is dependent upon a love that brings them together, is exclusive, and is mutually lifegiving.

The Song's extended poetic picture of love is unique in the Bible, and so some scholars have turned to ancient Near Eastern literary studies to shed light on the Song's style and imagery and thus attempt to discover its intent and meaning. Fox surmised that the Song of Songs was influenced by 19th to 20th dynasty (1305-1150 BC) Egyptian love literature, which could have circulated orally, possibly even along the Levantine coast in the Late Bronze Age.[19] He

[19] Michael V. Fox, "Rereading 'The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs' Thirty Years Later," *Die Welt des Orients*, 46:1 (2016), 12.

concluded, “The shared qualities, techniques, and motifs make it likely that Canticles is a late offshoot of an ancient and continuous literary tradition, one whose early forms, or at least early written forms, are found in the Egyptian love poetry *and* in Mesopotamia.”[20] Fox also concluded that both were written and perhaps performed for secular entertainment.[21] Some extant Egyptian poetry is labeled “entertainment,” with an Egyptian word meaning “diverting the heart,” an idea further supported by Egyptian tomb murals that show musicians singing to guests and urging them to ‘divert their hearts’.”[22]

I do not agree that the similarities in content mean the Song must be labeled as the same genre and function of the extant Egyptian love songs,[23] but they do reveal a literary relationship through which certain terms and motifs in the Song can be better understood.[24] In addition, once the comparisons are recognized, contrasts stand out all the more.[25] What will follow will be a brief comparative study of the Song with ancient Egyptian love literature. The study will reveal that there are numerous language and thematic similarities between the two, supporting the

[20]Fox, “Rereading,”, 13

[21] Ibid., 10

[22] “Love Poems,” *Context of Scripture: Volume 1, Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World,* eds. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 125. See also Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminister/John Knox, 2005), 63-64.

[23] I agree with Hess, who notes that the shared imagery in the Song of Songs with ancient Egyptian love songs only proves that the Song existed within that same cultural milieu; it does not necessarily help with understanding the function or message of the Song. See Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 27.

[24] As Garrett and House write, “The similarities are too close and too numerous to be explained as anything other than the influence of the Egyptian songs on the Israelite poem.” Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 53.

[25] Recognizing similarities is only a means to an end. As Walton writes, “Our analysis of any literature will be more significant when we move beyond the forces and process that shaped it to an understanding of how it functions and what it reflects in its new environment.” See Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought,* 314. Garrett and House note the likelihood of the Song borrowing from Egyptian love literature, but also realize that the use of the imagery points the genre in a new direction. See Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 21.

designation of the Song as ancient love poetry. However, the study will also reveal the differences that prove the Song is much more than just another secular love song to entertain its audiences, but one that sought to communicate a love that would provide a secure foundation on which to build according to the divine design.

Both Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs use description songs, known also as waṣfs.[26] In "The Stroll," the boy praises the girl's physical features, such as her skin, eyes, lips, neck, arms, fingers, waist, thighs, and her gait. He uses similes to capitalize on her beauty. For example, he declares she is "Long of neck, white of breast, her hair true lapis lazuli. Her arms surpass gold, her fingers are like lotuses…"[27] In the Song, the man does the same, three times at length, applying metaphors to the parts of the woman's body (4:1-7; 6:4-9; 7:1-9). She, also, admires her lover's body in metaphors in 5:10-16. While the Egyptian love songs primarily use similes in their descriptions of the lover's body parts, the Song more often applies metaphors that create distance between image and referent, with the focus on the image more than the part.[28] Fox offers important insight when he states that the metaphors in the Song point the reader beyond the lovers to "a cohesive picture of a self-contained world: a peaceful, fruitful world, resplendent with the blessings of nature and the beauties of human art."[29] In the Song, the beauty of love is

[26] This word comes from Arabic poetry, meaning "description." See Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs,* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 127.

[27] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group A., No. 31 in Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 52.

[28] Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 329. For example, in "The Stroll," the boy praises the girl as "shining, precious, white of skin," and "long of neck, white of breast," and "lovely of (walk) when she strides on the ground" (see Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group A., No. 31 in Fox, *Song of Songs,* 52). In the Song of Songs, the man describes the woman's hair as "a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead" (4:1; 6:5), creating metaphorical distance between the hair and the image.

[29] Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 329. Gault adds that the four wasfs in the Song are "bracketed by assertions of beauty (4:1, 7; 5:10, 15-16; 6:4, 10; 7:2, 7)," and "…the lover's physical appearance is praised with comparisons to

more than just a pleasant physical sight of the beloved or of sexual union, but the avenue through which an abundantly provisioned and secure home could be established.

The Song also shares several motifs with the Egyptian love songs. For example, lovesickness or weakness is a symptom of those who are not present with the one they love. In the Cairo Love Songs, a boy pines for the girl he loves, saying, "If I spend a moment without seeing her, [I] get sick to my stomach."[30] The woman in the Song of Songs, also, when thinking of the great love and presence of her lover, exclaims, "Sustain me with raisin cakes, Refresh me with apples, Because I am lovesick" (2:5; cf. 5:8). When she hesitates to open the door to him and finds that he has gone away, she laments, "My heart went out to him as he spoke. I searched for him but I did not find him; I called him but he did not answer me" (5:6).

A man standing outside the door and pining for the woman he loves is also a motif that the Song shares with ancient Egyptian love songs. In a poem in the "Nakhtsobek Songs," the girl leaves the boy standing outside of her door and refuses him entry.[31] In another poem in the same collection, the boy speaks directly to the door and the bolt, bribing them to open, and to the "carpenter lad", to construct a door of grass so he can walk through it.[32] In the Song, the man is also separated from the woman by physical barriers (2:9; 5:5:2-5), though he does not complain but rather speaks to her lovingly through them.

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prominent earthly locales and heavenly luminaries." See Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 189.

[30] The Cairo Love Songs, Group B, No. 21F in Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 38. In another song, the boy comes up with a plan to feign illness, and when his neighbors come to see him, along with the girl he loves, he says, "She'll put the doctors to shame (for she) will understand my illness" (Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 6 in Fox, 13). In the same collection, a girl says, "I have departed [from my brother]. [Now when I think of] your love, my heart stands still within me…The scent of your nose alone is what revives my heart" (Papyrus Harris 500, Group B, No. 12 in Fox, 21).

[31] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group C, No. 46 in Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 75.

[32] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group C, No. 47 in Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 75.

Garden and gazelle imagery to describe the woman and man are also shared motifs. In "Three Wishes," the girl expresses her desire that the boy would come to her "swiftly," like a royal messenger, a royal horse, and "like a gazelle bounding over the desert…"[33] The woman in the Song, also, likens her lover to a gazelle or young stag (2:9, 17; 8:14). However, unlike the boy in "Three Wishes," who's bounding and leaping is due to being chased by a hunter and his dog and into a trap, the man in the Song appears to leap on the hills to get to her by his own choice. While the male is likened to a gazelle, the woman is likened to a garden. In "The Flower Song," the girl describes herself as a garden belonging to the boy she loves.[34] In another song, a girl thinks of her lover as she travels to a cult center of Heliopolis. When she arrives, she meets with him in a garden of love.[35] In the Song of Songs, the garden is the place of abundance, enjoyment, and union of the couple (4:12-16), as are other natural spots like fields and orchards (1:16-17; 7:11-13; 8:5). The garden also directly refers to the girl, both literally and symbolically.[36]

On the surface, these shared motifs may seem like a reason to label the Song as a secular Israelite love song along the same vein as the Egyptian love songs, but the presentation of these motifs is quite different and reveals the Song's unique message about love. Perhaps the biggest difference between the Song of Songs and Egyptian love songs is in the mode of speech. Egyptian poetry by and large presents speech via monologues, while the Song is written entirely in dialogue. Even when the lovers in the Egyptian poems appear to be speaking about the object

[33] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group B, Nos. 38-40 in Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 66.

[34] Papyrus Harris 500, Group C, Nos. 17-19 in Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 26-27.

[35] Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 8 in Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 14-15.

[36] Ibid., 287

of their love, and sometimes even when it is spoken in second person, they are actually talking to themselves. In "The Stroll," the boy and girl alternately speak of the loveliness of and desire for the other, but they never act on it, and they are never aware of each other's feelings. Rather than a dialogue, it is a double monologue. They do not speak to each other; they are speaking wishes to themselves, and neither knows the other's thoughts.[37] The mode of monologue is especially true for all speeches given by males in the Egyptian love songs. There are at times exterior monologues in which a person speaks as though speaking to the other, but it is always a girl speaking to a boy.[38] For example, in "The Crossing," the girl sometimes addresses her lover (though he does not hear her from the other side of the river), but he only ever speaks of her in the third person.[39] As a whole, Egyptian love poems seem to be most concerned with the feeling of love, as though the fulfillment of love is the highest form of joy that can be experienced.[40] Love is "a state of pleasant harmony," not interaction.[41] The lovers are each more concerned with how *they* are affected, rather than how love can be mutually beneficial.

In contrast, dialogue is *the* mode of speech in the Song of Songs. "None of the speech is interior: the speakers never address their hearts or an indefinite audience, but rather speak to each other and respond to each other."[42] Even when the other is not present, the girl's speech is still not to herself, but to the daughters of Jerusalem (1:5-6; 5:8-6:3). Also, even when the man and

[37] Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 8 in Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 263

[38] Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 261

[39] Ibid., 31-33

[40] Ibid., 279. See for example, Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 2, where the girl speaks of the effects of the boy's love on her body (p. 8).

[41] Ibid., 316

[42] Ibid., 264

woman describe the effects the other has on them, they do not become introspective; rather, they speak passing statements that are part of the wider praises they express for one another (2:3, 4; 4:9; 6:5a).[43] Thus, in the Song, dialogue serves to teach that the ideal relationship is active, disclosed, and mutual. Rather than two people pining for love and flowery love language about the feelings of love, the Song's couple speaks openly about their desires, and this openness allows them to lay a foundation upon which a lasting home can be built.

The lovers in the Song do more than just speak to each other; they influence each other. Unlike in Egyptian love songs, where the characters make statements about love,[44] the speakers echo each other's words, proving that they are listening, answering, and declaring how they feel about one another.[45] Echoes are apparent in 2:10, 7:12; 2:12-13, 7:13; 1:15-16, 7:5; and 2:1-3a, 7:10. Note that these echoes are strategically located within the outer level of the chiastic structure of the text, balancing the portrayal of the couple's mutual relationship. As Fox writes, "They *display* their emotions rather than reporting on them, for it is the relationship that arises from the emotions of love, more than the emotions themselves, that concerns the poet of the Song."[46] Dialogue – direct speech – is the device through which loyalty and love are made known. Love is never a question left unanswered in the Song. Their open and assuring communication urges active pursuit of one another, as they are both aware of the other's desires and intent. In the Song, their greatest moments of joy and security are when those expressions of desire are realized in their physical union. More than their physical union, however, the

[43] Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 281

[44] For example, in "The Flower Song," the girl says, "my heart is in balance with yours." See Papyrus Harris 500, Group C, No. 17 in Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 26.

[45] Ibid., 222

[46] Ibid., 326

culmination of their desires are pictured in moments, during their union, when they look around them to see abundance and security in the abode that they share, such as a verdant bed (1:16), a house with beams of cedars and rafters of firs (1:17), a banquet hall (2:4), a beautiful garden (6:2-3), and an abundant vineyard and house full of "every delicacy" (7:12-13). Through their open communication, the reader learns of their exclusive, mutual, and active love, which appears to be the main foundation for the couple to build a blessed house together.

Love and Wisdom

While the form and content of the Song in some places does indeed resemble secular Egyptian love poetry, the mode and function of the love lyrics and the text, as a whole, more closely resemble wisdom literature.[47] As the differences between the secular Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs show, the Song is more than just a celebration or commentary about love (or lust). The Song is unique – the Song above all other songs – because of the picture it creates about the kind of love that is mutual, exclusive, and active. The metaphors in the love lyrics of the Song lead the reader beyond physical appearance and personal feelings to an entirely new world that has been created by love. As Fox notes, the Song is not about how they look, but how they see.[48] So far, I have shown that the lovers in the Song openly announce their love and exclusively seek each other with the goal of sharing their lives together in peaceful security. However, a repeated concern – particularly the woman's concern – is that others would follow

[47] As Andruska argues, the Song as wisdom literature can still be considered love poetry, since "This author has transgressed generic boundaries to offer wisdom concerning love." See Jennifer L. Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs,* Oudtestamentische Studien 75 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 13.

[48] Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 330

their example. In word and deed, the couple not only relays their own experience; they teach others about the kind of love that leads to security and blessing.

Wisdom in love is not just found indirectly in how the couple of the Song interacts with each other, but in what the woman says directly about love as an abstract concept. The Song's didactic refrains and abstractions about love set it apart from any other extant love poetry in the ANE.[49] Three times the woman adjures the daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse or awaken love until it pleases (2:7, 3:5, 8:4).[50] Even Webb, who supports an interpretation of the Song of Songs as love poetry, not wisdom literature, recognizes the didactic nature of Song 8:5-7 as the climax of the Song, where the woman becomes the mouthpiece of the author.[51] In Song 8:5-7, אַהֲבָה is again being used and defined in the abstract. Chapter 8 in general provides a sort of summary to the entire Song as love is defined according to its power and value. The woman declares that she aroused love (personified) (8:5) – something she had cautioned the daughters of Jerusalem not to do until the appropriate time. Thus, having entered love and having asked to be identified with

[49] As Clarke notes, there is no extant ANE love poetry as extensive as the Song or that contains "abstract reflections on the nature of love" as the Song does, particularly in the didactic refrains (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4) and in the summary in chapter 8 (8:6-12). See Rosalind Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs," *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature,* ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017, Web108.

[50] This is a paraphrase from the English Standard Version (Crossway Bibles, 2001). This and other versions, such as the New International Version (Biblica, Inc., 2011), which translates "until it so desires," is more faithful, in my view, to the MT, which presents אַהֲבָה as an absolute noun with no pronominal suffixes. Thus, "love" is an abstraction rather than a description of either of the lovers or their act of lovemaking, which seems to be the implication in versions like the NASB, which states, "do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases." This refrain and its varied interpretations will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

[51] Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 24. Garrett and House categorize the Song as lyric poetry, which is evidenced by "creativity and artful expression," not wisdom poetry, which is "essentially didactic and thus tends to be structured and straightforward in meaning." See Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 93. However, it is not necessary to bifurcate poetry from wisdom. In the Old Testament, poetry is foundational for communicating truth, particularly in the sense "to inspire faith and action in its readers" (see Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature,* 54). Bartholomew and O'Dowd even suggest that the Song of Songs would fit into several genres, such as legal, historical, poetic and prophetic genre categories, as well as wisdom. "Wisdom" as a genre, they note, is found in all genres and locations in the Bible, and especially poetical books (p. 23).

him (8:6), she declares that love is "as strong as death," and jealousy "as severe as Sheol" and "Its flashes are flashes of fire, The very flame of the LORD" (8:6). Love is so powerful, she states, that "many waters cannot quench" it, "Nor rivers overflow it," and that there is no amount of earthly wealth that could ever buy it (8:7). The chapter then continues with two parables of sorts, in which external societal (8:8-10) and royal (8:11-12) efforts to defend and cultivate love are viewed as falling short of the ideal in which personal, free choice of mutual and exclusive love is the ruling factor for enduring peace and happiness.

In addition to the indirect and direct ways that the Song communicates wisdom concerning love, the poetic nature of the Song and its portrayal of characters is idealistic – a form that aligns with the wisdom genre. As Fox notes, ancient love songs – Song of Songs included – did not necessarily portray the reality of love as experienced by people in their respective societies, but they rather communicated how poets "perceived and defined its potentialities."[52] Poetry can accomplish what prose cannot, creating a world through words that are wrought with emotion, instilling either dread or desire, and moving readers to action. The lyrical and poetical tone of the book only reinforces the beauty of love that man and woman are encouraged to engage in. As Exum writes, "The Song's is a magical world, but not unrealistic, and this makes it immanently accessible to readers who would identify with the lovers, since lovers know the world as real but magical as well."[53] Thus, the reader becomes like one of the "daughters of Jerusalem," being instructed by the woman's words of caution, her description of love, as well as through her words and actions toward her lover, and vice versa. In addition, the lover and

[52] Michael V. Fox, "Love, Passion, and Perception in Israelite and Egyptian Love Poetry," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 102:2 (1983): 220.

[53] Exum, *Song of Songs,* 47. Exum refers to the man and woman as archetypal, representing all lovers: see pg. 8.

beloved in the Song are never introduced or named,[54] making the Song not only of historical characters to simply read about, but as impressionistic and idealistic figures with whom readers can identify and from whom they can learn as they share the desire for a loving, lasting home on earth.[55]

What lesson is the Song teaching about love? While a number of recent scholars argue that the message of the Song is primarily about the beauty of sexual love,[56] it is about something much more secure and lasting. The couple seeks a particular kind of relationship – an exclusive, mutual, enduring love – upon which a lasting home can be built. This is also evidenced by their addresses for each other. The man refers to the woman predominantly as רַעְיָתִי.[57] This term can be translated as "companion" and comes from the root רֵעַ meaning, in general, "friend, companion, fellow."[58] Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word is used for female, virgin companions of a bride (Ps. 45:14) or would-be bride (Judg. 11:37). The man's use of this term to describe who the woman is to him, is a way of noting that she is much more than just a sexual object to him. Mitchell correctly notes that "He is raising her to be on par with himself and is expressing a bond

[54] "Shulammite" in Song 6:13 is a title, not a name. Also, I consider Solomon to be a background character and symbol in the Song, separate from the "lover."

[55] See Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 25; Longman, *Song of Songs,* 57; and Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 40.

[56] Longman believes the Song to be love poetry that teaches the power and beauty of emotion and sexuality – a "major aspect of the human experience" – and a warning to be careful about the kind of love to pursue. See Longman, *Song of Songs,* 55. Longman believes the Song of Songs is an anthology of poems and notes that some of the poems are about courtship, while others are about marriage. To Hess, the theme of the Song is erotic love and sexual freedom, with a focus on desire and the goodness of waiting, as real love is expressed by "commitment and loyalty"; see Hess, *Song of Songs,* 31-32. Exum argues that the Song describes love as mutual, and romance as more than "sexual gratification," and that which causes lovers to see beauty in the world and to experience deep emotions; see Exum, *Song of Songs,* 13. To Glickman, the Song is a guide to good, fulfilling relationships; see Craig Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Company, 2004), 14.

[57] Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4

[58] BDB, 945-56. This is different from חָבֵר in 1:7 and 8:13, which refers more to "associates" than an intimate friend; see BDB, 288.

of intimate trust and loyalty."[59] In every instance in which the man refers to the woman as רַעְיָתִי, it is in addition to referencing her outward beauty; rather than a repetitive term, רַעְיָתִי adds a depth to their intimacy. Mitchell also offers important insight by noting that the man first addresses the woman as רַעְיָתִי before she first addresses him as דּוֹדִי.[60] This insight is helpful to keep in mind for a discussion in Chapter 7 regarding the refrain to the daughters about not arousing love until it pleases (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). For now, it is simply helpful to note that דּוֹדִי is the most common address for the man throughout the Song, and 26 times it comes through the mouth of the woman herself. In the Song, the term is used in the sense of "loved one, beloved" and "lover" or "betrothed."[61] The word and its surrounding contexts belie something deeper than sexual prowess: an intimacy with and security in the other. In particular, the woman addressing the man as דּוֹדִי indicates that his primary identity is in his ongoing actions of love toward her. Thus, he provides security for her through his continued attentiveness to her and her needs (cf. 2:3-5). At one point, the woman recognizes the man as both דּוֹדִי and רֵעִי (5:16), affirming her confidence in his loyalty.

The woman is the dominant character and the dominant voice in the Song.[62] The reader learns more of her longings and her character than anyone else's. She is also the one who alone provides direct instruction about love. This is not a coincidence. As I will note in the next

[59] Christopher Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 391. Mitchell believes this reference to equality is even more striking, since he believes Solomon and the man are the same throughout the Song. Thus, the king lifts the maiden to royal status by referring to her this way.

[60] Song 1:13, 14, 16; 2:3, 8, 9, 10 16, 17; 4:16; 5:2, 4, 5, 6 (x2), 8, 10, 16; 6:2, 3 (2x); 7:9, 10, 11, 13; 8:14. Elsewhere in the Song, the word is used with a different pronominal suffix to indicate something more along the lines of the "lovemaking" of the man or the woman (1:2, 4; 4:10)

[61] BDB, 187

[62] The determination of female and male voices of the Song are largely based on pronominal suffixes, though there are some places where it is not clear who is speaking.

section, her unique, feminine role in the Song underlines and guides our interpretation of the Song as wisdom literature, a genre that instructs individuals on how to build successfully on earth.

Women and Wisdom

In the ancient Near East, a woman's role revolved around the home, raising children, making clothing, cooking, and caring for the sick.[63] That women were given these distinct duties, separate from men, was an integral part of ancient thought, in which nothing existed apart from its opposite.[64] Therefore, men and women, in their corresponding differences, make humanity. In ancient art, men were pictured as more active partners in a relationship, while women were seen as passive partners and were often pictured significantly shorter to reflect the patriarchal hierarchy.[65] The ancients also viewed men as the creative life force in procreation, while the woman was the arouser and nourisher.[66] According to Genesis 2:24, God's design was for a man to leave his parents and be joined to his wife. The man's action causes the union and relationship, and she becomes "the domain of love in the believing household."[67] In her womb, children grow, and "She is the glory of the family's love."[68]

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[63] Ann Macy Roth, "Gender Roles in Ancient Egypt," *A Companion to the Ancient Near East,* ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 87.

[64] Ibid., 88

[65] Ibid., 88-89. Roth writes that in some iconography, women are seen embracing the man and thus showing their inferior status.

[66] Ibid., 89

[67] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 120-21

[68] Ibid., 121

The woman in the Song is certainly concerned about arousal and nourishment as she seeks her lover and gives advice to the daughters of Jerusalem about love. She openly expresses her desire for intimate union with her lover (1:2-4a; 2:6; 4:16; 8:1-2). She urges him to "be like a gazelle or like a young stag" in coming after her (2:17, 8:14; cf. 2:9, 4:6) and actively seeks him (1:7; 3:1-4; 5:6, 8) and praises him (5:10-16), and asks for exclusivity and commitment (8:6-7). She rejoices in committed relationship (2:6, 16; 6:3; 7:10; 8:3). She adjures the daughters of Jerusalem to "not arouse or awaken love" until it pleases (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), while *she* roused her lover under the apple tree (8:5). As she speaks to the daughters, she speaks as an authority on love, as one who has found it and taken hold of it.[69]

More than just a picture of a typical ancient woman whose main domain was the home and family, the woman of the Song shares similarities with the so-named "Lady Wisdom," the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. An intertextual study can shed a greater light on why so much attention is given to the woman in a song that is all about love. After all, it is always the woman, never the man, who imparts wisdom in the Song.

Both Lady Wisdom and the woman in the Song have long speeches (Prov. 1:22-33, 8:4-36; Song 3:1-5, 5:1-8, 10-16); issue invitations (Prov. 9:5-6; Song 4:16; 7:11-12, 8:1-2); offer instruction (Prov. 1:22, 33, 8:6-11, 9:5-9; Song 2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4); take initiative in relationships (Prov. 1:20-21, 8:1-3, 9:3; Song 3:4, 4:16-5:1, 7:13, 8:2-3); are desirable above anyone else (Prov. 3:14-15; 8:11, 18-19; Song 2:15, 6:10, 7:2, 8:7); and they bring peace (Prov. 3:17, Song 8:10).[70]

[69] Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love,* 108

[70] Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom," 107

Rundus offers important insight regarding wisdom's personification as a woman: "…the feminine metaphor is to highlight *relational* and *covenantal fidelity* as the central components for discerning and obtaining and maintaining wisdom from YHWH."[71] In Proverbs 2 and 3, wisdom is presented as a woman who is familiar, desirable, and protective of the "son" who is being instructed. She is pictured as a woman who will keep the young man from the house of the "strange woman," the adulteress, which leads to death (2:16, 18). Rundus sees three metaphors within these chapters as a "syntactic chain" that is rooted in the "fear of YHWH": wisdom as a teacher of righteousness, as a woman who seeks intimate relationship, and as treasure to be obtained.[72] Similarly, the woman in the Song teaches the daughters of Jerusalem about love, seeks intimate relationship with her lover, and is clearly seen as an incomparable treasure in his eyes (1:9-10, 15; 2:2; 4:1-15; 6:4-10; 7:1-9).

Proverbs 5 and 6 instruct the "son" to be faithful to his wife, here an extension of Lady Wisdom as described in Proverbs 1-4, with the use of water metaphor. In Proverbs 5:15-17, the father refers to his son's wife as a cistern and well, and asks, "Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone, And not for strangers with you." Rundus notes that these water sources are associated with "personal ownership," and to be contained within one's own property.[73] In the actual physical practice of housebuilding, one of the most important provisions was "water supply and land management."[74] Cosmologically

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[71] Lance Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman: The Canonical Metaphor of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 Understood in Light of Theological Aesthetics (*Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 19-20; Bartholomew and O'Dowd note, "Personifications like Woman Wisdom and Egypt's female goddess Ma'at were used to create a personal and sensual relationship to the order and rhythm of life in the world." (See *Old Testament Wisdom Literature,* 34).

[72] Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman,* 104-107

[73]Ibid., 142

[74] Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia,* 68.

speaking, the world was kept in life-sustaining order by the gods controlling or directing water sources, while also holding back the chaotic waters of destruction (cf. Psalm 104; Prov. 3:19-20; Job 38; Psalm 65).[75] The father was instructing the son on the importance of being faithful to his wife, the source of life-giving water for their "house." If he instead chose to receive the "honey" that ends in "wormwood" of an adulteress (Prov. 5:3-4), then he would leave his wife vulnerable to others who would take of her blessings (Prov. 5:9-10). Her wellspring of water would overflow to others if he was not drinking from it (thus causing her to be unfaithful).[76]

The woman in the Song is strikingly like this wife and thus can be considered as a symbol of wisdom as well. The man praises the woman's oils and the honey that drips from *her* lips (contra the adulteress in Proverbs 5), for they bring life, not death (4:10-11). He also describes her as "a garden locked" and "a spring sealed up" (4:12), a "garden spring" and "a well of fresh water, and streams flowing from Lebanon" (4:15). While some commentators have understood this verse as the man praising the woman's chastity,[77] I believe with its connections to Proverbs 5 it is better to read this as a reason to praise the man's faithfulness to her. Because of his love and dedication to her, her waters did not overflow – she did not need to look elsewhere for someone to enjoy her blessings. The life that resulted from the wisdom and faithfulness of her husband toward her provided a sense of security for their relationship (Prov.

[75] Balint Karoly Zaban, *The Pillar Function of the Speeches of Wisdom: Proverbs 1:20-33, 8:1-36, and 9:1-6 in the Structural Framework of Proverbs 1-9* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 24; see also Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *From the Foundations*, 402. Cf. Eccl. 2:5-6.

[76] Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman,* 143; In Jer. 2:13, God describes himself as the "fountain of living waters," yet the people of Judah decided instead to build their own cisterns, which were broken and could not hold any water. Thus, their life could only come from God, not by their own selfish and rebellious efforts. In Proverbs 5, the woman/wife is the symbol of wisdom, from which life is bestowed.

[77] For example, Hess, *Song of Songs,* 29; Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 201; Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love,* 32. In contrast, Exum argues against understanding this as her chastity, but rather simply his "exclusive access" (*Song of Songs,* 176).

13:14; 18:4; cf. Song 4:16-5:1). Furthermore, the two women are connected via similar imagery. In Proverbs, the father tells the son: "As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love" (5:19). In the Song, the man says to the woman, "Your two breasts are like two fawns, Twins of a gazelle, Which feed among the lilies" (Song 4:5; cf. 7:3). The picture is that of a fully satisfying, intimate relationship, and within these contexts in both Proverbs and the Song, the imagery is in reference to the most committed earthly relationship: marriage. In Song 4:8 to 5:1, the man refers to the woman as "bride" five times in a context of consummation. Kaiser calls this satisfaction, "the joys of marital fidelity and connubial love."[78]

While the son in Proverbs is instructed to נָטָה his ear to understanding (Prov. 5:1), the woman in the Song is concerned with being a נָטַר of her own vineyard. In the former context, the son is urged to "stretch out, spread out, extend, incline, bend"[79] his ear to understanding, so that he may שָׁמַר, "keep, watch, preserve"[80] prudence. In the Song, the woman, as a keeper of other vineyards, has not been able to keep, or guard, her own.[81] In 8:11, Solomon let out his vineyard to keepers לַנֹּטְרִים, and they enjoyed the fruit by paying him for it. A different operation is depicted, however, in 8:12. The speaker of 8:12 is not clear; however, it is possible to interpret as the man announcing that his vineyard (the woman) is his alone. He thus obeys what the father in Proverbs was instructing his son to do – to keep wisdom, to protect it and care for it, and in so doing its fruits would be for him alone and no one else (cf. Song 2:15). She would not be

[78] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. "True Marital Love in Proverbs 5:15-23 and the Interpretation of Song of Songs," *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke,* ed. J.I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 111.

[79] BDB, 639

[80] Ibid., 1036

[81] Ibid., 643. נָטַר appears four times in 1:6 and four times in 8:11-12.

exposed to that which could harm her (1:6), and through his care, within their relationship alone, all enjoyment and security were theirs. At the same time, the woman in the Song acts wisely by seeking for and finding the one who will treasure her, exclusively commit to her, and awaken the innate blessings within her. As wisdom is not satisfied nor able to survive in solitary existence, the woman in the Song also appears to understand that her peace is impossible without the presence and love of her lover, and she gives her whole self to him. Wisdom may always be working to build her house, but it cannot be a blessed home without love and the security and sustenance that love provides.

The woman in the Song joins other women figures associated with wise housebuilding. As the mediator of wisdom (8:30), Lady Wisdom's skill was shown in the outworking of wise women in their everyday lives. "The wise woman builds her house, But the foolish tears it down with her own hands" (Prov. 14:1). Ruth was clearly recognized as a woman who used wisdom to build her house (Ruth 4:11; cf. 3:11).[82] Proverbs 31:10-31 paints a clear picture of a wise woman/wife who has learned the importance and necessity of ongoing building and filling of a house that is blessed. As an acrostic, the poem implies that the woman embodies complete wisdom, rooted in her fear of the LORD.[83] As a wise woman, she seeks to order her life, and build her home, particularly to the benefit of her husband (31:11-12, 23) and in line with the divine order (31:30). And she and her entire household are blessed because of it (31:31).

Job's daughters also remind us of the image of woman in relation to wisdom and housebuilding – or in his case, house restoring. Through his tragic losses and search for justice, Job obtained wisdom. He did not obtain wisdom to know God's ways, only wisdom to know that

[82] Only here and in Prov. 31:10 is חַיִל used to describe a woman.

[83] Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 104; See Psalm 112 for similar description for a wise man.

God's ways were above his own (Job 42:1-6). After Job prayed for his friends, the LORD proceeded to restore Job's household. Not only was it restored, but it was restored "twofold" (42:10). His family and friends came to his house to encourage him and bless him with riches (42:11), and the LORD gave him more livestock than he had before (4:12). He also had seven sons and three daughters. The sons are not named in the account, but his daughters are. In this new house built upon wisdom and the grace of God, the names of the daughters are important for understanding just how blessed Job's new household was. "Jemimah" may be a cognate of the Arabic word for "dove,"[84] a name that the man in the Song gives to the woman (Song 2:14, 5:2, 6:9) to praise her purity. "Keziah" is a name meaning "cassia," a fragrance.[85] The imagery of fragrance is used throughout the Song to illustrate attraction that leads to desire and union (1:3, 12; 2:13; 4:10; 7:8, 13). "Keren-happuch" is a name meaning "horn of antimony," or a "beautifier."[86] The beauty and beautifying of the woman in the Song is evident throughout (1:10; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 6:1, 4; 7:1, 6). These daughters of Job – the outworking of his obedience and wisdom – were such an epitome of goodness and beauty that they were given what few women in society were given in the ancient world: a future in which to build their own homes. "In all the land no women were found so fair as Job's daughters, and their father gave them inheritance among their brothers" (42:15). Likewise, the woman in the Song was the most beautiful and the only one with whom her lover desired relationship. Her status is also the outworking of wisdom. Her desire and efforts to build and fill a home with her lover[87] is evidence of her wisdom, and

[84] BDB, 410

[85] Ibid., 893

[86] Ibid., 902

[87] The vineyard of 1:6 and 8:12 is a symbol of both her person and this desire, and incidentally is her own inheritance separate from her brothers' as well.

this sets her apart as a woman to be admired by not just her lover, but all wise women past (6:9), present (6:9-10), and future (5:9; 6:1). Understanding the woman's associations with wisdom may be the answer to the riddle, "Who is this?" repeated in the Song, each time regarding her astounding presence before her lover (6:10; 8:5; cf. 3:6). She resembles the "excellent wife," who the author of Proverbs 31 asks, "who can find?" (Prov. 31:10).[88]

Mothers and Daughters

The woman in the Song is not the only female figure to appear in the text. Mothers of the woman are mentioned, as are the daughters of Jerusalem. Even the woman's brothers are referred to as "my mother's sons" (1:6). Each of these figures serves to represent the generational continuance of wise housebuilding through proper relationship.

The woman in the Song twice mentions her mother's house. First, it is the place where she determines to take her lover after seeking and finding him; specifically, she states that she brought him "into the room of her who conceived me" (3:4). Second, she expresses her wish to lead him "into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me" (8:2). Munro refers to this as the "place of security *par excellence.*"[89] This may also allude to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20-33 as a mother figure who calls all to obey her voice.[90] Solomon's mother is mentioned as crowning him on his wedding day (3:11). The woman states in 8:5 that she aroused her lover – or

[88] Murphy tentatively suggests that the Proverbs riddle of the virtuous wife (cf. 1:6, 31:10) may be key in understanding the personification of Wisdom as a woman. See Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 27. I understand the virtuous wife to be a symbol of a wise, committed relationship upon which an enduring house of wisdom can be built. The Song is also a riddle which urges the reader to identify the woman as a symbol of wisdom who is seeking and desiring the same.

[89] Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs,* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 70.

[90] See Murphy, *Tree of Life,* 16

as will be argued later, love personified – under the apple tree, where "your mother was in labor with you, There she was in labor and gave you birth." In every instance, the mothers are connected in their roles as "bearers and supporters of children."[91] In the Egyptian love poem, "The Stroll," the girl speaks of her lover as the neighbor of her mother's house, but she cannot go to him, and in fact her mother has ordered her not to. She laments that if only he knew of her desires for him, "he would send (word) to my mother."[92] The mother, there, seems to be the arbiter of love. In the Song of Songs, the mother and her house create pictures of security, a place for love to be realized, and life to be continued in subsequent generations.

In Song 6:9, the man praises the woman as being "her mother's only daughter" and "the pure child of the one who bore her," or "the favorite of the one who bore her."[93] She is unique and perfect, not just in the eyes of the man who loves her, but in the eyes of her mother. Perhaps her mother, who conceived, labored, and bore the woman, is to be seen here as rejoicing over the continuation of lovemaking in the next generation. This is not just any lovemaking, but wise lovemaking as the mother herself experienced and thus resulted in the birth of the woman who is now being praised not just by her but by all the women who gaze upon her (6:9). The woman is perhaps being celebrated for following her wise mother's teachings (8:2), becoming wise herself as she seeks to build a blessed house in her own generation.[94]

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[91] Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 69

[92] Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 52 (Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group C, No. 32)

[93] *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

[94] This thought is supported by Munro, who suggests that in her references to the mother's conceiving and laboring, the woman in the Song could be referring to the womb as her first home. Thus, her "mother's house," where she sets out to secure love for herself (3:4; 8:2; cf. 8:5), is a poetic way of showing that love, like birth, is a new start to a new generation. See Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron,* 71

The mother is indirectly mentioned in several other places, each time in connection to sibling imagery. The woman expresses her wish that her lover was as a brother to her, "who nursed at my mother's breasts" (8:1); this type of intimate connection would have allowed her to kiss him openly and bring him back to her mother's house where she could more freely give him her love (8:2). Her mother is also mentioned indirectly in 1:6, also in reference to the sibling connection: "my mother's sons." That the woman does not say "brothers," creates a distance from her brothers, who, for whatever reason were angry with her in 1:6. In 8:8-9, though they are not mentioned as brothers directly, it is likely that they are the ones speaking about their "little sister" and wondering what they should do with her on the day she is spoken for. The references to walls and doors appear to be about maintaining her chastity. In Israel, it was critical for women, as bearers of children, to remain chaste before marriage and faithful within marriage and properly perpetuate their family's lineage.[95] Much appears to be out of her hands when her brothers are involved; yet it is the actions of her brothers that allow her to reveal her desires for her lover (1:6-7; 8:10). Ironically, the house they wish to make out of her is not successful in bringing peace, no matter how fortified or beautified it is on the outside.

The daughters of Jerusalem in the Song are ever present as they watch the couple's relationship unfold, as well as hear the woman's advice to them about love (2:7, 3:5; 8:4). From her mother, to the woman, to the daughters, the Song illustrates generational wisdom about love via feminine metaphor. The woman had mentioned that her mother was the one who instructed her (8:2), and it was in her mother's house that she and her lover could secure their love. In the refrains, she becomes the teacher her mother was (cf. Prov. 1:8-9; 8:32-33), now to the next

[95] David Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 119:2 (2000), 237.

generation. The wisdom tradition had to do with urging every generation to stay within the way of wisdom, rather than seek selfish desires, and thus find blessing.[96] However, the advice could only come by way of someone who found success in their own life, if those listening were going to find success as well.[97] In ancient Near Eastern tradition, "…the one who knows instructs the less knowledgeable."[98] The woman in the Song has something to teach these daughters about love – specifically about the love that she has found. This is the foundation for wise housebuilding, which encompasses much more than fleeting physical, sexual fulfillment. The concern of wise housebuilding, in the conceptual sphere of the home, is for continuing, generational success in life and the love that sustains the critical role of relationship in the created order.[99]

Limitations

While the lovers in the Song of Songs and their love are admired by the watching public (1:4, 5:1, 6:9), the outer level of the Song's chiastic structure, especially, is not the end of the

[96] Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 28

[97] Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love,* 105-06

[98] Sara J. Denning-Bolle, "Wisdom and Dialogue in the Ancient Near East," *Numen* 34:2 (1987), 221. See, for example, "Teachings of Ptah-Hotep," a text from Old Kingdom Egypt, in which Ptah-Hotep instructed both teachers and students on how to maintain wisdom and integrity: Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 315-320.

[99] Van Pelt suggests that the didactive nature of the Song is similar to Proverbs 1-9, and so it can rightly be considered wisdom literature, which is "grounded in creation and the created order" and therefore is natural for it to speak of marriage. See Miles V. Van Pelt, "Song of Songs," *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 419. However, not all scholars agree that the love the couple shares is restricted to marriage. Garrett and House believe the Song teaches lessons about love and sexuality within an ideal monogamous, heterosexual marriage (see Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 103). In contrast, Andruska argues that the lovers in the Song are unmarried (see Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love,* 14), as does Fox, who states that both Egyptian love poems and the Song are about unmarried young lovers (see Fox, *Song of Songs,* xxiii). I believe it is best to not be distracted by arguments regarding marital status and simply see the couple as exclusively committed to one another throughout the Song, while noting those places where marital terminology such as a "wedding" (3:11) and "bride" (Song 4) are used to confirm that commitment.

story. In the most earthly and daily sphere of existence pictured in the Song, the woman is unable to experience a full and lasting union through her own efforts.

The couple is sometimes pictured as being separated by physical barriers, be that natural topography or architectural structures. After introductory comments (1:1-4), the woman is immediately described as vulnerable and exposed to the literal burning sun and the figurative burning gaze of the daughters of Jerusalem and the burning of her brother's anger (1:5-6).[100] The parallelism of 1:5 conveys that she sees herself as black "like the tents of Kedar" and beautiful "like the curtains of Solomon." The dark-colored tents of Kedar were those of pastoral, nomadic tribes in the desert lands, exposed to the sun just as she was,[101] wandering and vulnerable, without a permanent home. At the same time, she saw herself as beautiful, like the curtains of Solomon; though these building materials also implied impermanence (cf. 1 Chron. 17:1), their association with Solomon, famous for his building projects (1 Kings 5-8), imply that the woman had a desire for something more permanent. This is confirmed in the next few verses, where she speaks to her lover, asking him to tell her where he is so she can come to him where he rests his flocks.[102] This search carries on the picture of a pastoral, nomadic environment. Nomadic pastoral herders were one of three permeable social categories in the ancient Near East, along with farmers and urban settlements.[103] The sheep and goat herders required regular sources of

[100] The word חָרַר can mean "to be hot, scorched, burn" (BDB, 359).

[101] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1994), 47.

[102] The idea of rest implies security. Consider Numbers 10:33-35, where the LORD was believed to return to Israel when a resting place was found for the ark. Also see Ruth 3:1, where Naomi sought rest and security for Ruth in Boaz. See also Ezekiel 25:6, where the picture of a resting place for flocks is used to describe the settlement of enemy people in the land of Ammon, as punishment upon Ammon.

