# The One Whom My *Nefesh* Loves: Exploring the Relationship of the Lovers in The Song of Songs

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This work is dedicated to my wife, Julia.

The one whom my *nefesh* loves, my partner, my lover, my friend, my world.

Thank you for all your support, your commitment, your passion, your love.

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# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to express my appreciation and love for my wife who supports me throughout my journey and serves as the light of my life. My feelings for her were the force behind my desire to delve deeper into the Song of Songs. In addition, my daughter, Ella, brings me hope and joy every day and I pray that her relationships will be guided by mutuality and harmony – key elements in the Song of Songs.

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# Introduction

The Song of Songs stands out as an extraordinary work of biblical literature, so much so that Rabbi Akiva declared, "all the scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy."[1] Rabbi Akiva's words, also translated as "Holy of Holies," are an allusion to the most sacred part of the Temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed in 70 CE, before Rabbi Akiva's time. This suggests that somehow the Song provides access to the Divine in an analogous form to the most holy part of the ancient Temple.

The Song is an extended poem that relates the interactions of two lovers as they declare their mutual love, desire, and commitment. It offers us an important model of a loving relationship. Two lovers (a male and female) speak throughout the biblical book to each other and about each other. They invite the reader into the most intimate of exchanges while also making sure they preserve aspects of their relationship for themselves alone. At times their voices mingle with the "women of Jerusalem," companions who join their dialogue and support the lovers' explorations.

We have here a poem of imagination, intrigue, and impassioned speech. As Cheryl Exum points out, the poetry in the Song reflects a wide range of literary techniques to convey immediacy and express the many aspects of love it presents. Exum observes that, "among the many poetic features that go into making the Song the beautiful poem it is, we may include assonance, alliteration, sound play (paronomasia), parataxis, enjambment, and ellipsis. Structuring devices, such as chiasmus, inclusio, and other complex patterns, contribute to the Song's symmetry and circularity."[2] The Song is a set of lyric poems, not a

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[1] Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5.
[2] Exum, J. Cheryl. Song of Songs: A Commentary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 31.

narrative, and there is no closure at the end, leaving the reader assuming there will be a future meeting of the lovers. The complex structure and language of the Song correspond nicely with the complex ways in which the lovers express their love for one another.

Substantial evidence for authorship and dating of the Song is lacking, with proposals ranging from authorship during the time of Solomon (to whom the Song is attributed in 1:1; 10th century BCE) to the Hellenistic period (4th-2nd century BCE).[3] Though love poetry was common in the ancient world, with many examples of Mesopotamian and Egyptian love songs, the Song seems to be unique in its approach. Michael Fox, who dedicates much research to comparing the Song of Songs to Egyptian love poems, claims the difference lies in the way love is defined:

> "For the Egyptian poets, then, love is a way of feeling, well represented by images of harmony and pleasantness. It is a feeling inspired by a lover but remaining in the confines of the individual soul. Thus it is that monologue can fully convey its quality. Love in the Canticles [Song of Songs] is not only feeling. It is a confluence of souls, best expressed by tightly interlocking dialogue, and it is a mode of perception, best communicated through the imagery of praise."[4]

Traditionally classified as part of "wisdom literature," in which the relationship between men and women sometimes serves as a model for the relationship between student and wisdom (see Proverbs 1-9), the Song began to be interpreted allegorically, as the story of God and the People of Israel, in the second half of the 1st century BCE.[5] Both Jewish and Christian commentators have continued using this model, although modern commentators, including Chana and Ariel Bloch, Cheryl Exum, and Tamara Eskenazi, have moved away

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[3] Exum, 66.
[4] Fox, Michael V. "Love, Passion, and Perception in Israelite and Egyptian Love Poetry." Journal of Biblical Literature 102/2(1983), 228.
[5] Keel, Othmar. The Song of Songs. Trans. Frederick J. Gaiser. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 7.

from this approach and focus on the lovers as representing two individuals expressing their feelings for one another.

The language of the Song reveals the mutuality and depth of the lovers' relationship, with imagery that beautifully links the lovers with the natural world. The relationship, full of love, becomes the foundation upon which the world is envisioned and built, as emotions seem to impact the descriptions of the seasons and the landscape. The Song of Songs is about awakening one's capacity to express love. It serves as a model of one lover expressing his/her emotions and desires to the one he/she loves. The most important part of the interactions between the lovers in the Song is the mutuality that the Song discloses. There is no hierarchy in the Song. The male and female lovers have equally powerful voices and both the male and female partners express their own sexual desires. The lovers even go so far as to complete each other's sentences.

As part of the Bible, the Song is an ancient work composed in an ancient world. And yet it is more than an old song. The Song is a pertinent model of relationship, one which finds application in today's world, as we continue dealing with the challenges of expressing ourselves openly and fully with the ones we love. The words, "I love you," are powerful, but they also require clarification about one's personal definition of "love." The lovers in the Song truly define what they mean by "love" – it is the expression of the commitment of one's entire being, one's *nefesh*, to another. Through equality, sexual desire, acceptance of personal space, and the revelation of one's true feelings, "love" is expressed and defined.

It is essential that we continue to explore the application and relevance of biblical literature in our lives. With a tradition that presents us with an array of relationships, the Song of Songs presents a model of a loving relationship that can guide us through the

challenges and joys of loving another human being. With words that invoke passion and compassion, equality and mutuality, sexual desire and friendship, the Song can support us in letting a loving relationship become a genuine force in the world.

This paper offers an in-depth look at significant portions of the Song of Songs which focus on the lovers' relationship. Each section contains my translation of the Hebrew, a "Literary Setting" section which explores the literary context of the verses, and an "Intention" section, which examines the verses in detail to help us understand key elements of the lovers' relationship. Without a doubt, this is just an overview. This thesis is an addition to the work that has already been done in this field; and there is still much more to examine in the future. This examination aims to highlight those aspects of the Song that provide insights into how love can enhance our most intimate connections and how these attachments can be woven into the wider fabric of communal life.

