

Song of Songs : שיר השירים : Introductory Notes

By Norman Solomon

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The Superscription

Hebrew שיר *shir* means 'song' or 'poem'. שיר השירים *shir ha-shirim* is the superlative form, so 'most excellent song'.

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

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

Structure of the Song

In our printed Bibles the Song is divided into 8 chapters of 17+17+11+16+16+12+14+14 verses, a total of 97 verses. Verse divisions are part of the Hebrew tradition of reading and are found in early manuscripts. The chapter divisions were introduced by Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 1228), to facilitate citation, and were widely adopted by Jews as well as Christians when printing was introduced; they do not always correspond with the natural divisions of the text, and this is clearly the case in the Song.

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

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

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

for her shepherd for the love and wealth he can shower upon her. The ladies of the court also join in trying to dislodge her love for her humble swain. Her heart, however, belongs to him and she remains steadfast. (Lehrman, page x)

This is charming, but it is by no means the only story that can be or has been read into the text.

Others have read the book as the script for a drama or ritual performance.

Proposal for a Chiastic Structure

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

Superscript (1:1)

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

If this, or anything like it, is correct, it means that the final redactor imposed a very tight literary structure on the material before him.

Function and Social Setting (*Sitz im Leben*)

Many of the songs in their original form may have been sung at weddings or other festivities; below, I cite evidence from the Talmud of such use as late as the second century CE.

Could some of them have functioned as courting songs, serenades? Or as wedding songs? Fox (231) does not believe they formed part of a wedding ritual, though they may well have been sung at weddings as part of entertainment; he notes that the lovers are not married nor about to be, and that their behaviour in general is not that of newlyweds. But perhaps he is being over-literal; the completed work may well have served as a theatrical entertainment at weddings or other feasts,

simply as a celebration of true love, not because it accurately portrayed the behaviour of bride and groom.

Egyptian Parallels

The Egyptian love poems date from the period of the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1080 BCE), long before any plausible date for composition of the Hebrew poems. They are contained in four manuscripts: Papyrus Chester Beatty 1; Papyrus Harris 500; a Turin papyrus fragment; a fragmentary Cairo Museum vase.

Direct influence on the composition of the Song is very unlikely. More probably, elements of the Egyptian poems made their way into the general stock of Near Eastern poetry even before the individual Hebrew songs were composed, let alone before they were fashioned into the present work.

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

Song	Egyptian
<i>Translation: Jewish Publication Society (JPS)</i>	<i>Translation: M. Lichtheim</i>
[Girl:] Hurry, my beloved, Swift as a gazelle or a young stag, To the hills of spices (8:14)	[Girl:] O that you come to your sister swiftly, Like a bounding gazelle in the wild (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim p. 187)
[Girl first:] I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks! 'Let me in, my own, My darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, My locks with the damp of night.' I had taken off my robe—Was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet—Was I to soil them again? My beloved took his hand off the latch, And my heart was stirred for him. I rose to let in my beloved; My hands dripped myrrh—My fingers, flowing myrrh—Upon the handles of the bolt. I opened the door for my beloved, But my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he had said. I sought, but found him not. I called, but he did not answer. I met the watchmen who patrol the town; They struck me, they bruised me. The guards of the walls Stripped me of my mantle. (5:2-7)	[Girl:] My heart <i>flutters</i> hastily, When I think of my love of you; It lets me not act sensibly, It leaps (from) its place. It lets me not put on a dress, Nor wrap my scarf around me; I put no paint upon my eyes, I'm not even anointed. "don't wait, go there," it says to me, As often as I think of him; My heart, don't act so stupidly, Why do you play the fool? Sit still, the brother comes to you, And many eyes as well! Let not the people says of me: "A woman fallen through love!" Be steady when you think of him, My heart, do not <i>flutter</i> ! (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim pp. 183-4)
[The boy:] The song of the turtledove Is heard in our land ... Arise, my darling, My fair one, come away! (2:12-13)	[Boy:] I passed by her house in the dark, I knocked and no one opened ... (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim p. 188)
[The boy:] The voice of the dove is calling, It says: "It's day! Where are you?"	(Papyrus Harris 500. Lichtheim p. 190)
[The boy:] Ah you are fair, my darling ... Your eyes are like doves Behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats Streaming down Mount Gilead ... Your lips are like a crimson thread, Your	[The boy:] The One, the sister without peer ... Shining bright, fair of skin, Lovely the look of her eyes, Sweet he speech of her lips, She has not a word too much.

<p>mouth is lovely, Your brow behind your veil [Gleams] like a pomegranate split open. Your neck is like the Tower of David, Built to hold weapons ... Your breasts are like two fawns, Twins of a gazelle, Browsing among the lilies ... Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you. (4:1-7)</p>	<p>Upright neck, shining breast, Hair true lapis lazuli; Arms surpassing gold, Fingers like lotus buds. Heavy thighs, narrow waist, Her legs parade her beauty; With graceful step she treads the ground ... (Papyrus Chester Beatty 1. Lichtheim p. 182)</p>
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On Interpreting Sacred Texts

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

A modern reader will take stock of these traditions, but will also want to understand what the texts might have conveyed during the lengthy process of redaction, how they were understood by those who confirmed their canonical status, what their ritual or liturgical use signifies, and whether and how they can be meaningful for the modern reader or worshipper. To this end, we possess considerable philological, archaeological and historical resources which were not available to traditional commentators.