[103] John F. Robertson, "Social Tensions in the Ancient Near East," *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 204.

water and pasture, so were likely tied to villages,[104] but they were still constantly moving. The woman pictures her lover as one of these shepherds, and also pictures the difficulties she has in trying to find him on her own so that she can be with him. She remains veiled, vulnerable, exposed, living among tents, as she continues the search (1:7-8). In 2:8-17, the woman exclaims that she hears and sees her beloved making his way over barriers of mountains and hills to get to her, yet he remains barricaded from her by a wall, left to gaze through the windows and the lattice. He calls her to arise and come away with him to experience the newness of spring and the life it brings. As she remains within the house, he likens her to a dove hiding in "the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff" (2:14), and he expresses his desire to see her face and hear her voice. It is not entirely clear who is speaking in 2:15, but the imagery of catching foxes that ruin their vineyards (cf. 1:6) that are in blossom reveals the need for continued efforts to protect what they are building together. This is further supported by the woman's words in 2:16-17; in her first declaration, she reveals that they are committed to one another, and refers to her lover as pasturing [his flock] among the lilies. Has she finally found where he is (cf. 1:7)? If so, she still cannot find a way to get to him, so she urges him to continue seeking after her as he did when he first arrived, as a gazelle or young stag, leaping and bounding over mountains and hills (2:17; 2:8-9).

In the abstract statements regarding love in 8:6-7, the mention of "death" is prima facie evidence of the physical barriers or limitations they face. Their love cannot stop death from happening. The most they can hope for is that their love, passion, and jealousy will sustain their relationship as tenaciously as death, which claims everyone. The hope expressed here is similar to Qohelet, who understood that death could not be avoided by human effort, yet he taught that

[104] Ibid., 207

what *was* in human hands was our attitude toward the good things that life offered while we are living it (Eccl. 8:15, 9:7-10, et. al.).

As mentioned earlier, the woman's brothers appear to have a measure of control over her, requiring her to work in the vineyards (1:6). In 8:8-9, their comments also indicate that they are responsible for ensuring her chastity until she is marriageable age. They use architectural language. If she is a wall, they will "build upon her a battlement of silver," and if she is a door, "we will enclose her with boards of cedar" (8:9). In 7:10-13, the woman calls to the man to go into the countryside (cf. 2:8-17) and to see if all was blooming and ready to support their life together. But in 8:1-2, she again speaks of a desire that was not possible in that current state. In fact, she wishes that he were her brother – a socially accepted, intimate relationship that would allow them to publicly express their love without being condemned by onlookers. If that were only their situation, then she would be able to give him all that she has been storing up for him, and they could finally be together (8:3). But as of that time to which she refers, the couple is still under societal expectations "hostile to their relationship."[105]

Qohelet understood the need to "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love…" as the portion given to all men (Eccl. 9:9), even as he struggled with the realization that death would come to both the good and the wicked, and he would never understand this side of heaven why God allowed what he saw to be injustice in the world. Job, too, understood well that wisdom was unattainable within the confines of this earthly sphere (Job 28). Lady Wisdom's role on earth is also limited. As Rundus argues, her home in Proverbs 9 is secure, but she still exists on and thus remains vulnerable on earth. In fact, she herself is homeless in Proverbs 1-8.[106] "The goods

[105] Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire," 242

[106] Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman,* 209

offered by wisdom can only be for the possibility of a richer, better, longer, and more comfortable mortal life"[107]

In the outermost levels of the Song's chiastic structure (1:2-2:17, 6:1-8:14), the woman begins as a wandering nomad. She is seeking to build a home with her lover. But the reality is, she exists where the permanence she desires is just out of her own reach. As wisdom literature, the Song is illustrating the delicate balance that is required to successfully live in such tension. Bartholomew and O'Dowd write, "The earliest Wisdom literature was written and spoken to equip its hearers with a sense of the day-to-day patterns needed to play our role in an orderly but fallen world."[108] Just like the Proverbs 31 woman, who is to be praised for her desire to live out wisdom in the world, the woman of the Song is praised for her ongoing efforts at relational union and housebuilding with her lover. Even in her nomadic, inaccessible place, she is still seen as beautiful, as the man recognizes that her desire is for a permanent place with him alone (1:7; 4:1-15). In the meantime, she continues to long for their union and to call for him to keep seeking to come to her (2:17; 8:14). And he continues to ask to see her face and hear her voice (2:14; 8:13).

An important point needs to be made regarding the place of relationship and housebuilding efforts in the Song: the woman is dependent on her relationship with her lover to obtain a secure dwelling place, but the man never expresses dependence on her. Certainly, he seeks intimacy with her, reassures her of her value and beauty, and calls her to a new and better life. He does not, however, express lovesickness as she does (2:5; 5:8). He also never expresses the need for her to draw him after her, while she does call for him to draw her after him (1:4). In 2:1-4, he assures her of her beauty and value, while her compliments to him have to do with the

[107] Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman,* 210

[108] Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature,* 27

security he has given to her. She urges him to continue coming after her (2:17; 8:14), and he graciously says that he will (4:6). As much as she seeks to bring him *in* (3:4, 8:2), she depends on him to come to her and bring her *out* (2:10-14; 4:8), and to hold on to her even through chaos and death (8:6-7). The barriers between them are always something that *she* must be willing to cross when the time comes for love (2:9-10; 5:2-6), and her invitation in 4:16 finally ends with their secure union in 5:1 (the center of the Song's chiastic structure). However, it is also true that her motivation for, and perhaps even her ability to invite him in and open to him, is because he acted first. She is already well aware of the beauty of his love (1:2-4), which set her longing into motion. He comes to her in 2:8-14 and in 5:2; she needs only to respond. Also, as noted earlier, his references to her as a locked garden and sealed fountain (4:12) are likely due to his care and attention (cf. 8:12, Prov. 5:15-19).

Conclusion

In these reflections of the type of love being illustrated in the Song, along with the limitations of the woman's wisdom and efforts and her dependence upon her lover, I begin to consider the identities of the man and woman in the Song at their allegorical levels. The lover in the Song is presented as more than just a mere man. His presence and power are described as able to secure a love that goes beyond the earthly sphere, where barriers to ultimate security cannot be overcome by any human. The woman cannot reach him on her own, but when he arrives on the scene, their love becomes possible. The only One in the rest of the biblical canon who performs such miracles is God.

In addition, unlike early Jewish and Christian allegorical interpreters who saw the woman as the symbol of either Israel or the Church, I appeal to the way the Song focuses less on the woman's identity within a particular group in a particular dispensation, and more on the

motivation and actions of her heart. She is, most generally, representative of God's faithful covenant partner. She is more than just God's chosen nation or institution through which He reveals Himself, but she is the one who chooses to act in wisdom and seeks what wisdom seeks: a pure and perfect, enduring love. As I will note in future chapters, she as the covenant partner of God also embodies the full blessings of that covenant – including the fertility of the land's flora and fauna.

Scholars who understand the Song to be merely about the goodness of human love and sexuality fall short of its message. The Song's idealistic, larger-than-life mood lifts it beyond temporary, earthly experience. Scripture's own teaching on wisdom points us beyond this earthly sphere to a divine source through the fear of the LORD. Whatever homes or human relationships we build on a sin-cursed, broken earth are not ultimately secure. This is contra Webb, who while recognizing the realism in the Song in the struggles the couple faces to maintain their love, maintains that "the dominate note of the song," is that love is beautiful and fulfilling,[109] and the message is one that celebrates the goodness of both body and soul and celebrates the beauty of sexual love.[110] Hess supports this same interpretation, writing that "physical love remains the focus of the Song, and thus must never be lost in any identification of the major theme."[111] Passion is powerful, Hess concludes, and it is the closest we can ever get to God this side of eternity.[112] If that is the ultimate message of the Song, however, we end the search for love in a dark place. As the beloved in the Song can attest, any effort to build a house via mere human

[109] Webb, *Five Festal Garments,* 27

[110] Ibid., 32

[111] Hess, *Song of Songs,* 33

[112] Ibid., 33-34

effort is burdened with danger, hard work, disappointment, and lovesickness in longing.[113] Are temporary moments of pleasure all we can hope for until we reach heaven?

Duguid is partially correct when he notes the struggles that the couple faces in their search for one another and concludes that their committed love is not enough to protect them against the dangers of the night or ultimately, death.[114] He concludes that an understanding of the brokenness of human relationships points us to a more perfect relationship with God. But I believe the Song does more than just illustrate the couple's struggles in the hope that a reader might consider transcendent hope in God.

The Song is also not simply an arbitrary spiritualized allegory, detached from the text. As I will argue in the next chapter, in the middle level of the Song's chiastic structure (3:1-11 and 5:2-16), the Song enters the heavenly realm through the language of court, kingdom, and temple. There, in a mysterious wedding of King Solomon flanked by pericopes of the woman's searching the city streets for her lover, her lover finally comes within her grasp. Supported by a cultural and conceptual ancient Near Eastern background found within the text, along with the specific mention of King Solomon, it will be my contention that this section communicates God's presence breaking through the barrier between earth and heaven, entering time and history, and making the divine-human relationship possible. The lover's divine identity comes more clearly into focus. Rooted in the picture of King Solomon in 3:6-11, which is both historically based and metaphorically presented, this new reality is allegorically pictured in the elevated longing and

[113] In his Christological and analogical approach to the Song, Mitchell adds that human marriage itself is only an earthly institution; there will be no marriage in eternity. In theological terms, he describes human marriage as "sanctification" and references to Christ and His Bride as "justification" (Matt. 22:30; 1 Cor. 7:31). See Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 27-28.

[114] Duguid, *The Song of Songs*, 47-48

increased excitement of the beloved for her lover, the lover's nearness, and a chance for her to respond and make the union a reality.

Chapter 4: The Sphere of the Temple

Chapter 3 reviewed the elements in the Song that align with the most localized, earthly realm of conceptual order in the ancient world: the home. In this realm, as pictured by Van Leeuwen, individuals work with wisdom to build and fill their houses, mirroring the cosmic divine activity of creating and provisioning.[1] The pattern brought purpose and, as was their hope, plentifulness to everyday life.

The couple in the Song expresses their desire to be together (1:7; 2:10; 3:1-4; 5:2-7; 7:11-8:2), and they express joy in each other's presence (1:15-16; 5:1). The woman even speaks of the dwellings they share (1:16-17; 7:13). This longing for union pervades every part of the Song. As noted in chapter three, the Song conveys that the avenue to realize this desire is an active, exclusive, and mutual love. The woman exemplifies wisdom in her search to establish a proper relationship in which love can grow, and as she teaches others to do the same in every generation. She represents God's faithful covenant partner in response to His gracious extension of unfailing love.

However, as also noted in chapter three, in the outer level of the Song's chiastic structure (1:2-2:17, 6:1-8:14), the ability of earthly love and wisdom to build a secure house is shown to be limited. The woman cannot, on her own, obtain perfect wisdom to build a lasting house where she and her lover are together. At this level, the Song does not provide a straightforward narrative of the man and woman seeking each other, finding each other, and living happily ever after. Their efforts are ongoing, and social barriers exist. This picture implies that wise

[1] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 400.

housebuilding and filling requires something more than what can be realized solely within the earthly sphere.

As I will show in this chapter, in Song 3:1-11 and 5:2-16, the Song's chiastic structure moves from the ancient conceptual sphere of the house to a more focused concentration on the sphere of the "temple," using Van Leeuwen's terminology. The ancient concept of "house," according to Van Leeuwen, covers several realms of existence, which he describes as "concentric, interactive circles, utilizing the ancient pattern of micro- and macro-cosmos," and explains that "Each house is like one in a series of Russian babushka dolls, in which each smaller doll nests inside the larger."[2] By this he means that according to common ancient cosmology, the cosmos, as the conceptual dwelling place of God/the gods, is the house that encompasses all other houses. As noted in chapter three, people sought to model their daily lives after the pattern of the cosmic house.

If we picture the home as the smallest in the set of these conceptual "babushka dolls," the next largest realm in which the home nests, as termed by Van Leeuwen, is the temple. In general, the temple in ancient society and the area around it was understood to be the house of the deity on earth. David and Solomon both referred to the temple of Yahweh as a house (בַּיִת) (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 6). Neighboring civilizations also referred to their temples as the houses of their deity. For example, in Egypt, temples were referred to as *hut netjer*, "the abode of the god."[3] Temples in Mesopotamia were also considered houses. For example, in Babylon, the temple called Esagil

[2] Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *From the Foundations,* 401

[3] Miroslav Verner, *Temple of the World: Sanctuaries, Cults, and Mysteries of Ancient Egypt* (American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 32.

meant "house whose top is high,"[4] and The Eanna in Uruk meant "House of Heaven" in Sumerian[5] and was believed to be the terrestrial residence of the deities Anu and Ishtar.[6]

In general, ANE temples and their divine statues and symbols were distinguished from the mundane through their unique structure and adornments. The interior of the temple was "severely restricted" to humans, and though the temples were referred to as "houses" of the gods, the term was analogic.[7] Humans understood the concept of a house, and so could understand the idea of the god dwelling in his or her "house," yet the temple's structure and appearance were clearly set apart from any ordinary house. As Hundley points out, to show that the temples were the divine residence, they were constructed with much more costly materials, and the structure itself was aimed at "inspiring awe and submission."[8] For example, a text attributed to Amenemhet, Egypt's king – who was believed to be divine – boasted of subduing chaos and establishing order and then claimed: "I built myself a house decked with gold, its ceiling of lapis lazuli, walls of silver, floors of [acacia wood], doors of copper, bolts of bronze, made for eternity, prepared for all time. I know because I am its lord."[9] In a Sumerian inscription, a military standard for the god Nanna is also described in terms of precious materials: "a great divine standard, a tree fit for a (rich) harvest, evoking wonder, colored with gold, silver, and

[4] Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East,* Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series, No. 3, ed. Amelie Kuhrt (2013), 57.

[5] Rocío Da Riva and Jamie Novotny, "A Cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II from Uruk in the Collection of David and Cindy Sofer, London, Displayed in the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem," *The IOS Annual Volume 22: "Telling of Olden Kings"* (Brill, 2022), 3.

[6] See "The Laws of Hammurabi," *COS* 2.131:335-353. Also, "Stories of Gilgamesh" in Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels,* 39.

[7] Hundley, 9-11

[8] Ibid., 12

[9] "Amenemhet," *COS* 1.36:66-68.

shining lapis lazuli."[10] And after the destruction of her city, the goddess Ningal laments specifically that the loss of the precious materials that set it apart were no longer there: "My silver, gems and lapis-lazuli have verily been scattered about – let me cry: 'O my possessions!' My treasures the swamp has verily swallowed up – let me cry: 'O my possessions!'"[11]

Indeed, the most precious earthly materials and architecture set divine abodes and images apart from their mundane counterparts and aligned them more directly to their divine habitations. In sites uncovered in Egypt and Mesopotamia, temples appear to have been increasingly more adorned as one neared the cult statue in the inner sanctuary, and portals with doors and large creature statues marked the divisions into increasingly sacred space, while the spaces increasingly also rose upward, with the inner sanctuary occupying the space closest to heaven.[12] In some temples, like the Nabu temple, the walls also were built increasingly thicker as the areas became more sacred.[13] The divine statues in Assyria were constructed of precious metals.[14] In Egypt, it was believed that Re empowered the lesser gods to enter stone images in temples, and that he fashioned them in their likeness out of gold, silver and costly stone.[15]

In Israel, the tabernacle and temple also were set apart from the mundane through their dimensions and materials. As the place where God chose to dwell among His people, the

[10] "Shu-Ilishu," *COS* 2.93:246-47

[11] "Lamentations over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," *COS* 1.166:535-539

[12] Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings,* 73-74

[13] Ibid., 75. See also a description of the Karnak temple in Egypt, 30-48.

[14] G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God, NSBT,* Vol. 17, ed. D.A. Carson (IVP Academic, 2004), 97.

[15] Ibid., 97-98. For a description of a precious metals and materials used to construct a palanquin and divine image for Osiris, see a translation of a 12th Dynasty stela of Ikhernofret from Abydos in Nicky Nielsen, *Pharaoh Seti I: Father of Egyptian Greatness* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2018), 84.

structures had to reflect a suitable place for the divine.[16] The LORD instructed Moses to collect offerings for the tabernacle: gold, silver and bronze, blue, purple and scarlet material, fine linen, goat hair, rams' skins dyed red, porpoise skins, acacia wood, oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and setting stones for the ephod and for the breast piece (Exod. 25:1-7). Following the list, the LORD tells Moses: "Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8). Likewise, the Solomonic temple (and its furnishings) was uniquely constructed with precious materials including cedar, cypress, gold, bronze, as well as various artistic carvings (1 Kings 6-7).

The dimensions and materials used in ancient temples were physical reminders that the temple, and their divine statues within, were sacred, and illustrated ancient Near Eastern thought that the temple was the connector between the heavenly and earthly realms. The very names of the temples communicated this belief. For example, Eduranki, the temple of Ishtar at Nippur, means "Bond between heaven and earth."[17] In Babylon, a large temple complex was constructed and called Etemenanki, Sumerian for "The House [Temple] at the boundary of the heaven and earth."[18] The Old Testament, also, alludes to there being a cosmic pattern for the earthly temple (Ps. 78:69).

The divine presence condescending to the temple was understood to provide security on earth. The pagan ancient Near Eastern peoples lived according to the concept of a "Great Symbiosis," in which humans provided for the gods' needs, and in turn, the gods could spend

[16] Beale may rightly argue that the materials were to reflect the heavens, the sheen of the sun, moon and stars. See Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission,* 64.

[17] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 71.

[18] Louis L. Orlin, *Life and Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 12-13.

time defending chaos and maintaining order.[19] In Enuma Elish (Epic of Creation), Marduk resolves to create humankind for the purpose of reducing the burden of the gods so the gods can rest and set up their thrones securely in Babylon.[20] Ancient ritual texts provide insight into the lengths that communities went to ensure they did not anger the gods and so that the gods remained among them. For example, a daily ritual in the Karnak temple in Egypt calls for the priest, who approaches the cult statue, to follow strict order and speeches. At one point, he is told to say, "I have come not to drive the god away from his throne. It is to put the god upon his throne that I have come."[21] Walton helpfully summarizes:

> The temple was the central and fundamental component of the cosmos, the centerpiece of the function and identity of the community and the principal mechanism for the interface between humans and the divine. As the god sat enthroned in the temple, the order established through creation was maintained, the forces threatening that order were held at bay, and the viability of the human community was maintained.[22]

The same general idea was understood in regard to the temple in Jerusalem, though there was no cult statue to care for, nor did YHWH need humans to provide Him with food or clothes. Perhaps the clearest example of a similar practice of approaching the divine presence was on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest Aaron was instructed to approach the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant resided (Leviticus 16). He was required to bring specific offerings, wear specific garments, be bathed, enter with a thick cloud of incense, and sprinkle blood from the sacrifices on the mercy seat of the ark. The purpose of the ritual was to make atonement for

[19] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 90

[20] "Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)," *COS* 1.111:390-402.

[21] "Daily Ritual of the Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak, P. Berlin 3055 – A Selection," *COS* 1.34:55-57.

[22] Walton, 73

the sins of the people – to obtain forgiveness that could only come from God and by approaching His presence.

More than just the tabernacle or temple building, the conceptual sphere that Van Leeuwen labels "the temple," included the wider sacred city and public life, in which the building stood. For example, Jerusalem was the chosen city for the only temple to be built in Israel (2 Chronicles 6:6; Deut. 12:5; 1 Kgs. 11:32, 36). Enclosed with walls, the whole city – not just the temple – was considered sacred (Ps. 122). Walton notes that in Mesopotamia, cities contained public buildings centered around the temple, so that the whole city was considered a temple complex, and the ziggurat was like a tower that reached into heaven.[23] In "The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur," the goddess Ningal calls the entire city her house and wails over its destruction by a storm ordered by the god Enlil. The text describes her: "The woman bitterly utters the wailing for her devastated house."[24] She cries "Alas, my city!" and "Alas my house," as she grieves over the deserted Ur and its empty fields and orchards being overtaken by weeds.[25] In Egypt, the sanctuary within the temple was the place where the god resided, but the temple complex included the primary building as well as the walls around its temple courts and could extend to the entire city and surrounding area as long as the sacred was clearly distinguished from the mundane.[26]

Having already illustrated wise housebuilding according to proper relationship in the daily sphere of the home, I will argue that the Song also addresses wise housebuilding in the

[23] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought,* 80

[24] Line 255, translated in Nili Samet, "The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 69.

[25] Ibid., lines 247-248, page 68

[26] Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings,* 16

sphere of the temple, particularly as the chiastic structure moves closer to the climax. There is no direct reference to the temple or God; however, as poetry the Song urges the reader to make connections via the imagery and allusions that are used. A pericope centered around King Solomon, Jerusalem/Zion, and a perfusion of precious incense and materials pulls the Song into a more public, numinous atmosphere. Here, the Song's movement is in the conceptual sphere of the "temple," away from the strictly earthly realm to the divine realm as it instructs in wise housebuilding.

The Presence of God in the Song

The Song of Songs does not explicitly mention God, or Yahweh. Because of this fact, some scholars have suggested that the Song is not religious or theological, but rather is a secular song, or collection of songs, about human love and sexuality.[27] However, just because a text does not contain God's name does not mean that He is absent. In fact, if the Song is indeed an allegory in which the lover *is* God, then He is very present – especially when He speaks to the beloved.

As poetry, the Song should be approached with a sensitivity toward allusions and literary devices that point toward the intended meaning. Melton offers helpful insight through her use of

[27] Some examples: Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of The Song of Songs,* Bible and Literature Series, ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1994)*;* Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs,* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther,* New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

the phrase "literary absence"[28] of God in the Song. The "literary absence" of God does not have to mean that He is not at the center of the text; rather, "literary absence" can be a highly effective literary device to communicate more *about* Him. No human can understand God or His ways unless there is some sort of conceptual bridge. As Melton explains, God's literary absence in the Song makes room for an understandable relationship – that between a man and woman – to inform a relationship that is much more numinous, that between God and man.[29]

Thus, as is the focus of this dissertation, the Song as an allegory can teach about God and His love in ways that humans can understand, without having to mention God by name. More concretely, the text itself, as I will show, provides clues to help the reader conclude that the relationship being described moves beyond the human realm to the divine realm – the place where the woman, allegorically God's faithful covenant people, can experience a union that results in gladness and joy.

In the City

The center part of the Song's chiastic structure includes two pericopes of the woman's searches for her lover at night in the city (3:1-5; 5:2-8). In this context, the lover comes within the woman's grasp. She becomes a more active pursuer, rather than simply asking her lover to come to her or wishing that the situation was different.

Previously, the woman was pictured as exposed to the elements, a vineyard worker and a nomad in search of her lover in the open pastures (1:5-8). She was separated from him (2:5-14; 8:1-2) and remained dependent on his pursuit and protection of her (1:4; 2:17; 7:11; 8:6-7, 14).

[28] Brittany N. Melton, "Where Is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence," Oudtestamentische Studien, Vol. 73, ed. H. Ausloos (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 58.

[29] Ibid., 75-76

The beloved's nighttime quests appropriately take place in the city context. In ancient society, a city (feminine, עִיר) was generally distinguished from a village by a wall that surrounded it.[30] The same spelling, but in the masculine form, can mean "excitement"[31] and "waking, or wakeful, one."[32] A derivative, יָעִיר, is found in Job 8:6, where Bildad tells Job that if Job were pure, then God *would awaken* to bless Job. עוּר, the root of עִיר, can mean "rouse oneself, awake."[33] This root appears multiple times in the Song, including within the pericopes in the city context (2:7; 3:5; 4:16; 5:2; 8:4, 5). This is not likely a coincidence. In 3:1-5 and 5:2-8, the woman is on her bed, seeking or awake, not sleeping. Her desire incites her to go into the city streets, surrounded by walls which are guarded by watchmen, who are also awake for the purpose of protecting the city. The woman believes she can find her lover within this place.

The lover had previously urged the woman to arise (קוּם) and come with him (2:10, 13). In 3:2 and 5:5, in the context of the city, she does rise. In the first instance, she rises to follow her strong, inward desire; in the second, she is sleeping, but her heart is awake and so she rises after her lover comes to her and calls her to open to him. In 3:1-5, her inward desire enables her to seek him and find him and to bring him to her mother's house. In 5:2-7, she delays, and he leaves before she gets to the door. This time, when she goes into the city streets, she does not find him, and the city watchmen beat her and take her shawl. In this second pericope, there appears to be a connection to the woman's hesitation and subsequent vulnerability. The watchmen, who did not

[30] See עִיר in BDB, 746, and TWOT, 664

[31] TWOT, 655, and BDB, 735

[32] BDB, 1105

[33] See BDB, 734

react in the first instance, do react in this instance. Their role appears to be as decision-makers for whether the woman can be allowed to pass by them to be united with her lover.

Furthermore, between these sections is a pericope that seems to imply that the city in which the beloved is searching and which the watchmen are protecting is not just any city, but the sacred, capital, temple city of Jerusalem. This is supported by the direction in which the caravan is traveling ("up from the wilderness," 3:6; cf. Psalm 122; John 5:1), the mention of Solomon/King Solomon (3:7, 9), his "mighty men of Israel" (3:7), and the watching daughters of Jerusalem/Zion (3:10-11).

In addition, while 3:6-11 and 5:9-16 appear to be about a royal wedding and a lover with perfect appearance, the imagery provides clues to a deeper, allegorical meaning, in how it alludes to the divine presence. The Jerusalem context adds support for this conclusion. In the next sections, I will discuss how the picture of a wedding is used to describe the otherwise indescribable divine-human love relationship.

Union with the Divine

Lady Wisdom claimed to bring wisdom to earthly rulers: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all who judge rightly" (Prov. 8:15-16). Not only does her knowledge of the divine order on earth bring blessing to all who listen, she also actively establishes justice and righteousness through kings. Without wisdom, kings would not know how to rule in such ways. Only wisdom could bring the divine and earthly realms together in harmony by teaching knowledge and fear of the LORD (8:12-14). In the ancient world, the king was understood to be a mediator between heaven and earth because of the divine wisdom he received, particularly displayed by establishing peace and wealth in his kingdom and through temple

building and filling.[34] Kings claimed to receive special, divine instructions for the location and the actual building of the temple. In the Old Testament, Yahweh gives his representatives – Moses, David/Solomon – instructions on building the tabernacle and temple, which are then filled with Yahweh's glory (Exodus 40, 1 Kings 8). The Cylinders of Gudea describe Gudea as receiving a plan for the temple complex in Lagash, of Sumeria, from the god Enki: "Nisaba opened the house of wisdom for him, Enki prepared the plan of the house for him."[35] The temple, called Eninnu, was built and dedicated for the god Ningursu, the patron deity of Lagash. In the cylinders, Gudea is lauded and blessed and given the power to appoint officers over the temple complex: "for Gudea, the shepherd of Ningursu, to lift (his) head toward heaven as (if wearing) a beautiful crown."[36]

A crown in the ancient world appears to have symbolized the king's connection to the divine realm. In another example, a prayer from an Akkadian coronation ritual reads:

> May Assur and Ninlil, the lords of your crown, set your crown on your head for a hundred years! May your foot in Ekur and your hands stretched toward the breast of Assur, your god, be agreeable! May your priesthood and the priesthood of your sons be agreeable to Assur, your god! With your straight scepter widen your land! May Assur give you authority, obedience, concord, justice and peace![37]

The mediatorial symbol of a crown is also evidenced in the garb of the consecrated priests of Israel (Exod. 29:6; 39:30; Lev. 8:9), and in the connection between the royal crown and the testimony, which represented God's covenant with Israel (2 Kings 11:12, 2 Chron. 23:11).

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[34] Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House," *From the Foundations,* 405

[35] "The Cylinders of Gudea," *COS* 2.155.417-433

[36] "The Cylinders of Gudea," *COS* 2.155.431

[37] "A Prayer from a Coronation Ritual of the Time of Tukulti-Ninurta," *COS* 1.140:472

The Song of Songs explicitly mentions King Solomon in 3:6-11, where he, too, is seen as an active builder (3:9-10) and with a crown on his head (3:11). He was crowned, however, by his mother, and the pericope ends with a reference to Solomon's "wedding." His crown thus has something to do with relationship. At the literal level, the pericope is illustrating King Solomon's rule and his marriage. However, the imagery lends itself to a deeper, more spiritual connotation. In chapter three, I sought to show that proper exposition of the Song's similarities to ancient love poetry requires moving beyond simply seeing it as another ancient poem about love, to discovering what *kind* of love it is illustrating. This same method should be applied to studying Song 3:6-11. The greatest insights will not come by seeing it as just a wedding, but by digging deeper to discover what *kind* of "wedding" is being described. Certainly, it has something to do with the king, but as I will argue, the section is not just about a strictly earthly wedding but alludes to a union connected to the divine realm.

The speaker of this section cannot be known for certain, but it begins with a riddle-like question: "What is this coming up from the wilderness…" (3:6). מִי is used here as an interrogative pronoun and is tied to the feminine singular pronoun זֹאת. The same interrogative is used, and the woman is identified as the answer, in 6:10 and 8:5, so if we view the Song as a unity, then it appears the woman is implied here as well. The ambiguity leaves the question open.[38] However, because Solomon's name is subsequently mentioned in this pericope, and his wedding is named as the occasion (3:11), I propose – and will do so in more detail in chapter six of this dissertation – that Solomon should be seen here as being poetically portrayed as the bride of the lover, God. Solomon appears to be the one who is riding in the procession on his way to

[38] Exum, for instance, believes the word should be translated as "what" and that it refers to the caravan, which is a feminine noun. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 143.

the wedding, much like a royal bride would be transported to her wedding. The historical Solomon, as God's royal representative on earth and leader of the people, the receiver of wisdom and builder of the temple, served a unique role in Israel's existence and experience by establishing concrete symbols of God's covenant with and dwelling among them. His unique relationship with God was an avenue through which God also established a firmer, unique relationship with His covenant people, and thus the daughters of Zion are urged to gaze on King Solomon in this role (3:11).

The procession itself, of which Solomon is a part, is described in mediatorial terms. First, it is "… like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all scented powders of the merchant" (3:6). The combination of "wilderness" and "columns of smoke" hearkens back to the Israelites' wilderness wanderings, where they were led by the pillar (עַמּוּד) of cloud by day and of fire by night (Exodus 13, 14, et. al.). A different word for "pillar" (תִּימָרָה) is used in Song 3:6; this word is related to תָּמָר, or "palm tree," used in Song 7:7 to describe the woman's stature. However, the idea is the same in both – a picture of something tall and stretching to the heavens in a plume. Also, in 3:6, the mention of "smoke" ties the vision even more to the theophanic presence of God (Gen. 15:17; Exodus 19; 2 Samuel 22/Psalm 18; Isa. 4:5; Joel 2:30). In the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord was described as filling the tabernacle in a cloud (Exod. 40:34-35), and in Leviticus 8 and 9 the glory appears in fire at the inauguration of the priesthood. Only once a year could the high priest Aaron approach the inner sanctuary, where God's presence resided in a cloud over the atonement cover (Lev. 16:2).

The divine connections in Song 3:6-11 are further enhanced by the perfume of myrrh and frankincense and "all scented powders of the merchant (3:6)." By the second millennium B.C. there were well-established trade routes for merchants all across the ancient Near East,

particularly for incense like myrrh and frankincense produced in Arabia.[39] However, these commodities were extremely expensive and hard to obtain by the ordinary person, so most examples of their use come from royal and sacred texts, and specifically texts that have to do with kings and priests performing their sacred responsibilities in connecting the human and divine realms. For example, in the Pyramid Texts of Pharaoh Unis, incense and rising smoke are described as taking the pharaoh into the divine realm: "A footpath to the sky is laid down for me, that I might go up on it to the sky. I go up on the smoke of great censing…"[40] Later, the recitation references incense set on a fire, intermingling the pharaoh's scent with that of the incense, bringing the gods' scent to him and his scent to the gods, and allowing him to exist and live with the gods.[41] Specifically, ritual incense burning in Egypt, meant to connect kings with the divine realm, included burning frankincense in the morning, myrrh at noon, and a sacred blend in the evening.[42]

In the Israelite community, the high priest Aaron was required to burn a very specific kind of incense every morning and evening on a specially made altar in the tabernacle, so that it would burn perpetually before the LORD (Exod. 30:1-10; cf. 2 Chron. 2:4, 13:11). The altar was located in front of the veil to the holy of holies, near the ark of the covenant, the place where the LORD said he would meet with them (30:6). The incense included a specific recipe of various aromatics, including frankincense (30:34-35). On the Day of Atonement, Aaron was required to

[39] Kjeld Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel,* Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, Vol. 28 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 22, 26. See Gen. 37:25. Thus, that Solomon's litter is coming up from the wilderness with all of these fragrances also makes practical sense.

[40] See translation in James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts,* Writings from the Ancient World No. 38, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 52.

[41] Ibid., 53

[42] Elise Vernon Pearlstine, *Scent: A Natural History of Fragrance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022), 17.

take fire from the altar of burnt offering along with two handfuls of incense and take it into the Holy of Holies, ensuring that a cloud of incense would cover the testimony so that Aaron would not see the divine presence and die (Lev. 16:12-13). Myrrh, also mentioned in Song 3:6, was a key ingredient in the anointing oil used for consecrating the tabernacle and its contents, and Aaron and his sons (Exod. 30:23-25; cf. Song 1:13; 4:6, 14; 5:1; 5:5, 13).

Incense was also used for secular purposes, such as for sweet-smelling perfume or to cover the smell of a corpse in funerary rituals, so it can be argued that this vision in the Song is simply a picture of a public celebration – perhaps a royal wedding procession. While that may be the intended literal reading of the text, the allegorical reading of the divine presence is supported by the burning of incense in such vast amounts in an offering-like manner commonly consistent with ANE religious ritual. Again, the Song of Songs uses wedding language for the purpose of teaching about a particular kind of relationship. Here, it is clear that a royal wedding (3:11) is the literal picture, but rather than focus on a wedding and its more widely recognized customs of music and dancing and the bride's beauty and adornment, incense and fragrance become the central picture. From a canonical perspective, nowhere else in the Bible are plumes of smoke, perfumed with frankincense and myrrh, associated with any sort of actual wedding or wedding procession (royal or otherwise).[43] Rather, they are key ingredients in communion with the divine. The reader is supposed to see a lavishness that rises above the mundane and exceeds the human realm.[44]

[43] I also could not readily uncover any text from the ANE that described a human wedding with this type of picture.

[44] Consider also the magi, who being led by cosmic signs, brought Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:1-11). Also, Nicodemus is described as bringing an unusual, lavish amount of myrrh to Jesus's burial site (see John 19:39).

The connection that incense makes between the human and divine realms was a common concept in the ANE, so it is not a stretch to see this same idea being communicated in the Song. For instance, in Egypt, the "Ritual of Amon" describes incense as coming from the god Amun's body: "the incense of the god which has issued from his flesh, the sweat of the god which has fallen to the ground…"[45] Incense was considered not only a holy offering to the god, but the god himself. Wise explains, "Incense becomes the sensory equivalent of the cult statue – a manifestation in scent that complements the visual manifestation in gold or wood."[46] Myrrh and frankincense were the foundation for their incense rituals, which also included the Pharaoh blowing into the censer to animate a cult statue, cleanse the temple, and make offerings fit for divine consumption.[47]

The next verse (Song 3:7) describes the vision in more physical terms as it comes up from the wilderness: "the traveling couch of Solomon." BDB defines מִטָּה as a "couch, bed," commonly understood to be a piece of furniture on which to recline.[48] The bed is actively moving and guarded by a large regiment of mighty men with swords (3:7-8). Apparently, this bed needs great protection as it comes up from the wilderness – probably toward Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:27-28; Ezra 1:3; Psalms 120-134). Melville notes that in the ancient Near East, it was common practice in royal marriages among equal powers that the bride be brought to her new

[45] As translated in Elliott Wise, "'An Odor of Sanctity': The Iconography, Magic, and Ritual of Egyptian Incense," *Studia Antiqua* 7:1 (2009), 69.

[46] Ibid., 70.

[47] Ibid., 71-72

[48] BDB, 641. This is a different word than that used in 1:12, מֵסַב, which some English versions (NLT, ESV) translate as "couch." However, the verbal root is "turn about, go around, surround," so some more correctly translate as "table" (NASB, KJV, NIV).

home via huge military attendants and a large dowry,[49] and that may be a literal picture that fits here if we imagine the bed being occupied by a bride coming up from the wilderness, along with the mention of Solomon's wedding as the occasion in 3:11.[50] At the same time, 3:9 mysteriously states that the warriors are "guarding against the terrors of the night." The same phrase, פַּחַד בַּלֵּילוֹת, appears in Psalm 91:5, in the context of trusting in the LORD and finding shelter with Him, and being guarded by angels. It is possible to see in this phrase and context in both the Song and the Psalm the literal level of a bride on her way to making a home with her bridegroom, as well as the allegorical level of a vision in which the procession covered in the smoke of incense, rising to heaven, and guarded by a retinue of mighty warriors, is a vision of pursuing union and security with the divine.

The furniture mentioned in 3:7 is different than that mentioned in 3:9. In 3:9, the אַפְּרְיוֹן is described as not just being owned by Solomon but made by Solomon. אַפְּרְיוֹן is a hapax legomenon, so its exact identification is difficult. It has a "seat," which implies a vehicle that moves, whether a chariot (1 Kgs. 4:26) or a saddle for beast of burden (Lev. 15:9). Some English Bible translations use "palanquin" for the vehicle, a word that is also used in the ancient translation of at least one Egyptian inscription that describes an ornately decorated barque for moving the divine image of Osiris: "I made for him a palanquin bearing the beauty of the foremost of the westerners, of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, bronze, Sesenedjem-wood and cedar of Lebanon…"[51] Whatever the vehicle might be in the Song, as Garrett and House rightly point out

[49] Sarah C. Melville, "Royal Women and the Exercise of Power in the Ancient Near East," *A Companion to the Ancient Near East,* ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 103.

[50] Garrett and House translate this as "royal litter," not just a bed, stating this is more than just an ordinary wedding procession. Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 179. Cf. 1 Kings 10:10.

[51] Translation of a 12th Dynasty stela of Ikhernofret from Abydos in Nielsen, *Pharaoh Seti I,* 84.

the materials used and the description of the quality of its construction shows its value and the care with which it was made.[52] Solomon constructed the "sedan chair from the timber of Lebanon," and with posts of silver, back of gold, and a seat of purple fabric" (3:9-10), all material that has royal and temple associations (Exodus 25-28, 35-36, 38-39; Numbers 3-4; 2 Chronicles 2-3; 1 Kings 6-7, 9-10; cf. Song 1:11).[53] The word "posts," particularly those made of silver, likely implies divine connections, as elsewhere in the Bible it is used in reference to the tabernacle and temple.[54]

In the ANE in general, and in Old Testament Scripture specifically, gold was especially associated with cultic contexts, and for more reasons than its opulence. Its beauty and luminosity was seen as reflecting the divine, and in some ANE contexts it was believed to be the material of which the gods' skin and flesh were made, and thus gold also came from the gods themselves[55] (similar to the incense being the gods and from the gods). Amzallag makes a compelling case that in Israel, there was a "gradation of preciousness" in the tabernacle in regards to how the precious metals were used. [56] Pure gold was only used in the inner sanctuary and in the furniture which represented the divine presence (the ark, table, censer), and ordinary or alloyed gold was used in the mediatorial items such as the cherubim (Ex. 25:17-18) the priestly raiment (Exodus 28), and the poles, attachments, frames and moldings (Exodus 25, 30:3-5). Therefore, gold was

[52] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 180

[53] See also Song 1:17 (cf. 1 Kgs. 6:9-10), where the woman speaks of the cedars and cypresses that form the structure of her and her lover's abodes.

[54] See Exodus 26-27, 35-36, 38-40; Numbers 3-4; 1 Kings 7; 2 Chronicles 3-4, et. al.

[55] Nissim Amzallag, "Beyond Prestige and Magnificence: The Theological Significance of Gold in the Israelite Tabernacle," *Harvard Theological Review,* 112:3 (2019), 297-98.

[56] Ibid., 298-99.

not only used to represent wealth or used for aesthetics, but theological meaning was attached to it.[57]

רָצוּף is a passive participle, and the root רֶשֶׁף is found twice in Song 8:6 in reference to love's flashes of fire that cannot be quenched (8:7). In both instances, love – not Solomon – appears to be what keeps everything together. Solomon sat on the seat of the palanquin, made of purple fabric – a color that typically symbolized royalty. In Song 3:10, the purpose of the אַפִּרְיֹן, made by Solomon, and fused together by love, is to give the next generation cause for celebration. The structure is secured and made for the daughters of Jerusalem (3:10),[58] and more specifically, for the daughters of Zion, who are called upon by the speaker of this section to "gaze on King Solomon…" (3:11). Solomon, as the king, may be the public figurehead of a divine-human union and the joy and gladness that results, but this picture of a wedding was for all to come and see and reflect on its meaning for their lives, as well.

"The king" in the Song

While the Song mentions "King Solomon" explicitly, it also makes general, direct reference to "the king" (1:4, 12). Hamilton, who interprets the Song messianically, understands "the king" and Solomon to be one and the same – the typological picture of Christ.[59] However, I

[57] Amzallag, "Beyond Prestige and Magnificence," 306-07. Amzallag further notes that gold and silver were often listed together because silver was a byproduct of the type of gold-silver alloy that was imported into the Levant. Both were believed to have divine origins because they were mined straight out of the earth, rather than being formed through human metallurgy (see 310-11)

[58] The preposition in front of "daughters" has been translated as "by" in the English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, and New Living Translation. "For", as per the King James Version, seems the most likely. Why would the daughters be involved in the construction, when their role throughout the Song is to watch and learn from the events played out before them? Here, they are directly told that all that was happening through Solomon was for their benefit. It is also possible that, as the NIV and others translate, "Daughters of Jerusalem" begins a new sentence, as a vocative.