Beyond academic study of the language and imagery of the lovers' relationship, the Song offers a wealth of learning opportunities in teaching teenagers, newly married couples, or those who are struggling to revitalize their own relationships. Though the Song never mentions God, the text is sacred, establishing the holiness of relationships and offering us a model by which we can elevate our loving relationships to new heights. A closer look at the very language, form and imagery is one of the ways to access these insights from the past that have so much to contribute to the present and future. It is hoped that the reader will discover, in this journey into the world of the ever-renewing Song of Songs, a source for understanding afresh the power of love to transform and sustain our personal and communal lives.

# Song of Songs: Representative Selections

According to the Song of Songs, "love is fierce as death." (8:6) However, how is "love" defined and what does it mean? The answers are embedded in the specific language used and the sequential arrangement of the passages. In order to grasp the full notions of the Song's definition of "love", it is necessary to translate it carefully, place passages within the appropriate literary context, and explore the distinctive meanings that each passage conveys. Therefore, this section of the thesis offers selections of the Song that best highlight the lovers' relationship. It does so through three lenses. Since language serves as the primary source of meaning in the Song, my annotated "Translation" attempts to capture the power of the words while remaining true to their literal meanings. In the "Literary Setting" I review the flow of the text in order to show how it fits into a specific point in the Song. Finally, in the "Intention" section, I draw out the elements and themes that can help identify the Song's contribution to our understanding of a loving relationship.

# Song 1:7-8

1:7 הַגִּידָה לִּי שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי אֵיכָה תִרְעֶה אֵיכָה תַּרְבִּיץ בַּצָּהֳרָיִם שֶׁלָּמָּה אֶהְיֶה
כְּעֹטִיָּה עַל עֶדְרֵי חֲבֵרֶיךָ׃
1:8 אִם־לֹא תֵדְעִי לָךְ הַיָּפָה בַּנָּשִׁים צְאִי־לָךְ בְּעִקְבֵי הַצֹּאן וּרְעִי אֶת־גְּדִיֹּתַיִךְ עַל
מִשְׁכְּנוֹת הָרֹעִים׃

## *Translation*

1:7 – "Tell me, whom my *nefesh*[6] loves, where[7] will you shepherd [your flock], how will you lie down in the afternoon? For why should[8] I be like a wanderer[9] amongst the flocks of your companions."

1:8 – "If you do not know, the most beautiful of women, go in the tracks of the sheep, and graze your goats among the tents of the shepherds."

## *Literary Setting*

Having started the Song with her request for kisses from her lover (1:2), the woman turns to describing herself in Song 1:5-6. As black and lovely, she identifies the color of her

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[6] The translation for *nefesh* is difficult, for it does not usually mean 'soul' in the Bible, yet it implies one's whole being, one's entirety.

[7] Though commonly translated as "where do you graze" (Exum, Bloch and Bloch, Pope), elsewhere in the Bible it means "how". It is commonly used to open a lamentation or dirge as in Lam. 1:1, 2:1, 4:1,2; Isa. 1:21; Jer. 48:17. (Pope, 328) Its translation as "where" in this verse is linked to its Akkadian cognate or the Aramaic equivalent of older Hebrew. (Bloch and Bloch, 141)

[8] LXX and the Vulgate translate שֶׁלָּמָּה as "for why?" setting up the sentence as a question as opposed to others who link the Hebrew word to the Aramaic equivalent, *dilma*. (Pope, 330) The word is patterned after a word found in Ezra 7:23 as well as the phrase אֲשֶׁר לָמָּה in Dan. 1:10. (Bloch and Bloch, 142). Also possible: "Lest."

[9] Literally, "as one veiled". Many translators, such as Exum and Bloch and Bloch, rely on the Syriac and Vulgate readings which reflect the word as *to'ayah*, meaning "a wanderer". Though this is a change of the Hebrew from the MT version, Ginsburg points out that whenever the word "veiled" is used in the Bible, the part that is being covered or veiled is mentioned (I Sam. 28:14; Jer. 43:12; Lev. 13:45; Ezek. 24:17, 22). (Pope, 331) Fox and Pope choose to translate the phrase as "lest I be like one-who-wraps-herself-up by your companions' flocks," based on the veiling of Tamar in Gen. 38:14-15. However, with no object associated with the veiling and based on the context of the verse, this translation and connection seems unlikely. (Bloch and Bloch, 142-143)

skin as resulting from working in the vineyards and her exposure to the sun. While earlier she had addressed her lover directly, she describes herself to the women of Jerusalem in verses 5 and 6. The beauty described is a natural beauty, "associated with sun and soil, and change. It incarnates in man [sic.] the beauty of creation, and is the evidence of our intrinsic perfection...the Beloved becomes a wish-fulfilling image of freedom and sexual license, activity and open spaces."[10] This self-description of beauty is followed by a question posed to her lover, to be described in more detail below. Afterwards, the man responds with his own description of his lover's beauty, forming a chiasmus of verses 5-9.[11] The man's description of his lover's beauty begins with a comparison to a mare within Pharaoh's court, "a common trope in antiquity, indicating a male view of both as a coveted or prized possession."[12] His description moves into specifics in verse 10 as he focuses on her cheek and neck.

## *Intention*

The book has begun with the words of the woman, speaking to and about her lover, expressing her desire for him (1:2-4). Having described herself in bold and affirming ways (1:5-6), she now turns again to the man she loves and asks a question. Here, in Song 1:7, the woman's yearning desire for her male companion takes a new form. Through her language, we meet a woman whose love and whose connection to her companion encompasses her entire being, her *nefesh*. When she is separated from her lover, she goes on a quest to find him. And her questions speak to her need for detailed descriptions of her lover's location.