Interpreting the Song

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

Fox is correct. So how, we might ask, did the book attain scriptural status? The 'canonization' (a Christian term) of scripture was not a process of selection and adoption, but a process of *rejection* of works deemed not to meet the criteria of divine inspiration. So we must reformulate the question: Why was the book not rejected by the rabbis or the early Church fathers? Partly this must have been due to its antiquity and its attribution to king Solomon; but its retention was justified primarily by adoption of the allegorical interpretation.

Jewish Interpretation of the Song

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

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

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

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

We have no direct evidence as to how Rabbi Akiva interpreted the Song. However, by the third century rabbis were interpreting it, broadly speaking, as an allegory of the love between God and Israel, articulated through the Torah; detailed comments often refer it to incidents in the history of Israel or to aspects of the halakha.

Targum

5:10	My beloved is fine and ruddy, pre-eminent above the ten thousand	Then did the congregation of Israel begin to praise the Master of the Universe, and this is what they said: I desire to praise this God, who by day is clothed in a robe white as snow, and the glorious radiance of His countenance shines like fire with great wisdom and understanding as He daily generates new teachings that He will declare to His people on the great day; His instruction is to the myriads of myriads of angels who serve before Him
5:11	His head is as the most fine gold, His locks are curled, And black as a raven	His Torah is (regigin?) than fine gold; the interpretation of its words, and its numerous reasons and commandments, are white as snow to those who observe them, but to those who donot they are black as the raven.
5:12	His eyes are like doves Beside the water-brooks; Washed with milk, and fitly set.	His eyes look constantly to Jerusalem to do good to it and to bless it from beginning to end of the year, just as doves that watch for the outpouring of water, on account of the Sanhedrin who study the Torah and illuminate the law so that it should smooth as milk, and are cautious in judgement to pronounce innocent or guilty.
5:13	His cheeks are as a bed of spices, As banks of sweet herbs; His lips are as lilies, Dropping with flowing myrrh.	
5:14	His hands are as rods of gold Set with beryl; His body is a polished ivory Overlaid with sapphires.	

5.15	His legs are as pillars of marble, Set upon sockets of fine gold; His aspect is like Lebanon, Excellent as the cedars.	
5.16	His mouth is most sweet; Yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.	

Kabbalah

Midrash

3) MIDRASH SHIR HA-SHIRIM ("Midrash Song of Songs"), also a collection of extracts from various Midrashim. The redactor used tannaitic literature, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, and *Genesis Rabbah, as well as sources used by the *Yelammedenu-Tanḥuma* Midrashim. This Midrash, which likewise has no proems and contains many *aggadot* of a later type, is also quoted by Judah b. Kalonymus. It was apparently redacted in the 11th century. A scholarly edition was published from a Cairo *Genizah* manuscript, dated 1197, by L. Gruenhut (1897).

Origen and Rabbi Joḥanan

Rabbi Joḥanan of Tiberias, also known as Joḥanan Nappaḥa ('John the Smith—Aramaic *nappaḥa* means 'smith'), was born in Sepphoris and studied under Judah Ha-Nasi and Oshaya Rabba. He taught for a time in Sepphoris but later opened his own academy at Tiberias, where he died c279.

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

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

Attitudes to Sex

Cherubim (BB 99a – check out Yoma 54a/b too):

כיצד הן עומדין רבי יוחנן ור' אלעזר חד אמר פניהם איש אל אחיו וחד אמר פניהם לבית ולמ"ד פניהם איש אל אחיו הא כתיב ופניהם לבית לא קשיא כאן בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום כאן בזמן שאין ישראל עושין רצונו של מקום

Rashbam:

כאן בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום. הם הופכים פניהם זה לזה דוגמת חבת זכר ונקבה האוהבים זה לזה סימן שהקב"ה אוהב את ישראל ומתחלה כך נעשו פנים אל פנים כדי שתשרה שכינה בישראל וישראל יעשו רצונו של מקום וכשאינן עושין הופכין פניהם לבית על ידי נס:

An Interpretation by Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993)

In a beautiful essay he composed as a memorial for his wife Tonya, Soloveitchik, who categorically rejects as heretical the literal reading of the Song, distinguishes two types of allegory found in traditional commentaries:¹

- The metaphysical-historical allegory portrays the *actual* relationship between God and Israel as it has been (and will be) in history; this is the line taken in midrash, Targum, Rashi, Kuzari, Ibn Ezra.
- The metaphysical-universal allegory points to the *ideal* relationship between people and God; this is the approach of Rabbenu Bahya, Maimonides,² and kabbalah.

This is rather like the distinction he often makes between *goral* and *ye'ud*, Israel's (actual) lot in history, and its (ideal) destiny. Like Plato, he conceives the ideal as the truly *real*, and the actual or historical as a transitory approximation.

Jewish Liturgical Use

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

¹ Footnote 1 of משם ובקשתם on pp. 119-121 of IHH.

² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhhot Teshuva* 20:3; *Guide* 3:51.

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

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