[59] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.: Louisville, KY, 2015), 42, 71.

believe the two references in the Song are different. In Song 1:4 and 12, the reference appears to be to the lover, while in 3:6-11 King Solomon is mentioned directly. The image of "the king" in Song 1:4 and 12 creates a royal context, or background, for the Song, and in particular a royal context in which this king is securely dwelling in his house and on his throne. The king bringing the beloved into his bedchamber (1:4) and sitting at his table (1:12), is the activity of a royal figure who is presently in office and taking up residence in an official palace.[60] A number of scholars have concluded that "king" is simply a poetic device, a way to show how the woman thinks of her lover as royalty.[61] However, the title should be viewed as more than a simple romantic, poetic vision of the man she loves. He is uniquely celebrated by *all* of the maidens as the superior object of their affections, too (1:3-4).

In Chapter 6 of this dissertation, I will argue that the contextual background of the Song is the Davidic covenant and the Solomonic temple dedication, thus a concrete reason for all the court and kingdom imagery it contains. I will also briefly discuss the similarities between the Song and the royal Psalms, particularly Psalm 45; there, the "king" appears to be Yahweh as the King of all kings, and the King behind the earthly king, also in the context of marriage to His covenant people. The same explanation can apply in Song 1:4 and 12 – there, the lover is

[60] Palaces were also considered sacred in the ANE because the king was so close to the gods. See Gary Beckman, "Temple Building among the Hittites," *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* eds. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: UgaritVerlag, 2010), 71-72.

[61] Longman, *Song of Songs,* 84; Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 81; Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings* Ketuvim: *A Translation with Commentary* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 588; Hess, *Song of Songs,* 53; Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs,* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 35; G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 42; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 95. Garrett and House believe "king" is used as proleptic language about the lover as they look forward to the wedding of Song 3; see Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 130. Keel believes the royal court is just a fantasy setting for love poetry; see Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 51.

described as a king who acts to bring the beloved into relationship and security and create in her a desire for Him in return. The royal, kingdom context of the temple construction underlines the permanence that the lover, God, is creating through His sovereign acts in history – the divine realm entering the earthly realm and allowing the consummation of the divine-human relationship. In this sense, the role of King Solomon in the Song (3:6-11) is also as a recipient of God's covenant, and thus part of the "bride" in this love relationship with God as the bridegroom and King above all kings.

A Sacred Marriage?

The Song shares some motifs and imagery with ancient sacred marriage songs, but the similarities do not mean the Song is just another ancient, pagan, sexual ritual text. Rather, the similarities may simply help to identify the Song's intent to focus readers on a divine-human relationship. Pope argued for the Song's cultic background, saying it could best be understood in light of ancient sacral sexual rites and funerary rituals.[62] After all, he believed, the crux of the Song seems to be about its concern that love is "the only power that frustrates the complete victory of Death" (cf. Song 8:6).[63] He supported his argument by noting various funerary rituals in Mesopotamia that included "ongoing concern to commune with the departed and provide for their needs in the infernal realm with offerings of food and drink."[64] These observances included drinking, music, song, dance, and sex. The "banquet house" of Song 2:4, he stated, is like the *marzéah* in ancient times, in which groups met to conduct rituals and have feasts such as that

[62] Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven/London: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1977), 210, 228.

[63] Ibid., 210

[64] Ibid.

described in Song 5:1.[65] The groups also owned sepulchural gardens enclosed by a wall and containing vineyards (cf. Song 4:12*).*[66]

Nissinen, however, has rightly questioned Pope's stretched attempts to make the Song just another sacred marriage song, though he also concedes that the Song does have certain elements similar to ANE pagan texts. He writes, "It is impossible to miss the mythological dimensions of the language of love, which in the Song of Songs demonstrably draws from a common Near Eastern reservoir."[67] The sacred marriage song, "Love Lyrics of Nabu and Tashmetu," provides a good example of this common language.[68] In this Akkadian text, Nabu is a god of wisdom, and Tashmetu is his wife. Tashmetu at one point says to Nabu, "Put an earring on me and I'll give you pleasure in the garden!" which echoes Song 1:11 and 7:12 (cf. Song 4:16). Nabu says to Tashmetu that he will put bracelets of carnelian on her and that he wants to give her a new chariot (cf. Song 1:9, 6:12). He also expresses the desire that she come with him to the garden. Tashmetu also references "shade of the cedar" (2x) as "the shelter of kings" where they can be together (cf. Song 1:17).

As another example of an ancient *hieros gamos*, in the Sumerian text "The Women's Oath," the goddess Inanna describes her lover Dumuzi as a garden of apple trees (cf. Song 2:3), and as an alabaster figurine (cf. Song 5:15).[69] The Sumerian Dumuzi-Inanna songs were cultic songs, possibly accompanied by sacred marriage rituals, with the purpose of bringing life and

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[65] Pope, *Song of Songs,* 221

[66] Ibid.

[67] Martti Nissinen, "Song of Songs and Sacred Marriage," *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity,* ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 198.

[68] "Love Poems: Love Lyrics of Nabu and Tashmetu," *COS* 1.128:445-446.

[69] "Love Poems: The Women's Oath," *COS* 1.169A:540-541.

abundance to the soil and to the womb. The ritual would have been performed during the New Year festival, and the king would represent Dumuzi by wedding one of the high-ranking priestesses, who would represent Inanna. Similarly, "The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna" was possibly an annual rite in which the king would marry Inanna (incarnated in the queen).[70] In preparation for the marriage, the bride would make the bed ready, and guardsmen or warriors would parade before her with weapons (cf. Song 3:7-8). She is also said to look down from heaven (cf. Song 6:10).[71]

The Sumerian cylinders of Gudea also offer insight into a possible background for some of the Song's motifs. These inscriptions are regarding the building of a temple, starting with the dream in which the deity gives instructions to the king for its construction and preparations for inducting the god Ningursu and his consort, Baba, into the new Eninnu (temple).[72] The king was also an important part of this process, as the deity promised that when the king began building the temple, he and the people would receive abundance (cf. 1 Kings 5; 2 Chronicles 1-2; Song 3:11).[73] In these inscriptions, Baba goes into the bedchamber of the temple, as "a faithful woman taking care of her house…" (cf. Song 1:4).[74]

Though some parallels in sexual language can be drawn, there is no evidence within the text of the Song that it is a sacred marriage ritual text. The Song avoids all mention of gods or

[70] "The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna," *COS* 1.173:554-559

[71] Ibid.

[72] "The Cylinders of Gudea," *COS* 2.155:417-433

[73] Ibid. 419

[74] Ibid., 431

goddesses, priests, altars, or cleansing rituals.[75] It is more likely that the Song simply shared the ancient way of thinking about the divine-human relationship. In recent decades, scholarship has largely recognized that even in Mesopotamian society, people did not practice an actual sexual ritual, but rather the idea of a sacred marriage was conceptual. Nissinen states that the use of sexual metaphor was used to describe the divine-human connection of worlds via the king to the people, to the gods, and thus secure blessing for all.[76] Nissinen rightly concludes that the Song is not a sacred marriage ritual text of a rite performed in Israel, but it does use the "erotic-lyric tradition"[77] that can tie to the concept of sacred marriage in the ANE. It is not about the actual sexual act:

> Rather, sex and love are the best possible metaphors for divine-human communion and union, on an institutional as well as individual level. Because love in itself is a metaphor for this union, love poetry does not need to employee religious vocabulary or to explicitly mention divine actors to be read as a description of the relationship between God and people, especially if a long-standing cultural memory supports a reading of this sort.[78]

Any similarities between the Song and ancient sacred marriage love lyrics are probably due to commonly shared love language in the ANE and a literary tradition used in the Song for the purpose of declaring that a divine-human bond has been established with and through King Solomon. Garrett and House rightly point out that the Song is different from the "hymnic and liturgical" literature describing the love affairs of gods, even though they share terminology and motifs.[79] Indeed, as noted, there is no mention of cultic rituals at all. However, Garrett and House

[75] Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 13. See also Carr, G. Lloyd Carr, "Is the Song of Songs a 'sacred marriage' drama?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 22:2 (June 1979), 112.

[76] Nissinen, "Song of Songs," 202

[77] Ibid., 209

[78] Ibid., 215

[79] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 47-48

incorrectly conclude that the Song therefore does not address a means to divine love; rather, they write, the Song addresses only human love and sexuality in the earthly realm.[80] However, it is entirely possible that the Song used the language of sacred marriage rituals, just as it did the ancient Egyptian love songs, to build a conceptual bridge to a completely different vision of love – a love that is secure because it comes from Yahweh.

Specifically, the relationship between Yahweh and His people was different than that between pagan gods and their people, and the Song communicates this in how the shared motifs are used. In the Song, Solomon is not portraying a god in any sort of ritual, nor is he preparing the temple for a god and the god's consort to enter. Rather, Solomon is pictured as a bride at her wedding in 3:6-11. In addition, the woman of the Song – presumably an allegory for the faithful covenant people *and* the faithful covenant king, as will be argued further in chapter 6 – celebrates that the lover, God, has brought *her* into his chambers (1:4), and she expresses her delight in Him when she sees Him sitting nearby at His table (1:12).

The Song of Songs' hopeful illustration of divine-human love is also different than concepts of love that appear to have existed elsewhere in the ANE cultural and religious milieu. Carr refers to a "cosmic hierarchy" that was accepted in ancient Near Eastern thought, which involved defining "power differentials" in terms of gender and love relationships.[81] The hierarchy related woman to man, and humans to God. A woman who did not submit to man or God, who both stood higher in the hierarchy, was seen as challenging that hierarchy and thus the cosmic order. The prophetic corpus uses the language of adultery initiated by a woman to describe Israel's rebelliousness toward God (Hos. 7:4; Jer. 5:7, et. al.). In the Song, the hierarchy

[80] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs*, 119

[81] David Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 119:2 (2000), 240.

is also challenged by the woman, but not in a negative way. There, she speaks openly to her lover (God), and he is "taken" by her and "subject to her demands" (Song 6:5; 7:5). With the woman representing God's faithful covenant partner, and the man, God, the picture is of a secure, two-way relationship and communication between God and humans. She boldly and wholeheartedly approaches Him, and He responds in devoted love.

The Song's main theme of love softens any coldness or abuse that might have existed in the hierarchical experiences in everyday life, and challenges the way that people thought about the divine. Nissinen's conclusions are helpful here, as we consider the Song's overall feel to be that of an ideal love relationship, which "makes the existing hierarchy more bearable and benefits the lesser party of the relationship; it appeases the anger of the greater party and alleviates the threat of violence; it expresses mutual devotion and maintains the hope of an unbroken union, changing the discontinuity of separate bodies into continuity."[82] The Song's illustration of love between the woman and her lover is brimming with hope for all of those watching this beautiful, unparalleled relationship as they seek abundant security (Song 1:11; 3:11; 5:1; 6:10; 8:5).

Limitations to Love in the Temple Sphere

The setting and movement of Song 3:1-11 and 5:2-16 appears to revolve around a secured, sacred city and a royal celebration, but these elements – while not necessarily negative – are portrayed as less than ideal. In this royal/temple sphere of existence and thought, even the efforts of an anointed king and the setting of a holy city are not enough to give the lover and

[82] Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire," 218

beloved the secure home for which they are striving. Limitations are evidenced in the Song's illustration of watchmen, warriors, and workmen.

The watchmen are characters in the woman's searches in the city for her lover (3:3-4; 5:7). They are the men who patrol the city, and more specifically guard the city walls. They do not appear in a positive light in either instance. The first time they are apathetic, it seems, to her desperate search for her lover. The second time, after the woman hesitates to respond to her lover's call, and later goes out after him, they strike her and wound her and strip her of her shawl. They never provide help for the lovers to unite; rather, their role appears only to stop those they see as threats. To see the watchmen in a positive light is to miss the implication that the watchmen do nothing but prevent the lovers' union.[83] They are watching the walls and seeking to maintain order within the city walls, but they fall short of helping the woman find safety with her lover – which is the ultimate goal of the Song.

In Song 3:7-8, the Song's chiastic structure gets closer to the climax of consummation for the lovers, but the existence of warriors implies that dangers are still lurking in the journey toward love and security. The situation is better now, with the hopeful picture of a wedding, but it is still not ideal. The extended picture of the warriors as being 60 in number (double the mighty men of David listed in 2 Samuel 23) and a repeated emphasis on their weapons and readiness to fight against anything that would come near, also falls short of the ideal in which the woman can rest peacefully in her lovers' arms. The warriors, as representative of the conceptual sphere of the temple/kingdom, are part of a temporary path toward something better, but certainly not the ideal situation for which the lovers long.

[83] Exum notes that even in 3:1-5, where the watchmen are indifferent, their presence still "strikes a discordant note," similar to the brothers in 1:6 (*Song of Songs,* 137).

In addition, as noted, Solomon's אַפִּרְיֹן appears to be mobile in this pericope, implying that the situation is not yet the permanent one that the lovers are striving for. Duguid is partly correct when he concludes that in this pericope, Solomon's luxury, royalty, and splendor is set in contrast to the humble union of the man and woman in the rest of the poem.[84] However, I think it possible, and necessary, to see Solomon and his efforts here as hopeful, and good, though they are limited and somewhat cold in nature when one contrasts the theophanic arrival of the caravan, surrounded by soldiers, and the precious materials that make up Solomon's אַפִּרְיֹן, with the woman picturing herself in her lover's embrace (2:6; 8:3).

These verses also provide insight into the uniqueness of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. In the ANE, kings were generally understood to have divine status, representing the gods on earth, with divine wisdom to control chaos and preserve order.[85] In Israel, however, the king was simply a servant, and kingship was not a divinely-given role with ultimate authority. Rather, kingship rule was subservient to God's will,[86] and God was thus the only One who could establish ultimate order and provide ultimate protection. It would be fitting, then, to see Solomon as the bride in the wedding procession of 3:6-11, seeking union with God and the security and protection that He alone can provide for both the king and the people.

The one place in the Song where Solomon does seem to appear negatively is in 8:11-12, a short parable-like section in which he is described as having multiple vineyards and workmen to tend them and pay him proceeds from the produce.[87] Meanwhile, the lover is fully satisfied with

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[84] Duguid, *The Song of Songs,* 109.

[85] Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 35.

[86] Ibid., 46

[87] See John F. Robertson, "Social Tensions in the Ancient Near East," *A Companion to the Ancient Near East,* ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 207-213: In ancient Near Eastern societies,

owning and tending his one vineyard. Because the woman at the start of the Song referred to herself as a vineyard, now at the end of this chiasm she can be understood as the vineyard as well. The man is speaking of his beloved, which he, not Solomon, owns – since she has fully given herself to him (8:10). After all, true love cannot be bought (8:7).

Vineyards are critical to the life of a household, as well as a kingdom. Here, Solomon's methods of establishing his kingdom are challenged by the lovers, and the lover announces that his exclusive love for his beloved has given them everything they need to live happily and securely. Solomon, however, must continually hire workers and collect proceeds in order to keep his many vineyards and kingdom operational. Some scholars have assumed that this is talking about his large harem[88] compared to the one woman of the lover. In any case, it is true that to run a kingdom, and to maintain its order and security, a king must often act contractually, and his attention is divided. Wealth and power often become the focus, as though they can offer security, but ongoing work is required for the kingdom to stay within one's grasp. In contrast, the lover and beloved in the Song are satisfied and are not interested in contractual obligations. Such obligations in the beginning of the Song had caused the woman to neglect her own vineyard (1:6). Now together, the couple has already found their security. Munro correctly concludes regarding this pericope: "By deliberately distancing Solomon from the lovers toward the end of the Song, it becomes apparent that, in the end, the metaphor of kingship is inadequate to describe

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it was not uncommon for palace, temple, and royal authorities to control rural lands all around the cities and require local villagers to give a part of their harvest in taxation. In Egypt, royal documents have revealed that authorities oversaw and managed resources throughout the kingdom to "ensure constant revenues to support itself and its monumental construction projects." It was good for the governing, but not always for the governed. Many times, for example, forced labor would separate families. In addition, within the cities, there was a lot of social tension due to large, diverse populations, and rulers often became abusive – probably to maintain order. The Song appears to match this general experience, as the city is a place of alienation for the woman, contra the country where she is able to experience, or at least imagine, union and safety with her lover.

[88] For example, see Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 175

this great love. Love is not for sale, even to the most rich and powerful."[89] Indeed, the love between the beloved and her lover is greater than anything that could be found in an earthly kingdom. The man takes the helm as both her loving owner *and* her keeper. As will be noted in the next section, the place where their security is assured is found not in any external building, but in the home that the lover is preparing in the beloved.

Embodying the Divine Dwelling Place

The Song's presentation of the limitations of the earthly kingdom and human building efforts in Israel is balanced by its presentation of the place where permanence *can* be found on earth: in the lover and beloved themselves. Some of their metaphorical descriptions of one another speak to the unique strength of their characters which allows their relationship to be one of security. They embody, in themselves and their relationship, that which mediates an unbroken, ongoing communion between the human and the divine.

As the Song progresses, the woman is increasingly described metaphorically as a fortified city. Her journey begins as a world-weary nomad, seeking a place of rest with the one her soul loves (1:5-8). Then, the lover speaks for the first time, likening her to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots. Chariots in the ancient world implied military power, as well as royalty. While Pope argued that 1:9 was meant to illustrate the woman's distracting beauty like a mare among a brood of stallions,[90] I believe it is better to interpret this verse in light of the greater unity and chiastic structure of the Song. In 1:9, after looking for the one her soul loves (1:5-8), she is likened to a mare pulling the chariot of a foreign nation, Egypt. In 6:12, after she peruses the orchard to see if

[89] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron,* 42

[90] Pope, *Song of Songs,* 338

any of the produce has blossomed, "chariots" are mentioned again (6:12), but this time her soul set her in a royal, commanding position over עַמִּי־נָדִיב, her own people.[91] These juxtaposing sections reveal that her journey of seeking her lover and expectation for an abundant life with him has led her to a position of greater permanence and power. In 1:9-11, the lover proclaims the woman's beauty, and then proceeds (along with the chorus of onlookers?) to increase and fortify her beauty and honor with additional ornaments of gold and silver.

Song 6:12 is followed by the third and final wasf spoken by the man about the woman, where he proclaims her a "prince's daughter" (7:1) and describes every part of her in terms of royal luxury and abundance, and the greatest of city fortifications (7:1-6). Her body is like precious jewels and a piece of art, a goblet always full of mixed wine, a heap of wheat surrounded by lilies, and parts are likened to towers and pools. Her head is like a beautiful crown, with hair like purple threads that can capture a king. He celebrates her commanding stature in 7:7 as like a palm tree, and her breasts like its clusters. Mitchell provides helpful insight into the meaning of this verse by tying it to Song 8:10, where the woman declares that her breasts were like towers on a city wall.[92] In both verses, the implication of the metaphor of her breasts as towers and date clusters, is that she is inaccessible to outside enemy forces.[93] While this metaphorical picture can be seen as erotic, a better reading is to not read any sexual act into the scene, but rather see that the woman herself has become an abundant, honorable, secure place (7:11-13).

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[91] This verse consists of textual difficulties and has created many interpretive issues for scholars. While עַמִּי־נָדִיב could be a proper name, it is not likely since it is not a name that exists elsewhere in Scripture for any prominent figure.

[92] Mitchell, *The Song of Songs,* 1250

[93] The same word, tamar, is used in 3:6, translated as "columns." Hess calls the date palm tree a "symbol of royal splendor." See Hess, *Song of Songs,* 109.

The woman's noteworthy stature and status is also illustrated in the two other wasfs about her. The lover likens her neck to "the tower of David, built with rows of stones on which are hung a thousand shields, all the round shields of the mighty men" (4:4).[94] Song 6:4-10 is an inclusio that begins and ends with her being described as "awesome as an army with banners" (cf. 2:4, 5:10), first in the sense of a powerful city, and second in the sense of celestial radiance.[95] So awesome are her eyes, in fact, that they have an overwhelming effect on him (6:5). This is a different picture than the gentler picture in 4:1, where he describes her eyes "like doves behind your veil." אָיֹם, translated as "awesome" in 6:4 and 10, is used elsewhere only in Hab. 1:7 to describe the devastating destructive forces of the Chaldeans against Israel. In addition, this wasf in the Song contains reference to a royal court of sixty queens, eighty concubines, and innumerable maidens, but to the man, his beloved is unique (6:8-9). The women, also, understand the beloved's uniqueness, and praise her for her beauty and purity (6:10). She is greater than any royal title.

The military and fortification metaphors indicate that the woman is a powerful force, active, defensive, and strong, enough to attract a king to her (7:5; cf. 1:4). She is no longer hiding like a dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14); she is standing in a place of great prominence and honor, night and day, for all to see (6:10). Like a distinguished, fortified city on a hill, her character draws others to her.

The lover is described differently than the beloved, with imagery that alludes to the dwelling place and manifestation of God. The description comes through the words of the beloved, but rather than speak directly to him, she speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem *about*

[94] In contrast, in Song 3:6-11, the mighty men are prepared for battle, so in Song 4, she is depicted as experiencing and embodying a greater sense of peace.

[95] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs*, 227

him, as she recruits them to find him for her. She answers their question: "What kind of beloved is your beloved, O most beautiful among women? What kind of beloved is your beloved, that thus you adjure us?" (5:9). Her response leaves no question that his very essence is heavenly, and therefore he is superior to any earthly lover.

Other than the more natural images to describe his hair and facial features (which will be covered more in chapter five as it relates to his connectedness to a renewed cosmos), she describes his body metaphorically as the purest, most valuable, and strongest materials. Keel likens the description to a statue of a god,[96] but at the very least they are materials that allude to both architecture and sculpture.[97] More specifically, many of the architectural structures, such as pillars and pedestals/sockets, and the materials mentioned, mostly appear elsewhere in Scripture in relation to the construction of Israel's tabernacle and temple.[98] His entire appearance, the woman says, is like Lebanon's choice cedars (5:15), like those used to construct the temple.

From head to toe, he is pure gold (5:11, 15).[99] The purity of the mined gold (כֶּתֶם פָּז) mentioned here is different than the ordinary gold simply known for its shininess (זָהָב) that Solomon had used to construct his palanquin in 3:10.[100] In the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, only pure gold was used to represent the divine presence (for example, טָהוֹר is used as an adjective for gold, implying a refined gold, not alloyed gold in Exod. 25:11, 17, 24, 36, et. al.). Plain זָהָב is used, however, to describe his hands, while his abdomen is metaphorically described

[96] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 198. See also Alter, *The Hebrew Bible Volume 3*, 605.

[97] Duguid, *The Song of Songs,* 132

[98] See especially Exodus 25-40, 1 Kings 6-10.

[99] Keel believes the description of the head and feet made of gold implies the totality of the man is "superior". See Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 206-07.

[100] The two kinds of gold are also distinguished in Job 28:17.

as “carved ivory.” Ivory as a material is elsewhere used in the Bible to depict strength and immovability (1 Sam. 14:4-5; Job 39:28; Ezek. 27:6; Amos 3:15, 6:4), as well as a place of royalty and judgment (1 Kgs. 10:18, 22:39; 2 Chron. 9:17; Ps. 45:8). Meanwhile, his legs are described as “pillars of alabaster” (5:15). As a building material, this may refer to a marble like that used in the pavement of the Persian king’s palace court (Est. 1:6), or an alabaster like that set aside by King David for the building of the temple (1 Chron. 29:2).[101] The gold, ivory, and marble are clearly all attested, then, as material that represented earthly luxury and power. But here in the Song, they do not exist alone in their metaphorical contexts.

That the gold of his hands and the ivory of his abdomen are combined with beryl and sapphire points beyond the earthly materials to heavenly connections. The gold setting of his hands is filled with beryl, while the “carved ivory of his abdomen” is covered in sapphire. His legs of alabaster are set on “pedestals of pure gold” (5:15a). “Set” and “inlaid” are verbs that appear in the pual stem, making it appear that his hands, his abdomen, and his legs are passively, inseparably, existing within this state in which they are overshadowed by these precious materials that in the ANE were largely associated with the divine realm.

Sapphire and beryl appeared as precious stones on the breast piece of the high priest (Exodus 28, 39), and in Old Testament theophanies, such as the firmament above the cherubim in Ezekiel 10, and the pavement under God’s feet in Exodus 24:10. The lover in the Song is also described, overall, as “dazzling and ruddy” (5:10). He is also “outstanding” among ten thousand. The word translated in the NASB as “outstanding” is דָּגֻל, the same word that appears in 6:4 and 10 when the woman is described as “awesome as an army of *banners*” (cf. Song 2:4). Mitchell

[101] See BDB, 1010 (entry numbers 7893 and 8336).

rightfully concludes, then, that this phrase has to do with seeing the lover as "more dazzling and impressive than a myriad of soldiers, who likewise would be equipped with battle standards."[102]

While the materials mentioned had connections to both Israel's tabernacle/temple and the revelations of God on earth, the terminology in the Song is echoed in temple building practices throughout the ANE. The woman's description of the man ends with her comment, "His mouth is full of sweetness, and he is wholly desirable" (5:16). Ambos writes of a ritual surrounding a temple brickmold prepared by the ruler of a city: "Anointing was an act of purification and veneration, giving a pure sheen and emitting fragrance that resembled the sweet breath of the gods."[103] Hittite and Mesopotamian traditions especially emphasized using pure materials, "unblemished," and in their ritual texts often use adjectives for "pure" or "shining."[104] The poetic description of the lover's "dazzling and ruddy" appearance (5:10), and his mouth full of sweetness (5:16; cf. 1:2), can imply literally that he was the object of her affection *and* a deeper level suggestion that he was the very manifestation of God.

Conclusion

The Song of Songs never mentions God's name. That is because the Song is an allegory, a poetic literary device that aims to teach deep truth in a way that is understandable to the average reader. The Song's aim is to teach about the otherwise incomprehensible love of God via the common experience of a human love relationship. In chapter three, the uniqueness of the couple's mutuality and exclusivity was set against the common, often shallow, human love

[102] Mitchell, *The Song of Songs,* 919

[103] Claus Ambos, "Building Rituals from the First Millennium BC: The Evidence from the Ritual Texts," *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* eds. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 240.

[104] Ibid.

experience portrayed in extant Egyptian love literature. In addition, it was noted that the couple's union depended, ultimately, on the lover's faithfulness and movement toward her. Though in wisdom she sought him, she could not get to him on her own; he had to come to her. He is presented as more than a mere man, with the ability to overcome earthly barriers and secure their love.

In 3:6-11, the Song moves toward a more national celebration in which the human and divine come together, envisioned by vast amounts of burnt incense and secured structures of precious metals and fine material, prepared by King Solomon for his "wedding". This wedding is poetically describing a divine-human union. While God is the lover and King of kings in the Song, Solomon himself is pictured here as His bride.

On either side of this pericope, the beloved arises and seeks the lover in the city, where he is within her grasp. She understands the need to hold onto the one whom her soul loves with all her might (3:5), and also the need to respond to him with all her heart when he calls (5:4-8). In the sacred, walled city, she becomes more aware of his presence and his radiant beauty.

There is no other man who could be described as embodying the very presence and manifestation of God, in as best terms that humans can muster, and the beloved longs even more for him in her increased awareness of his incomparability. If the intention of the author was to describe the lover as an earthly man in his strength and beauty, then it seems that he would be described in terms of earthly associations – much like the woman, whose superiority is described in terms of earthly royalty and a well-fortified city. Rather, the man's superiority is in his heavenly associations, illustrated through materials understood as belonging to the divine realm. In the ANE, these heavenly associations were only available to deities, and in monotheistic Israel, these associations could only be applied to Yahweh.

This middle section in the chiastic structure of the Song moves the beloved and her lover closer together, but their union was contingent upon the lover's love for the beloved and his cultivation and care that has made her a metaphorical garden of delight. Their union is also contingent upon the beloved's faithful response to his love. This final picture forms the climax of the Song's chiastic structure and will be the topic of the final chapters.

Chapter 5: The Sphere of the Cosmos

In ancient Near Eastern thought, balance and communication between the heavenly and earthly realms was key to order and blessing. As noted in the previous chapters, wisdom supplied humans with instruction on how to live according to the divine, cosmic design. The temple was a tangible and visible symbol of the possibility of mankind's ongoing (and in the case of pagan nations, symbiotic) relationship with deity. The temple was a bridge between the realms; it was a microcosmic, earthly dwelling place for the deity from where he or she could provide order on earth for their servants and worshipers.

The blessings of that divine-human relationship were pictured on and around the temple structure itself. In both Israel and in ancient Near Eastern pagan societies, temples were decorated with generative images like trees, water, pomegranates, and lotuses/lilies. The Israelite priestly garments included a hem on which hung artistic pomegranates and golden bells (Exod. 28:33-35). This was part of the priestly attire which God said was "for glory and for beauty" (Exod. 28:2), as they served as mediators to the divine presence on earth. In addition, two hundred sculptured pomegranates surrounded the capitals of the pillars of Solomon's temple, and a lily design was on the top (see 1 Kgs. 7:15-22).[1] The brim of the sea, also, was designed as a lily blossom (1 Kgs. 7:23-26).

[1] A blossom-shaped ivory pomegranate from the time of Solomon's temple, inscribed as a sacred donation for the priests, "Belonging to the Temple of the Lord (or House of Yahweh)" was discovered in Israel. The symbol was also found on Hebrew seals from the 8th to 7th centuries B.C., and on clay vessels from the 10th to 8th centuries in Israel. In a Canaanite temple in Lachish, from the 13th century, ivory "scepters" with pomegranate-shaped heads were found, though their function was unknown. In a priest's tomb from 13th century Haifa, two scepters with pomegranate heads and other cultic instruments were found along with bronze incense vessels. Assyrian wall reliefs from the 9th to 8th centuries show a procession of people bearing offerings with branches of pomegranates, "described as representing divinities, priests, and worshipers." See Nahman Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate from the 'House of the Lord," *The Biblical Archaeologist,* 53:3 (September 1990): 157-166.

Though the Bible does not straightforwardly reveal a theological meaning of these symbols, it is clear elsewhere that pomegranates represented blessing and prosperity in the Promised Land (Num. 13:23, Deut. 8:8). שׁוֹשַׁנִּים – translated as "lilies" or "lotuses" – were commonly considered symbols of arousal, renewal, life and vitality,[2] and each of the appearances of the word in the Bible seems to point to the expectation of something new and good. At the very beginning of Psalm 45, musicians appear to be instructed to play this song of love "according to the lilies" (cf. Psalm 69). In the Old Testament, blossoming lilies are used as a simile for Israel in its future restoration (Hos. 14:5). Other ancient Near Eastern texts also indicate that the lily/lotus was considered a sacred symbol of life and regeneration. For example, in Coffin Texts, Spell 80, the god Shu, son of Atum, becomes life and atmosphere before Atum even had his full existence and a place to rest, which he describes as "before the Lotus had been tied together, on which I could sit."[3]

Other symbols that were rooted in nature also pointed to cosmic beginnings and connections. The lampstand (Exod. 25:31-40) resembled a tree, metaphorically a symbol of life that reaches to heaven with its roots in the earth, thus bringing life to creation (see Daniel 4; Ezekiel 17, 19, 31).[4] In the ANE, the temple was considered a primordial mountain that rose out of the cosmic waters and brought life to all creation. For example, the Mari Temple was decorated with trees, four cherubim, two mountains underneath, four streams and plants growing

[2] Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Company Inc., 2004), 25, 61.

[3] Trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1.8:12. Allen notes that "The Lotus…is part of an early Eg. Metaphor for the first act of life following the creation – the initial sunrise from the opening petals of a lotus flower growing on the first Place, the primeval hill."

[4] G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God, NSBT,* Vol. 17, ed. D.A. Carson (IVP Academic, 2004), 61.

from the streams.[5] In the Karnak temple in Egypt, as one neared the inner sanctuary, artwork progressed from military imagery to natural imagery, including forest and floral columns and capitals.[6] The floor rose upward, just as the primordial mountain was believed to rise out of the primordial waters and form the beginning of the created world.[7] The temple symbolized order and the cosmic center, and when it functioned appropriately, the world around it prospered as well.[8] Marduk's temple Esagil, in Babylon, was considered this cosmic center.[9]

Springs from the temple were considered the "primeval waters of creation" that brought life to the whole world (see Ezek. 47:1-12; cf. Gen. 2:10-11). An ancient Akkadian cylinder features a winged image of the goddess Ishtar, standing on a mountain next to a small tree, holding a bunch of dates; at her right is water gushing from the shoulders of the god of water, Ea/Enki.[10] The bronze "sea" basin in the courtyard of Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 7:23-26, 2 Chron. 4:2-5) possibly symbolized the stilling and containment of primordial chaos. As already stated, the basin made by Solomon was also decorated with a brim that looked like a lily flower and stood on twelve carved oxen, three facing in each direction. Excavations elsewhere also uncovered several large basins at ancient Near Eastern pagan temples in the Middle Bronze Age. For example, several large basalt basins were found in Ebla, containing carvings of a king's

[5] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission,* 62. See also Daniel Bodi, "Mesopotamian and Anatolian Iconography" in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts,* eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 169.

[6] Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East,* Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series, No. 3, ed. Amelie Kuhrt (2013), 40.

[7] Ibid., 40-45

[8] Ibid., 48

[9] Ibid., 81

[10] See Lincoln Taiz and Lee Taiz, *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 102.

banquet, women carrying buckets and men carrying spears, with the lower part featuring animals, demons and monsters.[11] At another temple site, a basin was found that pictured a king's banquet, the king accompanied by seven armed warriors, and four lions at the foundation. According to Otto, the main depictions found on these basins throughout the ancient Near East were cultic banquet scenes and ritual feasting, protective spirits or deities, and apotropaic animals or hybrid creatures,[12] again indicating that these basins were representative of chaos being contained.

The Song of Songs is rich in natural imagery, with abundant references to flora, fauna, water, vineyards, gardens, and more. While it does not directly mention the garden of Eden, it does allude at least to the common ANE ideal that is communicated in the account of the primordial paradise of Genesis 2-3. The imagery moves the Song's couple and the surrounding world in the direction of restoration, abundance, and union. Garden imagery is central to the Song and appears in its chiasmic climax (4:1-5:1), a section which follows the middle level of the chiasm that focuses on the sacred city and royalty. Elaborate, well-watered gardens were often located next to palaces and temples, where fruits and flowers were cultivated and harvested (Ezek. 19:10; Isa. 58:11; Eccles. 12:5; 1 Kgs. 21:12).[13] The temple described in Ezekiel included luxurious gardens and flowing fresh water, a fountain of life (Ezekiel 28, 47). Again, in ancient cosmology, the temple was a locale in which the divine presence and the restoration and life that

[11] Adelheid Otto, "Basins in the Temples of Ebla, Syria and Upper Mesopotamia: An Essential Cult Requisite?" in *Ebla and Beyond: Ancient Near Eastern Studies after Fifty Years of Discoveries at Tell Mardikh, Proceedings of the International Congress Held in Rome, 15th-17th December 2014*, eds. Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock and Marta D'Andrea (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018), 398.

[12] Ibid., 406

[13] Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 112.

comes with that, is made possible. Lyke has even concluded that the temple is like "the protective womb for God and his people – an ever-present Eden, if you will."[14]

At the same time, just like the limitations that the Song seems to place on the city and royal contexts in the Song when it came to finally achieving that longed-for union, abundance and security with God, the structures and artwork of ANE temples reveal that ancient people understood there to be a divide between the divine and human/earthly realms. Their desire was for a life that reflected the beautiful, life-giving, natural imagery depicted throughout. Just as Genesis relays that mankind was cast out of the garden of Eden, which was then guarded by cherubim, ancient pagan temples included carvings of mythic creatures guarding the way into the sacred space where the statue of the god was located.[15] The inner sanctuary of Solomon's temple, also, included two large cherubim (1 Kgs. 6:23-28), and the walls were carved with engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers (1 Kgs. 6:29).

The Song goes beyond the ancient conceptual sphere of the temple, communicating a need and desire for union with God through an illustration of love. Specifically, the Song illustrates the unique love and intimacy between God and His people that allows them to overcome their alienation in the proverbial wilderness and is marked by all the signs of enjoyment and sustenance that indeed were once theirs in the beginning. If not an exact picture of a return to Eden, it is at the very least a picture of a divine-human union where security and sustenance are celebrated.

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[14] Larry L. Lyke, *I Will Espouse You Forever: The Song of Songs and the Theology of Love in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 39.

[15] See Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings,* 227

The "Nature" of Love

The pervasiveness of natural imagery in the Song of Songs points to the author's concern for creation and how creation is somehow tied to the lovers' relationship. Elements and inhabitants of the cosmos are invoked as the couple seeks one another and ultimately finds a secure union in an exotic, abundant "garden".

Much of the natural imagery used in the Song is stock metaphor in ancient Near Eastern love poetry and sacred marriage myths and rituals. Women as gardens is a common metaphor, most likely because of their womb and role in procreation. Doves, gazelles and stags, lilies/lotuses, pomegranates, and gardens are often associated with ANE goddesses of love and fertility. The goddess Ishtar (Inanna in Sumerian), for example, was a predominant goddess in the ANE and was the goddess featured in sacred marriage rituals. In "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi," the king, Dumuzi, is depicted as a shepherd, and their romance is described in agricultural terms. Dumuzi becomes like a gardener, while Inanna is still the "ultimate source of agricultural bounty" that comes from her womb.[16] In "The Woman's Oath," Inanna describes Dumuzi as a garden of apple trees.[17] Love in the garden is also a recurring motif in ancient love poems in Egypt. In the Egyptian love song "The Orchard," the girl is compared to a garden.[18] In another song, the lover declares that he is "headed to the 'Love Garden."[19]

[16] Taiz and Taiz, *Flora Unveiled,* 107-08

[17] *COS* 1.169A:540-541

[18] Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 284.

[19] Ibid., 15

In Uruk, Ishtar was known as "Lady of Heaven" and was worshipped at the Eanna temple complex.[20] She was seen as protector of Uruk's storehouses, and thus of the harvest and agriculture. The Warka vase found at Uruk's Eanna temple features an artistic rendering of water at the bottom, then moving upward, green plants as the source of life, then sheep (male and female), then nude men with baskets and amphoras and containers of produce, then people bearing tribute to the king, who through his servant presents a basket to Inanna, who is pictured as embodying both the celestial and earthly realms – causing plants to grow.[21] Other goddesses throughout the ANE also are associated with grain and grapes – Ezina, Ninshebargunu, Sala, Bau or Baba, and Ninkasi.[22] In Egypt, the goddess of love, Hathor, was named "Mistress of the Date Palms" in the town of Kom el Hism. All of these associations imply that, in ANE thought, fertility and life on earth were dependent upon the divine realm. The sacred and secular were interconnected.

Earthly love itself was also associated with the mythical, heavenly realm. For example, divinity and nature come together in one Egyptian love song. When thinking of love, the boy speaks of seeing divinity in nature; of the river, he says, "the leaves of its lotus-buds are Sekhmet, its lotus-buds are Yadit, its lotus-blossoms are Nefertem…joy," and refers to Memphis as a bowl of mandrakes (cf. Song 7:13).[23] In the Egyptian love poem "Three Wishes," the young man cannot avoid running to his lover's home because "the Golden One" (Hathor) has decreed their love.[24] In another love song, the young man says he worships "the Gold Goddess," the "lady

[20] Taiz and Taiz, *Flora Unveiled*, 89.

[21] Ibid., 90

[22] Ibid., 104-05

[23] Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 5 in Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 12

[24] Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 67

of heaven," and gives "adoration to Hathor, Praise to the Mistress," for listening to his pleas, for she "ordered a Mistress for me, and she is come herself to see me."[25] In another song, the boy speaks of the lotus, a prime symbol of love and regeneration, being in his lover's hand, a seal-ring on her finger, and she is wearing a necklace of flowers. "I kiss her before everyone," he says. "Indeed it is she who captures my heart, when she looks at me (I) am refreshed."[26]

The Song's use of similar imagery from the surrounding cultural milieu of ancient love literature does not mean that the Song should be simply categorized as another sacred marriage ritual or secular love song, however. Though the images may communicate the idea of an erotic, intimate relationship, the wider, extended metaphor of the Song is not of a temporary union, but a secure and lasting union. The images are the same, but the bigger picture is different. In ANE fertility/sacred marriage myths, like those of Inanna and Dumuzi, there is a constant cycle of courtship, consummation, death, and rebirth to mirror the earth's seasonal cycle. The relationship between Inanna and Dumuzi is rocky, at best. They are not so interested in a committed relationship as they are in their own self-interests. In "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi,"[27] Inanna is only concerned about which lover can bring her the best gifts, and who will provide the sexual service necessary for her to bring forth life. At the beginning, she prefers to marry the farmer, because he gathers grain into heaps and brings grain regularly into her storehouses. Dumuzi, the shepherd, must convince her, with the help of her brother and mother, that he is the better choice. After he adequately performs his duties to her, she goes with him to

[25] These excerpts are in the fifth stanza of seven from a series of poems found on the back of the roll of Papyrus Chester Beatty I. "Love Songs from Ramesside Egypt," ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/literature/lovesongs.html.

[26] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group C., No. 54 in Fox, *The Song of Songs*, 81

[27] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi." web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

his garden and before him she pours out plants and grain from her womb. At the end of the text, Dumuzi asks for her to free him so he can return to the palace and rule – now with full confidence that the land will be blessed, because he performed his duty to her. In an Akkadian text regarding the couple, "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld,"[28] Ishtar travels to the netherworld, abandoning heaven and taking her divine powers of life (the *me*), with the hope of also attaining power over death. She is stripped of all of her powers as she descends and is punished and killed for trying to usurp the throne of the underworld. With the help of the god Enki, she is able to ascend again to the land of the living, but must find a substitute to take her place in the underworld. She finds all of her close companions mourning her death, but Dumuzi has taken her throne and was thoroughly enjoying the power; so, in her anger she commands that he be the one to take her place. She later regrets her decisions. Eventually, Dumuzi's sister agrees to take the place in the Underworld for six months, so Dumuzi can be with Inanna for the other six. The myth was a way for the ancient people to explain the changing seasons on earth, so the "relationship" matched the cycle of life and death that the people experienced on earth.