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[10] Landy, Francis. Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983, 144-145.
[11] Exum, J. Cheryl. Song of Songs: A Commentary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 102.
[12] Exum, 108.

Her questions not only touch on geographic details, but also suggest urgency. And yet the urgency of her questioning is not desperation but rather, loving excitement at the possibility of finding him in the heat of the day. Her questioning serves as a double entendre, expressing her sexual and emotional desire to be with her lover. As found in other passages of the Song, natural settings allow for intimate interactions between the lovers, whether it be in a garden, under an apple tree, or among mountains of spices. The woman seems to be searching for her lover among the daytime world, contrasted with her search for him in the dark of the night later in the Song (3:1-4 and 5:2-7).

The word כְּעֹטָיָה complicates the woman's motivation, for if it is translated as 'veiled', as suggested by the MT (Masoretic Text), it leads towards an impression of hiddenness and secrecy. Is the woman afraid to be misconstrued as a harlot or illicit woman, as Pope suggests?[13] Is the search for her lover in the middle of the day a dangerous task? It seems more appropriate to assume the woman wants to learn of her lover's whereabouts so as to easily locate him in the fields and thus, quickly reunite with him.

Beyond the literal understanding of this verse, the woman's questions can be applied figuratively. The questions allow the reader to gain insight into the woman's desire to find the one she loves when she is feeling lost, alone, far away. It is important to note that the woman is not asking her lover to find her. Rather, she is taking the initiative to search for him. The woman in the Song is neither passive, shy, nor apprehensive. And yet she is also self-aware – aware that as a woman, her forwardness may be construed by some as overbearing or even possibly inappropriate. She is aware that there are risks associated with her outlook on her relationship with her lover. Wandering through the fields in search of her

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[13] Pope, Marvin H. Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible, Volume 7C. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977, 330.

lover has its risks and yet she seems determined to find him nonetheless. The purpose of her search is to unite with the one whom her *nefesh* desires, to be with him under the midday sun.

Landy suggests these verses may be a reflection on the lovers' place in society:

> "If the day is associated with conscious differentiation, and sunlight with the objectivity of vision, the center of the day and the excess of sunlight bring about a reversion to unfocused half-consciousness, parallel to the relationship between the friends' flocks and the shepherds' huts, which the lovers visit at noon when the occupants are away, but which are the center of their activities. The siesta in the middle of the day is parallel to intimacy at the heart of society."[14]

In the heat of the day, among the tents of the shepherds, the lovers seek intimacy and solitude. Whether purposeful or not, "the lovers are at the center of a society that is apparently unaware of them."[15] They do so as equals, both of them taking on the identity of shepherds. This equality of social position is maintained throughout the Song and these verses may be considered the Song's first illustration of mutuality. Additionally, by identifying the lovers as shepherds, the reader is introduced to the connection between the lovers and nature. References to shepherds are minimal in the Song, yet this imagery early on in the Song plays an important role in identifying the two lovers. As Landy notes, "the shepherd is characterized by an intimacy with wildness. His flocks graze on the hills; he is sustained by and knowledgeable of the rough terrain. He is an image of harmony, of nature beneficent to man, and man at ease with and respectful of nature."[16]

In verse 8, it is unclear who is responding to the woman's request. The text gives no indication and commentators differ on whether it is the women of Jerusalem or the male lover. The term of endearment used in this verse, "the most beautiful of women," is not associated with the male lover at any other point in the Song and this is used to support the

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[14] Landy, 173.
[15] Landy, 171.
[16] Landy, 174.

idea that the women of Jerusalem are the speakers.[17] Others interpret this verse as being the male lover's response to her questions, offering her reassurance on which path will lead her to him. And the reassurance comes with a compliment, as the man recognizes a need to go beyond a direct answer. Instead, he express his desire for her by responding to her reference to him as the "one whom my *nefesh* loves." While the male lover's use of the phrase, "the most beautiful of women" sets his lover apart from all other women, it is not an exact parallel to her use of the phrase "one whom my *nefesh* loves" to describe him. Landy elaborates on this:

> "'Fairest among women' is a gesture of objective appreciation that perceives her relative to others, no matter with what superiority... 'whom my soul loves' defines their relationship, without regard for others; whereas beauty refers to appearance, 'whom' implies that she loves him for himself, with her 'soul', not her looks. She speaks objectively of her *nefesh*, as if love were something that happened through her, that forces her to become an *oteyah*, a victim of shame."[18]

In other words, the man expresses differentiation while the woman expresses unification. In the Bible, the word *nefesh* holds many meanings – "soul," "living being," "life," "self," "person," "desire," "appetite," "emotion," and "passion."[19] The word appears seven times in the Song[20] and one can assume its deliberate use throughout as an indication of the centrality of defining one's love through the lens of the *nefesh*. According to Deckers, *nefesh* "denotes the essential being of the speaking woman, her vitality, her principle of life."[21] In Song 1:7, the use of the phrase "the one whom my *nefesh* loves" is evocative and captivates the reader as to the degree of emotions felt by the woman towards her lover. Through the woman's use

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[17] Exum, 108.
[18] Landy, 175.
[19] Job 14:22; I Kings 17:21-22; Gen. 2:7, 19; Deut. 12:23-24; Ex. 21:23; Ps. 124:7; Prov. 27:7, 18:25; Ezek. 24:21.
[20] Song 1:7; 3:1, 2, 3, 4; 5:6; 6:12.
[21] Deckers, M. "The Structure of the Song of Songs and the Centrality of *nepes* (6.12)." A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs. Brenner, Athalya, ed. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, 189.

of the word *nefesh*, the reader comes to understand the complexity with which the lovers understand a loving relationship. Throughout the Song, they go through stages of unification and separation, of distance and closeness. The *nefesh*, the vitality and deepest part of one's being, as well as the wholeness that the term connotes, is the best expressions of that complexity.

# Song 1:15-16

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| 1:15 הִנָּךְ יָפָה רַעְיָתִי הִנָּךְ יָפָה עֵינַיִךְ יוֹנִים׃ |
| 1:16 הִנְּךָ יָפֶה דּוֹדִי אַף נָעִים אַף־עַרְשֵׂנוּ רַעֲנָנָה׃ |
| 1:17 קֹרוֹת בָּתֵּינוּ אֲרָזִים רַהִיטֵנוּ [רַהִיטֵנוּ] בְּרוֹתִים׃ |

## *Translation*

1:15 – "Behold you are beautiful, my friend[22]! Behold you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves[23]."

1:16 – "Behold you are beautiful, my beloved[24]! Even pleasant! Our couch[25] is verdant[26].

1:17 – The beams of our houses are cedars[27]; our rafters[28] are cypresses."

## *Literary Setting*

In Song 1:9-14 the lovers address each other (vs. 9-11 in the voice of the male and 12-14 in the voice of the female) with praise. The male lover describes one particular aspect of his lover's beauty that invigorates him and leads him to declare that he wishes to adorn her

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[22] This designation of the female lover is found throughout the Song (1:9, 15, 2:2,10,13, 4:1,7, 5:2, 6:4) and is not found in this form anywhere else in the Bible. The noun appears in a masculine form throughout the Bible, most notably in Lev 19:18 ("you shall love your fellow [רֵעֶךָ] like yourself"). The feminine form in the plural appears in Judges 11:37, where it refers to the female companions of Jephtah's daughter. Delitzsch stated that the word was related to the root for "guard," "care for," "tend," "delight in something," or "take pleasure in intercourse with one." The general sense seems to be that of "fellow, "friend," or "companion." (Pope, 341) Pope translates as "my darling," Bloch and Bloch and Exum translate as "my friend," JPS translates as "my darling."

[23] Specifically, the rock dove (*Columba livia*). (Bloch and Bloch, 147)

[24] The word means "beloved," "uncle," or "love." The Ugaritic word *dd* parallels other words for "love" and the Akkadian *dadu* is cognate with the Hebrew word *dod*. (Pope, 298-299)

[25] This is the common term for "bed" or "couch", as in Deut. 3:11; Amos 3:12; 6:4; Ps. 6:7, 41:4, 132:3; Job 7:13; Prov. 7:16.

[26] The adjective רַעֲנָנָה is used in the Bible in reference to flourishing trees, young plants, fresh leaves, as in Deut. 12:2; I Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 16:4, 17:10; Isa. 57:5; Jer. 2:20, 3:6, 3:13, 11:16, 17:2, 17:8; Ezek. 6:13; Hosea 14:9; Ps. 37:35, 52:10, 92:11, 92:15; Dan. 4:1; 2 Chron. 28:4. Some translations suggest "fertile" or "lush."

[27] The word can apply to the trees as well as the wood, as in 2 Sam. 7:7. Therefore, it could mean that the beams are cedars or they are made of cedar wood. (Bloch and Bloch, 148)

[28] Hapax legomenon. It suggests something related to 'runners', connected with an Aramaic word. The plural noun of the word is used in Gen. 30:38, 41; Ex. 2:16 but is usually translated there as "gutters" or "troughs". (Pope, 361)

with jewelry to accentuate her beauty (vs. 11). The female lover responds to his compliments by referring to him as her 'king' (vs. 12), whom she wears in the form of her fragrance. Verses 15-17 seem to be a conclusion to this exchange in which the lovers invoke fruits, scented spices, royal chambers, and lush vineyards. The chapter ends with the lovers describing the setting in which they meet or wish to meet one another. Following these verses, we enter into an exchange where both lovers affirm the beauty and uniqueness of the other. The dialogue at the end of chapter 1 is followed in the next section, Song 2:1-3, with the woman's self-description and another dialogue between the lovers.[29] At that point, it is unclear whether or not the lovers are still lounging on the couch mentioned in Song 1:16. Either the encounter at the end of chapter 1 concludes one exchange or it is continued with their conversation at the start of chapter 2.

## *Intention*

The male lover speaks in verse 15 and he does so with excitement and urgency, as noted by two uses of the word *hinach*. The urgency not only seems to be his desire to express his affection for her and her qualities, but also an urgency for his female lover to see herself as he sees her. The double use of *yaffa* may be his attempt to express her beauty on two levels – her internal beauty and her physical attractiveness. He addresses her with the word רַעְיָתִי first used in Song 1:9 and a word he uses throughout the Song to address his lover.[30] Translated as "friend," "companion," or "fellow," it has the connotation that his lover is more than just an object of his lust and romantic infatuation. Through his use of רַעְיָתִי he is speaking to the multiple ways in which he relates to her. He sees her as an

[29] Exum, 113.
[30] Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4.

intimate partner while simultaneously relating to her as a companion with whom sexual attraction is not relevant or appropriate.

At the end of chapter 1, we begin to get a sense of the complexity of roles and identities through which the lovers relate to one another. It is noteworthy that the man frequently refers to the woman as his "friend" (see Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4) whereas she uses the term only once. This expression and the frequency with which it appears in the Song is unique in the Bible. Friendship is used elsewhere when describing the proper attitude towards a fellow Israelite and famously, Leviticus 19:18 refers to loving one's fellow as oneself (often translated as "you neighbor," but the same word as here, although in a masculine form). The term in Leviticus and elsewhere evokes the values of responsibility, care, and equality. It is significant that the term does not carry sexual or sensual connotations and by using this term to describe his lover, the male affirms the breadth of his relationship with the woman. The term highlights an aspect of the relationship that is not sexual or sensually driven. Throughout the Song, it is clear that there is a sexual and sensual part of this couple's love, but these components do not constitute the whole of their relationship and it does not necessarily serve as the center of their relationship. The coupling of friendship and passion is one of the distinctive features of the Song of Songs.