The couple's relationship in the Song of Songs, by contrast, is steady and unchanging. The lover's caretaking never fails to produce fruit through the beloved. Even when they are separated (3:1-5, 5:2-9), the beloved is always confident of his committed love and presence (6:1-3) and asks to be a seal on his heart, for love is strong as death and jealous as the grave (8:6-7). The lover in the Song, as will be shown in this chapter, is eternal. He does not die. He pastures among lilies and gathers lilies. His shepherding and gardening work never ends, and in most cases, the fertility of the land is blossoming apart from her active involvement (2:10-13;

[28] The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.4.07.2#.

6:11; 7:11-13). The changing of seasons does not affect their relationship. They are continually belonging, assuring, tending, and sharing.

The Song also does not illustrate young love, unrequited love, infatuation, or a passing tryst as is the general picture of the ancient Egyptian love songs. As noted in chapter 3 of this dissertation, in those songs, the lovers are often pining for something they cannot have, or they are seeking little more than sexual fulfillment. Many of the songs are introspective and focused on the speaker's feelings, rather than the one they love. Also, both characters are strictly human, and thus the love of which they speak and experience is restricted to the earthly realm and subject to fail. Also as previously noted, the love of the Song's couple is aimed at exclusiveness, mutuality, and permanence. The metaphors of the Song depict the woman and the couple's world of love in terms of a protected, thriving space of all life-giving plants and a domesticated countryside. The woman speaks of houses that they share, made of sturdy, flourishing natural resources (1:16-17), and doors/gates that are filled to the brim with the choicest of fruits (7:13). The expectation is a permanent situation in which their love can be enjoyed and grow. At the end of the Song, the woman is described as dwelling (יָשַׁב) – a permanent situation – in the gardens. She is also uniquely positioned to teach and adjure the next generations (2:7, 3:5, 8:4, et. al.).

Because of these wider contextual differences, it is better to understand stock love poetry metaphors used in the Song simply as a vehicle to communicate its main topic: the unique relationship Yahweh has with His covenant people, and perhaps in polemical fashion the Song is meant to communicate how different this relationship is than with the mythic ideas of divine-human union elsewhere in the world. This unique relationship is communicated in the Song through assigned natural images that distinguish the man as divine and the woman as the recipient of the divine's care – a seeming gender reversal of the ancient pagan fertility myths that

feature a goddess controlling all of life on earth. For example, the lover is primarily associated with mythic and cosmic locales, the beloved in protected and domesticated ones. In these roles, their relationship brings life to the earth and security to their union. These unique roles will be explored in the sections that follow.

Mountains, Hills, and Gazelles: The Nature and Realm of the Lover

While the wisdom literature of the Old Testament teaches about the created order and how to align to that order and find life (Prov. 3:18), that instruction alone does not reveal how the fallen state of the world may be redeemed.[29] Wisdom seeks order in the fallen world, but the desire of the human heart, as seen throughout the biblical narrative, is for security and eternal restoration for all of creation. Likewise, the woman in the Song, representing God's faithful covenant people who act in wisdom by desiring and seeking for God, cannot reach Him and find abundance, security and peace on her own. In the earthly realm, peace is impossible without intervention from the divine realm.

In the Old Testament narratives, God's direct involvement in the world led to blessings of restoration and abundance for His faithful, chosen people (think the Flood, call of Abraham, and His revelation at Sinai to name just a few). Old Testament poetry also communicates redemption and blessing that comes from the gracious hand of God. The Psalms, for example, are replete with celebrations of God's faithfulness. As Bartholomew and O'Dowd write, "Biblical poetry in particular can renew our vision of God and his good but fallen world, and it can invite us again to align ourselves wisely with him and his purposes."[30] This kind of focused life is modeled

[29] Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 257.

[30] Ibid., 71

poetically by the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31, and arguably the woman in the Song of Songs, who are both concerned with their homes and gardens in obedience to the mission of Gen. 1:28 and in expectation of a blessed future (Prov. 31:25; Song 1:6, 6:11, 7:12-13). However, as I will seek to show, the woman in the poetry of the Song of Songs remains dependent on the divine lover's gracious extension of himself into the earthly sphere to which she is bound.

In several places in the Song, the lover is described as a gazelle or young stag on mountains and/or hills (2:8-9, 17; 4:6; 8:14). In the first reference, located on the outermost part of the Song's chiastic structure, the woman describes him as a gazelle or young stag, "climbing on the mountains, leaping on the hills" (2:8-9). In ANE iconography, gazelles are commonly found grazing alongside sacred trees and in depictions of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar.[31] More than just a wild animal, they are a symbol of regeneration and more specifically the divine realm in which the goddess of love and war resides. The Song, with its emphasis on love, does not refer to this animal simply because of its beauty and grace, but because of its symbolism. Pictured as a gazelle, the lover is not only swift and graceful as he bounds across the mountains and hills, but he represents the divine, eternal realm entering the earthly, temporary realm. The imagery urges an allegorical identification of the lover as God/Yahweh, for no human lover could accomplish such feats.

In the verses that follow, we see the lover is coming towards the beloved in order to call her, who remains inside, out into the country where the signs of life and springtime are

[31] See Gabor Kalla, "Date Palms, Deer/Gazelles and Birds in Ancient Mesopotamia and Early Byzantine Syria: A Christian Iconographic Scheme and its Sources in the Ancient Orient," in *Across the Mediterranean – Along the Nile*, Vol. 2, Studies in Egyptology, Nubiology and Late Antiquity, Dedicated to Laszlo Torok on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday," eds. Tamas A. Bacs, Adam Bollok, and Tivador Vida (Budapest: Institutes of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Museum of Fine Arts, 2018), 881-83. An ivory pyxis found in a 13th century Assyrian tomb, contains pictures of gazelles feeding on flowers underneath fruit-bearing trees (see page 865-66).

appearing. Thus, the purpose of his movement is to close the distance between them. Both דָּלַג and קָפַץ are active piel participles, indicating an ongoing, purposeful action. As noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, similar imagery is found in the Egyptian love song, "Three Wishes," where the girl expresses her desire for the boy to come to her "swiftly…like a gazelle bounding over the desert…"[32] However, unlike the boy in "Three Wishes," whose bounding and leaping is due to being chased by a hunter and his dog and into a trap (cf. Prov. 6:5), the man in the Song appears to leap on the hills, effortlessly, to get to her by his own choice.

Song 2:17, 4:6, and 8:14 are slightly different but similar enough to be considered a refrain in the Song. Song 2:17 and 8:14 appear on the outer level of the Song's chiastic structure. The lover is urged to "be like a gazelle or a young stag" and traverse the mountains, and thus the couple are still separated.[33] In fact, in 2:17, the word בֶּתֶר is a hapax legomenon, and can mean "cleft" mountains or mountains "of separation.[34] Similar sounding words with the same root are found twice in Gen. 15:10, referring to the divided pieces of the sacrifice made by Abraham.[35]

In Song 8:14, the lover is again urged to "be like a gazelle or a young stag," but this time "on the mountains of spices." בֶּשֶׂם can mean "spice, perfume, sweet odour."[36] Elsewhere in the Song, this word is used to describe the lover's cheeks (5:13) and garden beds (6:2). The word is also repeated in the central part of the Song's chiasm (4:10, 14, 16) as fragrances that emanate from the beloved. As will be discussed in more detail later, fragrance in the Song represents

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[32] Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group B, Nos. 38-40 in Fox, *The Song of Songs,* 66.

[33] The preposition עַד also indicates that the woman desires the lover to make this action "until" their union – "the cool of the day when the shadows flee away" (2:17). This phrase is repeated by the lover in 4:6 as he commits to doing just what she asked.

[34] BDB, 144

[35] See also Jeremiah 34:18-19

[36] BDB, 141

proximity and is the attraction that draws the lovers to each other. In 4:6, the Lover specifically mentions "the mountain of myrrh" and "the hill of frankincense" that he will traverse to get to her (the gazelle imagery of 2:17 and 8:14 may simply be implied). The same exotic fragrances are combined in 3:6, where they surround Solomon's palanquin. As discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, those particular fragrances were associated in the ANE with approaching the divine presence. In 4:6, the lover (God) states his intention to go to the mountain and hill where those scents are evident. As the couple moves closer together as the chiastic structure of the Song progresses, this verse indicates that the lover (God) thus moves closer to the beloved (His chosen), who seeks His presence. Keel helpfully notes that in 4:7, the lover's comment that his beloved is "altogether beautiful," and that "there is no blemish in you," also has cultic connotations in relation to bringing God holy and pleasing offerings.[37] Elsewhere in the Old Testament, בָּשֶׂם predominantly appears in the anointing oil in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:6, 30:23, and 35:8, 28) and the temple (1 Chron. 9:29-30), and as gifts that recognized Solomon's unique position as being chosen and blessed by God (1 Kings 10, 2 Chronicles 9). These particular spices, therefore, had a sacred element meant to connect humans with God.

Mountains and hills are also images in the ANE that commonly indicate connection with the divine. In general, as already stated, the first land to arise in creation was known as a cosmic mountain. According to ancient cosmology, mountains held up the sky and intersected it, while politically, each peoples saw their land or city as the center of the earth, or as a "world tree or cosmic mountain."[38] Throughout history, temples were believed to have been modeled after that

[37] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1994), 153.

[38] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018). 141.

original cosmic mountain, as a way to connect with the creator gods. In Cylinder B of the cylinders of Gudea, the temple is called "mooring pole of the land, which grows (high) between heaven and earth…" and "the temple, being a big mountain, reached up to heaven."[39] Achaemenid temple foundation texts found in Iran also communicated that mountain peaks were sacred.[40] In Isaiah 2:1-4, the LORD's eschatological temple is described as a mountain that "will be established as the chief of mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it" (v. 2). From it, the LORD will judge the people and bring peace (v. 4). Van Ruiten further notes that in the Old Testament, mountains and hills are "connected with the creative acts of YHWH" (Ps. 65:6; 90:2; Prov. 8:25),[41] though it is important to note that the mountains themselves are not sacred or divine. In the Bible, mountains served positively as the place where God meets with His people. He made His covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai, and the temple, symbolizing His dwelling with them, was built on Mount Zion (traditionally, Mount Moriah where God revealed Himself to Abraham in Genesis 22). Moses instructed the Israelites to stand on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim when they crossed the Jordan, to hear the Levites announce the divine curses and blessings they would experience according to their obedience (Deuteronomy 27 and 28). Mountains and hills were also places where Israel committed idolatry, following the practices of the wicked Canaanites who worshiped their false gods there (Deut. 12:2; 1 Kgs. 14:23; 2 Kgs. 17:10; 2 Chron. 28:4, etc.). In idolatry, man tries to reach god. In the

[39] *COS* 2.155:429

[40] Margaret Cool Root, "Palace to Temple – King to Cosmos: Achaemenid Foundation Texts in Iran." In *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* edited by Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 210.

[41] Jacques T.A.G.M. Van Ruiten, "The Relationship Between Jeremiah 4:23-26 and Genesis 1," in *Creation of Heaven and Earth: Reinterpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics,* ed. George H. van Kooten (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 29.

Song, the lover (God) comes to the beloved (His people), thus indicating that the relationship is initiated by Him, and He alone can bridge the gap between heaven and earth. As Duguid notes, "The man embodies grace and beauty as well as strength and speed, in almost mythical quantities."[42] This is why the beloved can ask him to be like a gazelle or young stag and to continue bridging that gap, "Until the cool of the day when the shadows flee away," for he is her safety and security (cf. 4:6).

Finally, in 4:8, mountains are used to describe the woman's location. Here, rather than being a divine-human meeting place, the picture is of a dangerous wilderness of lions and leopards – a typical scene associated with the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, who tamed the wild.[43] The previous mountains and hills were barriers that the lover could easily overcome, but here, the mountains are a barrier that the beloved must act to overcome. The lover calls her out from there, twice urging her to come with him from Lebanon, from the summits of Amana, Senir and Hermon, and "from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards." The list of mountains given here are the towering, distant figures that one would have seen on the northern border of Israel. The picture presented in the Song is a place of distance and danger. The lover ascends toward her and calls her out of that place, perhaps with more urgency than he had previously called her to "arise" and "come along" to the blossoming fields around them (2:10-13). Previously, the man described her as a dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14). The metaphorical language describes the woman as inaccessible, perhaps fearful, trying to find shelter in the wilderness regions. Staying where she is, she would not find the abundant life she desires.

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[42] Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 98.

[43] Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 126, 158

Therefore, 4:8 seems to be a similar urging for her to leave behind the search for security in such wild and desolate places. He does not tell her where they will go; rather, he simply tells her to come *with him,* and then proceeds to tell her how wonderful she is to him. As I noted in Chapter 3, this further confirms that the security she seeks is in relationship, not a physical structure. Hess helpfully notes that in 4:6, the lover ascends like the myrrh and frankincense, and in 4:8, the beloved descends, and so they join together.[44]

Thus, while the lover is free to roam as a gazelle in the Song, the beloved in contrast is bound behind walls and seeking security in desolate, dangerous rock crags and lion's dens. So, he crosses the mountains and hills and calls her to the blooming countryside where life is breaking forth, and more importantly, he calls her to himself. Perhaps a similar meaning is found in Song 7:7-8, where she is described as a palm tree – a towering tree in the Near East, whose fruit is accessible only to those determined to climb and grasp it. The symbolism of the date palm tree will be discussed in more detail later. However, in general, the Song allegorically pictures God determined to reach His covenant people, just as He is determined to climb and leap over mountains and hills to get to her. She needs only to respond to His call.

Taming the Wild

Twice the Song asks who is coming up from the wilderness, as though the vision is a public spectacle (3:6-11; 8:5-7). We may answer the riddle-like question with "the beloved," though the text does not directly state that is so. Place these sections in the wider context of the Song, however, and we do see the beloved seeking protection, or shelter, that she knows comes only from the one she loves (1:5-8, 16-17; 2:3-6; 8:6-7), the one described as divine (5:10-16, et.

[44] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005),140.

al.), the one who calls her out of the desolate places (4:8) and instead seeks to be present with her in abundant fields and gardens (2:10-17; 4:9-5:1; 8:13). The Song presents a dichotomy of the wilderness and the domesticated countryside, the latter being the desired location for their ultimate union.

Mountains and hills certainly have religious symbolism, as described above, but even considered literally, they can be seen as barriers to be overcome. The Old Testament narratives often highlight topography in the context of Israel conquering the land promised to them by God. Levtow comments, "These Israelite narratives trace paths of victory through waters and wilderness, over hills and mountaintops, with ritual conquest motifs unfolding along the way as Yhwh and Israel vanquish other gods and peoples and claim hegemony over newly acquired territory."[45] Leaping over such difficult domains, the lover is also seen as strong and a conqueror, and as a nimble gazelle, able to do overcome the challenge with ease.

Several examples of flora and fauna mentioned in the Song can shed further light on how the Song communicates the beloved's progression from vulnerability in the wilderness to strength in security. Likened to a gazelle on the mountains and hills, the lover is pictured as dwelling in the wild regions of the earth. In "The Epic of Gilgamesh," Enkidu is described as a wild creature, covered in hair, living among gazelles and eating grass like them.[46] In the ANE, gazelles and stags were (and still are throughout the world) wild creatures, undomesticated, roaming the uncultivated countryside. They represent "the world of the steppe, the untamed

[45] Nathaniel B. Levtow, "Monumental Inscriptions and the Ritual Representation of War" in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts,* Ancient Israel and Its Literature, No. 18, eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 25. This language is apparent, for example, in Exod. 19:3-6, Deut. 6:20-25, 26:5-10, and Josh. 24:2-13.

[46] See "Stories of Gilgamesh," in Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 40.

land," also mythologically as the netherworld in Mesopotamian thought.[47] Yet in reality, they were not dangerous like lions and leopards (4:8). They were prey, not the predator, and therefore not to be feared by man. They formed a middle ground, in a sense, between wilderness and domesticated countryside. The man in the Song being described as a gazelle and then standing behind her wall and looking through her windows (2:8-9) is a picture of this wild creature encroaching a domesticated area. In addition, the Song specifically mentions gazelles and hinds of the field (2:7; 3:5) by which the daughters are adjured to take an oath about not awakening love until it pleases; there, they appear to serve the symbolic role of love, as well as more literally those wild yet curious creatures who from a distance watch the actions of humanity and serve some sort of moral role of holding them accountable to the right way of love that brings security to the wider world.[48]

The dove also serves a symbolic role in the Song as a wild creature, yet one that also could inhabit the domestic sphere. Like the gazelle, a dove-like bird has been found in ancient art connected to Ishtar. For instance, pottery jars from ancient Ebla were found in a well within a sacred area of the Ishtar temple. Decorations on the jars included bird figurines facing forward, with outstretched wings and fan-shaped tails, large eyes, and with a decorated collar around the neck. The birds were sometimes perched on the vase rim like they were drinking from it, and sometimes were depicted as wearing necklaces – both depictions associating them within the

[47] Kalla, "Date Palms," 881. An ivory pyxis found in a 13th century Assyrian tomb, contains pictures of gazelles feeding on flowers underneath fruit-bearing trees (see page 865-66).

[48] Some scholars have noted the similarities of the Hebrew words for gazelles and deer of the field to the Hebrew renderings of "the Lord of Hosts" and "God Almighty." See, for example, Longman, who believes that at most, this may be an allusion to the divine name, "while at the same time evoking a pastoral image, in keeping with the tenor of the book": Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 104-05.

domestic sphere, causing scholars to assume the birds were something like pigeons or doves, versus birds of prey.[49]

In the Song, the lover tells the beloved that her "eyes are like doves" (2:15). He also says that her "eyes are like doves behind your veil" (4:1), perhaps connecting to that same idea of hiddenness and vulnerability in the metaphor of a dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14). The beloved uses the same metaphor to describe the lover's eyes, but with an extended description: "His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, and reposed in their setting" (5:12). The picture of a safe and domestic situation versus a wild situation is clear here. The eyes, poetically considered windows of the soul, thus represent both the beloved's and the lover's being. They can relate to one another through the image of a dove – another creature that symbolizes the otherworldly, divine realm of love, as well as the capability of finding a home in an earthly, domesticated way of life.[50] The lover also refers to the beloved generally, as *his* dove and his "perfect one" (5:2, 6:9). If she was once hiding and looking for safety in desolate places, with him she has found not only a safe place to belong but a place where she is loved and valued.

The wild also merges into the domestic in Song 1:16-17, where the Beloved revels in the structure of their home together. Specifically, "The beams of our houses are cedars, our rafters, cypresses." It goes without saying that trees only become human houses when they are chopped down in the wild and formed for domestic purposes. It is not just any old tree or wood that the beloved is describing, however. Both cedar and cypress/juniper (בְּרוֹת) were used to build royal temples and palaces, certainly, but perhaps more germane to the Song is that they originate in the

[49] Frances Pinnock, "The Doves of the Goddess: Elements of the Cult of Ishtar at Ebla in the Middle Bronze Age," in *The Journal of the Council for British Research in the Levant* 32:1 (2000), 122, 127.

[50] In contrast, the hair of both the lover and beloved is described in more wild terms: the man's is black as a raven (5:11), and the woman's hair is like a flock of goats descending from Gilead (6:5), and like purple threads that captivate a king, growing out of a head that is like Carmel (7:5).

remote mountains of Lebanon, often viewed as a mythological realm of the gods in the ANE.[51] Thus, as Keel states, "To place the lovers in a 'house' of cedars and junipers is to see them more as divine than as royal."[52] If that is so, the beloved celebrates the idea of living in the divine realm with her divine lover, in secure and comfortable houses constructed of otherworldly materials. With him, she is safe from the desolate abodes of lions and leopards. Allegorically, the faithful covenant people of God can celebrate in the security of their relationship with God, who dwells with them.

The beloved, therefore, pictures securi with imagery of the greatest of all trees, but there is also the realization that the couple's security on earth must still be protected from the smallest of threats. In 2:15, while the speaker cannot be clearly identified, the idea is that the couple also shares earthly vineyards, from which come sustenance. As those vineyards begin to blossom, "little foxes" must be prevented from ruining them before the fruit can fully grow and be harvested. The beloved seems to exist at once in both the heavenly and earthly realms – able to joyfully celebrate a heavenly abode and assurance of the security of their relationship (2:16, et. al.), while also recognizing the reality of her security on earth requires constant vigilance.

At the same time, the Song also communicates the idea of common grace throughout the land. With no help from the beloved, the land produces flowers and fruit (2:10-13; 6:11; 7:12-13). Her lover also embodies this picture of life that exists apart from human cultivation. To the beloved, he is an abundant oasis in the wilderness (1:14), and an apple tree providing shade and

[51] For example, in the Gilgamesh epic, Enkidu says, "When I ran with animals, I learned that the Cedar Forest is a vast wilderness. No one goes there. Humbaba's roar is like the sound of a flood, His mouth is fire, and his breath is death." See Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels,* 43-44. Also, "A Hymn to Mar," part of "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script" says to the god Mar: "The beams of your house, Bethel, are from Lebanon; from Lebanon, {and} your garden, are they, and resident of Hamath" (*COS:*1.99:309-327*).*

[52] Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 75

fruit in the forest (2:3). TWOT notes that forests described in the Old Testament were dense and filled with wild animals (ex. 2 Kgs. 2:24; Amos 3:4; Mic. 5:8; Jer. 5:6, 12:8; Ps. 80:13; Isa. 56:9; Ezek. 34:25).[53] In general, the forest was a wilderness area – though one over which God had dominion, whether literally or figuratively (Ps. 29, Isa. 10:18, et. al.) and could certainly sovereignly grow as a proverbial apple tree in its midst. Here in the outer chiastic level of the Song, He is found by the beloved in the wild, where she resides, and He provides shelter and sustenance for her there.

In Song 8:5, the "apple tree" is mentioned again. תַּפּוּחַ, apple/apple tree, comes from the root נָפַח, which can mean to "breathe, blow," as on a furnace to fan the flames.[54] In 8:5, the woman says she awakened him under the apple tree, so the apple tree communicates life and love being fanned into flame (cf. 4:16). The woman makes this statement right after she is described as coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved. In 2:3, the lover is pictured as an apple tree in the wilderness, and his shade and fruit sustain her life. There is no need to try and identify his "mother," mentioned in 8:5. As elsewhere in the Song, the "mother" represents generational continuance of love and life. The motif may be further understood through a comparison with a Sumerian Inanna-Dumuzi text in which Inanna strolls with Dumuzi in the garden following their consummation, and there she kneels by the apple tree "as is proper," and before him she pours out plants and grain from her womb.[55] In this fertility myth/ritual, the apple tree becomes a metaphorical location for birthing life and sustenance in each new growing season. The idea of the continuance of love is found in the verses that follow (8:6-7), where the

[53] TWOT, 890

[54] BDB, 655. Consider also the possible poetic construction of Song 7:8, where he says the fragrance of her breath is like apples.

[55] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi." web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

woman asks the lover to put her as a seal on his heart. It is helpful to also note that in the ANE, the concept of a sacred tree, or tree of life, was common and may be what is evoked here. For example, in the tomb of Sennedjem in Egypt, the sky goddess, "Nut the Great" is pictured as a tree, giving food and water to the dead for his journey in the afterlife.[56] Also, in a 9th century cult stand from Taanach, a tree is flanked by caprids, and two lions guard a tree of life representing fertility and wealth, given by a deity.[57] In Proverbs 3:13-18, a tree is used as a metaphor for the order that comes from wisdom and leads to life. In Daniel 4, a tree is used as a parable for Nebuchadnezzar, and in Ezekiel 31 for the kings of the earth as world powers (which God tears down). In general in the ANE, a "world tree" or "tree of life," whether the embodiment of a deity or a king, was considered the cosmic center, with its roots going into the netherworld and its tops to heaven,[58] and as Bauks summarizes, the meaning of the symbol of a tree may vary across time and cultures in the ANE, but "common to all the different examples is the thematic reference to divine life-giving and guarantee of blessing."[59] In Song 8:5, the "apple tree" may symbolize the continuance of life that a mother does when giving birth, and that a young woman initiates by awakening love, while also alluding to the eternal life that issues from the tree of life. Allegorically speaking, the covenant relationship between God and His faithful covenant people is eternal, from generation to generation.

The lily/lotus, which in addition to being a common symbol of love and regeneration in the ANE, also grows in the wild. The beloved likens herself to both a rose of Sharon (also a

[56] Michaela Bauks, "Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their Ancient Near Eastern Precursors," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* (May 2012), 275.

[57] Ibid., 276-77

[58] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought,* 142-43

[59] Bauks, 281

flower that blooms in the desert, see Isa. 35:1) and a lily of the valleys (2:1), though the lover assures her that she is more than just one common wildflower among others – she stands out as a lily among the thorns (2:2)! The lover's lips are described as lilies that drip with liquid myrrh (5:13), indicating that the sweetness of his mouth (5:16) is not just enjoyable but provides life. Furthermore, he is described in the Song as feeding or pasturing among lilies (2:16, 6:2-3).[60] רָעָה is a word related to shepherding, as in this qal form it can mean "pasture, tend, or graze."[61] The word can also mean to "associate with," in the sense of companionship, friendship, or cherishing faithfulness (cf. Ps. 37:3).[62] In the context of the Song, the woman speaks of this action of the man alongside her statement that they belong to each other: "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16), and "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). The lily, also, as a symbol of renewal and regeneration, is that on which the lover *continually* feeds or pastures (רָעָה is an active participle in both 2:16 and 6:3). These passages provide a sense of eternal belonging and security to their relationship. In 6:2, the woman knows that the lover has "gone down to his garden, to the beds of balsam," and for the purpose of pasturing in the gardens and gathering lilies. A גַּן is a garden that is enclosed, and thus containing produce that is cultivated, domestic – not wild.[63] Here, the metaphor of lilies shifts to being that which the lover/caretaker harvests from "his garden." In 2:1, the woman claimed to be a lily of the valleys, a wildflower in the open fields. The lover further distinguished her as a lily among thorns – thus, a special flower that represents life in the desolate wild. But when the lover is near and is described as caring

[60] While some English versions, including the New American Standard Bible and New King James Version, translate as "he pastures his flock," the MT does not include "his flock." (Cf. Song 1:7, 8).

[61] BDB, 944

[62] Ibid., 945

[63] Ibid., 171

for/shepherding among the lilies, lilies become part of a garden – enclosed, secured, and growing in abundance. As will be discussed in the next section, metaphors of domestic security come to a climax at the center of the Song's chiasm in chapter four, where the woman is depicted as an enclosed, abundant garden.

Vineyards, Gardens, and Other Domestic Metaphors: The Nature and Realm of the Beloved

The woman both resides in and embodies the domestic sphere throughout the Song, marking a contrast with the lover who leaps on mountains and ephemerally moves between wild and domestic locations at will. As I will argue, below, throughout the Song the lover is depicted as the one who provides the beloved with security and abundance, having met her in a state of metaphoric wilderness and calling her out of it and to himself. He is a shepherd/gardener who protects her and infuses her with such abundance that she embodies it within her being.

The woman of the Song is alone in a physical domestic structure in several places in the Song – a house with windows and lattice (2:9), on her bed (3:1, and implied in 5:2), and behind a locked door (5:5).[64] In the middle section of the chiasm, she is also wandering in a city surrounded by walls and watchmen (3:1-4; 5:2-7). However, these locations are less than ideal, as they do not provide her with the lasting rest and security she desires. Furthermore, she is either being called away from them by her lover, or she still longs for her lover while in these locations. Even when she is "inside," therefore, she is not experiencing a state of security or lasting belonging. As Landy notes, when it is human society that tries to order and tame the

[64] If she is implied in Song 3:6, then she is also pictured as being enclosed in Solomon's palanquin.

situation, it actually becomes a danger to the lovers' union.[65] He adds that when mankind tries to recreate paradise through culture, they always fall short.[66] As I will show, elements of an ordered cosmos, depicted as a paradisical garden and embodied by the woman in the Song, only appear when the lover – allegorically, God – is either behind the scenes making it grow, or enters the scene to celebrate its fecundity.

In the ancient world, particularly in ancient sacred marriage/fertility myths, it was common to view a woman – specifically, a goddess – as embodying the very land around them, and pictured as needing to be fertilized by a male consort in order to bring forth life. As Jacobsen notes, the literal image of natural law helps in imagining the numinous as people sought to understand the world around them and the security for which they longed.[67]

In the Old Testament, the Promised Land, specifically Jerusalem and its people, was described in female terms. Consider Isaiah's description of the renewed, eschatological Zion: "You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. It will no longer be said to you, 'Forsaken,' nor to your land will it any longer be said, 'Desolate'; but you will be called, "My delight is in her,' and your land, 'Married'; for the LORD delights in you, and to Him your land will be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:3-5). The land and the people within the land merge in God's covenants. For example, in Genesis 12:1-3, God tells Abram to leave his country and go to a land

[65] Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 98:4 (December 1979), 522.

[66] Ibid., 524

[67] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

that He would show him, and in that land, God would establish Abram into a great nation that would in turn be a blessing to the world (cf. Exod. 6:2-8). In conjunction with God's unconditional covenant, however, were the blessings of each generation based on their obedience, which was inextricably linked to their own fertility and that of their land and livestock (Deuteronomy 28). On the Moab border, Moses reminded the people that the welfare of the land they were entering was not dependent on their labor, but on the grace of God, as it would not grow without His care (Deut. 11:10-12). Furthermore, the blessings of the land would be according to their faithfulness and love toward God (Deut. 11:13-17). In the Song of Songs, the woman is representative of this covenant, for she embodies the natural, cosmic realm in all its abundance as she seeks for and longs for her lover, yet at the same time is dependent upon his gracious, divine initiative.

Vineyard

At the beginning of the Song, the beloved openly admits that she had been unable to care for her own vineyard (1:6). Forced to care for her family's vineyards, her vineyard was left exposed and harmed by the sun. Here, the metaphor of a "vineyard" in the Song is applied to the woman herself. She thus seeks to find the one whom her soul loves (1:7; cf. 3:1-4) – the shepherd/gardener who will love and value her enough to care for and tend her (possibly the meaning of 8:11-12) so that she can, metaphorically, grow into a life-giving vineyard instead of a neglected and wilting one.

Literally speaking, a vineyard was grown on open land, vulnerable to weather and to wildlife (cf. 2:15). Vineyards had to be cultivated, meticulously cared for, if they were to produce fruit. Perhaps in a telling metaphor of her lover's divine sovereignty and transcendence, the beloved describes him as "a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi" (1:14), an

oasis surrounded by wilderness. In addition, he invites her to come out and see that the fig tree has ripened and the vines are in blossom (2:13), so in addition to a vast surrounding world of abundant, blooming life, he implies that the vineyards have been carefully tended and are soon ready to be harvested. That he has to call her out to see this vision also implies that she is not the one who has done the cultivating. In light of this, it is more likely that she is the speaker in 2:15, responding to his call to hear her voice (2:14) by instructing *him* to protect these blossoming vineyards from "the little foxes."

In what appears to be a parallel to chapter 2 in the outer level of the Song's chiastic structure, Song 6 refers to the woman inspecting and expecting the growth of plants in the orchards and vineyards around her. In 6:11, she is checking for blossoms in the נַחַל. Translated as "valley" in the NASB, נַחַל is more specifically a wadi, defined by TWOT as "a dry river bed or ravine which in the rainy season becomes a raging torrent, and/or the resulting torrent" (cf. Deut. 21:4; Amos 5:24; Ps. 104:10, 110:7).[68] The lover in 2:11 had announced that "The rain is over and gone," indicating that it was time to come out and see the growth. She appears to be doing just that in Song 6:11: "I went down to the orchard of nut trees to see the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded or the pomegranates had bloomed."

In Song 7 the woman speaks directly to her lover and invites him out into the country ("fields," as translated in 2:7 and 3:5), to spend the night and then to rise early and go the vineyards (7:11-12). "Let us see whether the vine has budded and its blossoms have opened," she says, "and whether the pomegranates have bloomed" (7:12). It is in that location, in that time when all was ripe, she promises to give him her love. In contrast, in Song 1:6-8, she is watching over others' vineyards while her own is crumbling, and she is not with her lover but seeking for

[68] TWOT, 570

him in the fields. In both Song 1 and 7, however, she continues to wish for him and dream of their union in a house that is not only strong and secure, but also luxurious and abundant with life-sustaining and choice fruit over their doors – fruit that she has been saving up for him as she waited for that day (7:13; cf. 1:16-17). The fruit is both "new and old," implying that the growth and harvest has been ongoing. Interpreted allegorically, the faithful covenant people of God are constantly reminded of God's faithful presence and care through the abundant, sustaining life in and all around them. They in turn give a portion of those blessings back to him in thankful worship (Psalm 107:8-9; Exod. 23:19; 2 Cor. 9:10-15).

Domesticated Countryside

In the three wasfs in which the Lover describes the Beloved, she is primarily pictured in terms of domestication. I will here offer a list of these images, following the order of the Song's chiastic structure from the outer to inner levels.

The first wasf in Song 7:1-5 (7:6-9 will be discussed later) describes the beloved in terms of beauty that results from domestic toil and ornamenting. She is wearing sandals, her hips are like jewels – "the work of the hands of an artist" (7:1), while her navel is likened to a round goblet that never lacks mixed wine, and her belly a heap of wheat fenced about with lilies (7:2). These descriptions are prefaced by calling her a "prince's daughter"; therefore it seems her state is a result of being related to and cared for by royal family. Her two breasts are likened to twin fawns of a gazelle (7:3), not just indicating fertility, but also implying that her lifegiving, nourishing ability has its root in a previous generation that has produced this offspring. He also states that her head "crowns you like Carmel" (7:5), a mountain range in Israel with "fertile

slopes."[69] The word כַּרְמֶל also literally means "plantation," "garden-land," or "orchard,"[70] further supporting the illustration of the woman being lovingly cared for and tended. Rather than seeing this wasf, and the other wasfs, as containing erotic connotations to a woman's physical appearance or sexual fertility, the allegorical interpretation understands that these distant metaphors paint a picture of the faithful covenant people of God, and by association the land in which they live, exuding such health and abundance as they remain in God's loving tender care. God, as the lover, is not concerned with how her beauty makes *Him* feel, but rather is the One behind making her the beauty that she is.

The wasf in Song 7 also likens her to parts of a fortified and inhabited city (with towers, pools, gate), probably a city that is the palace headquarters (since she is a prince's daughter, after all), and her locks are likened to purple threads that captivate the king (7:5). These metaphors were noted in Chapter 4, where I suggested these images help to illustrate a divine-human union. All of these metaphors, however, also imply that she is enclosed and protected in a domesticated environment, where she can enjoy sustenance and the pleasures of life. This wasf may be the chiastic parallel of chapter one, where she is likened to a mare wearing ornaments and beads in the context of Pharaoh's chariots (1:9-10) – also a royal situation but one with connotations of motion and war. There, unnamed voices declare they will make her ornaments of gold and beads of silver (1:11), thus seeking to increase and secure her beautiful, royal, domestic state that seems to be described in the Song 7 wasf.

Another wasf appears in Song 6:4-10, an inclusio. The lover compares the beloved to the cities of Tirzah and Jerusalem and "awesome as an army with banners," again implying that she

[69] BDB, 502

[70] TWOT, 1042

is firmly protected. He further tells her to "Turn your eyes away from me, for they have *confused* me," (6:5). רָהַב in the hiphil can mean to alarm, disturb, confuse, or make proud.[71] That they have this effect on him implies that she is the qal form of the verb, meaning "to act stormily, boisterously, arrogantly" – I suggest a picture of the boldness that she has because of the protection that she enjoys. This wasf furthermore pictures the woman in terms of domesticated countryside, or pastureland, where a flock of goats descends from Gilead (6:5), and where a flock of ewes ascend from washing – "all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost her young" (4:6). A flock of goats going down a mountain paints a kind of wild, yet domesticated picture.[72] In Song 1:8, the woman is pictured as owning a flock of goats, which she is instructed to take and pasture by the tents of the shepherds – those who share the same vocation as the one she loves. Therefore, the two animals are distinguished, as they are here. In 1:8, she is still wandering, which may be why she is described as having goats, rather than sheep. In 4:6, the sheep are clearly already domesticated and protected, having come up from washing and having born thriving twins. Therefore, the woman exudes both a sense of wildness seeking domesticity, and the state of having been cared for well and able to be a conduit for flourishing life. Furthermore, he describes her temples as being like a slice of pomegranate – a fruit that symbolized both physical and spiritual health, particularly as a result of YHWH's provision and favor (Deut. 8:8; cf. or the lack of His favor, see Joel 1:12, Hagg. 2:19).[73]

[71] BDB, 923

[72] Consider also the mention of Engedi in Song 1:14. The word is a construct of עַיִן, meaning "spring" (see BDB, 745), and גְּדִי, meaning "kid" (see BDB, 152) – thus, "spring of the kid." As an oasis in the desert, Engedi was a place for wild goats to find refreshment.

[73] Mary Abram, "The Pomegranate: Sacred, Secular, and Sensuous Symbol of Ancient Israel," *Studia Antiqua*, 7:1 (2009), 29.

The third and final wasf (4:1-7) occurs in the Song's chiastic climax and includes similar metaphors that appear in the previous wasfs, while adding a few more descriptions. Here, too, her temples are like a slice of pomegranate behind her veil, and her breasts are like twin fawns of a gazelle – this time feeding on lilies (4:5), adding to the eternality of the fecundity and safety that she embodies. Again, her hair is likened to a flock of goats that descended Gilead, and her teeth to ewes – here "newly shorn" (4:2), further adding to the picture of domesticity. As noted earlier, her eyes are likened to doves behind her veil (4:2), a picture of protection from the wild. In 4:3, her lips are likened to a scarlet thread, and her mouth is described as "lovely." Scarlet thread is elsewhere used in Scripture to set apart something. For instance, it was used to mark which twin of Tamar's was the firstborn (Gen. 38:28, 30), and one was used to mark Rahab's home so it would be safe from the coming destruction in Jericho (Josh. 2:18). The beloved in the Song, also, is being set apart and protected. Her neck is likened to a tower (4:4; cf. 7:4), specifically the tower of David, further pictured as "built with rows of stones, on which are hung a thousand shields, all the round shields of the mighty men." The picture alludes to 3:7-8, but this time the shields are hanging up, indicating that she is safe and protected, with no need to take up arms against an enemy.[74] In this wasf in the central part of the Song's chiasm, Duguid makes an important insight: seven body parts are listed here, indicating completeness and perfection (cf. 4:7).[75]

Garden

Finally, as the central climax in the Song, the beloved is pictured as a garden (4:12-5:1). As noted earlier, a גַּן is a garden that is enclosed, containing produce that is cultivated and

[74] Duguid, *The Song of Songs*, 112

[75] Ibid., 114

protected, as opposed to growing in open fields or in the wild. Also, as noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the similar metaphor and language in Proverbs 5 supports the interpretation that the lover, not the beloved, is to be lauded here for her abundance. As advice to a "son" to be faithful to his wife, Proverbs 5 describes the wife as a cistern and well, and the son's responsibility to her, as her owner or caretaker, is to stay faithful to her alone, taking of her wellspring of water so that it would not overflow to others. In the Song, the woman is described as "a garden locked" and "a spring sealed up" (4:12), a "garden spring" and "a well of fresh water, and streams flowing from Lebanon" (4:15). Lebanon, as noted earlier, was commonly regarded in the ANE as the abode of the gods. He earlier called her down from those dangerous mountains and to come with him (4:8), and she subsequently was secured as his bride – from 4:9 to 5:1, he refers to her as "bride" five times. Secured in relationship with her lover, they come from Lebanon, and she appears to embody and exude the eternal life of that divine connection – both to the symbolic place and to the lover himself. Taking her as a bride, he makes her secure, and, like the son in the Proverbs, his faithful caretaking helps her to thrive. Furthermore, the long list of produce and by-products of the garden and livestock that she embodies are exotic, coming from various distant lands. As Hess insightfully notes, such a conglomeration can only thrive in the perfect climate.[76]

I would add that all of those exotic plants can also only thrive with the perfect gardener. As Exum notes, the exotic lushness of the garden would require irrigation (cf. Ecc. 2:5; Neh. 2:8).[77] Furthermore, the verbs describing her as a locked garden and sealed spring are passive participles rather than active voice – which may imply she did not make herself that way, but rather she embodied the metaphor due to an outside caretaker. This same idea is expressed in

[76] Hess, *Song of Songs,* 150

[77] Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminister/John Knox, 2005), 177.

Song 7:7-8. Interpreters commonly see these verses as explicitly erotic, and as a difficult passage to explain for those who interpret the Song allegorically. However, the symbolic and practical place that date palms played in the ancient Near East helps to show that the metaphor here is simply another instance in which the lover, God, determines to tend the beloved – allegorically symbolizing both the covenant people and land of promise – making her strong and fruit-bearing. She was established and tended by God, and in turn produces abundant life and blessings that she offers back to Him.

The harvest of date palms in the ancient world was closely related with the goddess Inanna, and thus carried sacred connotation in the context of love and fertility.[78] As one example, previously mentioned, an Akkadian cylinder features a winged figure of Inanna/Ishtar standing on a mountain next to a small tree, holding a bunch of dates; at her right, water gushes from the shoulders of Ea/Enki.[79] An orthostatic relief in northwestern Iraq pictures a goddess between two date palms, their clusters resting on her breasts.[80] In Egypt, the tree-goddess, which was believed to nourish the dead, is sometimes depicted as a date palm, such as in a relief from 13th century Abusir, in which arms coming out of the tree are holding an abundance of produce and serving pitchers.[81] In an 18th century B.C. mural in the Mari throne room, Ishtar and king Zimri-Lim are standing in a garden with male and female palm trees and mythic creatures, as well as a flying dove and water of life with fish flowing from a flask held by water goddesses.[82]

[78] Taiz and Taiz, *Flora Unveiled,* 85

[79] Ibid., 104

[80] Keel, *The Song of Songs,* 243

[81] Ibid., 248

[82] Kalla, "Date Palms," 885

The ANE picture of the date palm, then, is one of life and nourishment that was believed to come from the goddesses of fertility. The metaphor is a natural one. Date palms were central to every garden or orchard in the ANE. They were tall and provided shade for the other plants. In addition, it was a viable tree, resilient even in desert conditions.[83] Germane to the date palm as a metaphor in the Song is the fact that date palms that grow in the wild do not produce as many offshoots as cultivated ones do. Cultivated palms produce so many offshoots that they must be regularly removed so that they can continue to thrive.[84] When it does thrive, it produces fragrant and sweet fruit, and every part of the palm could be used in trades such as construction and weaving.[85] In the Song, the lover states that the woman's stature is like a palm tree, and her breasts like its clusters (7:7), echoing the iconography of fertility goddesses. Then he states his intention to climb the tree and take hold of its fruit stalks (7:8). With a jussive he wishes, or commands, that her breasts be like clusters of the vine, her breath like apples, and her mouth like the best wine (7:8-9) – all mature fruit, harvested and ready for consumption. Only with his caretaking and gracious union with her was it possible for her to achieve this state.

The language echoes the erotic imagery as seen in the sacred marriage/fertility texts like those of the Inanna and Dumuzi tradition. However, just as in that tradition, the emphasis is on the result of the relationship. Erotic terminology is only the metaphorical bridge by which one is to understand how the fertility of the land is possible via the deity's intervention. Though strange and shocking to modern ears, the picture was a common one in ANE thought. There is a difference, though, that should be considered: In the ancient pagan myths, the goddess needed a

[83] Kalla, "Date Palms," 868

[84] Taiz and Taiz, *Flora Unveiled, 87*

[85] Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 244.

consort in order to bring life to the land. In the Song, the land is already fertile and blossoming in God's presence, apart from the beloved (2:10-13), though His desire is for His covenant people to be "fruitful" as well (7:7-9).

Fragrances and Feasting: Spatial Indicators of the Couple's Union

In Song 6:1-3, the beloved answers the daughters of Jerusalem who ask where her beloved has gone, saying that he "has gone down to his garden…" and further describes him as doing the work of both a shepherd and gardener, pasturing among lilies and gathering lilies. In the middle of this description, she announces their commitment and belonging to one another: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (cf. 2:16, 7:10). In the Song's climax in 4:16-5:1, this mutuality is realized when she calls upon the wind to spread the fragrances of her garden abroad and expresses a desire for the lover to come in and "eat its choice fruits!" Sustenance and security is the end goal of the couple's union, but before that union takes place they know of each other's presence only through sight, sound, and smell.

Sight and Sound

The couple's union involves seeing and hearing one another. She seeks to find him (1:7-8; 3:1-4; 5:5-7), sees him coming over mountains and hills, and listens to his voice as he calls her to arise and come with him (2:8-13) or to open to him (5:2). He asks to see her form and hear her voice (2:14; cf. 8:13). The wasfs are based on the lover's view of the beloved (6:4-10; 7:1-7; 4:1-7). In contrast, the wasf of the lover is based only on the beloved's memory of him (5:10-16) as they remain apart (5:2-9, 6:1-3).

Fragrances and Flowering

The fragrance of oils and perfumes and the blossoming of flowers and fruit in the land are images used in the Song to illustrate the couple's distance from, and attraction toward, each

other. The lover tells the beloved that the flowers have appeared in the land, the fig tree has ripened its figs, and the vines are blossoming and giving forth fragrance (2:12-13). The beloved, likewise, says "The mandrakes have given forth fragrance" (7:13)[86] as she looks with expectation for growth in the vineyards (7:11-12) and desires to go with him to check on the progress.

The lovers' fragrances mimic the aroma of springtime blossoms and ripening of fruit. The beloved, whose "perfume gave forth its fragrance" (1:12), lauds the fragrance of her lover's oils (1:3). She describes him as a pouch of myrrh between her breasts (1:13), and henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi (1:14). Myrrh drips from the beloved's fingers when she just misses a meeting with the lover at her door (5:5). The lover is described as having cheeks like a bed of balsam and banks of sweet-scented herbs, with lips dripping with liquid myrrh (5:13). Similarly, Solomon's palanquin comes up from the wilderness, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense and all scented powders of the merchant, describing movement toward the divine realm (3:6-11). The lover never comments on the beloved's aroma until the center of the Song in 4:10-5:1, when he also calls her his bride and they are closest together (take note that he can smell her garments in 4:11). In this section, fragrance and feasting merge together as they celebrate the fruit of their union.

Feasting

Early in the Song, the woman describes getting a taste of the lover's life-sustaining fruit (2:3), and he took her to his banquet hall as a sign of his love (2:4-5). In Song 4, where the beloved is described as a locked garden, the flowers and fruit that were blossoming earlier in the Song are now in full bloom. Water is flowing to support life, an exotic list of fruits, plants, and spices (4:12-15). Now, the fruit is ripe and ready to be consumed. In 7:8-9, this was the lover's

[86] "Mandrakes" were considered an aphrodisiac in the ANE. See Gen. 30:14-15.

wish – that the beloved would exude the fragrance of apples and fruit of the vine. Here, she does just that. The list of fragrances and food, however, in this section are clearly just metaphor. As she said to him at the start of the Song, he now says to her also that her love is *better* than wine (4:10; cf. 1:2), and her oils better than the fragrance of all kinds of spices. When she calls for the winds to awaken and blow on *her* garden and spread its fragrance, she in the next breath calls it *his* garden. The language echoes that of Inanna and Dumuzi in the ancient Sumerian text about their courtship. Following their sexual consummation, Inanna goes into Dumuzi's garden, where she gives birth to the fruit. The beloved's fragrance draws the lover into this shared garden, where he gathers, eats, and drinks (5:1). In just this one verse, the lover uses "my" nine times. Both the beloved and all that is found within her belong to him. He is both owner and caretaker of the beloved, illustrated throughout the Song as a vineyard and garden. He has brought forth life in her, and now they are encouraged to rejoice in that life together, to the full (5:1).

Conclusion

Life in the ANE was dependent upon the fertility and fecundity of the land around them. Like all humans of every age, people longed for security in abundance – which they envisioned as aligning with the cosmos that was ordered by deities in the divine realm. Proper relationship with these deities meant divine favor that was seen in springtime and harvest, the production of food and drink that sustained life.

In the Song, the beloved seeks this security in a love relationship with the lover. Leaping over mountains and hills, pasturing among lilies, and gathering lilies, he is pictured as both a divine shepherd and gardener who provides eternal life. Not only is this life seen in the land around them, but also specifically in the woman herself, who embodies, or mirrors, the natural, cosmic realm in all its abundance. Due to his faithful caretaking, she becomes a metaphorical

fortified city, a vineyard producing fruit, a beautiful domestic landscape where lovingly tended sheep produce abundant offspring, and ultimately an enclosed garden so infused with life that its fragrance wafts beyond its walls to the wider world.

In the climax of the Song, the beloved expresses her own recognition that she belonged to the Gardener, who made all of this grow, and to the Shepherd who was responsible for the production of milk and honey that dripped from her lips and tongue, and the garments she wore (4:11, 5:1). Throughout the Song, she is filled with expectation, watching for fecund fields and blossoming plants, holding on to her lover's fragrances, and dreaming of the day when they will be together and experience the joy of feasting on the fruit of her lover's faithfulness.

The lover is the force behind the beloved's journey from the wilderness to domestic security. Allegorically, God, as the lover, is the One who reaches to earth from the divine realm and superintends all of nature. He, solely, tames the wilderness, holds the cosmos together, and as the ultimate Shepherd and Gardener, He ensures its well-being so that abundant life is unbroken and eternal. The woman, allegorically representing God's faithful covenant people, seeks Him for protection and life, and in so doing proves that she is wise and becomes not just one who is blessed by God's secure and everlasting love, but one who declares that love to future generations as she dwells eternally in the "gardens" (8:14).

Chapter 6: Solomon's Temple as the Song's Historical Context

The concerns addressed in the Song of Songs align with the concerns in the wider conceptual world of the ancient Near East. These concerns centered around the home and the temple, as people sought to align their lives with the divine order. As shown thus far, ancient people believed they were to live a daily life of wisdom and to maintain a proper divine-human relationship so that the earthly would reflect the heavenly, and so that the people would be secure and blessed. The couple in the Song seeks a committed union that results in security and abundant provision. The lover is the allegorical representative of God, who crosses into the earthly realm to bring that security and provision to the woman, who is the allegorical representative of His faithful covenant people, who are characterized by seeking and depending upon Him. The divine-human relationship being poetically portrayed is more committed and surer than relationships portrayed in extant ancient pagan love songs. In this chapter, I will argue that the Song of Songs adapted the love language and imagery of its day to describe the unique relationship between God and His covenant people, particularly as it was shown in a specific historical context: the Davidic covenant and the dedication of Solomon's temple. The connections between the Song and the historical narratives of Scripture can illuminate the identity of the Song's protagonists and the Song's peculiar message about the covenant love of Yahweh amid the wider pagan cultural milieu.

It is first necessary to make a case that the Song of Songs, placed canonically within the Writings/Wisdom books of the Old Testament, can find connections with the Old Testament's historical narrative of God's dealings with Israel. If there are no literary or textual connections to the historical narrative, then an allegorical interpretation of the Song, in which the main characters are God and His covenant people, is difficult to argue. For example, Webb argues that

the Song is a commentary on human love and thus rejects it as an allegory of marriage between God and His people, a metaphor that he believes appears exclusively in the Old Testament's prophetic corpus.[1] However, it is not necessary to bifurcate the Song's wisdom about love from the historical context in which that wisdom arises.

One of the keys to understanding the Song's wider canonical connections is in determining the role of Solomon. The meaning of the ascription in Song 1:1 is somewhat elusive, since the preposition לְ in לִשְׁלֹמֹה can mean "to" or "for" Solomon.[2] Some scholars believe the ascription naming Solomon is a reason for placing the Song strictly within the wisdom tradition, much like Proverbs, which addresses Solomon as the author and/or collector at the start (Prov. 1:1). One of the earlier views in this camp is Childs, who maintained that Solomon's association with the Song was as the "source of Israel's wisdom literature," much like Moses was associated with the Law and David with the Psalms.[3] To Childs, the canon itself assigns the Song its function in its placement among the wisdom literature,[4] as well as its interpretation: "The Song is wisdom's reflection on the joyful and mysterious nature of love between a man and a woman within the institution of marriage."[5]

However, Solomon's name in the ascription and his connection to wisdom writing does not mean the book has to be pigeonholed into an abstract wisdom collection, with no historical

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[1] Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 29.

[2] Chet Roden, *Elementary Biblical Hebrew: An Introduction to the Language and its History* (Solana Beach, CA: Cognella, 2017), 59.

[3] Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 574.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 575

considerations. After all, as Heereman rightly notes, not all wisdom writing in the Bible is attributed to Solomon, and not all texts attributed to Solomon (Psalms 72 and 127) are considered wisdom literature in the form-critical sense.[6] Van Leeuwen adds that Exodus 31 and 1 Kings 7 provide historical narratives of wisdom being played out via the pattern that is set out in Proverbs; therefore, topos is not bound by genre.[7] Keeping in mind that categories like "wisdom literature" in the Bible are heuristic, connections from any part of the canon should be investigated and considered in the formulation of an understanding of a text. For example, Dell proposes viewing "Solomon" as a category, rather than the late category of "wisdom literature," which would include the wisdom literature as well as the Song of Songs and Samuel-Kings for intertextual study.[8] In the Song, the name of Solomon is not only invoked in the ascription – he appears as a literal figure, in the third person (Song 1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12). The question becomes why Solomon, specifically, is mentioned repeatedly in the Song. Is his name and legacy simply a literary tool or symbol, or is it about the real king? Can the two really be divided?

It is important to recognize that the poetic books of the Old Testament were not written in an historical vacuum. Israel was a people of God formed by God and upheld by God, as both the Law and Prophets testify, and that is what the Old Testament Writings remember and celebrate. How the people viewed the world and their place in it, how they conducted their lives and

[6] Nina Sophie Heereman, "Where is Wisdom to be Found? Rethinking the Song of Songs' Solomonic Setting," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130:3 (2018), 421.

[7] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed. Christopher R. Matthews, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 200, 85.

[8] Katharine Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of 'Wisdom' and Its Influence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 15. Dell does not consider Solomon's association with these texts as necessarily literal or historical. Rather, she writes, Solomon is a "symbolic figure who holds this 'family' together", p. 30. However, in the Song of Songs, Solomon's name is at times used for symbolism, as in the mention of his "curtains" for imagery sake (1:5), but other times he appears to be the literal king in royal fanfare (3:6-11) and conducting kingdom operations (8:11-12).

directed their hearts, had everything to do with their identity as the chosen nation of Yahweh. As Campbell rightly argues, "The interpreter must appreciate that the unfolding of God's redemptive covenant of grace lies at the heart of a truly biblical theology."[9] In each special revelation of God recorded in Scripture, humanity is given supernatural insight not only into God's redemption plan, but also into His character and how they, as bearers of His image, are to reflect His character. For example, the people of Israel were told to be holy, as God is holy, but they could not know what "holiness" meant apart from God's revelation of Himself. Walton calls this "co-identification with Yahweh" a unique sociology found in Israel.[10] He writes: "The understanding of both justice and wisdom was founded on this principle, which in turn became the keystone of ethics and morality. The knowledge of God required in such an enterprise was available only to the extent that the Israelites were persuaded that God did not reveal simply answers or commands but his plans and purposes."[11] In this co-identification with Yahweh, Walton writes, Israel was identified as God's holy people: "They are called upon to reflect that status that he has given them both in the way they order their society and in their maintenance of sacred space in the cultic dimension."[12] As will be described in more detail in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, the people were also called to love God and neighbor, but they could not know what love really is apart from God revealing it to them in time and space, and therefore His calls for them to love always followed Him showing them what love is (ex. Deuteronomy 6). The idea of co-identification is developed further in the New Testament in the person of Christ, who in

[9] Iain D. Campbell, "The Song of David's Son: Interpreting the Song of Solomon in the Light of the Davidic Covenant," *The Westminster Theological Journal,* 62 (2000), 23.

[10] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 316.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 71

stepping into history was the exact representation of God (2 Cor. 4:4-6), exemplifying God's character in human form. God's people are called to identify with Christ in His sufferings as they await their eternal home (Romans 8:17).

It is undeniable that the Song of Songs is written about ideal love, but within the unique, covenantal, Israelite context, the love it illustrates cannot be a disembodied love that is rooted in one's fallible human sensibilities. The Song is not about a human marriage that reflects God's love for His people. Rather, the Song is directly about God's love for His people, and any lessons about love and marriage that come from that example is secondary – a microcosmic reflection, or pattern, of the perfect, cosmic model; it is not the primary message of the Song. In the Song, "love" is that which was revealed to them by God Himself. Though the text of the Song may have been the product of a particular context in Israel's history, the "love" that was revealed in that context is timeless, because it comes from the transcendent and immutable God. What makes the Song different than any other kind of secular love poetry of that day, or even of sacred marriage rituals or myths of that day, is that "love," to the people of Israel, was more perfectly defined and exemplified by God through direct revelation in His covenant with His chosen people. In this covenant, "love" was never just about human infatuation or longing for another, nor was it ever about conducting a ritual to ensure God would take care of them and love them. The Song's "love" is that which is rooted in God Himself, his very nature being "love." As part of the "Writings," the Song may exist in a different genre than that of narrative or prophecy, but it, too, communicates Israel's relationship with Yahweh and the repercussions that special relationship had on their everyday lives.[13] The poetry and wisdom of the Old Testament was

[13] The historic relationship between God and Israel informed rabbinic interpretation of the Song up to the present day. As late as 1977, Rabbis Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman, building their overview around a commentary by Rashi, argued that behind the Song was the context of the Solomonic temple. See *Shir Hashirim/Song of Songs: An Allegorical Translation Based upon Rashi, with a Commentary Anthologized from*

written in response to one's real-life experience, and in particular the real, special revelation of God and His character in time and space.

Solomon himself is an historical figure who connects the wisdom tradition with the historical narrative.[14] In 1 Kings 1-11 (cf. 1 Chronicles 28 - 2 Chronicles 9) Solomon is described as a wise king who had incomparable intellectual knowledge, sought to lead the people with justice, and whose divinely-given wisdom was ultimately shown in the construction of the temple. Heereman helpfully notes that in ANE literature, when a king is described in literature as having wisdom in these domains, the text can be considered "royal ideology." She writes, "An essential part of the royal ideology is that the king, not only through wise governance and instruction, but first and foremost through his service to the gods, particularly in the construction of temples, participates in the ongoing work and maintenance of creation (understood as an establishment of cosmic order after the defeat of chaos). Royal wisdom is therefore inseparable from *creation* and *temple theologies.*"[15] What this means is that while the Song is canonically located among the Bible's wisdom literature, it can also be tied to the historical narrative literature, for both genres, at their core, concern God's revelation, acts, and order upon the earth.

Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources (Brooklyn, N.Y.: ArtScroll/Mesorah, 2000), xxi-lxvi. However, they argue that Solomon is simply the closest allegory of God, who is the ultimate king, to help people, as best as possible, understand who God is (see pg. lxi), and therefore, Solomon and the lover appear to be the same in their thinking, when, as I contend, they should be considered separate figures. In addition, these rabbinic interpreters emphasize Torah obedience as central to relationship with God as described in the Song, while I argue that the celebration is more about God's unconditional covenant that cannot be obtained or thwarted by man, no matter how pious or evil. See chapter 1 of this dissertation for a more thorough overview of the early rabbinic interpretations of the Song.

[14] Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus*, 208

[15] Heereman, "Where is Wisdom to be Found?" 422. See also Bartholomew and O'Dowd, who note that in Israel and in the ANE in general, a king's wisdom was recognized through his skill in justice and in temple building. More than just intellectual wisdom about the world, a king's legitimacy to the throne was based on his wise, physical leadership within the kingdom (*Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 76-77).

The Song does indeed reference the historical king Solomon, as well as allusions to his time and situation. The main setting of the Song appears to be the sacred, royal city of Jerusalem (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10: 5:8, 16; 6:4; 8:4) at a time of great abundance and wealth (1:5, 11, 16-17; 3:6-11; 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-10; 7:1-9; 8:9-12), and the background seems to be a public celebration of love (1:4, 11; 3:6-11; 5:1, 9; 6:1, 10, 13; 8:5) . In addition, the mention of various types of oils, scents and spices – particularly the very costly myrrh – are associated with the anointing of kings and the consecration of sacred objects[16] (1:3, 12-13; 3:6; 4:6, 10-14, 16; 5:1, 5, 13; 7:13; 8:14; cf. Exod. 30:22-38). Hess helpfully observes: "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."[17]

In addition, possible allusions to God's covenant relations with His covenant people can be found in some of the poetic terminology used within the Song. For example, as Davis notes, the public exulting and rejoicing of Song 1:4 echoes the public worship of Israel elsewhere in Scripture (Psalm 118:24; Isa. 25:9), and in 2:1-3 and 3:6, the woman being likened to a rose of Sharon and lily of the valley and coming up from the wilderness echoes the symbol that is used of a restored Zion in the prophetic books (Hos. 14:5; Isa. 35:1).[18]

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[16] Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs,* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 48.

[17] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 18.

[18] Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 243, 260-61. See also Yair Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs: Riddle of Riddles* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 106; and Carr, who notes the phrase "We will exult" in Song 1:4 elsewhere in the Old Testament is most often in context of the Lord's promises or deliverance (*The Song of Solomon,* 81).

It may also be helpful in support of this argument to note that in the ancient Near East, the songs that have been preserved, particularly lengthy ones like the Song, were produced by the royal court – those in the kingdom who were rich and powerful, who alone had the resources to hire professional musicians and singers.[19] The Song of Songs, a polished literary text, is ascribed to Solomon and contains a reference to his "wedding," in addition to having a Jerusalem context – all signs, according to Klein and Sefati, that point to the Song originating in an elite collection of literature, composed for the king, and not just popular poetry.[20]

In addition, in consideration of the entire biblical canon, the Davidic-Solomonic kingdom was a time of what Garrett and House call "the period of great musical and literary flourishing in Israel,"[21] and in Solomon's reign, especially, there was plenty of exposure to foreign works as he entered marriage and trade alliances with the nations around Israel, which may have influenced the literary character of the Song. I have already shown the literary similarities that can be found between the Song and both Egyptian and Mesopotamian love songs. While some scholars believe that Solomon's name in the Song is simply a literary tool to describe the lover, there remains a lingering ambiguity regarding the mention of the historical king. For example, Exum argues that the man is simply being depicted as Solomon, "lover-king par excellence," but she admits that the mention of Solomon and imagery that resembles the kingdom at the time of his reign – an atmosphere of splendor, regality, and city walls, squares, and watchmen – urges the

[19] Garrett and House make this point: See Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations,* World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 57-58. However, rather than seeing the Song as concerning the court or the kingdom, they believe the Song is about an anonymous, idealized couple anticipating and consummating their marriage, and thus simply a wisdom text, with Solomon serving only as a symbol of royalty and majesty, "a quality that every groom (ideally) partakes of" (p. 181).

[20] Jacob Klein and Yitschak Sefati, "Secular Love Songs in Mesopotamian Literature: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism. Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday," *Birkat Shalom,* Vol. 2, eds. Chaim Cohen et. al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 624.

[21] Garrett and House, *Song of Songs,* 22

reader to think of that period.[22] These references, she admits, does "put an Israelite stamp on this exotic description."[23]

In this chapter, I will seek to show that there are indeed connections to be found between the Song and the Solomonic narratives of the Old Testament. However, Solomon's story, as the wise and chosen king of Israel, does not begin when he takes the throne. He is, in a partial and temporary sense, the fulfillment of the covenant Yahweh had made with his father, David. My study into the connection of the Song to the historical King Solomon will start there, as I seek to build support for reading the Song as an allegory of the lover, God, and the beloved, His covenant people – a relationship most clearly evidenced in God's revelations of Himself in history, not least of which was the announcement of His promise to establish an eternal kingdom through David and his descendants.

The Song of Songs and the Davidic Covenant

In 2 Samuel 7 (cf. 1 Chronicles 17), David – a king known for his warrior exploits as he fought to establish the kingdom of Israel – finds himself in a period of rest (7:1), and his thoughts turn to a more permanent future, and thus a more permanent dwelling for the ark of God. The ark represented God's glory and presence among the people (Exod. 25:22), and at that time, the text states that the ark was dwelling "within tent curtains" (2 Sam. 7:2). David's desire was a noble one – so noble, in fact, that the prophet Nathan felt it was not even necessary to consult God about it (7:3). However, that evening, God tells Nathan to communicate a message to David, indicating that a permanent earthly house, or temple, was not His primary concern. If it

[22] Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminister/John Knox, 2005), 90, 141.

[23] Ibid., 144

were, He would have required that task of tribal Israelite leaders long before David's time (7:7). Instead, God had been present among His nomadic people as they wandered in the wilderness, with both He and they living in moveable tents (7:6). The purpose of God's corrective to David's desire was to remind David that all that concerned the people of Israel and His kingdom was according to *His* plan and timing, not David's, and that relationship, not temple building, was how God took care of them (7:8-11). Only by God's faithfulness to Israel had they found any sort of rest or victory in their past wanderings, and the same would be true for their future now that they were on the verge of realizing secure nationhood in the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15:16, 17:8).

Without mentioning David directly, the Song alludes to him, and particularly the passages of 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, in several ways. First, David's concerns about a permanent home for the ark, and thus God's presence among the people, echoes the extended metaphor of the Song, in which the beloved desires a secure home with the lover. As the royal head of Israel, David was to represent God on the earth as His vice-regent. overseeing order and justice in the land. Throughout the ancient Near East, finding a permanent place – a resting place – for the temple and its deity was an important responsibility of the king, particularly following victory in battle, to provide for the people's future security.[24] For example, in The Cylinders of Gudea, the king is promised by Ningursu that when he began building the temple, he and the people would receive abundance.[25] In the case of the Israelites, however, God cared for them even during their wilderness wanderings. In the wilderness, the ark symbolized God as a divine warrior as He existed in the midst of their tribal camps and led the way when they were marching

[24] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 170, and Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 30.

[25] "The Cylinders of Gudea," *COS* 2.155:417-433

forward (Num. 10:35-36).[26] Coming to rest in Jerusalem was symbolic of having achieved victory and now establishing a more permanent security (Deut. 12:10-11) and place for Yahweh's Name and worship of Him.[27] In bringing the ark into Jerusalem and building the temple, the king of Israel was not responsible for bringing blessings to the people; he merely served a symbolic role as he obeyed God and then shared in the blessings that God graciously provided through His presence with them in this more permanent place of rest. Allegorically, the woman in the Song – representing the covenant partner of God – includes, as I will show in more detail, allusions to David specifically.

The Song echoes the Davidic covenant passages in specific imagery and phrases found in the poem's outer chiastic level. First, in Song 1:5-8, the woman likens herself to the black tents of Kedar, but also calls herself "lovely…like the curtains of Solomon" (1:5). Kedar was among the descendants of Ishmael who settled in the Arabian desert region (Gen. 25:12-18; Isa. 42:11). They were nomadic shepherds (Isa. 60:7; Ezek. 27:21) and men of war (Psalm 120). The covenant people of God, up to the time of David and Solomon, had not had a permanent place of peace in which to dwell, and so they are likened to the black tents of this nomadic tribal group. On the other hand, however, she is also lovely like the "curtains of Solomon." The root of the name Solomon is שָׁלוֹם, or peace, and so is a direct contrast to the people of Kedar. Solomon's curtains, in contrast to the tents of Kedar, have a more positive connotation. "Curtains", יְרִיעָה, though still impermanent and moveable, is a word used elsewhere in the Old Testament most

[26] Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopedic Exploration of Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 170.

[27] Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "'Solomon Built the Temple and Completed It': Building the First Temple According to the Book of Kings." In *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* edited by Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 286.

often in reference to the wall hangings of the tabernacle (Exodus 26, 36; Num. 4:25). When David stated that the ark of the covenant "dwells within tent curtains" (2 Sam. 7:2; 1 Chron. 17:1), he was referring to the tabernacle as he expressed longing for a temple to be built as a more permanent home for the ark, which represented God's presence and the covenant He made with Israel. Both the ark of the covenant and the covenant people had been nomadic tent-dwellers (2 Sam. 7:6-7). But God had promised to bring them into a secure and abundant land (Deut. 8:7-9) and that David's son would build a house there for His name (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Chron. 22:10). In expectation of God's promises, the woman calls herself lovely like the curtains of Solomon as she looks forward to that day. She may look like the dark tents of Kedar, but the longing of her soul (Song 1:7) for God's promises of a more permanent home with Him made her much more like a lovely vision of a shelter in which peace and the presence of God is found within. In the epilogue of the Song, she is described as a fortified city within which peace is found, and thus her desire for permanence appears to have been realized (Song 8:10).

Metaphorically, the woman describes herself as a neglected vineyard (1:6) and is wandering in the pastureland, among the flocks of her lover's companions, looking for him (1:7). חָבֵר can mean someone of like calling.[28] The lover and his companions in this context are being pictured as shepherds, which is confirmed in 1:8. Ultimately, the people's rest would not come through any structure built by man, no matter how noble or pious. God reminds David that He took him from the pasture to be ruler over "My people Israel," that He was with him all that time and defeated his enemies (2 Sam. 7:8-9), and His same gracious sovereignty would be what would establish David, his name, and a secure home for God's people in the future (7:9-11). In Song 1:8, the woman, in response to her request to locate her lover, is instructed to follow the

[28] BDB, 288

trail and pasture her young goats by the tents of the shepherds. In the context of David's search for a way to realize the covenant in a more permanent way, this passage in the Song can be understood in light of the patriarchal history up to this time. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, were all literal shepherds, but also figurative shepherds tasked with leading God's people and bringing them into the promises of God. They were the human shepherds under the great Shepherd. The beloved, here alluding to David, is being told to pasture her young flock next to the tents of these shepherds – all of whom had looked for the promise of God to be fulfilled.[29] In 2 Samuel 7:7, God describes the earlier tribes of Israel as having been commanded to shepherd His people Israel. They truly were all nomads, tent-dwellers, for that time, just as David, also both a literal and figurative shepherd, still is at this time (at least in terms of his place within God's covenant promise with Israel, since he *was* living in a nicely constructed palace!). They were all looking for a better, more permanent fulfillment of God's promise (cf. Heb. 11:8-10). The sense of Song 1:8 is one of expectation, of the need for her, as all up to this time had done, to keep looking for that day, trusting in God's promises that He would indeed be faithful to lead her to that place of permanence.

At the other end of the outer layer of the Song's chiastic structure, we find this same picture of expectation. In 6:11-13, the woman shares that she is actively seeking for signs of growth in the land – specifically, signs of buds and blossoms that would indicate the time is ripe for security and sustenance. Though 6:12 is a notoriously difficult passage with possible corruption in the extant texts and translated in a variety of ways in English versions, the sense is

[29] Note that Isaac's blessing upon Jacob included prophetic words about Jacob's "mother's sons" bowing down to him (Gen. 27:29; cf. Gen. 37:9-11). The same picture was prophesied by Jacob over his son Judah (Gen. 49:8). In Song 1:6, the woman states the opposite: "my mother's sons were angry with me," and as a result she was forced to be caretaker of the vineyards, exposed to the scorching sun. The Song, here, may reflect the situation of all in the line of promise who were still looking for that day when the prophecy would be fulfilled.

one in which she is, by no concerted effort of her own, taken from that place of expectation to one of realization. The phrase, נַפְשִׁי שָׂמַתְנִי מַרְכְּבוֹת עַמִּי־נָדִיב, is translated as "…my soul set me over the chariots of my noble people" in the NASB. Her expectation and desire was fulfilled when she went from being a wandering shepherd and exposed vinedresser to a powerful ruler. David's life was similarly changed, as conveyed through God's words to David in 2 Samuel 7:8: אֲנִי לְקַחְתִּיךָ מִן־הַנָּוֶה מֵאַחַר הַצֹּאן לִהְיוֹת נָגִיד עַל־עַמִּי עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel."

God goes on to remind David that his elevated position was because of what *He* had done for David – cutting off all of his enemies from before him (7:9). Now, moving forward, God would make David's name great, "like the names of the great men who are on the earth" (7:9), and plant His people Israel in a permanent, secure place (7:10). In a similar picture of the passive receiving of a royal position, the woman of the Song in 1:9-11 is described as being decorated with precious materials and standing out among all of Pharaoh's chariots. Furthermore, in Song 7:1-9, she is also described in terms of royal beauty, adornment, and kingdom strength and provision, as well as a firmly planted and abundantly producing palm tree. In the Old Testament narrative, God had planted the original garden (Gen. 2:8). In the renewing of His covenant with humanity, *Noah* took on the role of husbandman, planting a vineyard (Gen. 9:20). Later, God furthered His covenant through Abraham, who also planted a grove (Gen. 21:33) where He called on the name of the LORD. The expectation for God to once again do the planting shows up in Exodus 15:17: "You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, the place, O LORD, which You have made for Your dwelling, the sanctuary, O LORD, which Your hands have established" (cf. Ps. 44:2). As discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, the Song pictures the lover as the loving and faithful caretaker who forms the beloved into a

blooming, lifegiving, secure garden. The woman, through the poetry of the Song, is the fulfillment of this promise made to the patriarchs, including David. Just as God's promise to David included God's covenant people over whom David would rule, the woman of the Song appears to stand for, in her allegorical role, both the king and the people. Together, they shared the benefits of being God's chosen people – His beloved.

In a second promise, God flips the script on David, saying that while David's descendent would build a physical house/temple for His name, God would build a house for David – specifically, a dynasty through that descendent, which would be eternal because God's חֶסֶד would never leave him (2 Sam. 7:11-17). The permanent kingdom, then, did not rely on human buildings or humans/kings at all – since God notes that the son of David will indeed fail and have to be corrected (7:14). The Song focuses on the beloved, not her physical house; in fact, the lover, God, calls her out of the physical structures, beyond the walls and their watchmen (2:10; cf. 3:1-4, 5:2-7). The Song instead progresses toward a secure, abundant garden setting where the beloved and lover come together. As noted in chapter five of this dissertation, the Song seems to show that the lover is the one who is protecting her and enabling her to become a metaphorical productive vineyard and garden. Similarly, in the covenant with David and the people, God promises to bring peace not through a temple building, but rather through the people themselves. They were told to look forward in expectation and longing – something that the beloved in the Song is poetically presented as doing when she is looking for the buds and blossoms in the vineyards.

The somewhat peculiar verse of Song 6:13 may also be better understood in the context of this new transition in David's time to greater permanence for Israel. The voices are not identified, but four times they call the woman to "come back" so that "we may gaze at you!"

Furthermore, they call her "the Shulammite," a gentilic, feminine, absolute noun, with the root שָׁלַם, which can mean to "be in covenant of peace."[30] The name given to her, then, indicates that she exists in a state of peace. However, another voice, perhaps of the lover, asks these voices why they would gaze at her "as at the dance of the two companies?" "Two companies" is the NASB translation of the Hebrew word מַחֲנָיִם, which can mean temporary, moving encampments, perhaps even of armies (and thus an absence of peace),[31] again hearkening back to that place of exposure that the woman experienced as a caretaker and wandering shepherd in 1:5-8. Thematically and narratively, מַחֲנָיִם was a place marking a division: for example, the place where Jacob's camp encountered God's camp (Gen. 32:1-2), and where He wrestled with God to obtain a blessing (Gen. 32:24). מַחֲנָיִם was also the place where Shimei, of the family of Saul, cursed David as he fled Jerusalem from his son, Absalom (2 Sam. 16:5-14); while David chose to offer Shimei peace at that time, his seditious actions were punishable once the throne was secure (1 Kgs. 2:8-9). Historically rooted in the context of the Davidic covenant, then, מַחֲנָיִם in the Song, being used in derision, may indicate a call *not* to return to wandering and division, as the voices asked, but to remain in the state of peace which has now been secured. A new day was dawning. God's covenant people were rising to prominence among the nations due to His grace and sovereignty (Song 6:4-10), and it was time to press forward, not backward, toward the eternal promises of God.

As already mentioned, the Song echoes these connections to the Davidic covenant in the outermost level of its chiastic structure, where the woman is seeking a more secure place of sustenance and shelter. Under David, the same was true for the people of Israel. David,

[30] BDB, 1023

[31] Ibid., 334

particularly through the covenant God made with him, pointed toward something better for Israel. As I suggested in chapter four of this dissertation, "the king" in Song 1:4 and 1:12 appears to be a title for the lover. The ultimate longing of the people is for intimacy with the lover, God – not the human king (Song 1:2-4; 12b-13). As will be discussed later in this chapter, "king" is a title that indeed appears in Scripture to refer to God Himself as the king above all kings. While the most concrete picture of the king in the Song may be David, or Solomon, who worked to prepare for and build the temple, it is also possible to consider the title "king" in the Song as used in a broader sense to allude to God establishing His home among the people. This way, both kings, David and Solomon, as well as the rest of the covenant people, can be understood as the beloved, seeking after and dwelling with the lover, God.

David's Prayer

A few words may also be said about David's prayer response (2 Sam. 7:18-29) to God's covenant announcement, and how his attitude reflects the woman's attitude and situation in the Song. First, he responds in humility, even self-deprecation, recognizing he had no standing, outside of God's grace, to have received such an honor. In Song 1:5-6, the woman also recognizes her humble state and appearance and that she has nothing to boast about – though there is a spirit of hopefulness in her voice. Not only was David an unnatural choice for the kingship according to human standards (1 Sam. 16:6-11), the entire nation of Israel was also insignificant and even homeless when God chose it for His grand purposes (Deut. 7:6-10).

David also recognizes that the promise will continue through generations beyond him, and that it would not be fully realized until the "distant future" (2 Sam. 7:19). The woman in the Song, too, has the sense of needing to keep looking to the future and calling for the lover to keep running after her (2:17; 8:14), as well as advise future generations on how to secure this

relationship (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). In addition, David recognizes the graciousness of God to condescend to reveal this plan to him and the people of Israel, and in David's eyes, this is what especially makes God so great and worthy of worship (2 Sam. 7:21-22; cf. Song 5:10-16). David has confidence that God would never renegue on His promise (2 Sam. 7:24-29), for God is planting them as a garden where they would be forever secure (7:10). This is just as the beloved celebrates in Song 6:1-3, where she describes the lover/God as the gardener who is always working and pastures among the lilies, symbols of constant regeneration. The garden *He* plants – metaphorically His covenant people – is constantly being renewed, for He is its constant and faithful caretaker.

David's Last Song

Toward the end of his life, David reflected on God's gracious promises toward him and his house. First, he recognizes, again, that God is the one who raised him to this position (2 Sam. 23:1). God also directly taught him, "He who rules over men righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is as the light of the morning when the sun rises, a morning without clouds, when the tender grass springs out of the earth, through sunshine after rain" (23:3-4). The Song uses similar imagery when the lover describes the beloved who "grows like the dawn, beautiful as the full moon, as pure as the sun, as awesome as an army with banners" (6:10). The beloved, allegorically representing God's covenant partner, is seen by the lover/God as reflecting that state of righteousness to the watching world (6:9). Also, such a state is exuded *when* the grass begins to grow and the sun shines after the rain. The same picture is painted for the union of the lovers in the Song, through the lover's description: "For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have already appeared in the land; the time has arrived for pruning the vines…" (2:10-12). This is how David likens his house because of the sure and everlasting

covenant God had made with him; he has confidence that in the future God will make it grow, just as he promised (2 Sam. 23:5). In contrast, the "worthless" will be "thrust away like thorns" and burned. In the same way, the lover describes the beloved as a "darling among the maidens" like "a lily among thorns" (Song 2:2). And indeed, He will make it grow (Song 4:10-16).

The Song of Songs and the Royal Psalms

David brought the ark into Jerusalem with dancing and music arranged and performed by certain Levites (2 Samuel 6; 1 Chronicles 16). These Levites, whom David later tasked with ministering regularly before the ark, led the people in thanks to the LORD for His faithfulness and called upon them to remember His covenant, and for all the earth to bow before Him (1 Chron. 16:7-37). These official musicians did the same at Solomon's direction when the ark was brought into the Temple (2 Chronicles 5). A number of Psalms in the Psalter are ascribed to some of these Levitical musicians. Sometimes referred to as royal psalms, their content and location within the Psalter's larger structure communicate a future expectation for a king and kingdom not realized in the Davidic and Solomonic reigns, or in any of the reigns of the Israelite kings throughout history. Much like the Song of Songs, they point to something that supersedes that earthly monarchy. Together, they witness that the "lover" of the Song is someone greater than either David or Solomon.

The Sons of Korah are listed among the Levitical temple guardians who were also part of the musical guild at the temple (1 Chronicles 26:1-19). A group of Psalms (42-49) that begin Book II of the Psalter are ascribed to them. The middle Psalm of that grouping, Psalm 45, most closely resembles the wording and wedding atmosphere found in the Song. Rather than simply discuss the similarities between the Song and Psalm 45, I will consider the literary context of Psalm 45 and its covenantal concerns that tie the two texts together.

Book I and Book II contain the most Psalms within the Psalter that are associated with the historical life of king David. In Psalm 41, which ends Book I, David expresses trust in God's ability to deliver from sickness and trouble, and he is confident that the God of Israel will not forsake him, that he would be in His presence forever (41:12). Then, what follows is the Sons of Korah collection, which contains both individual and corporate longings, trust, and worship. First, in Psalms 42 and 43, which are linked by similar phrases (42:9; 43:2; 42:11, 43:5), the psalmist expresses his longing to return to the sanctuary of God. Psalm 44 is a more corporate expression of trust in God, based on His faithfulness in the past. The psalmist speaks for himself, calling God his King (44:4), and stating that he will not trust in his bow or sword (44:6), but he also speaks for the corporate community, complaining that though he and they trusted in God, He has rejected them. The psalmist then calls on God to awaken and help them (44:23-26). In Psalms 46-48, the psalmist celebrates God as Israel's never-failing refuge and ever-present help. God is the great King over all the earth (47:2, 7, 9) who loved Jacob and chose to give them an inheritance (47:4). Mount Zion is the glory of all the earth, and God will establish her forever (48:8).

In the middle of these two sets of Psalms of the Sons of Korah collection is Psalm 45, a celebration specifically of the victorious warrior king and his wedding – the one who is responsible for bridging the feelings of distance and presence that are found in the psalms before and after it, respectively.[32] God is called "king" in the surrounding psalms, but here the reference seems to be at once a reference to Him *and* His chosen earthly regent. The psalmist announces that the psalm is addressing "the king" (45:1) and goes on to describe him as especially blessed

[32] Seth D. Postell, "Psalm 45: The Messiah as Bridegroom," *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament,* eds. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 522.

by God and successful in battle (45:2-5). But then the address switches immediately to God and *His* righteous throne and kingdom, which is eternal (45:6) before switching back again to the king whom God has chosen and anointed for special purposes (45:7).