Unlike the reference to "the one whom my *nefesh* loves" offered by the woman in 1:7, the man focuses on external features in verse 15, drawing attention to his lover's eyes and comparing them to a dove. As Keel notes, "it is no surprise that the eyes receive special attention. Leah's disadvantage over against her more beautiful sister Rachel was lack of luster in her eyes (Gen. 29:17). David's beauty was due largely to his beautiful eyes (1 Sam. 17:42, 16:12). The eyes are still an essential component of a person's radiance or lack

thereof."[31] With the Hebrew word for "eyes" also meaning "sparkle" or "gleam," those who choose to focus on movement and liveliness in comparing eyes and doves come closer to the essence of the Hebrew expression.[32] However, this still remains a theory. What is known is that the dove is a central symbol of love in the ancient Near East.[33] It was used in this way across the entire eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE and appeared on terra cotta in Israel in the first millennium BCE.[34] As Exum points out, "for the range of romantic images it conveys by its aspect, movement, and behavior, as well as its association with the love goddess and with spring, the dove has attained a special status as a love bird in ancient and modern love poetry."[35] The man is not the only one who compares his lover's eyes to doves, for she relates the same image in Song 5:12. The comparison between eyes and doves plays an important role in expressing the lovers' mutual understanding of physical beauty.

The woman responds with the same urgency found in verse 15, repeating the same structure in the first part of the verse. Her use of אַף adds to the urgency of her response to his description of her beauty. Exum indicates that it is "as if she were gasping for breath in wonderment."[36] However, the woman refers to her lover as *dodi*, a term she uses to describe him throughout the Song. This also marks the only time the male lover's attractiveness is referred to by the use of the word *yaffeh*. All other uses of this adjective (eight times total, five of which are in the absolute form) are directed towards the female lover.[37] The use of this adjective by both the male and female lovers is unique in that it is usually only used by a male to describe a female's attractiveness. Its use by the woman in Song 1:16 is one of

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[31] Keel, Othmar. The Song of Songs. Trans. Frederick J. Gaiser. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 69.
[32] Keel, 69.
[33] Pope, 356.
[34] Keel, 71.
[35] Exum, 112.
[36] Exum, 113.
[37] Pope, 355.

several indications that the Song assumes an equality in the way the lovers view beauty. Outside the Song, very few males are described as beautiful whereas women are commonly described as such. In the Song, however, a woman's beauty and a man's beauty are almost synonymous. The woman's use of the word adds to her willingness to break away from social norms and use female-focused words to describe her male lover.

In addition to the use of *yaffeh*, the woman references their couch (עַרְשֵׂנוּ) and the natural world which serves as their resting place. The entire natural world becomes a place of intimacy for the lovers. They clearly and articulately describe the verdant ground on which they lie and the trees which serve as the frame of their dwelling place. As Landy indicates:

> "The Beloved[38] looks from her loved one to the bed where they will be united, in touch with and cradled by the verdant flourishing of nature. The natural and human levels are metaphorically identified, and also logically, as an image of the womb from which new life develops."[39]

Although the few fragments of their dialogue do not indicate whether the "bed" is a bed imagined as surrounded by trees or simply a grassy space in the woods imagined as a bed, we do witness how the lovers perceive the space they share. The trees themselves serve to frame the power of the lovers' relationship. In the Bible, cedars are referred to as the mightiest of the trees,[40] planted by God's self,[41] and considered the most valuable of wood.[42] Cypress trees play a similar role, often mentioned alongside cedars and connected with Lebanon.[43] Keel points out that, "to place the lovers in a 'house' of cedars and junipers is to see them more as divine than as royal. To have fresh greenery as a bed is the prerogative of the

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[38] Landy uses the passive form for the female lover, although the Song does not render her as passive.
[39] Landy, 177-178.
[40] 1 Kings 4:33; 2 Kings 14:9.
[41] Ps. 104:16
[42] 1 Kings 10:27; Isa. 9:10.
[43] Isa. 14:8

gods...life can unfold undisturbed in the shadow of the great cedar, the tree of life (Ezek. 31:6)."[44] As Eskenazi notes, "the encounter, therefore, is clothed with meanings that extend far beyond the literal, embracing the wider natural world and alluding to the divine."[45]

[44] Keel, 75-76.
[45] Eskenazi, in notes to author.

# Song 2:1-3

2:1 - אֲנִי חֲבַצֶּלֶת הַשָּׁרוֹן שׁוֹשַׁנַּת הָעֲמָקִים׃
2:2 - כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים כֵּן רַעְיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת׃
2:3 - כְּתַפּוּחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי׃

## *Translation*

2:1 – I am the rose[46] of Sharon, the lily[47] of the valleys[48].

2:2 – Like a lily among the thorns, thus my friend[49] is among the young girls[50].

2:3 – Like an apple tree[51] among the trees of the forest, thus my lover is among the young men; in his[52] shadow[53] I delighted[54] and I sat[55], and his fruit is sweet to my palate/mouth.

## *Literary Setting*

These verses come directly after the lovers praise each others' beauty in an excited and passionate way. The last two prior verses (1:16-17) described a location in which the couple enjoys each other. It is not clear whether the current verses, 2:1-3, are intended as

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[46] Commentators are unclear about the exact type of flower being referred to here. Translations range from 'rose' (KJV, RSV), 'tulip' (Mondenke), 'lily' (Feliks), 'crocus' (Pope, Fox), 'wildflower' (Falk). The only Biblical reference to this flower is in Isa. 35:1-2, where it is described as blooming abundantly.
[47] Similar to חֲבַצֶּלֶת, commentators are unclear about the identity of שׁוֹשַׁנַּת and suggest 'lily' (KJV, RSV, JPS, Fox), 'lotus' (Pope), 'hyacinth' (Mondenke), and 'narcissus' (Feliks, Falk).
[48] Could also be translated as 'lily of the depths'
[49] (See comments on Song 1:15)
[50] or 'maidens'.
[51] Many translate this as 'apple' but it is not clear if apple trees were abundant in the land of Israel in ancient times. Rather, apricot trees were prevalent and therefore, this may be a more plausible translation. (Bloch and Bloch, 149) The word is assumed to derive from the root *nph*, meaning "to breathe, pant", referring to the scent of the fruit. (Pope, 371) According to Keel, ancient Israel had more apple trees than it does today, with an archeological dig uncovering more than two hundred carbonized apples. (Keel, 82)
[52] The Hebrew is ambiguous, meaning the shade could be 'his' shade, meaning the male lover, or it could be 'its' shade, referring to the tree. As the man is being compared to a tree in this statement, I translate as 'his'.
[53] or 'shade'.
[54] "to take delight in something" or "to covet." The form of the verb suggests a past tense, but present tense is possible, as in Ex. 21:5 or Gen. 29:5. Here, it is in the *pi'el* form and not *qal*, leading Bloch and Bloch to suggest it denotes continuity or a prolonged experience. (Bloch and Bloch, 149)
[55] The verb can also mean "to stay for a long time, linger on, tarry" as in Gen. 22:5 or Num. 22:19. (Bloch and Bloch, 150)

their continuing dialogue in the same location or represent a new one. Either way, they now partake in a dialogue in which they build off one another in a conversation. Their conversation becomes more mature and sophisticated in these verses. Following Song 2:3, the woman proceeds to describe the sustenance, both physical and emotional, that she receives from her lover. Through images of intoxicating substances and refreshing foods, the man refreshes the woman who is "faint with love." The section ends in 2:7 with a declaration to the women of Jerusalem not to "awaken love until it delights."

## *Intention*

These verses express the lovers' desire to elevate one another beyond the commonplace. It is a dialogue between the lovers in which the woman begins by expressing modesty. There is a debate as to what the woman conveys by equating herself with these two specific flowers, the rose of Sharon and the lily-of-the valleys. By examining the qualities of a flower, including its scent, form, and delicacy, one may conclude with Bloch and Bloch that verse 1 may be "an expression of a young woman's proud awareness of her blossoming beauty...she is identifying herself with the חֲבַצֶּלֶת and שׁוֹשַׁנָּה that are the very epitome of blossoming in the symbolism of the Bible."[56] But according to commentators, the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys were commonplace flora. And so she may, conversely, be suggesting that she is just one among the many and that her beauty should not be held in high esteem. In that case, while using flowers to represent herself, she is unwilling to suggest that her beauty is unique in its scent, its coloring, and its structure. Rather, it would be similar to her suggesting that she is no more than the modern-day dandelion. It may also be her attempt

[56] Bloch, Ariel, and Chana Bloch. The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary. New York: Random House, 1995, 148-149.

at prodding her lover to elaborate on how he views her. Given that this self-description comes after his reference to her eyes as doves (1:15), she may be looking for more affirmation of her beauty and of his feelings for her. Therefore, 2:1 could be either a playful coquettishness or genuine modesty.

References to flowers also evoke frailty and vulnerability. As Landy indicates, "the lily of the valleys in 2:1 is solitary and fragile; its calyx and whorl of sepals round the central funnel reinforces the feminine connotation. It is a quiet, naturalistic comment on her Sitz-im-Leben ['setting in life'], perhaps a little rueful, addressed half or wholly to herself."[57] Therefore, even as the woman declares her coquettishness or her modesty, she is also expressing her own frailty and delicacy. Her self-description may be seen as a subtle reminder to her lover that she is neither as hard as a rock nor stately as a tree. Like the lily, she is "the sublime and feminine principle, untouched and unguarded, the identity ultimately desirable, and alone in the world."[58] She reveals a sense of vulnerability to her lover and he responds with reassurance.

In 2:2, the male lover responds to the woman by elevating her beyond the mundane. He listens to how she describes herself and responds by using similar language. Additionally, he reinforces and confirms her self-described identity as a lily by declaring that she is a rose among a thicket of thorns. By referencing a lily in a field, he is affirming that he heard her fully and that he wishes to speak to her in a similar language. But he also goes on to indicate that there is more to her, extending beyond her own view of herself. In the same verse, he clarifies the metaphor by declaring that his lover is set apart from all other young ladies. She is unique and is far superior to everything and anything around her. Even if

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[57] Landy, 81.
[58] Landy, 83.

commonplace, next to her, all others are but thorns. Again, he uses the word רַעְיָתִי as he does in 1:15, to reiterate his special relationship with her.

The dialogue continues in 2:3 as she responds with a similar comparison to the one he makes in 2:2. Just as he elevated her above the rest in verse 2, the woman attempts to do the same for her lover, expressing his uniqueness. Just as he set her apart from the other women, she sets him apart from the other young men, going beyond flowers by using a metaphor of a tree to describe him. In his shade she finds comfort and in his fruits she finds pleasure. Landy expands on the meaning of trees in the Song:

> "Trees as opposed to flowers are manly, powerful and vigorous; and indeed later in the Song we have a tree that conforms to phallic expectation figuratively attached to the Lover...But the apple tree is an affectionate rather than an impressive tree, associated in the Song with shelter and good. Clearly the primary reference is to sexual pleasure and more distantly to protection and provision, familiar male (or paternal) roles."[59]

The contrast here between the woman as a flower and the man as a tree highlights a hierarchy and different perceptions. Throughout most of the Song, the relationship between the lovers is one of mutuality, with metaphors and similes that apply to both and make them appear to be equals. In this exchange, however, there is an acknowledgement of hierarchy or differentiation of roles. The fragility of the woman is understood by both of the lovers as a natural and appropriate state. The man does not offer a new comparison in verse 2, but rather solidifies the image of his lover as a lily. On the other hand, the woman describes her lover as a tree of whose fruit she tastes and in whose shade she delights. She turns to him for protection and sustenance. Though there is no sense of deference or submission, per se, the male and female lovers fulfill different roles in these verses of chapter 2.