The remainder of Psalm 45 contains images and phrases that echo the Song of Songs as it focuses on the king setting up his throne. The scent of his garments (45:8) – myrrh, aloes and cassia – are images used to describe the presence, abundance and union of the Song's couple (Song 1:13; 4:11, 14; 5:5). The supreme queen and royal daughters at his side are testament to his blessed status (45:9). Verse 9 and the subsequent sustained vocative and reference to the king's "daughter" echoes the Song's repeated address to the "daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 1:5; 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). As I will discuss later, these "daughters" in the Song represent subsequent generations of the covenant people of God. "Daughter," in the singular, signals a more corporate address of Israel in Psalm 45. Echoing Song 1:2-4, this woman, along with the maidens/virgins, (her contemporary companions, since she at this point is also identified as a virgin, longing for intimacy) – are being brought into the king's palace (cf. Song 3:11). The idea is one of a continued relationship, a continuance of intimacy, with the chosen earthly king serving in the role of leading the union that is ultimately between God and His people. As Schroeder notes, God is the one who anoints the king with the oil of joy (45:7) that leads to the marriage between God and His people, and God is therefore the source of their joy.[33] Song 3:6-11 pictures Solomon in the role of the chosen earthly king, while also picturing him as part of the bride in this celebratory wedding. He is not the lover, but rather seeks relationship with the lover. The

[33] Christoph Schroeder, "'A Love Song': Psalm 45 in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Marriage," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 58:3 (1996): 427. Alden describes the king as being "supernaturally endowed" (Robert L. Alden, *Psalms: Everyday Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019], 7).

solution to the distance that Israel feels from God in the previous psalms is found in the recognition of God as the King of the universe. The earthly king, like the earthly temple, served as a symbol and reminder of God's covenant promises with His covenant people. Even when God's covenant with David appeared to be broken (Psalm 89), God remained faithful to His promise by continuing David's dynasty in 1-2 Kings, up to, in, and even following the Babylonian exile, during which time the anointed leaders Zerubbabel (of David's kingly line) and Joshua (of the priestly line) brought more fully into focus God's plan for the messianic "Branch" who would ultimately fulfill the Davidic covenant and establish the enduring "house" God was building through Israel (see Zechariah 4 and 6).

The message in the Psalter's progressive structure can help to confirm the Song's corroborating testimony that the earthly king was not intended to be the ultimate object of the people's love. In the Song, the lover, God, is uniquely the object of her love, not the human king. Book IV of the Psalter begins with a psalm attributed to Moses (Psalm 90). Hensley rightly notes that here the Psalter moves from an emphasis on the Davidic kingship to the transfer of the covenant to a "new David" who fulfills "Abrahamic covenantal promises, supersedes Moses as intercessor for the people in the face of their covenantal unfaithfulness, and is faithful to Mosaic covenantal obligations."[34] Books IV and V remind God's people that their hope is not in a human king, but in God, the King of kings. As Wilson writes, "Yahweh was the rock of refuge available for Israel long before the monarchy was even a glimmer in Israel's collective eye. Yahweh is the almighty creator who founded the earth and controls the destiny of all nations," and his kingship is eternal (cf. Psalms 93, 95-99).[35]

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[34] Adam D. Hensley, *Covenant Relations and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, No. 666, ed. Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 9.

[35] Gerald H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46:2 (1992), 140.

Psalm 45 and the Song of Songs both imply that the earthly king, as God's vice-regent on earth, serves in a limited role of leading the people into covenant faithfulness to God, but he is never the people's ultimate hope. As stated earlier, echoes of David appear in the description of the woman who is seeking her lover in the Song. Israel's king, though serving in a peculiar, representative (and servant) role, also seeks intimacy with God as he is included among God's covenant people. While the New Testament interprets Psalm 45 as ultimately typological, pointing to Christ (Heb. 1:8-9), the Old Testament context celebrates those within the kingly line through whom God, by His grace, would maintain His covenant with Israel through every generation until the Messiah's arrival. Likewise, the earthly king in the Song of Songs serves the interests of the lover, God, who is the one in every generation who faithfully cares for and promises to dwell with His chosen king and covenant people.

If, as I have argued, the earthly king is indeed separate from the lover in the Song of Songs, the Song's couple should be interpreted allegorically, not typologically. Some typological interpreters of the Song have argued that Solomon and the lover are the same. While it is true that Solomon, as the next king in the chosen line, can be seen in the Song as pointing to the future Messianic king, he is never the lover in the Song's portrayal. In more contemporary and evangelical scholarly circles, Hamilton has become a voice for a typological interpretation of the Song, in which he believes Solomon is the lover, the symbol of the promised Davidic king who would restore Israel and all of creation.[36] He describes the Song as an "impressionistic narrative" depicting this descendant of David, the new Adam who will renew and restore Eden.[37] He argues

[36] James M. Hamilton Jr. "The Messianic Music of the Song of Songs: A Non-Allegorical Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal,* 68 (2006), 345.

[37] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.: Louisville, KY, 2015), 26.

that Solomon in the Song is an historical representation of Solomon, depicting this future messianic realization through his present relationship with his wife.[38] The historical Solomon indeed plays a role in the Song of representing greater intimacy with God. However, Solomon's role is historical/literal, while the lover's role is allegorical. The lover, not Solomon, is the constant and perfect covenant keeper of the people through every generation. An allegorical interpretation of the Song, in which the lover is in one-to-one correspondence with God, allows Solomon to be an important peripheral (and even typological) figure in the Song who represents God's faithfulness to His covenant and covenant people, but he is never the same figure as the ultimate lover Himself. Solomon's role in God's covenant promise was simply as the initial descendant in a Davidic dynasty that God would preserve for eternity. In 1-2 Chronicles, which was compiled after the exile, the expectation for this fulfillment was still alive and well, though the temple had been destroyed and the official kingship dismantled. Instead, the writer looks to a future temple and a specific messianic figure who could not fail.[39] The Song's lover – God Himself – is the only One who could preserve His people throughout every generation and also provide the eternal security for which they longed. In the Song, the lover is God, who dwelt with His people throughout the Old Testament, and who would also appear in flesh as Jesus Christ, the eternal son of David *and* son of God, in order to fulfill His promise in full.

[38] Hamilton, *Song of Songs,* 28

[39] Eugene H. Merrill, "1 Chronicles 17: The Davidic Covenant (II)," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament,* eds. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 385, 88.

The Song of Songs and the Temple Dedication

Book II of the Psalter ends with Psalm 72, ascribed to Solomon and identified as the end of the prayers of David, the son of Jesse (v. 20). Whereas the king in Psalm 45 was a man of war, the king in Psalm 72 appears to be a man of peace.[40] A transition here takes place in the kingship of Israel; it moves from David to Solomon – the next in line to inherit the promise of the Davidic covenant (cf. 1 Kgs. 8:14-21). The Psalm expects that this new king would rule with justice and righteousness and have a peaceful reign over extended kingdom borders and that he would receive the deference of kings from the surrounding nations; yet, Israel's ultimate hope was not in the earthly king but in God alone.[41] In Solomon's day, God would give the king capacity to reign in righteousness, to serve as a vessel through whom God would provide for the people in his day.[42] Origen wrote that the Song, pointing to Christ, was written for a time when the Bride (in his view the Church) had attained a new maturity and was "ready for a husband's power and the perfect mystery."[43] However, the Song not only looks with faith toward the future – it celebrates what was happening in that very moment in Israel, as God continued to show His faithfulness in their generation. The temple dedication in Israel was a major moment in God's covenant plan, a time when His *hesed* was made evident.

Solomon's special relationship to God and His plan began at his birth. After the loss of their first child, David and Bathsheba had another son, whom David named Solomon. God,

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[40] Postell, "Psalm 45," 523

[41] James Spencer, "Psalm 72: The Messiah as Ideal King," *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament,* eds. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 542-44.

[42] Postell, 547

[43] Origen, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies,* trans. R.P. Lawson, (New York, N.Y./Ramsey, N.J.: Newman Press, 1956), 47.

however, gave him a different name: "Now the LORD loved him and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named him Jedidiah for the LORD's sake" (2 Samuel 12:24-25). As Kalimi notes, no other king in Israel's history is said to have been loved by God, according to Scripture, and the notation indicates that Solomon was being set apart for something special.[44]

Most notably, Solomon was chosen as the son of David who would build the temple in Jerusalem, a sign that God has established Himself there and would be true to His promise to be faithful to Israel forever (Psalm 48; 2 Sam. 7:12-16). Scripture says that Solomon, also, loved the LORD (1 Kgs. 3:3), and he is shown in a positive light in the chapters that follow, where he acts in all the ways an ideal king, chosen by God, should act: when God appears to him in a dream, he asks for an understanding heart to judge His people and to discern between good and evil (1 Kgs. 3:9). God grants him this request and much more, further causing Solomon to stand out among all of Israel's kings, past and present (1 Kgs. 3:10-13). This background, and the surpassing wisdom that he shows as judge, administrator, and teacher (1 Kgs. 3:16-4:34) helps to explain why, in the Song of Songs, Solomon is pictured as the ideal bride and vice-regent of God, representing covenant relationship and blessing (Song 3:6-11).

However, in the narratives and in the Song, Solomon does *not* serve as the central focus for praise and adoration, as was typically the case for ANE kings. In the ANE, building and wisdom were linked, and wisdom to build was believed to have come from the gods. Thus, when a king set out to build, it was by the deity's enablement and instruction, and success in building legitimized the king's position and authority.[45] Pagan royal accounts focus on the power and

[44] Isaac Kalimi, *Writing and Rewriting the Story of Solomon in Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 141.

[45] Sennacherib, for example, was king of Assyria known for his many building and rebuilding projects. For a brief history of Sennacherib, his buildings and claims to build by the wisdom of the gods, see Eckart Frahm, "The

status of kings and their accomplishments, often in first-person accounts, while the biblical accounts are much more focused on God's purposes in and through Israel and Israel's king. It is about what God is doing, over and above what Solomon is doing.[46] Solomon could jeopardize his own covenant blessing through disobedience or rebellion against God (1 Kgs 6:11-13). Both the Song and the historical narratives surrounding Solomon's kingship are not primarily about Solomon, who works in the background, but about God and the work He was doing to secure His presence with His beloved.

Solomon is later described as being faithful to the details of the building, including the inner walls of cedar and floors of cypress, and the inner sanctuary (1 Kgs. 6:14-38). He hires Hiram, a man from Tyre with superb wisdom and skill for building and craftsmanship, to fashion strategic pieces of the temple architecture, which appear to also have served as theological reminders for the people. For example, the pillars of bronze with a lily design at the tops, were named Jachin – "he shall establish,"[47] and Boaz – "in strength,"[48] as reminders that God was the One who ultimately brought security (1 Kgs. 7:21). Solomon understood that he was only a vessel for God's great work of establishing a permanent place among His chosen people. Solomon knew, as David knew, that God was actually establishing an eternal dynasty through *them* (1 Kgs. 2:24). In Psalm 127, he proclaims: "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain" (v. 1).

Great City: Nineveh in the Age of Sennacherib," *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Journal,* Vol. 3 (2008): 13-20.

[46] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 420-21.

[47] BDB, 467

[48] Ibid., 127

All human effort to maintain security and relationship with God, even in the building of a temple, is vanity if God is not the ultimate Builder. The remainder of the Psalm switches to a picture of children as a reward and "arrows," and the pride of men as they stand before their enemies (127:3-5). The psalm echoes God's promise to David to build a lasting house through his descendants; no such promise was given regarding the Temple. As Campbell writes, "The lesson David learned was that it was a greater privilege to be the object of God's building than the builder of a house for God. The wisdom of the gospel centers not upon what we can do for God, but what God can do for us."[49]

As noted in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, the Song pictures the city life, the watchmen, and even King Solomon as unable to ultimately ensure the security of the lover's union with the beloved. As great as Solomon's temple was, it was just a shadow, a glimpse, or a symbol of God's more eternal plan to dwell with His people through relationship, not a structure. In 2 Chronicles 2, Solomon admits his own limitations, and the limitations of the temple, as he sets out to build it: "But who is able to build a house for Him, for the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain Him? So who am I, that I should build a house for Him, except to burn incense before Him?" (v. 6; cf. Song 3:6). All Solomon can do in his role is lead in justice and righteousness as God's vice-regent, and guide the people into covenant obedience. The temple, which he builds in this role, symbolizes God's resting place, and thus peace and rest for the people as well (Ps. 132; Isa. 66:11). Solomon, whose name at the root means "peace" is an added symbol of the significance of this time in Israel's history.

Along these same lines, Song 8:11-12 may picture Solomon in this role of vice-regent within the kingdom. Using an agricultural picture, this little vignette describes Solomon as an

[49] Campbell, "The Song of David's Son," 30

administrative landowner who appoints caretakers to care for the abundant vineyard, which in Song 1:6 was used as a figure for God's covenant partner, and then requires those same caretakers to pay him a thousand shekels for the fruit they eat from them. But it may be the lover, God, speaking next, saying that He, not Solomon, is the ultimate owner of the vineyard/His covenant people. He tells Solomon, whom He appointed as the earthly owner and overseer, to keep the thousand shekels, and to give two hundred to the caretakers who serve under him. God is thus understood as the ultimate owner and overseer of His covenant people who gives graciously to them (even the caretakers are paid in monetary means within his administrative rule), needing and asking nothing in return. The Song, which focuses on God's relationship with His faithful people, is set over and against law practices that were common in the ancient Near East. For example, in "The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar," the following instructions are given: "If he leases his orchard to a gardener in an orchard lease, the gardener shall plant […] for the owner of the orchard and he shall have the use of the dates from one-tenth of the palm trees."[50] In Leviticus 25, which addresses how the Israelites are to live justly and fairly within the land God gives them, God reminds them that the land belongs to Him (25:23). The focus of tithes, Jubilee years, and the like, were aimed at creating a just and equal society, which most importantly pointed to God as the owner of it all, the one who appointed caretakers and provided for all people. Unlike other pagan gods who required regular gifts of food and drink from the land in order to remain among the people, God may be stating in Song 8:11 that His vineyard, His covenant people, belongs to Him, and He is not concerned with money or gifts of produce, but relationship (as noted in the larger context of Song 8:6-14).

[50] *COS,* 2.154:412

In the next section, I will provide further reflection on agricultural images that connect the historical narratives of Solomon and the Song of Songs and recognize the LORD as the only trustworthy source for constant provision and security. The message of the Song, in light of this historical context, flips the script on ancient Near Eastern love songs that emphasized human efforts to satisfy capricious gods.

The Feast of Tabernacles

In addition to building the temple, Solomon oversaw the completion of numerous other buildings of similar workmanship and valuable materials (1 Kgs. 7:1-12). For the Israelites, who had wandered for centuries (see 1 Kgs. 6:1), the time of Solomon and his building projects was a time of celebration as their identity as God's chosen people was cemented in the chosen land of Israel and especially the city of Jerusalem. Just as the historical narratives of Solomon's acts center on a time of creating stability for God's people through the temple and the installation of the ark of the covenant, the Song of Songs' references to fortified structures and protected and abundant land alludes to this time, particularly in terms of the relationship between God and His people who embody these blessings through Him. The temple dedication was during Israel's Feast of Tabernacles, and that context, as I will show, illumines the unique, big picture message of the Song as it is set over and above the sacred marriage rituals/fertility myths of neighboring pagan nations.

Scripture states that the construction of the temple was finished in Solomon's eleventh year in the eighth month (1 Kgs. 6:38), and that Solomon brought the ark into the temple at the feast during the autumn harvest month of Ethanim, the seventh month (1 Kgs. 8:2). This may indicate that he purposefully waited nearly a year until the Feast of Tabernacles to officially

dedicate the temple. Typically held for seven days, Solomon extended the feast celebration to fourteen days (1 Kgs. 8:65).[51]

Directions for the celebration of the feast are given in Leviticus 23:33-44. The feast was held on the 15th day of the seventh month, "when you have gathered in the crops of the land" (Lev. 23:39). On the first day, they were to take foliage from the trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows and rejoice before the LORD for seven days (Lev. 23:40). In addition, the native-born Israelites were instructed to live in booths for those seven days, in remembrance and testimony to every generation of Israel's tent-dwelling days during their wilderness wanderings, when the LORD brought them out of Egypt (Lev. 23:42-43; cf. Num. 29:12-40). The feast also included burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings. Deuteronomy further explains that the feast would involve children, servants, strangers, orphans, and widows in Israelite towns, and the feast was one of three annual pilgrim festivals, when all the males of the nation would bring offerings as they were able and "appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses" (Deut. 16:13-17). The feast was to be celebrated in this place, "because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful" (Deut. 16:15). Earlier, the Israelites were instructed to observe what was called the "Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field," occurring seven weeks after the barley harvest (the Feast of Unleavened Bread, approximately March-April), as well as "the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field" (Exod. 23:14-16). The Feast of Ingathering (the same as the Feast of Tabernacles, and thus included the construction of

[51] 2 Chronicles 7:8-10 indicates that the feast was held for seven days, and the dedication of the altar for seven days, before the people were sent back to their tents.

booths for those harvesting the produce to commemorate the wilderness wanderings) was celebrated in the autumn, at the final harvest and right before the rainy season began – marking the beginning of the agricultural year and the time for storing the last ripe grain and fruit.[52] Thus, trust in the LORD's faithfulness in each season was commemorated in year-round, publicly celebrated feasts.

The dedication of the temple and the Feast of Tabernacles, coinciding with each other, would certainly have given the people in Jerusalem a picture of God's faithfulness to the covenant. It was a time for remembering God's faithfulness in their wanderings and also now seeing His promise of a permanent place take place right before their eyes in the beautiful temple building. This may just be what the woman in the Song is thinking about when she proclaims, "our couch is luxuriant! The beams of our houses are cedars, our rafters, cypresses" (Song 1:16b-17). No longer is tent-living necessary for God's covenant people, since God now dwells with them in a permanent place! The feast was also a time to remember God's faithfulness in providing food for them to eat, and in faith and thanksgiving offering portions of that food back to Him. As Solomon took the throne, the hope of Psalm 72 was also realized: "abundance of grain in the earth on top of the mountains" and that "its fruit will wave like the cedars of Lebanon," and the city's inhabitants would "flourish like vegetation of the earth" (Ps. 72:16).

The Song of Songs' imagery of year-round, abundant provision, and of a secure place to dwell, echoes the narratives concerning this celebratory day, as well as the events that would have surrounded the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. More specifically, as I will argue below, the Song adapts the imagery and phrases common in ancient sacred marriage literature to

[52] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 103.

speak to the superiority of Yahweh, who is transcendent and personal, over other impersonal gods who could not promise the same guarantee of constant provision and protection. In addition, whereas the ancient sacred marriage rituals involved kings in the role of the lover of a goddess in order to gain security through her, the Song presents God as the lover as well as the gracious source of all blessing.

In ancient times, people sought security in the lands where they lived, and tried to make sense of their experiences. They developed myths to explain what they experienced, and they developed rituals to manipulate their circumstances for their own good. One prime example is found in the various literary traditions of the Inanna and Dumuzi (Sumerian) or Ishtar and Tammuz (Akkadian) cult. As noted in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, the myth sought to explain how the fecundity of the land was possible and how it could be secured. Dumuzi was known in the ancient world as far back as the fourth millennium as "the power for fertility and new life in the spring."[53] Inanna, in some versions of the cult, is the goddess of the storehouse. Therefore, Dumuzi, through intimate relationship with Inanna, is responsible for bringing about the fertility of the land, which is then put into the storehouse.

In one text, the shepherd Dumuzi is chosen by Inanna's brother Utu to be Inanna's husband. However, Inanna protests, saying she loves the farmer instead. In the tradition, Dumuzi, though presented in god-like terms, appears to be a human king. Utu defends his worthiness, saying Dumuzi would share his rich cream with her if she would marry him, and then asks her, "You who are meant to be the king's protector, why are you unwilling?"[54] Later, after Dumuzi fertilizes her womb and she produces plants and grain from it, Inanna responds by

[53] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 10.

[54] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi." web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

decreeing his fate, proclaiming that she is his leader in battle, armorbearer in combat, advocate in the assembly, and inspiration in the campaign. She further proclaims that now, he, as king of Uruk, chosen shepherd of the gods, is fit to lead the people and to have a long life.[55] This text then presents a word by Ninshubur, servant of the holy shrine of Uruk, who presents Dumuzi to Inanna and asks her to bless him and that his reign would bring protection and fertility over all the land, in the sheepfolds, vegetation, grain, marshland, the steppe, the grasslands, orchards, meadows, and in the palace. In particular, the request is for the king to "enjoy long days in the sweetness of your holy loins," for only in his intimacy with Inanna could such fertility be possible.[56] At the end, the king asks her to set him free so that he can return to the palace. Thus, the entire mythic/ritual, erotic text appears to be for the purpose of sustaining life in the land. The same idea of kings securing agricultural favor through the goddess is found in "The Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad," where the king states, "During my orchard work, Ishtar loved me, Fifty-five years I ruled as king."[57] Other kings of their respective cities are presented as the fertility partner of Inanna in texts such as "Bridegroom, Spend the Night in our House Till Dawn"[58] (King Shu-Sin), and "The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna."[59]

The myths surrounding the ancient pagan rituals also sometimes sought to explain why at certain times of the year the crops died and the people would be forced to depend on their storehouses for survival. For example, in "The Descent of Inanna" (Sumerian), Inanna descends to the Underworld, where she is taken captive and killed by her sister, queen of the Underworld.

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[55] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi." web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

[56] Ibid.

[57] *COS,* 1.133:461

[58] *COS,* 1.169B:541-42

[59] *COS,* 1.173:554-59

The timing for this annual occurrence was when the storehouse that she embodies begins to diminish in late winter.[60] As spring edges closer, she is resurrected thanks to the help of Enki, the god of freshwaters. This is when the Dumuzi-Inanna sacred marriage ritual would take place, to ensure a productive spring season, when pastures would be filled again with livestock, and the storehouses could be stocked with the animal products. The stocking of those storehouses, however, coincided with Dumuzi's death, for he as a shepherd represented the flocks of lambs and kids that would be killed for their meat around late spring and early summer.[61] In one tradition, Inanna is depicted as lamenting Dumuzi's death "as the dry heat of summer yellows the pastures and lambing, calving and milking come to an end."[62] In the "Descent" myth, the queen of the Underworld demands that someone must take Inanna's place in the Underworld. It ends with Dumuzi being chosen to take her place for six months of the year (corresponding to winter), and Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna, the other six months. Jacobsen notes that Geshtinanna was the "power in grape and wine," and Dumuzi in some traditions was considered the god of brewery/beer/grain, and so in certain traditions, the brother and sister both die at their associated harvest times, when they go into underground storage: grain in the spring and grapes in the autumn.[63] Both the Sumerian version and the Akkadian version, "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," appear to contain rituals involving cult statues of Dumuzi or Inanna. The Akkadian version probably explains the "weeping for Tammuz" that was practiced in Jerusalem and condemned by God through the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 8:14).[64]

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[60] Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness,* 62

[61] Ibid., 63

[62] As noted by Jacobsen, 26

[63] Ibid., 61-62

[64] "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," *COS,* 1.108:381

Thus, it seems that such pagan practices and myths were well known to Israel, even through exilic times. The Song is able to use what is known of these traditions to illustrate God's beneficence and superiority. In earlier chapters, I noted that the Song contains similar imagery used in ancient love songs, particularly sacred marriage songs. The Song of Songs, however, contains no mention of rituals, and King Solomon is not pictured as the source through which fertility would come to the land, as the pagan sacred marriage songs pictured earthly kings. As noted earlier, the allusions or references to David (Song 1:5-8; 6:11-13) and to Solomon (3:6-11; 8:11-12) uniquely depict them both as under-shepherds or overseers of that which is ultimately owned and overseen by God. They can also be identified with the woman/the covenant people of God as they, too, are seeking the lover, the ultimate Shepherd (1:7-8). As noted in Chapter 4, it is better to view Solomon as part of the "bride" on the sacred wedding day (3:11), not the groom. The role of his "mother" on his wedding day fits with the social practice of the ancient world, with the mother and mother's house being the place where marriages were agreed to and consummated. In addition, in "The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna," which pictures the human king and Inanna in sacred marriage, guardsmen or warriors parade before Inanna with weapons. In the Song, it is not any sort of divine being but Solomon who is surrounded in this way. In the ancient myths, Inanna is a mediator to divine blessings, ruler of the human king, but here the king himself is surrounded by warriors on his wedding day, making him the "bride" that is protected and seeking relationship with the divine lover.

In addition, in the Song, the lover/God alone is responsible for the fertility that is manifested around, in, and through the woman/His faithful covenant people. In a sense, *God* is as Dumuzi in the pagan myth, while the woman of the Song would be like Inanna. The huge difference, however, is that the lover alone embodies divine characteristics and abilities. The

woman, unlike Inanna, is never depicted as divine or able to give the lover power or authority on earth, and all of the life and strength that is found in her or comes through her is due entirely to *God's* caretaking and empowerment. In the Song of Songs, security does not come from a goddess who relies on a human king to fertilize her and bring forth growth. Security comes from Yahweh alone. Yahweh is the one who looks after the land of promise, "from the beginning even to the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12).

In addition, the Song never mentions the divine lover dying, or the land ever lacking abundance. Instead, the relationship between the lover and the beloved is one that spans the seasons. He is there to call her out of her shelter at the end of winter and start of spring (2:11-13), when the land is already beginning to produce new life. She is there in the fall (the time when mandrakes are blooming) to testify to the abundant provision she has saved up for him and placed over the doors that they share (7:13). She is a locked garden, and a sealed spring, full of all that is needed for life, even when she is on her own (4:11-15), because she is owned and cared for by the lover Himself (4:16-5:1). From the wheat harvest of spring and early summer (7:2), to the harvest of grapes and pomegranates in late summer, early fall (6:7, 11; 7:8-9, 12), to the fruit harvest of late fall (4:16; 7:13), just before winter sets in, the woman embodies the lover's faithful attention and ability to bring forth life for her and through her. Though there may be times when the lover seems absent (3:1-4 and 5:2-9 may be a representative of winter in the Song), He can always be found (3:4; 6:1-3). He never dies, because He pastures among lilies (2:16; 6:2-3), the symbol of ongoing life. The lover will always call her out and revive her just as faithfully as winter turns to spring (2:11-13; 4:1-5; 6:4-6), so that she will stand as a strong and shining testimony of His faithfulness (6:4, 8-10). Their love, after all, is as strong as death (8:6-7).

Conclusion

The temple and its dedication during the Feast of Tabernacles would have communicated something unique not just to Jerusalem but the surrounding nations as well: Yahweh, for whom this temple was constructed, was the One who faithfully provided for His covenant people Israel. In Solomon's day, God fulfilled His promise to the patriarchs, giving the Israelites "great and splendid cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied…" (Deut. 6:10-11; cf. Joshua 24:13).

Just as a king in ancient Near Eastern thought was a divinely chosen agent through which a house/temple would be built for the deity (1 Chron. 28:6), therefore bringing together the heavenly and earthly realms, David (implied) and Solomon in the Song can be understood as the divinely chosen agents to bring those two realms together as well. The lover, who is both separate from and superior to these earthly kings, is the God of Israel who came to dwell with His chosen people and to direct their hearts toward Him and the permanent house He promised to build (2 Samuel 7). The King of kings had brought her into His chambers (Song 1:4).[65]

As the harvest was gathered, and winter loomed, the Israelites, who were celebrating the construction of the temple and the Feast of Tabernacles, did not turn to laments in the hope of God's soon return; rather, they celebrated His very presence among them. The Song of Songs, with its textual allusions and echoes of the surrounding nations' pagan fertility myths and rituals, was the superlative song of them all, because it pointed to the only true King and Shepherd, the

[65] The bedchamber in the temple was where the deity was believed to reside, making the space sacred. The inner sanctum of the temple was the place of the divine presence. See John H. Walton, "The Temple in Context," *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts,* eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 349, 351. See also Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East,* Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series, No. 3, ed. Amelie Kuhrt (2013), 131-136.

divine God above all other gods. He came to dwell among His covenant people, Israel, and He promised He would build an everlasting house through them that would bring blessing to the entire world.

The people were expected to respond to God's gracious covenant with loyal hearts. As will be argued in the next chapter of this dissertation, Solomon's temple dedication prayer and the woman's warnings and wisdom about love complement one another to provide a well-rounded picture of what it means to be God's faithful covenant partner, and how each generation can find a place within the house He promised to build.

Chapter 7: The Sphere of the Heart

Within the context of the construction and dedication of the temple under King Solomon, the king and the people were once again reminded of God's covenant faithfulness. They were also reminded of their calling as His chosen people to respond with love and obedience. The words of Solomon's public prayer at the dedication of the Temple, along with God's subsequent words of warning, communicate the solemn responsibility of the people to learn to respond rightly to the gracious acts of God and His renewed presence among them. Likewise, the Song of Songs, while allegorically reaffirming the gracious and steadfast love of God and the enduring nature of His covenant promises, also provides staunch warnings and words of wisdom about how to embrace God's love and find peace through wholeheartedly loving and obeying Him in return.

Solomon's Temple Dedication Prayer

In Solomon's public prayer at the dedication of the temple, which he prayed before the altar and in front of all the assembly of Israel (1 Kgs. 8:22),[1] he declared Yahweh's superiority and lovingkindness, given "to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart…" (1 Kgs. 8:23). The proof of God's covenant faithfulness was the temple which they were dedicating that day (8:24). Hurowitz notes, "This event is the height of, and most crucial occurrence in, the entire building project, because on this occasion the temple is put into use and its function is expressed for the first time."[2] The temple symbolized God, as the Divine Warrior, now coming to

[1] See also 2 Chronicles 6:12-42

[2] Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "'Solomon Built the Temple and Completed It': Building the First Temple According to the Book of Kings." In *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* edited by Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 296.

a place of rest, and His presence meant blessing upon the land.[3] However, Solomon also recognized that God does not dwell in a temple built by human hands (8:27); rather, He resides in heaven, from where He hears their prayers. Hurowitz notes that this conceptual theology is similar to Mesopotamian royal inscriptions; however, here, the practice is very different. In the ANE, a king would request rewards from a god for having built the temple, but Solomon simply asks that God would keep the promises He made to David and to Israel.[4] God does not need the temple, so Solomon's construction of the temple was not something that needed to be rewarded. Solomon's prayer, instead, where he calls upon God to answer their prayers in time of need, is what Hurowitz calls an "owner's manual" for the temple; prayers could be offered by the people toward the temple, which was like "a sort of switchboard which redirects prayers aimed at it to God who is in His heavenly abode."[5]

God's presence among them was entirely due to His grace and love toward His covenant people. God manifested Himself in the temple that day through a cloud of His glory, not embodied in a statue like other ANE gods; though the ark was a representative of God's presence, it was only God's footstool – He resided above it, not in it.[6] The temple, where God placed His name, was only a symbol to which the people could look and remember God's faithfulness in all seasons to come. Solomon's prayer reflects this conceptual purpose of the temple when he calls upon God, from His throne in heaven, to hear all the prayers, from both Solomon and "Your people Israel" that are prayed toward the temple (8:28-30). The temple thus

[3] Hurowitz, "Solomon Built the Temple," 298

[4] Ibid., 300

[5] Ibid., 299-300

[6] As noted by Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East,* Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series, No. 3, ed. Amelie Kuhrt (2013), 50-51. See Exod. 25:22 and Isa. 37:16.

becomes a symbol of the peace that is available to the people through God's gracious presence. Peace, as Solomon makes clear in his prayer, would come as the people directed their hearts to the LORD – when they repented of sin that led to judgment, and sought the LORD's forgiveness and renewed intimacy with Him (8:31-52). Solomon goes on to list the possible scenarios in which someone might pray toward the temple. At the heart of each of these prayers is a trust in the LORD's compassion, who listens to the voice of His people.

Any trouble that would befall the relationship between Israel and Yahweh was due to Israel's failure. Repentance would show that they understood the "affliction" (נֶגַע) that was in their heart. נֶגַע can mean "stroke, plague, mark, plague-spot."[7] The LORD used that same word within His covenant with David when He spoke of chastening David's son when he sins (2 Sam. 7:14). While a plague is physically manifested (1 Kgs. 8:37), it was rooted in the plague of one's heart (1 Kgs. 8:38). But when the person would recognize their heart's condition, and pray toward the temple in repentance, Solomon asked the LORD to hear and to "forgive and act and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know, for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men, that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You have given to our fathers" (8:39-40). When God made the unconditional covenant with Israel, He did so knowing their hearts were fickle and they would not always be faithful to Him. Solomon, humbly but confidently, appeals to God's love and compassion, which makes a way for His covenant people to be forgiven, renewed, and to find peace within the land He promised them as an inheritance. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the Song of Songs, possibly within this very historical context, is illustrating this relationship, with the lover representing God and His

[7] BDB, 619

faithful love and care, and the beloved, His covenant people, constantly directing and redirecting her heart toward Him.

The Song of Songs and the Song of the Vineyard

The relationship between Yahweh and His covenant people is communicated and developed throughout the Old Testament. Yahweh is consistently faithful, while the people vacillate between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Their unfaithfulness is especially emphasized in the prophetic corpus. There, relationship metaphors are employed to illustrate the seriousness of His people's complacency and disloyalty toward God, who had declared His love and promises for them. The image of a vineyard, in the genre of a love song, is used to show this in Isaiah 5, and as I will argue, this literarily and conceptually links it to the Song of Songs and provides a key for the Song's interpretation. Both songs seek to convey the importance of a right heart that results in covenant faithfulness toward God (cf. Psalm 50).

In the prophetic book of Isaiah, Israel's failure is front and center. They are sacrificing and praying, but the LORD makes it clear that He does not want their sacrifices, nor does He hear their prayers (1:11-15) because they abandoned Him and turned to sin (1:4), and as a result they and their land were stricken and desolate (1:5-8). Yet, God was still offering them a chance to repent and be cleansed and be restored to relationship with Him (1:18-20, et. al.), so they can look forward to the Lord's future salvation, not wrath and judgment.

Labeled a "song of my beloved" (Isa. 5:1), Isaiah 5:1-7 uses common literary love language of the day to present a rhetorical trap, aimed at leading the disobedient, disloyal people to repentance and restoration. The poem describes a vineyard lovingly prepared by the beloved on a fertile hill (5:2). He gave the vineyard everything it needed – the best of everything – to grow and produce abundant fruit. However, it produced "worthless" grapes (5:2, 4). The

vineyard had failed. As a result, the beloved took away its protection and abandoned it, leaving it to die. At the end of the song, the meaning of the metaphor is clearly explained: The vineyard is the LORD's, and it is the house of Israel, with the "men of Judah His delightful plant" (5:7). The LORD had expected to see this vineyard/Israel produce the fruit of justice and righteousness, but instead they produced bloodshed and distress (5:7-30). Israel is pictured as a metaphorical vineyard elsewhere in Scripture, planted by God and expected to produce a good crop; when it did not, it was destroyed (Exod. 15:17; Ps. 80:8-16; Jer. 11:17).

Isaiah 5:1-7 is introduced as a love song of the beloved, God, concerning His vineyard, a poetic metaphor for Israel. In the love song of the Song of Songs, God's covenant people (and bride), are also metaphorically likened to a vineyard, but in the more positive context of covenantal faithfulness and blessing (cf. Isa. 27:2-6). As the woman seeks after her lover, she becomes an example and an appropriate voice of wisdom for the "daughters" (which I will discuss more fully below)(2:7, 3:5, 8:4, et. al.). The beloved refers to herself as a vineyard that she has not been able to keep (1:6). The extended metaphor of the Song is concerned with protecting and inspecting the vineyard so that it grows and produces good fruit (2:15; 6:11). The literary picture being painted is of the woman becoming like a healthy, producing vineyard or garden (7:8-9; 8:2; 4:12-16, et. al.). The lover praises her for embodying the physical blessings that are available to her within the covenant promise (4:1-7; 6:4-10; 7:1-6). She submitted to His care and metaphorically became an abundant garden (4:12-16).

The Song of Songs and the *Shema*

As the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses declared the commandments of God that would guide them and their future generations. These commandments would ensure blessings in the land they were about to possess (Deut. 6:1-3). God

had already promised the land would belong to Israel (Genesis 12), but receiving the blessings within that land was dependent upon the people's love and loyalty in each generation.

The שְׁמַע (Deut. 6:4-9) was and continues to be foundational to daily Jewish life and practice. The words are a clear reminder to God's covenant people that they are to never become complacent in their relationship with God. The section begins with an imperative: "Hear, O Israel!" (Deut. 6:4). Then, it declares foundational truths before moving on to the commandment. "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (6:4). This statement succinctly and powerfully communicates the special relationship Israel has with God (cf. Deut. 4:32-35; 1 Chron. 17:21-22; 2 Sam. 7:23-24). With this unique relationship came great responsibility. Thus, what follows is a command: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Moberly calls this the "logic of love."[8] *Because* Yahweh is who He is, they should love Him in this way. Similarly, he notes, by remembering how Yahweh had led them through the wilderness, testing and humbling them so that they would learn to be faithful and to trust Him, the Israelites were told to keep the commandments of Yahweh and to walk in His ways and fear Him (Deut. 8:1-6). Not only has Yahweh led them in the past, He was bringing them into an abundant land, and when they receive the blessings there, the logical thing for them to do is to bless Him for all He has provided (Deut. 8:7-10).

The "oneness" of the LORD is also a critical factor in the people's response toward Him. Moberly points to Song 6:9 to help explain the idea behind the LORD being called "one" here in Deuteronomy 6. In the Song, the lover describes the beloved as "one," perfect and pure. She stands above and beyond any of her mother's daughters and any of the queens, concubines and

[8] R.W.L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 20.

maidens who saw her. Because of her unique and lofty position, the lover needed no one else.[9] Likewise, the LORD is "one," and therefore, Israel needed no one else (cf. Song 5:10). The relationship was to be exclusive between Yahweh and His people, and the people and Yahweh.

Such an exclusive relationship required extreme commitment. Yahweh had already acted and chosen them as His covenant people and blessed them with unconditional covenant promises that He would indeed fulfill. The people, however, would need ongoing reminders to guard against their wandering, fickle hearts. In the שְׁמַע, therefore, they are commanded to love the LORD their God with *all* their "heart," "soul," and "might." In the Hebrew, these words, used together, create a picture of a total response of love toward Yahweh. לֵבָב can mean the "inner man, mind, will, heart."[10] The word is semantically related to רוּחַ, in the sense of a meaning of "spirit, animation, vivacity, vigour."[11] In the abstract, which is how לֵבָב is used in Deuteronomy 6:5, the meaning can be defined as "the totality of man's inner or immaterial nature," or the function of one's heart as "the whole spectrum of emotion."[12] In Song 3:11, Solomon's wedding is described as the day of the gladness of Solomon's לֵב. His intimate union with God was not just a formality – it was a union that affected his "inner man." As throughout the Song, the intimacy between divine and human is conveyed not in the terminology of a cold, legal agreement, but the entirety of one's being expressed in desire, joy and gladness.

The Song especially references the woman's soul (נֶפֶשׁ) as that which is loving and seeking after her lover. In Song 1:7 and 3:1, 2, 3, and 4, the lover is identified by the woman as

[9] Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 20

[10] BDB, 523

[11] Ibid., 925

[12] TWOT, 466

"the one whom my soul loves." נֶפֶשׁ can mean "soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion, and passion."[13] In the Song, the word appears to be both the being of the woman, as well as her desire. The function of the soul has to do with hungering, both physically and spiritually/volitionally in the sense of having a desire, or will.[14] While its root may be found in the meaning of a life breathed into existence by God (see Gen. 2:7), it is not just life (חַי) but life "with all its drives."[15] It is separate from, and more than, the flesh; it is "the vitality, the passionate existence of an individual" (see Lev. 17:11).[16] In the Song, the woman's soul is also what is affected by the lover's voice from outside her abode (5:6; cf. 2:8, 10), though she delayed to respond. The way her soul is affected appears to be what urges her to then seek him after she realizes he had left. Her נֶפֶשׁ is also what appears to be the actor that places her in a royal position in 6:12. Idiomatically, the נֶפֶשׁ in the Song is the woman's desires for the lover, and to be unified with Him.

Song 3:1-4 and 5:2-7, part of the sections just before the climax of the Song's chiastic structure, illustrate the love that is commanded in Deuteronomy 6:5. The woman's soul is longing for her lover so much that she is willing to enter the city streets and squares at night (in practical social sense, not the safest move for a woman of her day) to find him. Particularly, in 3:1-4, her longing does not come from a specific instance of his presence near her, as in 5:2-7, but rather it is something that has been welling up in her "night after night" (3:1), and she is so set on finding him that when she finally does, she holds on to (אָחַז) him, with force (cf. Song

[13] BDB, 659

[14] TWOT, 588

[15] Ibid., 589

[16] Ibid., 590

2:15, 3:8, 7:8), and brings (cf. Song 1:4, 2:4) him into her mother's house – the place where marriages were typically arranged in the ancient Near East.[17] Here, the woman appears to be loving her lover with "muchness" (מְאֹד).[18] These sections show the woman doing what is required of her as God's covenant people, per Deuteronomy 6:5.

Communication between God and His people is central to the covenant He made with them. In his temple dedication prayer, Solomon asked God to hear (שָׁמַע) from heaven the prayers of the people directed toward the temple (1 Kings 8:30). He did not at this point ask to hear from God, for God had already spoken to David and through His faithfulness surrounding the building of the temple, which symbolized His presence among them. Solomon's prayer was concerned with the people's communication toward *God*, now that He had so graciously drawn near to them and had given them an everlasting promise. Similarly, the woman in the Song does not ask to hear from the lover, allegorically God, for she already knew His love and His name (1:2-3), His provision and protection (2:3-4), His desire for her (2:10-14), and His constant work of regenerating and caretaking (2:16, 6:3). In Deuteronomy 6, the covenant people are asked to hear (שָׁמַע) the words and commandments of God to love Him, and by not just hearing, but obeying – inseparable from the love mentioned here – they would secure their safety in the land, which He had promised (Deut. 6:18, 24). In the Song, the relationship between the man and the woman, representing God and His covenant people, provides a different, beautiful perspective to the communication made possible through God's gracious presence among them: Not only are the people called to hear and obey, but God is longing to hear them too. When He calls the beloved

[17] See, for example, "Love By the Light of the Moon," where Dumuzi woos Inanna, and she invites him to her mother's house for him to properly ask for her hand (*COS* 1.169C:542-43). See also Ruth 1:8-9 and Gen. 24:67.

[18] BDB, 547

out from her hiding place, He expresses His desire to see her and to "hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your form is lovely" (Song 2:14). In the epilogue, He speaks of His companions (cf. 1:7) listening for her voice, and that He too, wants to keep hearing it (8:13). Interestingly, this next to last verse in the Song is aimed at the woman as she dwells securely in the gardens. Likewise, Deuteronomy 6 is instruction for the people once they enter the Promised Land and live in secure houses. They are to constantly remind themselves, even placing reminders on their door frames and gates, of the covenant and their responsibilities as God's covenant people.

In Song 5:2, the lover knocks at the beloved's door and speaks to her, lovingly referring to her as his precious, chosen one, and asks her to open to him. Much like those instances that Solomon lists in his prayer, her complacency and disloyalty opens her up to danger. But the danger and his absence causes her heart to remember his incomparable greatness and turn to him and search for him with all the resources she can muster (5:8-16). Elsewhere in Scripture, watchmen are described as being appointed by God as constant reminders to the people of God's faithfulness and to call the people back into relationship (Isa. 62; Ezek. 3). Therefore, the punishment the watchmen inflict on the woman may be for the purpose of calling her back to faithfulness to the lover, God.

As a whole, the Song presents a beautiful picture of the lover, God, who has spoken, who has acted, who has already shown His love toward the beloved, His covenant people, and how He continues to show His love by calling her to Himself, by calling her to speak to Him, by declaring her beauty and His love for her and reminding her that she embodies abundance and security because of His constant caretaking. But the Song also shows the necessary picture of the beloved/God's covenant people who seek after God. When the beloved seeks, she finds Him, or

at least knows where to find Him (1:8; 3:4; 6:2; cf. 3:6-11). In her righteous desire for relationship with Him, she calls for Him to keep drawing close to her (2:17; 8:14), and He is faithful not only to respond (4:6), but also in His grace – knowing that she is prone to wander – to keep calling her to Himself, as well. The Song shows that God will, as promised, continue to build an everlasting house in Israel, but it is up to Israel – the covenant people – to decide if they will live within it. Their decision involves a total commitment to seeking and obeying God.

The Song of Songs and the Covenant Formula

Israel's relationship with God was established through the covenant God made with them. God chose them. He was their God; they were His people. This "covenant formula" is found throughout the Old Testament to explain the unique divine-human bond that defined, empowered, and secured Israel's very existence. The Song of Songs figuratively and formulaically echoes this covenant formula in the beloved's exclamations of the exclusive claims she and the lover have upon each other. The Song allegorically communicates how the unique relationship between God and His people provides the people with the peace and security for which they long, and that this relationship is two-sided.

From the very beginning of Scripture, God communicated His plan to secure and save humanity. At the time of the exodus, Scripture states that God remembered His covenant with the patriarchs, and would continue to work out that promise through their descendants, the Israelites (Ex. 2:24-25), and He promised to deliver them from slavery: "Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Exod. 6:7). He also promised to bring

them into the land promised to the patriarchs (Exod. 6:8; Cf. Gen. 12, 15). He would always remember and fulfill His promise to them (Deut. 4:31).[19]

However, God's work of redeeming and adopting the people of Israel was not just so they could be assured of God's protection. The covenant He was making also called for them to belong to Him; the relationship was mutual. Rendtorff notes that in Genesis 17, God promised to be the God of Abraham and his descendants, but Abraham also had a responsibility to set up a covenant sign to show that they were His people – the sign of circumcision. Likewise, Israel was required to keep the Sabbath as a sign of their covenant with God (Exod. 31:12-17).[20] God met the Israelites and spoke to them in the wilderness of Sinai, reiterating that He had rescued them miraculously from slavery and brought them to Himself (Exod. 19:4). He said to them: "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine" (Exod. 19:5; cf. Deut. 7:12, 8:18). Walton explains how this relationship was unique: "In the ancient Near East, both gods and humans were self-serving; in Israel, the ideal was that God's presence was an act of grace to his people and Israel's responses (rarely manifested) were to reflect wholehearted service to God, who was worthy."[21] Within this gracious covenant established by God, and the willing, loving response of the people, the people would find security and blessing (Lev. 26:1-13; cf. Deut. 28:1-14).

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[19] Note also places where the covenant formula is repeated in the context of eschatological hope: Ezek. 34:30, 36:28, 37:27; Jer. 30:22; Zech. 8:8. The covenant formula is also repeated as a reminder by the prophets to show how far the people had gone outside the covenant: see Jer. 7:23, 11:4.

[20] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Orton, Tools for Biblical Study, Vol. 7 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 433-34.

[21] John H. Walton, "The Temple in Context," *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 352-53.

However, there would be penalties through the disobedience of God's chosen people (Lev. 26:14-46; cf. Deuteronomy 27, Deut. 28:15-68). Hosea aptly illustrates these penalties through a relationship metaphor. In direct contrast to the covenant formula of God being Israel's God, and Israel being His people, the children of Hosea by his harlot wife are named Lo-ruhamah, meaning that God would have no compassion on Israel, and Lo-ammi, "for you are not my people and I am not your God" (Hos. 1:8-9). The names reflect the adulterous, idolatrous acts of Israel at that time by seeking after other gods rather than Yahweh. Their actions broke the security they found within the covenant relationship graciously established by God. God had withdrawn from them, and they would not be able to find Him when they go with their flocks and herds to seek Him (Hos. 5:5-6; cf. Song 1:7-8).

God, however, would never completely reject them and would fulfill His covenant promises in them. In Hosea 2, He announces that He will restore Israel, illustrated in the reversal of those names announced on Hosea's offspring: He would have compassion on Israel and once again say to them "You are My people!" (v. 23). The hope of God's covenant people, then, could not be found in the wayward hearts of the people themselves. As Rendtorff aptly states, "The 'keeping' of the covenant remains a constant duty for Israel; but ultimately, it is based on the fact that God himself is the 'keeper of the covenant' (Deut. 7:9, etc.)."[22]

The Song of Songs poetically communicates this beautiful hope of security found in God's grace and sovereignty alone. At opposite ends of the Song, this relationship is depicted through the metaphor of a vineyard and vineyard keeper. The woman, the covenant people, realize that they cannot keep themselves (Song 1:6). However, 8:11-12 may imply that the lover, God, will ultimately watch over her and keep her, His vineyard (8:11-12) – elsewhere described

[22] Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible,* 437

in Scripture as His unique "holy people" and "possession," among all the nations of the earth (Deut. 7:6-11; Song 6:8-9). Even though Israel continues to fail to keep its end of the covenant agreement/relationship, the fact remains that the covenant continues to exist because it was established and is maintained by God Himself. This is the picture that appears to be poetically illustrated in one of the refrains found twice in the Song. In 2:6 and 8:3, חָבַק, which can mean "clasp, embrace,"[23] is used as an imperfect verb, so the embrace of the Lover – "Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me" – can be understood as a continuous action. Also, the verb appears in the piel stem, so the embrace is intensified; perhaps it can be seen here as a sure, secure embrace that never lets go. Each of these statements is followed by another refrain in the Song, which will be discussed more fully below: the daughters of Jerusalem are warned about arousing or awakening love (2:7, 8:4). Taken together, both refrains indicate that the beloved, God's people, are to recognize the intensity of God's love for them, and about the seriousness of what it should mean for them as the recipients of that love, as partners in the covenant He has established with them.

The covenant formula is more directly echoed in a refrain that appears three times in the Song of Songs (2:16, 6:3, 7:10). Each is worded slightly differently. Considering the chiastic structure of the Song and where each of these refrains is located can help to draw a theological conclusion for their differences. Of the three statements, Song 7:10 is located at the outermost level of the Song's chiasm, making it the first to be considered as one moves inward to the chiastic climax. Song 7:1-9 creates a picture of the beloved's royal status, and God's delight in her and His caretaking of her so that she produces the best of all produce that can be enjoyed (see also 7:11-13). This section may correspond to Song 1:9-2:5 on the opposite end of the chiasm,

[23] BDB, 287

where both they and their relationship are illustrated in imagery reflecting a royal setting. Here, the beloved declares, "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (7:10). She exclaims that she belongs to him, though she does not finish what would typically be the rest of the full covenant formula – that He belongs to her. Rather, his "desire" for her is emphasized. The word translated as "desire" here is תְּשׁוּקָה, which appears only in two other places in Scripture – Genesis 3:16 and 4:7. The root of the word can mean "attract, impel, of desire, affection."[24] In the context of Genesis 3:16, the word is used to describe the woman's desire for her husband. In the context of Genesis 4:7, "sin" is the subject of that which desires for Cain. The fact that the word only appears three times in Scripture makes it noteworthy. It is a word different than others translated as "desire" in the Old Testament. For example, it is not חָמַד, which can mean to "desire, take pleasure in,"[25] (Gen. 2:9, 3:6; Deut. 5:21, 7:25; Ps. 19:10, etc.). Rather, תְּשׁוּקָה implies a strong desire that impels, or pressures, the object of its desire to respond. Thus, in Song 7:10, where the woman, allegorically God's covenant people, recognize they belong to the lover, God, God is not described here as belonging to them. Rather, He desires them in a way that impels them to respond in like manner, so that they *could* claim that Yahweh was their God. Just as described in the narratives in which the covenant formula is found in the Old Testament, God acts first, choosing them as His people, while they are called upon to respond, recognizing that He is their God and giving Him their total allegiance.

In Song 2:16 and 6:3, the echo of the covenant formula appears as "My beloved is mine, and I am his," and "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," respectively. In both contexts, the woman has been hesitant to respond to the lover's call to union. In Song 2, he calls her out to

[24] BDB, 1003

[25] Ibid., 326

experience the budding flowers and fruit, but she appears to remain hidden and concerned about the buds being threatened before they reach maturity and thus before they are able to provide sustenance. In Song 5:2-6:1, she hesitates to respond to his call for her to open to him, being more concerned about her own comfort. His voice does awaken in her a desire for him; however, when she finally gets around to answering his call, he has left. His absence makes her desire him even more, and she remembers his characteristics that make him the supreme object of desire (5:10-16). The daughters of Jerusalem, who are listening to this description, ask where he could have gone and where they might be able to find him (6:1). She then explains that he went to his garden to pasture in the gardens and gather lilies (6:2), before announcing that she is his, and he is hers – the one "who pastures his flocks among the lilies." In 2:16, she also declares, after announcing in opposite order that he is hers, and she is his, that "He pastures his flock among the lilies." As stated earlier in this dissertation, the picture of the lover pasturing among lilies poetically illustrates that he is constantly working and regenerating or renewing. Therefore, what this refrain in the Song teaches is that God had established His covenant love with His covenant people, and He will constantly be faithful to that covenant. The beloved, remembering His desire that calls her to Himself, as well as His faithfulness to the covenant He made with her, awakens to the security that she can find within it – a promise of security that in turn feeds her desire for Him, and He for her (cf. Ps. 45:11).[26] She thus is able to go from being afraid to come out into the countryside at her lover's beckoning, to calling *him* out into the country, where they can check on the state of the buds and blossoms with expectation and joy, not fear (2:10-15, 7:11-

[26] Mitchell argues that the refrains, in order (2:16, 6:3, 7:10), show a progression of love maturing and perfecting over time between Solomon and the Shulammite. Though I do not agree with his identification of Solomon as the lover, nor in seeing a chronological progression except through a chiastic lens, I do agree that Song 7:10 provides a picture of the most mature and foundational relationship that allows the couple's love to exist and thrive. See Christopher Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 397-98.

13). The Song illustrates this circular longing – a continuous cycle that is intended to protect their relationship from all inward wanderings and outside threats that might come against their blessed union. Not only is this security found in the lover's – God's – unconditional love, but also in the beloved's – the covenant people's – continuous love and trust in Him.

The Oath Refrain

The Song provides an allegorical example of covenant love between God and His people through the storytelling of the woman of her experiences and the dialogues between her and her lover – a relationship that remembers the past and considers their present situation. The woman also instructs the next generation about this covenant love through warnings and parables, particularly in the oath refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7, 3:5, 8:4; cf. 5:8-9). I will consider the wording of this refrain as well as its theological meaning in light of the wider context of Scripture and extended metaphor of the Song, concluding that the oath is meant to remind future generations of God's chosen people of the seriousness and necessity of committing their hearts only, fully, to Yahweh.

The Daughters of Jerusalem

The daughters of Jerusalem (or Zion) are addressed several times throughout the Song (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10-11; 5:8, 16; and 8:4). They may even be considered the audience to which the entire Song is being sung by the woman.

It is not uncommon in Scripture to see references to the "Daughter of Jerusalem" or "Daughter of Zion." Specifically, the "daughter" metaphor appears in the prophets in reference to impending judgment upon God's chosen city. The prophet Isaiah addresses Israel, on the brink of experiencing God's judgment, specifically referring to "you women who are at ease…" and "you complacent daughters" (32:9-11). Isaiah calls on them to cry out to the LORD to save them

from the coming judgment, manifested in the destruction of vineyards, and an abandoned palace and forsaken city, a once fortified region overtaken by wild animals (vv. 12-14). In Isaiah 10:32, the prophet also announces the judgment of God upon "the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem." However, the situation changes in Isaiah 52, where the daughter of Zion is described as "captive," yet is told to shake herself from the dust and loosen the chains around her neck, and to put on beautiful garments – because the LORD would restore Zion.

Lamentations addresses exilic times when Judah is taken into captivity. Jeremiah here, too, refers to Jerusalem/Zion as a woman, having suffered judgment. She was once a princess, but now a forced laborer (1:1), with none of her lovers to comfort her (1:2), and her children had been taken captive (1:5). "All her majesty has departed from the daughter of Zion" (1:6), and "How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud of His anger!" (2:1). He has slain those within her tent (2:4) and determined to destroy her wall, rampart, and gates (2:8-9). Her elders and virgins were stricken with sorrow (2:10), and so is Jeremiah, "because of the destruction of the daughter of my people…" (2:11). He goes on to describe children who desperately ask their mothers for food, but this "virgin daughter of Zion" is destroyed (2:13) because of her sin. "Virgin" implies that they are childless and therefore there is no future for the nation. Jeremiah then calls the people to repentance and trust in God's compassion (Lamentations 3) as he grieves "because of all the daughters of my city" (3:51).[27] The poetic book ends with a remembrance of God's rule and enduring throne, "from generation to generation (5:19), and a cry for God to restore Israel. Daughter Zion/Daughter Jerusalem is finally told to rejoice in the days of Micah (4:8) and Zechariah (9:9) as they look to that future

[27] Jeremiah also juxtaposes timing for the rejoicing and lamenting of the daughter of Edom and the daughter of Zion, when each one found victory or punishment according to God's purposes (4:21-22).

restoration. In each of these cases, “daughter” or “daughters” is used to refer to God’s chosen city as a whole or the individual inhabitants within the city.

If the Song does indeed exist within the context of the Solomonic temple dedication, or at least in the time of Solomon, then these prophetic illustrations may be alluding to these subsequent generations to which the woman in the Song is speaking. These “daughters” in the prophetic corpus are the generations *after* God brought the people into the Promised Land and established a permanent place for them in God’s presence. These generations failed in their role as the covenant people, the covenant Bride, of Yahweh. Even though God would eventually restore them, they certainly suffered judgment for their idolatry/adultery.

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus addresses the women, weeping as He is on his way to be crucified, as the “daughters of Jerusalem.” He tells them to stop weeping for Him, and to instead weep for them and for their children, because a day was coming when there would be exceeding destruction in the city, and they would wish they had not been born (Luke 23:28-31). Just as Jesus was concerned about the subsequent generations to follow His day, who would also turn against God, the woman in the Song appears to be concerned about the subsequent generations who would follow her. Allegorically, as God’s covenant people, she has earned the right to offer them instruction, because she, as a daughter (Song 2:2, 6:9, 7:1), has shown the way such a right commitment to the covenant could be accomplished and lead to security and blessings as God’s covenant bride.

Thus, the woman can be understood as the “daughter” of the current generation of God’s covenant people, on whom the lover, God, is bestowing blessings through her desire for, and commitment to, Him. However, she is not the first generation of those called to this relationship, as her “mother” represents the previous generation who provides guidance to the next. Her

mother's abode is where the woman lived until it was time to marry (implied in 1:6), and where she learned about love (8:2), as well as where her "marriage agreement" was made (3:4). The symbol of a mother is also used in regard to the passing on of the crown to the next generation, her son Solomon, on his wedding day (3:11).

A wider canonical context, in conjunction with a more detailed discussion of the oath refrain, below, may help to support the interpretation of the Song as an allegory that teaches the importance of generational covenant faithfulness toward Yahweh. In Deuteronomy, Moses addresses his generation and calls for subsequent generations to remain faithful and thus continue in the blessings found within the gracious covenant of God. They were told to diligently keep their soul and not forget what they had seen God do, and to not depart from God's commandments, "but to make them known to your sons and grandsons" (Deut. 4:9; cf. 6:1-3, 7; 7:9-11; 11:19; 29:29; 31:13). Later, in Israel's post-exilic history, the reconstruction of the temple was a sign of the people's covenant faithfulness after God brought them back to the land. The prophet Haggai condemned the people for living in their own paneled houses while the temple laid desolate (1:2-4), and thus they were struggling to exist in the land (1:5-6). The entire community was complacent in their relationship with Yahweh, represented by the temple. In contrast, in Ezra 3:10-11, upon the completion of the temple, the people praised the LORD and his lovingkindness for Israel. Hezekiah and Josiah both oversaw building restoration projects as they sought to renew Israel's relationship with Yahweh (2 Kings 12, 16).

The Oath

Thus, the generational continuance of covenant faithfulness, especially in the context of the building and dedication of Solomon's temple, was naturally of enough importance to the woman of the Song – the current generation of the faithful covenant people of God – that she

saw it necessary to cause the daughters of Jerusalem to swear an oath regarding it. I will offer an explanation, in the next sections, for the content of the oath to which they are told to swear, but first it may be helpful to describe what an adjuration, or oath, may mean and entail.

In 2:7, 3:5, 5:8-9, and 8:4, the woman puts the daughters of Jerusalem under an oath. In the hiphil verb stem, שָׁבַע can mean to "cause to take an oath."[28] This means that her words urge them to take action (or not take action)(cf. Gen. 50:6; 1 Sam. 14:27; 2 Kgs. 11:4-8).[29] To take an oath implies that one agrees to its seriousness and accepts the penalty attached to it for not following through. As TWOT states, "To swear in the Old Testament was to give one's sacred unbreakable word in testimony that the one swearing would faithfully perform some promised deed, or that he would faithfully refrain from some evil act…Occasionally one swore that he freely acknowledged a truth and would continue to acknowledge it in the future" (ex. Gen. 21:30, 31).[30] In the Song, the woman calls upon the daughters of Jerusalem to take an oath that they would "not" (אִם)(3:5, 2:7) awaken love, while in 8:4, she calls upon the daughters to "מָה" awaken love, which most English translations also translate as "not." Longman argues that "מָה" is a stronger form of negation, and along with the absence of the mention of gazelles and hinds, makes the warning of 8:4 even stronger and more urgent.[31] However, מָה is also an interrogative particle, so it may be that a question is being asked here, rather than an imperative statement being made. Exum suggests that מָה can mean "why," and serve a rhetorical purpose, as in "why" would you rouse love? She writes, "There is no need to [rouse love] since, when it is ready to be

[28] BDB, 989

[29] TWOT, 899

[30] Ibid., 900

[31] Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 184.

roused, love overwhelms with its force" (cf. 8:6-7).[32] According to BDB and TWOT, מָה may be translated, in general, as "what?"[33] Furthermore, TWOT explains that the word implies more than just a surface inquiry, but of someone's or something's "character and meaning" (cf. Prov. 30:4; Ex. 3:13).[34] In Song 5:9, the word is used by the daughters themselves, as they seek to know what makes the lover so special, compared to all other lovers – allegorically, what makes Yahweh greater than all other gods. Their question comes after the woman puts them under oath to tell her lover, if they find him, that she is lovesick for him (5:8). So, in 8:4, the use of the word, rather than אִם, may imply that the woman is asking the daughters to consider what kind of love they *will* awaken. Glickman rightly proposes that the slight change in 8:4 from the wording of 2:7 and 3:5 moves the oath from a warning to "not arouse" to "now arouse." As in 5:8, she is telling the daughters to promise her that the daughters would "seize the opportunity when it comes."[35] Thus, the adjuration moves from an admonition to not awaken love before it pleases, with negative consequences, to awakening real love at the right time, with positive consequences.[36] The location of 8:4 – the last verse before the epilogue – may support this interpretation, since the verse leads into a final word about the "love" that has been central to the Song. In essence, the epilogue (which I will discuss below) will answer that very question so the daughters know how to identify the "love" to be awakened. Allegorically, these instructions to the daughters of Jerusalem are instructions to the future generations of God's covenant people,

[32] Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminister/John Knox, 2005), 248.

[33] BDB, 552; TWOT, 490

[34] TWOT, 491

[35] Craig Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Company, 2004), 227.

[36] Ibid., 228

so they would know what real, covenant love looked like and how to live it out in their relationship with Yahweh.

Words of Wisdom

In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I discussed the wisdom elements that are found within the Song. These elements are especially found in the oath refrains and in the generational concerns that are expressed by the woman. The instruction, or warning, being offered in the refrains, as discussed above, is similar to that found in Old Testament wisdom literature, supporting the argument that the Song does indeed contain wisdom elements, if not a wisdom structure overall. For example, King Lemuel shared an oracle from his mother: "What [מָה], O my son? And what [מָה], O son of my womb? And what [מָה], O son of my vows? Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings" (Prov. 31:2-3). Also, as in the Song's concern about the timing of the buds and blossoms, and here in the refrains a more direct warning about the timing, kind, and opportunity for love, in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Qohelet expresses wisdom about understanding the timing and seasons for all that one might experience under the sun, and he concludes that all comes from God and only God stands outside of time and eternally superintends it all to lead humanity to fear Him (3:11-15). Just as God initiated wisdom in the world, He initiated covenant love with Israel. In both accounts, people were to embrace both wisdom and love, and armed with such revelation, to respond in faithful obedience to God and live.

The Song's lover, God, then, is the source of wisdom and of love,[37] and through the beloved's relationship with Him she finds life. This involved not just God's commitment toward her, but her commitment to God. As Bartholomew and O'Dowd write, "One must commit to

[37] God is also one and the same as "love" according to 1 John 4:8.

Yahweh and his plan for creation to begin attaining wisdom. Then, obeying and loving Yahweh becomes the means to find his ways in life in every area of God's good creation."[38] The covenant people's deference to and dependence upon the lover, God, in the Song allows them to receive the wisdom that leads them into a more intimate covenant relationship and all its associated blessings. In addition, the current generation becomes a voice to the next generation on how to live before God in that same way.

As noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, wisdom was understood in ancient times to "build the house" that would provide the best opportunity for security on earth (Prov. 24:3-4). Rundus suggests that the feminine metaphor for wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, as well as the figure of a woman as the receiver of covenant fidelity (Prov. 5-6; Song of Songs), creates a theological picture around "womanhood," symbolic of humanity's innate longing for relationship. He writes, "The desire for and fidelity of these feminine persons beckon to a deeper longing for life and love that reside only in the life of the triune God."[39] While wisdom builds the house, wisdom is sourced from God Himself, and it is God's love that will sustain the house. In the Song's oath refrains, and the Song of Songs as a whole, God's covenant people are reminded to seek after the secure house that only God can build. The love they are to awaken must align correctly with Him and His will.

Gazelles and Hinds

In Song 2:7 and 3:5, the daughters are called to swear "by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field." As noted in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, these creatures in their literary usage here

[38] Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 80.

[39] [39] Lance Rundus, *Wisdom is a Woman: The Canonical Metaphor of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 Understood in Light of Theological Aesthetics (*Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 223.

may, in part, represent the wider cosmos who would experience the repercussions of the divine-human relationship between God and His people; after all, as the blessings and curses are laid out, the entire land, the created order, would be either blessed or destroyed dependent on the people's obedience or disobedience. However, I think the specific use of gazelles and hinds has further meaning also intended here. First, as also noted in Chapter 5, gazelles have been identified in ancient iconography as associated with the goddess of love, and thus served as divine symbols of "love." Second, the Hebrew words for these creatures, as some scholars have noted appear similar to the divine titles: "gazelles" (צְבָאוֹת) and LORD of hosts (יהוָה צְבָאוֹת), and "hinds of the field" (בְּאַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה) and "God Almighty" (אֵל שַׁדַּי).[40] Andruska rightfully concludes, "Both meanings are likely intended, so that she asks them to swear by love itself as well as by God."[41]

This possible authorial intention of subtly incorporating God's divine names in the oath can be further supported by the way oaths worked in the ancient world. As TWOT explains, "Often one would swear by…another who was tacitly and mutually assumed to be greater or more precious than the one making the oath" (ex. 1 Kgs. 2:8).[42] If the daughters of Jerusalem are in essence being told to swear by God Himself when it came to awakening love, their oath becomes much more serious, since Scripture speaks unequivocal judgment upon those who swear falsely by God (Zech. 5:3, 4; Mal. 3:5; Matt. 5:37).[43] In addition, swearing by false gods

[40] Jennifer L. Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs*, Oudtestamentische Studien 75 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 129. See also Mitchell, *Song of Songs,* 364.

[41] Andruska, 130

[42] TWOT, 900

[43] Ibid.

was a sin (Jer. 5:7), so at the very least the hinds and gazelles in the Song likely symbolize much more than the pagan gods or symbols of gods in the ancient Near East.

"Do not awaken love …

The woman adjures the daughters of Jerusalem about not awakening love. תָּעִירוּ, the verb translated "arouse" in NASB, is in the hiphil stem, so it can be understood as causing love to be aroused. תְּעוֹרְרוּ, the verb translated as "awaken" in the NASB, is in the polel/piel stem. The intensive verb can mean that she is actively, perhaps forcefully, awakening love. If she stirs up love, she would cause it to move into action. In the imperfect, the verb can imply that it is something she is not to do now or in the future, nor to make it a regular practice. Though in the next phrase the woman will give the daughters conditions on when love *can* be awakened, this caution to *not* awaken love aligns with the seriousness of oath-taking. As Andruska notes, the woman's adjuration is a warning against what Proverbs would call "folly"; a call to follow the path of wisdom means there is human responsibility, a choice, about awakening love, and restraining or resisting that which is not love as defined in the Song.[44]

Gault argues that the extended metaphor of the Song is about the couple enjoying love, with all of the sexual images, and therefore עוּר should be translated as "disturb," making the instruction from the woman, "do not disturb."[45] According to Gault, the couple is already enjoying love when this is spoken, and they do not want to be disturbed at daybreak.[46] He also

[44] Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love,* 128

[45] Brian P. Gault, "A 'Do Not Disturb' Sign?: Re-examining the Adjuration Refrain in Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* 36:1 (2000), 103. See also Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 1994), 89-92, and Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 109.

[46] Gault, 97-98. He references Papyrus Harris B and Nabu and Tasmetu for examples in ancient love literature of the desire for privacy in lovemaking.

argues that while it is evident elsewhere in the Old Testament that עוּר is used to describe a stirring up from inactivity (Isa. 14:9; Job 3:8, 41:2; Hos. 7:4), in poetry the meaning can be extended.[47] However, the extended metaphor of the Song is more about searching, waiting, and expecting.[48] The woman wants to know where to find her lover (1:7-8). She is hesitant about responding to his call and is concerned that the vineyards be protected from threats as the fruit is still maturing (2:14-15). She looks for the budding of the vine and the blooming of pomegranates (6:11, 7:12), and saves choice fruits to give to him when they are finally together (7:13). She longs to find him and to experience the right scenario in which they can enjoy love together (3:1-4; 5:5-8; 8:1-2). She calls for him to keep running toward her (2:17, 8:14; cf. 4:6). The union takes place at the center of the chiasm, 4:16-5:1, though the sense of movement toward and security in the love they have for each other is glimpsed throughout the Song (ex. 1:15-2:4; 3:4; 2:6, 8:3; 2:16, 6:3, 7:10, etc.). Thus, it makes more sense that the woman would be offering advice based on her own experience of waiting, desiring, and awakening love. In addition, in Song 8:5 (which will be discussed further in the next section), the woman is described as awakening love in a positive sense.

While some English versions (KJV, NASB) translate "*my* love," no pronoun appears in the MT. Rather, the definite article implies that the "love" mentioned here is not a person but an abstract quality. Gault perhaps rightfully argues that the definite article in 2:7 points the reader to "this love" that is described in 2:4-6, and that love then becomes the formula for "love" in the

[47] Gault, "A 'Do Not Disturb Sign'?" 102. The word used in the idea of awakening or stirring up to action is also found in Deut. 32:11, Judges 5:12, 1 Chr. 5:26, 2 Chr. 36:22 [Ezra 1:1, 5], Job 8:6, and Ps. 7:6, 35:23, and 78:38.

[48] This view is shared by Exum, *Song of Songs*, 118, and by G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 102, who rightly notes that it is not just wakening and summoning love, but also sustaining it.

following repetitions of the refrain.[49] The article in front of "love" only elsewhere in the Song appears in 8:7, where it also describes the inextinguishable love that is described in the whole of 8:6-7.[50] TWOT notes that אַהֲבָה is frequently found in wisdom literature, with Proverbs typically using its abstract form (Prov. 10:12, 15:17; cf. Eccl. 9:1, 6).[51] Elsewhere, the word is used in the context of several relationships: a husband toward his wife (ex. Gen. 29:20), God's love for His people (ex. Deut 7:8, 2 Chr. 2:11), and Jonathan for David (1 Sam. 18:3, 20:17; 2 Sam. 1:26.)[52] BDB suggests that אַהֲבָה is used in a figurative sense in Song 3:10, and as a personification in Song 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4.[53] I believe it is best to view אַהֲבָה in the abstract sense in that refrain, as well as in 2:4, 3:10, and 8:5-7 (with 8:5 an implied personification), where the woman is seeking to define for her audience what true love is, mainly for the daughters, or future generations, of Jerusalem.

…until it pleases"

The oath refrain restrains the daughters of Jerusalem to when they *can* awaken love, or stir it into motion. This interpretation is supported by the use of the prepositional phrase עַד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ. In the refrain, חָפַץ is imperfect, and thus likely points to something in the future, or in the context of the refrain, something to look for so the daughters would know when it was time to awaken love. The preposition עַד can mean "as far as, even to, up to, until, while."[54] The preposition is used in 2 Kings 13:23 to speak of God having withheld judgment on Israel *until*

[49] Gault, 100

[50] Ibid., 99-100

[51] TWOT, 14

[52] Ibid.

[53] BDB, 13

[54] Ibid., 723

now. עַד is also used in Deuteronomy 12:9 in the context of the Israelites still waiting to enter the Promised Land: "for you have not as *yet* come to the resting place and the inheritance which the LORD your God is giving you."

In addition, the construction of the phrase connected to the verbal root חָפֵץ provides more information about when love is to be awakened. שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ begins with the שֶׁ conjunction, which points to a dependent clause. The clause should read "it pleases,"[55] as the subject is not either of the lovers but the abstract affection, אַהֲבָה. BDB defines חָפֵץ as "delight in," and more specifically in the qal form as it appears in the oath refrain of the Song, to "delight, desire, be pleased to do a thing."[56] Throughout the Song, there is an emphasis on the protection of the budding and blossoming plants in the vineyards and orchards. Not until the fruit was mature and ready to eat could the couple enjoy it together. The oath refrain, also, emphasizes waiting until love could be delighted in or desired. This kind of love is exemplified by the beloved and lover throughout the Song (2:4-6, et. al.). As already noted in previous chapters, their love is exclusive, mutual, and committed, and the woman seeking her lover shows that she had awakened love that would continue to press on toward the maturity that would lead to a peaceful, abundant union.

Allegorically, the beloved, representing God's faithful covenant people, illustrates what it looks like to wholeheartedly seek the LORD, the lover. Such an ideal relationship is described in the שְׁמַע (Deut. 6:4-9), while the opposite is condemned. For example, Davis draws attention to Old Testament prophetic warnings; when Israel would go after other lovers, they would seek God and not find him (Isa. 9:13, 31:1, 65:1; Hos. 2:7), teaching that God is found only when one

[55] BDB, 342

[56] Ibid.

seeks with full devotion and boldness,[57] as the woman does in Song 3:1-4. Davis further writes that the oath refrain, as a prohibition and warning, is teaching the daughters that love is more than passion; it is a soul prepared to be faithful and sacrificial.[58] It is a love, as Solomon prayed, that was shown by God's servants who walk before Him with all their heart (1 Kgs. 8:23). The daughters had to learn the signs of readiness for a love that was exemplified by the woman who protected and inspected the blossoming and budding vineyards that figuratively represent her own heart.[59] Allegorically interpreted, to enter into covenant love with God requires wholehearted devotion that will guard against any sort of allegiance to idols (Ps. 86:8-12). Half-hearted, immature commitments to God – like the figure of the fruit of the vineyard being destroyed before it budded (cf. Song 2:15) – would make them vulnerable to straying (Hos. 10:2); however, constant devotion – a heart set on God alone – would lead to blessings and security within the kingdom God was building for them (figuratively, the garden of Song 4:12-15; cf. Hos. 10:12, where God calls them to wholehearted commitment, with garden imagery – sowing righteousness, reaping loyalty, and breaking up their fallow ground).

The lover in the Song, however, stands alone and opposite the beloved and the daughters in this song of love. He remains faithful in love throughout the Song, and as already noted, he is pictured with otherworldly, divine images and actions, praised by the beloved and all the maidens (1:2-4). As already argued, allegorically he represents Yahweh Himself. He is described in Scripture as *always* delighting in His chosen, covenant people. For example, David had

[57] Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 256.

[58] Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 259

[59] Glickman states that the couple must learn to be sensitive to the right timing for the principles of love, just as a farmer is to nature and harvest, see Glickman, *Solomon's Song of Love,* 202.

already experienced God's faithfulness and could pray that God delighted in him (2 Sam. 22:20; cf. Ps. 18:19, 22:8). Even the Queen of Sheba recognized that God had delighted in Solomon (1 Kgs. 10:9; cf. 2 Chron. 9:8). God is described as delighting in Israel in the eschatological age (Isa. 62:4).

חָפֵץ is also used in the Old Testament in regard to man's delight in the LORD – and thus that idea of love that commits wholeheartedly to God. In Psalm 40:8, the psalmist delights to do God's will. In Psalm 73:25, he delights in God, and in Psalm 112:1 he delights in God's commandments (cf. Isa. 58:2). This "delight" on both the parts of God and His people is not just a feeling. It is a feeling that leads to action. For example, Joshua and Caleb knew that if the LORD indeed delighted in them, "then He will bring us into this land and give it to us…" (Num. 14:8). Jonathan's "delight" for David led to him warning David of Saul's ill-intentions (1 Sam. 19:2). This kind of "delighting" is necessary in a relationship if that relationship is going to be strong and secure. While God's חֶסֶד is sure within the covenant (ex. Exod. 20:6), the more general word for love, אַהֲבָה, represents a human's capacity and ability to be faithful in return. That is the abstract word for "love" that is used in the Song, and thus implies not only God's love for His people, but also the people's love for God. In the next section, I will discuss how the epilogue in the Song (8:5-14) further defines what this "love" is and looks like, with an emphasis on its power – and thus it is not something to be taken lightly.

The Epilogue: What is Love?

From the beginning, God had called Israel to be separate from other nations, so as not to be seduced by their gods (Ex. 34:10, 14, etc.). Because of His great love for them, God chose Israel out of all the nations to be His people and to enter a covenant with Him, a covenant which He established (Deut. 7:6-11). As I have already noted, the covenant formula and the echoes of

that formula in one set of the Song's refrains (2:16, 6:3, 7:10) communicates allegorically that within the covenant, God had acted first, choosing His covenant people and urging them to respond to His love as faithfully as He had acted and would continue to act toward them. He could not force them to respond a certain way, however. As Moses had powerfully communicated in Deuteronomy, they had the option to choose death or life by way of their disobedience or obedience toward Him and His covenant with them (30:15-16; cf. 11:26-32). In that context, Moses had also communicated to them that the loyalty and love that God had asked of them was not beyond their ability (30:11), and that even when they would disobey Him and experience judgment and exile, if they repented He would bring them back and give them a heart to obey and experience His blessings (30:1-10).

Solomon recognized the utter dependence Israel had on God. In his benediction following his prayer of dedication for the temple, Solomon blessed the LORD for giving rest to Israel, for fulfilling all of His promises to them, and then called on the LORD to continue to be with them: "May the LORD our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, which He commanded our fathers" (1 Kgs. 8:56-58). Even though God's covenant promises were eternal, the realization of the peace within those promises relied on a healthy relationship – one that depended on the LORD's graciousness toward them and the people's ongoing faithfulness toward and reliance on Him. Disobedience to the covenant agreement meant falling into judgment and curses. Therefore, the people had to understand the meaning and power of this covenant love and how to live securely within it, and this is the purpose of the Song's epilogue (Song 8:5-14).

In the outermost level of the chiastic structure of the Song, the oath refrain follows the two pictures in which the lover is embracing the beloved with his left and right hands (2:6, 8:3). In 3:5, the refrain follows the woman's desperate search for "the one my soul loves" (4x); she finds him and brings him to her mother's house (3:1-4). Thus, each refrain follows some kind of realization of security in the lover and beloved's intimacy and commitment: in 2:7 and 8:4, the *lover's* act of love and embrace, and in 3:5, the *beloved's* act of love and commitment. The woman, with her serious instruction to the daughters, aims to ensure that they find that same secure commitment.

Awakening Love (8:5)

The epilogue begins with a voice or voices of those watching the lover and beloved together: "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (8:5). Elsewhere, the beloved is the answer to the riddle-like question of "who" (3:6, 6:10). In 3:6 and 8:5, she is coming up from the wilderness, but in 3:6 she appears to be enroute to her wedding. In 8:5, רָפַק is the hithpael verb stem, indicating that she is supporting herself on her beloved, openly recognizing her dependence upon Him.

She then shares how this relationship began: "Beneath the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother was in labor with you, there she was in labor and gave you birth" (8:5). As the verse that immediately follows the oath refrain in 8:4 and which uses the same word, "awaken" as in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4, it can be understood that the woman awakened "love," here personified. This is the very thing she had instructed the daughters to avoid doing until they were willing to delight completely (allegorically, in the LORD). She may be referring to Song 2:3, where the beloved described her lover as "an apple tree among the trees of the forest." She sat down and took great delight (חָמַד) in his shade, and enjoyed his sweet fruit. חָמַד is in the piel stem,

intensifying her desire. In Song 8:5, she refers to that moment she had awakened love. In Song 2, her lover was the apple tree providing shelter and sustenance for her. Under Him, then, is where love had been awakened. It was where love was brought forth, pictured as the mother laboring and giving birth there (8:5).

As noted in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, this picture may also allude to ANE imagery picturing the concept of a "world tree" or "tree of life" as the cosmic center, with roots going into the netherworld and its tops to heaven that connected the netherworld, earth, and heaven,[60] symbolizing "divine life-giving and guarantee of blessing."[61] Also, in sacred marriage rituals and myths, goddesses, particularly Inanna/Ishtar, played the divine part, ultimately bringing abundant agricultural yields. In one literary tradition for the growing season, Inanna strolls with Dumuzi in the garden following their consummation, kneels by the apple tree, and births plants and grain from her womb.[62] Song 8:5 is different, however, in that there is no prior consummation, and the woman references the mother as giving birth to *love* under the apple tree, and the woman simply awakens it. The mother, as elsewhere, may represent generational continuance, and in this case, allegorically speaking, of the love that is meant to sustain the relationship between God and His covenant people.

Once the beloved awakened love, she entered that covenant relationship, described as the lover bringing her into his banquet hall and raising a banner over her: "Love" (2:4). At that moment, when she awakened love, she became very aware of her dependence on her lover, and

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[60] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018, 142-43.

[61] Michaela Bauks, "Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their Ancient Near Eastern Precursors," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* (May 2012), 281.

[62] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi," web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

she describes their intimacy (2:5-6). This picture then ends with the oath refrain, where she warns the daughters *not* to awaken love until it pleases – allegorically, when they find pleasure in God's protection and provision and are willing for Him to bring them to His banquet hall, raise a banner of "love" over them, and realize that their way out of the wilderness is by leaning on Him all the way. The big picture of the narrative of Israel's exodus from Egypt supports this reading, as God chose them as His people, protected them throughout the wilderness, and took them into the Promised Land, while the people had to learn to trust Him and obey in order to realize the blessings of that unique relationship. The beloved had awakened love and subsequently acted in trust and obedience as she sought to protect the metaphorical vineyard and inspected the buds and blossoms, expecting they would mature to an abundant yield.