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[59] Landy, 81.

This dialogue between the lovers is respectful, uplifting, compassionate, passionate, affirming, sweet, and playful. As Fox points out, "not only do the lovers address each other and exchange words, they *influence* each other. The speak and respond to each other...the words of one lover echo the words of the other."[60] The responses in 2:1-3 are succinct and rapid, creating a web of conversation. Not only do actions impact how the lovers engage with one another, but their words have profound impact. Beyond expressing their feelings for one another, the Song illustrates, "the interanimation of two souls."[61]

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[60] Fox, Michael V. "Love, Passion, and Perception in Israelite and Egyptian Love Poetry." Journal of Biblical Literature 102/2(1983), 221.
[61] Fox (1983), 222.

# Song 2:8-14

2:8 קוֹל דּוֹדִי הִנֵּה־זֶה בָּא מְדַלֵּג עַל־הֶהָרִים מְקַפֵּץ עַל־הַגְּבָעוֹת׃
2:9 דּוֹמֶה דוֹדִי לִצְבִי אוֹ לְעֹפֶר הָאַיָּלִים הִנֵּה־זֶה עוֹמֵד אַחַר כָּתְלֵנוּ מַשְׁגִּיחַ
מִן־הַחַלֹּנוֹת מֵצִיץ מִן־הַחֲרַכִּים׃
2:10 עָנָה דוֹדִי וְאָמַר לִי קוּמִי לָךְ רַעְיָתִי יָפָתִי וּלְכִי־לָךְ׃
2:11 כִּי־הִנֵּה הַסְּתָו [הַ][סְּתָיו] עָבָר הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף הָלַךְ לוֹ׃
2:12 הַנִּצָּנִים נִרְאוּ בָאָרֶץ עֵת הַזָּמִיר הִגִּיעַ וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר נִשְׁמַע בְּאַרְצֵנוּ׃
2:13 הַתְּאֵנָה חָנְטָה פַּגֶּיהָ וְהַגְּפָנִים | סְמָדַר נָתְנוּ רֵיחַ קוּמִי לְכִי [לָךְ] רַעְיָתִי
יָפָתִי וּלְכִי־לָךְ׃
2:14 יוֹנָתִי בְּחַגְוֵי הַסֶּלַע בְּסֵתֶר הַמַּדְרֵגָה הַרְאִינִי אֶת־מַרְאַיִךְ הַשְׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת־קוֹלֵךְ
כִּי־קוֹלֵךְ עָרֵב וּמַרְאֵיךְ נָאוֶה׃

## *Translation*

2:8 – The voice[62] of my beloved, here he comes, bounding[63] over the mountains, jumping across the hills.

2:9 – My beloved is like a gazelle[64] or a young ram[65], here he stands on the other side of our wall[66], glancing from the walls[67], peeking[68] through the latticework[69].

2:10 – My beloved responded to me and said to me, "Rise up, my friend, my beauty, and go forth!

2:11 – Because now the winter has past, the rains have passed and gone

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[62] Pope indicates that this should be translated as 'hark' but I prefer to follow Bloch and Bloch who suggest 'the voice'.
[63] The use of this verb as 'bounding' is found nowhere else in the Bible, but is supported by Aramaic and Arabic verbs which are similar (Pope, 389)
[64] or 'deer'.
[65] Occurs only in the Song (2:9, 2:17, 4:5, 7:4, and 8:14).
[66] Only use of *kotel* in Hebrew in the Bible. It is found in the Aramaic form in Den. 5:5 and Ezra 5:8.
[67] When windows, holes, and walls are involved, the preposition מִן acquires the secondary sense of "through", as compared to Song 4:1 and 5:4. (Bloch and Bloch, 154)
[68] This verb is hapax legomenon
[69] This word is hapax legomenon and a verb root associated with it is used in Prov. 12:27. However, Pope points out that the root probably comes from the Arabic for "fissure" and may designate window-lattice like the word used in II Kings 1:2. (Pope, 392)

2:12 – The buds are seen in the land[70], the time of the singing[71] has arrived and the voice of the turtledove is heard throughout the land.

2:13 – The fig ripens[72] and the vines in blossom offer scent; Rise up, my friend, my beauty, and go forth!

2:14 – My dove in the cleft of the rock, hidden in the steps; show me your sights[73] and let me hear your voice, for your voice is delicious[74] and your sight is lovely[75]."

## *Literary Setting*

Having adjured her female companions in regard to awakening love in 2:7, the woman describes her lover in 2:8-14. The woman repeats the "refrain of adjuration" to the women of Jerusalem again in Song 3:5 and 8:4. The woman's reference to awakening love in 2:7 is taken as an abstract emotion by some commentators and a reference to erotic arousal by others.[76] This comes after the woman's description of her lover's care for her, supporting her while she is "faint with love." Because of the "refrain of adjuration" in verse 7, it is assumed that verse 8 begins a new section of the Song in a new setting, possibly the man's visit to his lover's home.[77] The next major section, Chapter 3 of the Song, begins with the