Proverbs and Parables on "Love" (8:6-12)

After announcing she had awakened love, the woman requests that her lover put her as a seal on his heart and his arm (8:6). As a seal is the symbol for someone's identity, she asks that she be identified with, or in, him. She wants to become permanently recognized as belonging to him and being loved by him. Allegorically, she, as God's covenant people, does not want to exist outside of the lover's, God's, covenant love. Why? Because within the covenant, she has the greatest security of all: "For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol; its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD" (8:6). Some scholars have recognized possible mythic associations to the gods of death, like Seth in Egypt, and Mot in the West Semitic Baal myth, that the Song may be alluding to in this verse and the next. In addition, as I already noted in previous chapters, sacred marriages were very much concerned with the death and life cycles

of the land and how to control it. As Jacobsen notes, these rituals included "Yearly lamentations for the death and disappearance of the power of fertility at the onset of the dry season."[63]

Love within the covenant also means that God's jealousy is initiated, ready to react as necessary. Jealousy can be a negative emotion, but Scripture shows that it is right and good when God is jealous for His people. Longman rightly states, "There are only two relationships that are mutually exclusive to humans. We may have only one spouse and only one God. Accordingly, these are the only two relationships where jealousy can be a positive emotion."[64] He adds that jealousy in these cases is an avenue to "rescue the relationship."[65] Moberly, likewise, comments on the goodness of jealousy in this context; jealousy, he writes, is "a corollary of love when it matters that the loved one, especially if covenantally committed (as in marriage), should return the love and not faithlessly go elsewhere."[66]

Moses warns the people not to forget the covenant and make idols, "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut. 4:24; cf. 6:10-15). His jealousy is also "as severe as Sheol" (Song 8:6). The Song of Moses aptly explains how the previous generations of Israelites made Him jealous with their idols, and in response He would pour out his anger: "For a fire is kindled in My anger, and burns to the lowest part of Sheol, and consumes the earth with its yield, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains" (Deut. 32:22). Through this punishment, God desires that they would come to an understanding of God's superior power and the need to follow Him alone (Deut. 32:29-33). By being a seal on His heart and His arm, the woman is

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[63] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 14.

[64] Longman, *Song of Songs*, 63

[65] Ibid., 188

[66] Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 46

subjecting herself to this powerful love that will not simply let her walk away (just as no one can walk away from the grave), but will show Himself faithful, even in extreme punishment, to lead her back to the way of life within His covenant love. He promised to be faithful to Jerusalem at all costs (Zech. 1:14). Though they deserve Sheol (Isa. 5:14), He always redeemed them. In addition, David recognized God as his mighty rescuer from enemies. In Psalm 18, David describes God as thundering from the heavens, and sending coals of fire, lightning flashes, and channels of water against his enemies, and drew David out of the "many waters" (vv. 12-16). Therefore, those who act in covenant unfaithfulness receive the correction of God, while those within the covenant receive the protection of God, both described in the imagery of powerful fire and water.

The love that is found within covenant with God is so powerful a flame that many waters cannot quench it. Again, ANE myths often view water as a divine force of chaos – for example, Tiamat in "Enuma Elish," or Yam in the Baal cycle myth. Hamilton adds that God's power in the Bible's flood narrative, as well as His power to part the Red Sea and the Jordan River shows that He is not thwarted by any created cosmic force.[67] God had promised His covenant people: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you" (Isaiah 43:2). The same idea is reflected here in the Song, where the woman knows that as long as she is identified with the lover, nothing – not even the most powerful forces known on the earth – could stop this love that she had awakened. Lastly, she mentions another powerful force in the world known to draw away even the most faithful: wealth. But again, this love would

[67] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.: Louisville, KY, 2015), 140.

despise even the entire amount of a man's riches (cf. Num 24:13). Love could not be bought or enticed, manipulated, or coerced.

In two short parable-like vignettes, the beloved further explores the idea of love as it specifically relates to her decision to awaken it. Song 8:8-10 begins with the siblings of a young, not-yet-mature woman (no breasts) who go to great lengths to ensure her chastity before marriage. The parable may correspond to 1:6, where her mother's sons were angry with her and made her caretaker of the vineyards, rather than allow her to focus on her own maturing. If she is a wall, they say they will build a battlement of silver on her. If she is a door, they would barricade her with planks of cedar (8:9). Then the woman speaks, declaring that she was a wall, and her breasts were like towers – therefore, she remained fortified against any threat to her virginity, and when she became mature (the imagery of breasts like towers), she "became in his eyes as one who finds peace" (8:10). By giving herself to her lover, or awakening love, she became known as "Shulammite" (6:13), which is a title with the root שָׁלוֹם and may be translated as the "perfect or peace-filled one."[68] The title is given to her in Song 6 after she is described by the lover as beautiful fortified cities and "awesome as an army with banners" (6:4, 10). Her state caused all other queens, concubines, and maidens to admire her (6:9-10) as the one alone who could obtain the peace that is pictured in the tranquil description in 6:5-7 (cf. 4:1-5). In 8:10, she declares that in the eyes of the one who would ask for her hand (8:8), she was the "the one" (6:9). Now mature, she was able to find the peace that alone comes in giving herself to love – awakening love – within God's secure covenant (8:6-7).

[68] Iain M. Duguid, *The Song of Songs: An Introduction and Commentary.* Volume 19 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries,* eds. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 142.

I have already argued the possibility that the lover is speaking in 8:11-12. After all, allegorically, it is true that God owns all of the vineyards upon the earth and superintends all that happens within them and how they are cared for. In the love song of Isaiah 5, God plants His vineyard and expects it to produce good fruit, but it only produced bad fruit; there, the vineyard is the figure of His covenant people, and the song illustrates the decision the people had – whether they would be faithful to God as their caretaker (they were not). While God is the owner and caretaker of the vineyard, it is equally possible that the parable of Song 8:11-12 is spoken by the beloved as the vineyard that God had planted. In contrast to the people in Isaiah 5, in Song 1:6 the beloved laments that she had neglected to keep her vineyard, though she has been the caretaker for others' vineyards. In 8:12, the speaker states that "my vineyard" is "before me" (פָּנַי). If she is the one speaking, she is in a sense reclaiming her vineyard as her responsibility. She goes on to apparently reject any sort of monetary contract that would cause her to rent out her vineyard and allow others to have the fruit. Solomon may have his thousand shekels for renting out his vineyard, and the caretakers may have their two hundred for their work in his vineyards (this latter mention seems to go above and beyond what was described in 8:11). Her concern is caring for her own vineyard. Elsewhere, the Song speaks of this concern that the couple's vineyards would be protected while the fruit was maturing (2:15), and the beloved is expecting that she would have wine (7:9) and ripe pomegranates (8:2) to offer her lover. In this sense, 8:11-12 is a parable about the woman's decision to protect God's vineyard (herself), and willingly offer all she has for Him once it matures; thus, the covenant people awaken love and willingly offer all for the LORD, not anyone else. The love she has entered into cannot be bought, even by all the wealth of one's house (cf. Song 8:7). Again, this love is not just due to her decision to love God, but is premised and founded upon God's undying love for her.

Worship in the Gardens

When the beloved, God's covenant people, had recognized God's faithfulness and responded with wholehearted commitment, the beloved is pictured as dwelling in gardens (8:13). יָשַׁב can mean to "sit, remain, dwell,"[69] and appears here in an active form. The woman is thus apparently living permanently within these gardens. The lover states that his companions are listening for her voice. I concluded that in 1:7, the companions represent those faithful shepherds, or the patriarchs, of Israel, who were looking for the promise of God – specifically for a permanent dwelling place where God would put His name and give them rest. The woman, as the current covenant people of God celebrating the construction and dedication of the temple, is pictured as dwelling in that permanent place of security and abundance, and these companions long to hear her as the generation who can testify of this promise fulfilled. But the lover then adds, "Let me hear it!" This echoes his call to her in 2:14, when she was hiding away in the clefts of the rock like a scared, hesitant dove. He wants her to respond to his faithful love and continue the covenant conversation and commitment to him. This relationship is ongoing. She awakened love, but this love must be maintained. Not only does he recognize this, but so does she, because she once again calls for him to come to her as a gazelle on mountains of spices – spices perhaps tying to her embodiment of a garden full of every good blessing as she is described in Song 4:14 and 16 (cf. 3:6).

In Song 4:10-15, the lover describes the beautiful abundance that the beloved exudes, including honey and milk on her lips and the fragrance of Lebanon on her garments. The lover then describes her as a "garden locked" and "a spring sealed up" (4:12). Her state is similar to that seen in 8:8-10 (cf. 6:4-10), where she describes herself as inviolable and finds peace, and in

[69] BDB, 442

8:11-12, where she takes responsibility for her vineyard and refuses to rent it out to others. At the same time, as I argued in Chapter 3, the passage also alludes to God being the one who has been faithful to her and allowed her to grow to this level of maturity and beauty in such peace and security, in accordance with her faithfulness to Him (cf. Hosea 14; Ps. 36:7-9; Ps. 46:4-5; Jer. 2:13). She, so full of the best fruits and spices and continuously well-watered, is unlike the later unfaithful covenant people of Israel who, as a metaphorical vineyard, produced bad fruit from all that God had given them and were laid to waste (Isaiah 5:1-7).

A Continual Offering

The woman, however, knows that all that she now has to offer is not to be kept for herself. In an act of worship, she calls for the north and south wind to "awake" (4:16). In his opening monologue, Qohelet considers the evidence of there being "nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9), and how the world continues as it has for every generation. In 1:6 he writes: "Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses the wind returns." This means the wind continually blows in each direction; it never stops, it just keeps blowing and continuing its circular momentum. In Song 4:16, however, the woman awakens it, apparently setting this ongoing movement of the wind in motion with force (פּוּחַ appears here in the hiphil stem). Whereas she instructed the daughters of Jerusalem *not* to awaken love until it pleases, she is awakening the wind that causes the fragrances from *her* garden and all its spices to "waft abroad." In 2:17 (cf. 4:6), she had told her lover to turn and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of Bether, "until the cool of the day when the shadows flee away." Other translations read "until the day breaks" (KJV, NIV) or "until the day breathe" (RSV). In the MT, פּוּחַ is the word used to explain this breaking, cooling, or breathing of the day. She appears here to have reached that moment of maturity when

she could give *all* that she had away, but only to her lover (cf. 7:13), as her next statement clarifies: "May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits!" In Song 4:16, then, she identifies the garden as both hers and his.

In a tradition of the Inanna and Dumuzi cult, Dumuzi – presumably represented by the city's king via ritual enactment – invites Inanna into *his* garden. Inanna also recognizes it as *his* garden, saying, "He brought me into his garden…"[70] Prior to entering Dumuzi's garden, Inanna states that if Dumuzi, a shepherd, would satiate her with goods from his flocks, then she would willingly produce fruit for him. When they enter his garden, she kneels before the apple tree and pours forth plants from her womb. Afterwards, when the plants are matured, Dumuzi comes to her and then satiates her sexually, after which she acknowledges him as king, he acknowledges her as his bride ("sister"), and he returns to the palace. In this ritual, the two essentially have a quid pro quo relationship. Inanna must be satiated by Dumuzi in order for her to promise to provide food for him and the people of the city. Once she provides food, he then satiates her again through sex. By contrast, in the Song, the garden is where the woman exists securely, and it belongs to her as well as to her lover. They do not go to the garden simply to procreate. In fact, the beloved *is* the garden, and she recognizes that all she is belongs to him. In addition, the lover calls her "my sister, my bride" four times in Song 4:10-5:1. There is no previous exchange of favors to secure this relationship. In the Song, the couple continuously pursues one another. The woman exudes the abundance of a blessed land, and at a point of maturity for which she had longed (symbolized by the maturing fruit), she willingly offers it all back to Him.

Allegorically interpreted, the Song communicates that within the covenant, the people are continuously blessed, and they acknowledge their dependence on God and willingly offer back to

[70] "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi," web.ics.perdue.edu/~kdickson/Inanna.html.

Him all that is indeed His – including their very selves. They consistently belong to each other (2:16; 6:4; 7:10). Moses described God Himself as a dwelling place, for Israel to live in securely; they as the fountain of Jacob would be secluded (Deut. 33:27-28; cf. Psalm 90:1). In addition, God said He would dwell with a contrite spirit (Isa. 57:15). This is why, in Song 5:1, the lover then announces that he *has* come into *his* garden (5:1). The expression is in the perfect tense, indicating the action is finished. He also *has* gathered, eaten, and drunk all that was indeed his to consume. In Song 7:9, the woman seems to finish the man's sentence, in which he wishes for her to produce fruit and wine. She describes the wine is "flowing gently through the lips of those who fall asleep." Hess helpfully notes that wine rouses, awakens, and delights,[71] and thus this verse may also be referring to the oath refrain, an example of the woman again awakening love by presenting her lover with the best of what she produced as the vineyard planted by God and expected to produce good fruit (contra Isaiah 5:1-7). She desired what God desired. Mitchell notes that Song 2:12-13 and 6:2 may refer to the lover's pruning work in order for the vines to bear yet more fruit.[72] If so, God is again seen as the ultimate caretaker of the vineyards, His people, giving them all they need to produce good fruit.

Public Worship

Within the covenant, the king and the people would bring sacrifices and offerings to show their loyalty to and to renew their relationship with the LORD. At the time of the temple dedication, Solomon and the people presented a large amount of peace offerings to the LORD (1 Kgs. 8:63). Solomon also offered a large amount of burnt and grain offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings, and then observed the feast with the multitudinous assembly that gathered in

[71] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 223.

[72] Mitchell, *The Song of Songs,* 306

Jerusalem for the occasion. As noted earlier, the temple dedication coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles, during which the people brought gifts to the LORD from the produce of the land, in thankfulness and trust (1 Kgs. 8:2) After the celebration, they returned to their tents, "joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the LORD had shown to David His servant and to Israel His people" (8:66).

The Song of Songs is similarly a public celebration of the relationship between God and His people – a relationship renewed and affirmed by the temple dedication. The very beginning of the Song notes a corporate longing and rejoicing in the object of their shared love: "Let us run together!" and "We will rejoice in you and be glad; we will extol your love more than wine" (1:4). The beloved then states, "Rightly do they love you." The beloved's wishes are combined with those of the maidens, the soon-to-be brides, all around her. Davis notes that זָכַר, or "remember" ("extol" in the NASB), connotes God's acts of saving love in the Old Testament, and that "exult and rejoice" and the pronoun "we" indicates public worship (cf. Ps. 118:24, Isa. 25:9). The beloved's love is personal and public, and they all rejoice in "the king."[73] שָׂמְחָה "rejoice," is primarily used elsewhere in the Old Testament in reference to the victories that God grants to Israel, and cultic sacrifices in thankfulness to God for His faithfulness and His presence among them, including when the ark of the covenant was brought into a more permanent location.[74] The word is also used to describe the loss and regaining of gladness via God's judgment and grace throughout the prophetic corpus.[75] In the Psalms, שָׂמְחָה is used in reference

[73] Davis, *Song of Songs,* 243

[74] Num. 10:10; Deut. 28:47; 1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Sam. 6:12; 1 Kgs. 1:40; 1 Chron. 12:40, 15:16, 15:25; 1 Chron. 29; 2 Chron. 20:27, 23:18, 29:30; 2 Chron. 30; Ezra 3, 6; Nehemiah 8, 12; Esther 8, 9.

[75] Isaiah 9, 16, 22, 24, 29, 30, 35, 51, 55, 61, 66; Jeremiah 7, 15, 16, 25, 31, 33, 48; Ezekiel 35, 36; Joel 1:16; Zech. 8:19. Jer. 16 and 25 specifically mentions the voice of bridegroom and bride being quieted as a result of God's judgment.

to the joy that is given by the Lord.[76] The word is also used as the reward of righteousness, peace, and justice in Proverbs, all in relation to the fear of the Lord.[77]

The people were instructed in Deut. 12:4-7 to seek the LORD at the place He would choose to establish His name and His dwelling, and to come and bring their offerings and sacrifices to Him. Unlike other ANE gods who were believed to physically consume the sacrifices, the sacrifices in Israel were simply a "token of devotion" or of remembrance for the people as they gave God a portion of the food given to them for survival.[78] At the time of the offerings, according to the instructions in Deuteronomy, all were to learn to fear the LORD, feast and rejoice, including the Levite, widows, orphans, and aliens (14:22-28). The Israelites were also instructed to offer their first fruits to God when they enter the land at the place God chooses, remembering their history of wanderings, slavery, and God's faithfulness (Deuteronomy 26). They would have something to offer if they were truly living in faithfulness to the LORD, since the blessings listed in Deuteronomy 28 include blessings in their barns and work, with the storehouse of heaven being open to them.

Yet the lover in the Song was not primarily enthralled with what the beloved produced, but rather her "love," which was the motivation for her to release everything back to him in an act of vulnerability, trust, and thankfulness. In Song 4:10, he says that her "love" is beautiful, much better than wine. And *her* oils, specifically, were better than all the spices that one might be able to present to him. The beloved said the same of him: "For your love is better than wine.

[76] Psalm 4, 16, 21, 30, 43, 45, 68, 97, 100, 106, 137

[77] Prov. 10:28, 12:20, 21:15

[78] Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings,* 114

Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, Your name is like purified oil" (1:2-3). Both delight in the other's love, while the beloved also delights in the lover's name.

While the lover, God, initiated the relationship, His covenant people had to choose to respond to Him with their whole hearts, and when they do, His love seems to increase and draw even closer (Song 4:9, 6:5). When the woman awakens love, that begins the cycle of security, blessing, and continual faithfulness. While the lover states that He has enjoyed all of the abundance of their mutually owned garden, they both – "friends" and "lovers" – are encouraged to eat and drink, even to drunkenness (5:1). The encouragement comes from unidentified voices, so one can only surmise who might be speaking. Taking the Song as a unified whole, the voices may come from the companions/shepherds (1:7-8, 8:13) or the daughters of Jerusalem (1:5; 2:7; 3:5; 5:8-9, 16; 6:1; 8:4). Perhaps the voices are a combination of the testimonies of every generation, past ("mothers" and "companions/shepherds"); present ("maidens," 1:3-4; queens, concubines and maidens [possibly representing the surrounding nations], 6:9-10); and future (daughters of Jerusalem), who are encouraging the current expression of covenant faithfulness as a link in the chain of generational blessings, and maintaining their place in the covenant promises of God.

Concerning the Future

After his dedication prayer, Solomon rose from before the altar and blessed the assembly of Israel. He began by acknowledging the LORD's work in giving rest to His people, and thus fulfilled all the promises He had made to them (8:56). Solomon desired the current generation to continue experiencing God's favor and presence just as the previous generation had (8:57). God would continue to draw them and help them to turn their hearts to Him and follow His commands (8:58). Solomon also recognized that the relationship would require an ongoing

conversation between God and His covenant people. Solomon desired that his words would rise to the LORD day and night, so that God would maintain their cause each day" (8:59).

In addition, the LORD's reputation as the only God in all the world would be known throughout the earth. All of this required the people, in each generation, to be singularly focused: "Let your heart therefore be wholly devoted to the LORD our God, to walk in His statutes and to keep His commandments, as at this day" (8:61). The relationship between God and His people would require an ongoing commitment on both sides. The main concern, of course, was that the people would keep their end of the commitment since God would always remain faithful to His promises.

The Song of Songs poetically describes this same relationship, with an emphasis on the covenant people's ongoing love for the lover. The beloved not only recognizes her need for him, but she urges the next generation to recognize their ongoing need for him as well (cf. Ps. 145:4; Deut. 5:8-10, 6:7). Allegorically, the covenant people of God, in each generation, must enter the love relationship with full commitment, trusting the LORD to help them in their weakness (Ps. 147:6; 1 Kgs. 8:61; Lam. 3:19-23).

Following the dedication and the sacrifices and feast that followed, God appeared to Solomon a second time, confirming that He had heard Solomon's prayer and supplication, and confirming that He had consecrated the house "by putting my name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually" (1 Kgs. 9:3). He also reiterated the conditions of the covenant He had made with David – that Solomon, too, would have to faithfully follow the LORD if his throne was going to endure (9:4-5). If Solomon would not be faithful to the LORD, then God would cut off Israel from the land and would cast the temple from His sight (9:6-7). Universally, they would become a byword to all the nations, who would know that Israel's

unfaithfulness was the reason for their punishment (9:8-9). Again, the king and all of Israel were bound together as God's covenant people and would suffer sure punishment for stepping outside the conditions of the covenant. Song 3:6-11 highlights the importance of Solomon faithfully fulfilling his role in the covenant, and how that also affects the "daughters of Zion."

The tabernacle and the temple were the places from where Israel was told to extend God's glory throughout the earth.[79] As Beale explains, "The commission to have dominion (Gen. 1:26-28), first expressed through Adam's role in Eden, is expressed in Israel's temple that also represented God's cosmic rule."[80] In Exodus 19:6, Israel was called a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation." Therefore, they were to take their positions seriously as the chosen covenant people of God.

Guidance for the Future

The promise of God's covenant was to last through all generations, thus the need for the people to remain faithful through all generations as well. The Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) address the state of the heart as one prepares to worship at the temple, recognizing the holiness of God's presence and all that God had given them, and being prepared to give all of themselves to Him.[81] In some places, these psalms echo the Song of Songs.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist writes, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." In the Song, the woman recognizes that her help comes from the lover (allegorically, the LORD), who she

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[79] G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God, NSBT*, Vol. 17, ed. D.A. Carson (IVP Academic, 2004), 108.

[80] Ibid., 126

[81] Note also Psalm 84, which speaks of the soul's longing for the courts of the LORD, and that those whose hearts are dedicated to the LORD metaphorically turn the valley of Baca into a spring as they walk to the temple to appear before the God of Zion (vv. 5-7).

calls to cross the mountains to come to her (2:17, 8:14). The psalmist also describes the LORD as his keeper and shade from the sun (cf. Song 1:6, 2:3), his protection from evil and his eternal guard (cf. Song 3:7-8).[82] Psalm 122 (cf. Ps. 125:5, 128:6) is concerned for the peace of Jerusalem, echoing Song 8:10 and the beloved as "the Shulammite" (Song 6:13), and alluding to the current and future generations (daughters) of this holy city in which God dwells. In Psalm 124, the psalmist praises the LORD for being their protection from the raging waters that would have engulfed their soul (vv. 4-5; cf. Song 8:6-7). Psalm 126 addresses the same exilic context of Song 1:6-7, with a longing to be in the Promised Land. That abundance is then pictured in Psalm 128, where all who walk in the ways of the LORD are described as eating the fruit of their hands, and their wife will be a fruitful vine, and their children like olive plants (vv. 2-3)(cf. Song 1:6, 4:12-16, 8:12). The longing of the woman's soul and her interaction with the watchmen (3:1-4; 5:4-7) is echoed in Psalm 130, where the psalmist says his soul waits for the Lord…more than watchmen for the morning (vv. 5-6).

I have already noted that Psalm 127 directly speaks to Solomon's realization that the temple he built was the LORD's doing, not his. His kingship was limited, and so were the watchmen (cf. Song 3:6-11; 3:3; 5:7). Their roles were meaningless without the ultimate protector and builder of that which they were overseeing. Psalm 132 also directly addresses the Davidic covenant, and David's overwhelming desire to find a dwelling place for the LORD (vv. 4-5). The psalmist then reiterates God's promises to David for an enduring throne if his sons would keep God's covenant, as well as God's choice of Zion as his eternal resting place (vv. 10-14). The psalmist calls for the LORD to come to His resting place and for the priests and godly

[82] In Song 3:7-8, the context is of a procession toward the bridegroom, from the wilderness; therefore, there are earthly guards depicted to guard that procession until the ultimate protector is secured through Solomon's "wedding."

ones to be prepared for His arrival (vv. 8-9). Likewise, the beloved in the Song understands the importance of timing, maturity, and commitment in her relationship with the Lover.

The Psalms of Ascent are followed by psalms that remember God's covenant faithfulness. Psalm 136, in particular, repeats the call for the assembly of Israel to "give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Ps. 136:1, et. al.; cf. Ps. 106:1, 107:1, 118:1, Jer. 33:11, et. al.). God's goodness and everlasting lovingkindness is the reason they give thanks. Likewise, the beloved in the Song gives all to the lover for his goodness and everlasting kindness, illustrated in his gardening of lilies, of providing her with protection, and his calls and kind words to her. The people of Israel were also prepared to give thanks continuously before the temple. David appointed Asaph and his relatives to offer burnt offerings to the LORD day and night, "to give thanks to the LORD, because His lovingkindness is everlasting" (1 Chron. 16:41). When Solomon brings the ark into the temple, the Levitical singers again repeat: "He indeed is good for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (2 Chron. 5:13). At the sound of their worship, the glory of the LORD filled the temple. These psalms, narratives, and the Song of Songs, combine to offer a beautiful picture of the covenant relationship between God and His people, particularly the intimacy with God that is possible when His people worship Him with all of their heart.

Conclusion

As the allegorical representative of God's covenant people, the woman of the Song of Songs is the primary speaker of the love song that emphasizes an ongoing desire for and faithfulness toward the man, the lover, God. In the context of the Davidic covenant and the dedication of Solomon's temple, there was never any concern that God would renegue on his unconditional promise to establish a house for His name. The temple was a symbol of God's

presence among them. However, the human element of the covenant He made with Israel required regular maintenance to ensure every generation experienced the covenant blessings. In his dedication prayer, Solomon, expressing trust in God's compassion, asked God to hear and forgive when they sinned, repented, and prayed toward the temple. In what may be considered a beautiful response to that prayer, the lover in the Song of Songs asked to hear the voice of his beloved.

God's people are depicted as a vineyard in both the Song of Songs and Isaiah. In Isaiah 5, the "Song of the Vineyard," God, the beloved, planted that vineyard and gave it everything it needed to grow, but it was unfaithful to produce good fruit and instead grew worthless grapes. God subsequently abandoned it. In the Song of Songs, however, the woman is concerned about maintaining the vineyard and ensuring its fruit grows to maturity and is the best of what can be produced, which is then given to her beloved, enjoyed by them both, and celebrated. The Song's woman allegorically portrays a covenant people that is faithful to the LORD.

The relationship between God and Israel was exclusive and mutual. Israel was called to remember God's faithfulness and love and obey Him in return. The woman in the Song exemplifies this calling as she seeks and finds her lover and continues calling out to him to come to her and draw her to himself. In an echo of the Old Testament covenant formula, the beloved also reiterates the sense of belonging she and her lover have to one another. Allegorically, God chose and desired her (the covenant people) first, igniting in her a desire to respond in like manner. She belonged to Him, and He belonged to her. She found protection in this cycle of calling, desire, and belonging.

Understanding the importance of maintaining such security, the woman cautions the daughters of Jerusalem, allegorically the subsequent generations of people called to this unique

covenant with God. In the oath refrain, she instructs them to ensure that their hearts are fully devoted before claiming the love that she has been illustrating. They are to love God as God loves them. This love is described in the Song's epilogue: love that is unyielding and uncompromising. Love within the covenant cannot be overcome by any of the most powerful forces known in the world. It goes to great lengths to maintain covenant loyalty and safety. As long as she is identified with the LORD, the beloved knows she would be protected, and corrected, at all costs.

Awakening this love, she presses on toward maturity, and in understanding its power and inestimable value she finds peace and is dedicated to producing good fruit for God, her planter and caretaker. Within this covenant commitment, she is pictured as dwelling in gardens, and even embodying a garden that is protected and full of every good blessing. In return, she offers all that she is to God, knowing that all belongs to Him.

God promised He would dwell with His covenant people *and* be their dwelling place. In their identity with Him, they, like the beloved in the Song, could enjoy all the security and abundance that comes from God's gracious hand. They in turn become a testimony to all generations and all nations to the superiority of God and His goodness. They prepare their hearts, give thanks, and seek the LORD continually, "because His lovingkindness is everlasting."

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The Song of Songs presents a beautiful, allegorical picture of covenant love between Yahweh and His people. When viewed through its ancient Near Eastern context, the lyric poetry exceeds the inferior pagan and secular notions of love. Also, when viewed in light of the larger narrative of Scripture, the Song of Songs draws attention to the celebrated incomparability of Yahweh, while also calling for His people in every generation to continually delight in Him and in His enduring love and grace. Ultimately, the Song allegorically illustrates the journey of a people (the woman, beloved) learning to seek God (the man, lover) for sustenance and shelter, provision and protection, and thus find peace.

In Chapter 3, I argued that the woman's longing in the Song for security was shared by those in the surrounding ancient Near Eastern world in a sphere of conceptual order that can be labeled the "home". Constantly threatened by weather and wars, the people were consumed regularly with concerns about survival. In fact, much of the extant ancient literature shows that they were constantly seeking security by ordering their daily lives according to the divine, cosmic design, and seeking favor from their local and regional deities. This was possible by acquiring and practicing wisdom – typically something gods gave exclusively to kings. Van Leeuwen uses the picture of "housebuilding" to describe this concept of security through wisdom.[1] This idea appears in the Song of Songs through concrete pictures like houses, walls, doors, windows, a banquet hall and secure gardens. Throughout the Song, the woman seeks peace and security. However, it becomes clear that her security does not lie within physical

[1] Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, 399-421 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010); and "Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed. Christopher R. Matthews, 67-90 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

structures, but rather it lies within relationship with the lover. While their interactions and desires are sometimes expressed with similar imagery found in secular, ancient Egyptian love songs, the Song's couple communicates their love in terms of greater security through exclusivity, permanence, and mutuality. However, the poetry also reveals that the woman cannot achieve this security by her own efforts. She may have wisdom about love and is able to teach the daughters of Jerusalem about how to look for and handle it, but she relies completely on the man to come to her and thus allow her to experience the security that comes only through his presence. Purely human relationships cannot bring this kind of security, and there is only One in the entirety of Scripture who can: the LORD God. In addition, those receiving such security are only those found within His gracious covenant. Herein lies a foundational reason for viewing the Song's couple in their allegorical roles: the man/lover as God, and the woman/beloved as God's faithful covenant partner.

In Chapter 4, I argued that the woman's desire and search for peace in the Song also aligns with the ancient belief that societies could not achieve security apart from divine help. They sought order and security through a temple, which they viewed as their deity's house on earth. It was the place for divine-human union, of securing blessing and favor from a god. The Song, especially in the second level of the poem's chiasm, alludes to this conceptual sphere, with references to the city, watchmen of the walls, Solomon, Zion, and incense. In Song 3:1-11 and 5:2-16, the woman (and specifically Solomon) is pictured as taking action to be close to the lover in this setting. While God is not mentioned in the Song, the lover, for whom she searches in the city, is described in heavenly, divine figures (5:10-16), and the description of Solomon's wedding procession from the wilderness to Jerusalem echoes Israel's incense offerings that symbolized going into the LORD's holy presence. While the Song shares terms, images and

motifs with pagan sacred marriage literature, which describe the divine-human union through erotic rituals between the king and a goddess, King Solomon in the Song appears to be the bride in the divine-human union it is illustrating. In fact, all human actors in the Song – including King Solomon, watchmen, and the warriors around the palanquin – appear to serve a peripheral and subordinate role in the Song. Only in the descriptions in which the lover and beloved describe each other is there a sense of permanence and security. The woman is pictured in terms of royalty and a fortified city, while the man is pictured in terms of the very dwelling and manifestation of God. While God's name is not mentioned, He is allegorically presented to the reader as the lover who alone can make her secure.

In Chapter 5, I argued that the Song also conveys the ancient belief in a search for order that culminated in a cosmos that was producing all the beauty and abundance that would sustain the people. The Song poetically uses regenerative symbols and imagery to describe the woman's relationship with the man – where that order is found. Pomegranates, lilies/lotuses, cosmic trees, primordial mountains, contained water, and flowing streams, all allude to order and the cosmic center from where such order comes. The movement of the Song's couple toward one another illustrates the desire to overcome alienation in the wilderness and to experience abundant, protected gardens. In the Song, nature and relationship are intertwined, and the two find their greatest fulfillment in a garden setting. While some imagery, like lilies, gazelles, and women as gardens, are stock metaphors in ANE love literature, often found within annual pagan fertility myths and rituals, the Song's contrasting extended picture of love between the man and woman is constant and assured, and thus the stock metaphors in the Song are used to allegorically communicate the unique relationship between God and His covenant people. God, the lover, is pictured in cosmic, divine terms – a gazelle leaping over mountains to get to the beloved, take

her from the wilderness, and provide her with blessing and protection. The beloved, pictured in domestic terms like vineyards and gardens, embodies the result of His gracious care and presence in her life.

In Chapter 6, I argued that the allegorical identities of the couple, God and His faithful covenant people, can be further supported by comparing the Song to a proposed historical context where the ancient, conceptual spheres of order come together: the Davidic covenant and the dedication of the Solomonic temple. Within this context, the Song finds connections through its references to Solomon, Jerusalem, a public and celebratory setting, and through poetic images that were especially found in Israel during the united monarchy. This monarchy began with King David, and the Davidic covenant, in particular, is where the Song finds its greatest echoes. In the outer levels of the Song's chiastic structure, David is allegorically presented as the beloved, as he desires a permanent home (temple) in which God would dwell with His people in Jerusalem. In the covenant God makes with David, God promises to plant them and make them secure in the land, and that *He* would build a house for David and his descendants. "The king" (1:4, 12) in the Song is the lover, the ultimate King, who would show His faithfulness to Israel. God, not the human king, was to be the object of the covenant people's love in every generation. In Solomon's reign, the kingdom transitioned into a time of peace and expansion in the land, and the building of the temple communicated relationship between God and the people. The pericope of Solomon's wedding (3:6-11) presents Solomon as the bride of Yahweh as Solomon seeks greater intimacy with Him. That the temple dedication coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles may also add to the reason for the Song adapting imagery from ANE sacred marriage myths to illustrate God's unparalleled grace and constant provision of sustenance and security for His

people. Thus, the woman in the Song is pictured as an enclosed, abundant garden and sealed spring.

Within the graciousness of God's eternal covenant with David, and the accompanying promises to sustain and bless Israel, the people were called to commit wholeheartedly to the LORD and find peace in intimate relationship with Him. In Chapter 7, I argued the Song teaches that in *this* sphere of order – the heart – the people would be able to find rest in the secure "house" that God was building. His grace would always be extended, but they were called to constantly direct their hearts to Him in order to partake of its blessings in each generation. Unlike the unfaithful "vineyard," Israel, of Isaiah 5:1-7, the woman of the Song – allegorically, God's faithful covenant people – is pictured as a vineyard and garden producing good fruit, and thus has been faithful to receive the blessings of covenant that God, the lover, had bestowed on her. The Song also finds connections with the שְׁמַע (Deut. 6:4-9), as well as the covenant formula of the Old Testament, in that the woman (the covenant people) exemplifies a heart that loves the man (God) with all of her heart, soul, and might, while also recognizing that the connection she has with Him is one of a secure, mutual belonging. She puts the daughters of Jerusalem – representing the future generations of God's covenant people – under an oath to ensure that they understand the importance of full-hearted devotion to the LORD alone, a maturity of devotion that is poetically pictured throughout the Song as the buds and blossoms of plants. God had already fully delighted in them; now, they are called to respond to Him in full delight as well. Half-hearted commitments would not be enough to avoid the dangers of idolatry. The "love" that the woman is teaching the daughters is further defined in the Song's epilogue. This love was initiated and shown first by the lover, God, and received joyfully by His people. It is love that can withstand any earthly or mythical force, as the covenant people remain identified with the

LORD. The people are to seek maturity and devotion toward God and thus find themselves dwelling in the "gardens" of peace, protection, and abundance that God promises to those who do. He was graciously building a "house" in which He would dwell with His faithful, covenant people.

Suggestions for Further Research

Nineteenth century German commentator Franz Delitzsch began his commentary on the Song of Songs with these words:

> The Song is the most obscure book of the Old Testament. Whatever principle of interpretation one may adopt, there always remains a number of inexplicable passages, and just such as, if we understood them, would help to solve the mystery. And yet the interpretation of a book presupposes from the beginning that the interpreter has mastered the idea of the whole. It has thus become an ungrateful task; for however successful the interpreter may be in the separate parts, yet he will be thanked for his work only when the conception as a whole which he has decided upon is approved of.[2]

Interpreters of the Song of Songs certainly have the burden of proof. However obscure the Song of Songs may be, though, to modern ears, it is my hope that its unity and theological value continues to be mined and defended. The allegorical interpretation for which I have argued, with a focus on the Song's extended metaphor, can provide a foundation for further research that would contest the more recent critical and literal scholarship that has often led to theologically weak conclusions, or even outright arguments against the book as inspired scripture at all. An allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs sees God as a main character and actor in His ongoing redemptive work through His people in the world.

[2] Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, Keil and Delitzsch Commentaries on the Old Testament, trans. Rev. M.G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 1.

More work can be done in finding connections between the Song of Songs and the literature of surrounding ANE societies. Though I have sought to address some similarities in the well-known ancient traditions, there are many more documents and inscriptions that could be explored, and the corpus of ancient literature continues to grow as more discoveries are made. As I have sought to show, this ancient literature can be invaluable for understanding the obscure imagery or motifs that are found in the Song, though the goal should be to investigate both the similarities *and* the differences as interpreters seek to understand how ancient thought and culture may have informed the Old Testament Scriptures, or is adapted by the Scriptures to reveal unique truths about Yahweh and His relationship with His people.

I also encourage scholars to build upon the allegorical interpretation that I have proposed and find additional canonical connections in the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, so that the Song of Songs can be utilized as a foundational text in understanding the relationship that God is establishing with humanity. What are the details in the Song that point to the larger narrative of Scripture, especially regarding God's character and how He relates to His people? How do we see this unique relationship continue to play out through the coming of Jesus Christ and the promise of His return? As I have argued, the Song of Songs communicates God's steadfast love and the calling for His people to continue seeking Him and delighting in Him, finding safety, security and provision in His grace. In what ways has Christ's coming advanced or underlined this illustration of the love between God and His people, perhaps in greater ways than Solomon's temple did? Are there echoes of the Song in New Testament Scripture, whether that be through specific images and motifs such as the marriage between Christ and the Church, or through theological concepts like the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit, or events like the crucifixion on the hill of Calvary that brought the earthly and heavenly realms together? How did

the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church connect with that ancient idea of aligning with the cosmos and finding peace and order on earth? In the NT, do we find a greater sense of security, of permanence, and hope for the future? Can we find connections between the Song of Songs and theological teachings in the epistles, such as God's provision and care and our call to be steadfast in our hope in the Gospel?

More specifically, more research can be done to show how the Song of Songs adds to the larger biblical theological picture of wise housebuilding. After creation and paradise lost, humanity has certainly longed to rediscover a secure home. Throughout the rest of Scripture, a number of historical events and imagery build upon this theme: the building of the ark, the tower of Babel, the tabernacle and temple, slavery and exile, Jesus's promise to build His church and to go and prepare a place for us, and the yet future perfect Jerusalem coming down from heaven. The Song exists within this wider biblical-theological picture as the man and woman – God and His people – celebrate, strive for, and instruct on the ideal divine-human relationship.

Contribution for the Church

In recent years, interpreters have relegated the Song of Songs to a pagan or humanistic poem, or poems, on human love. Those with a slightly higher view of Scripture have argued that it is a poem describing the beauty of human marriage as God has designed it and thus points us to Him. Typological, messianic interpretations have attempted to reaffirm the book's rightful sacred place in biblical-theological and redemptive history, but this typically involves viewing Solomon and the lover as the same and dismissing the Song's original historical context in favor of a vague hope or foretelling of the future.

Because of so many disagreements and uncertainties around the book – and truth be told, discomfort with what appears to be blatant eroticism – the Song of Songs is rarely a book chosen

for personal study or for the pulpit. Aside from the occasional marriage seminar in which its contents are used to teach attendees practical tips for improving their relationship, it exists in ecclesial obscurity. But is that all that the Song is for? Why would a book of the Bible be directed only to married couples, when all Scripture should be relevant for *all* of God's people?

The purpose of this dissertation is to reclaim the Song of Songs as an essential, sacred text that points us beyond the human realm to the divine realm and informs God's people of His love and calls them to love Him in return. Its overarching theme of love cannot rightly and truthfully be understood apart from God, who is the very source of love as we were created to experience it. The aim of this project is to return readers of the Song to an allegorical interpretation that again underlines its message of God's love for His people, and vice versa. However, rather than subjugate interpretation to the stretched attempts of early Jewish and Christian allegorical interpreters to assign oft-subjective meaning to each obscure detail of the Song, I have sought to communicate this relationship via the Song's extended metaphor, with support from the larger narrative of Scripture as well as what is known about ancient concerns, thought, and life.

Understanding more of the Song's historical background and of ancient thought can aid readers in considering the meaning of its strange-sounding literary elements and imagery, how they are being used, and for what purpose. I sought to help readers consider the literary, cultural and religious context in which the Song and its message is located, and how that may have informed its writing. While I realize there may be some limitations in the church setting to delve as deeply into the ancient literature or to analyze all of the details of the Song as I have in this dissertation, even a cursory knowledge of some of the ancient ways of thinking and of the wider narrative and genres of Scripture can provide readers with a more secure bridge over which to

carry more sound applications from the Song to the modern-day context. For example, ancient societies were much more focused on survival than most of the western world today, and to them, that survival depended on proper alignment with the cosmos and the manipulation of their gods to give them favor. Israel would have shared those same concerns, but the Old Testament teaches that they were to rely solely on the love and grace of Yahweh and to love Him and serve Him wholeheartedly in return. In Israel, the love between Yahweh and His people was about relationship, not the building of temples or the practice of rituals. In this sense, the Song reminds modern-day readers, who also have an innate desire for security – though it may look different – that the God who does not change is still to be the sole object of our submission, trust and desire in every season.

The Song reminds the church today that our place of hope and rest is still in relationship with God, a relationship that is reliant on His continued grace and mercy, His love that endures forever. We are called to receive this love and to delight in Him continually with faith, worship, and love – and thus find peace as well as wisdom to relay to future generations as they, too, wait for Christ's return.

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