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[70] or "on the ground".
[71] Some translate this as 'pruning' due to the double meaning of the verb. Both seem appropriate in this verse, as pruning would refer to the seasonal change while the singing speaks to the joy associated with the coming of spring.
[72] The only other use of the verb is in the sense of embalming in Gen. 50:2, 26. (Pope, 397) The infusion of spices and aromatic plants may be the link between the word and its use in this context. (Bloch and Bloch, 155)
[73] The noun denotes the image as received by the viewer and in the plural form, indicates seeing the various parts or different perspectives; in this case, referring to seeing the woman from all sides. (Bloch and Bloch, 156) The word can refer to external appearance or shape as in Gen. 12:11; 29:17; 39:6, or to supernatural appearance or vision, as in Ex. 3:3; 24:17. (Keel, 106)
[74] Usually used to refer to taste and smell, it is used here to refer to the woman's voice.
[75] Meaning, "you are lovely to look at." Unlike the use of the plural מַרְאַיִךְ earlier in the verse, its use here is in the singular.
[76] Exum, 117.
[77] Exum, 122.

woman's search for her lover and her success at finding him after which she once again offers the "refrain of adjuration" to the women of Jerusalem.

## *Intention*

In this section the woman describes the one she loves and even quotes her lover's words to her. From this section, we learn about her view of the relationship and the world of love. She creates vivid images of springtime, the season that seems to serve as the lover's playground, and through language that highlights the voice and sounds, she describes a world where "the voices of the lovers merge in that of the spring."[78] Animals abound in this section, with the man being compared to a gazelle or young ram, "the deer with its proverbial swiftness and justified timidity. Its repose is rare and tense; at any moment it might become aware of our presence."[79] However, the Song offers us an image of a deer at peace, able to frolic without concern. Linked to this freedom of movement is the male lover's voice, as she hears it, free to express itself to his lover with words which in other circumstances would have to be tamed. She tells us that to her, his voice is present even before he is. The role of language serves as the vehicle of the lover's appeal and beginning with the mention of "voice" in 2:8, sound becomes a central theme. Vision and recognition also become important, as verse 8 combines the centrality of voice with the excitement of energetic action, such as "bounding" and "jumping."

The woman describes her lover as a gazelle or young ram, a description also found at the close of chapter 2, in verse 17. Throughout the Song, animals communicate sexual

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[78] Landy, 42.
[79] Landy, 237.

energy and instinctual wisdom, qualities that tie the lovers to the natural world.[80] The speed and leaping abilities of gazelles are prominent in the Bible and throughout ancient Near Eastern literature.[81] More so than sexual passion, the animal imagery in verses 8 and 9 "express agile grace and a heightened feeling of life."[82] Both lovers employ animal imagery, with the man referring to his lover as a dove in verse 14. The mutual use of such descriptions gives us insight into a relationship that is tied to the lovers' surroundings. While they have moments in which they relate to each other as if they the only two humans in the world, they never lose sight of their natural surroundings. Nature offers the lovers a refuge to which they can escape, yet it is also serves as their home. Further exploration of the centrality of natural settings is found in the discussion on Song 4:12-5:1.

With the swiftness of a gazelle, the man is suddenly standing on the other side of a wall, peeking through the latticework at his lover. The woman is mindful of a wall that separates the lovers, though they can see each other through small holes or at least know of one another's presence. She reports that with an eagerness to be with one another, he calls out to her in verse 10 to "rise up" and "go forth!" His words are in response to her, though there is no indication that she says anything in verses 8 and 9. Therefore, we can view his response as a response to her emotional needs rather than her vocalized desires. From behind the wall, in verse 9, the man was able to gain a sense of his lover's needs, feeling the urgency or excitement that seems to be expressed through the language of the verse. He responds to her needs and does so by giving her the opportunity to "go forth." Translations tend to give the sense that the man is telling his lover to "come away" (Bloch and Bloch, Exum, JPS) or

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[80] Landy, 236.
[81] 2 Sam. 2:18; 1 Chron. 12:8; Isa. 35:6; Hab. 3:19 - Keel, 96.
[82] Keel, 96.

"come" (Pope), yet the command can be compared to God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 - לֶךְ־לְךָ – "go forth". Directionally, the man's invitation to his lover in verse 10 is one away from him or away from her present situation. Whether or not he joins her is not indicated in his language. There is no sense of hierarchy or power struggle in the man's words, for he is more concerned with his lover's ability to exert her independence than he is about her being by his side. There are other times when the lovers indicate their need for closeness, but here, separation is accepted and even expected.

The man's command to "rise up" creates an inclusio, with one part of his speech explaining why this is an appropriate time for her to "go forth," and the second part being his description of why he wants her to "go forth." Images of enclosure tend to be used in describing the woman, such as a home, locked garden, or dove in the cleft of a rock. As Landy points out, "the lover seeks to draw her out...his seduction of her using images of the wind, trees and flowers is consequently not mere rhetoric, for it is with that world that he seduces her."[83]

Spring is the quintessential time of love and in verse 11, the man points out that spring is approaching. In verse 12, the voice emerges yet again as a sign of comfort and of excitement. The root of the word זָמִיר has two meanings – "to prune" and "to sing" and the verse seems to be playing on both of these definitions. Pruning the vines takes place at the end of winter, just as spring begins,[84] and the song of the turtledove heralds the apex of spring, as this migratory bird tends to enter the land of Israel in April.[85] The sounds of spring mirror the communication of the lovers, fresh and new, offering replenishing energy to the

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[83] Landy, 72.
[84] Exum, 127.
[85] Keel, 101.

world with which they inhabit. From these verses, we learn once again that language serves as a key component of the lovers' relationship. Through words, the lovers are transported into the natural world and into a Spring filled with smells, sights, and sounds that elicit joy, comfort, and emotional, as well as sexual, excitement.

The man also alluded to his lover as a dove in Song 1:15, an animal connected to the goddess of love, serving as a messenger of love or a representative of the goddess.[86] Addressing his lover as "my dove", in verse 14, implies that he is coming face to face with love incarnate. However, along with the gentle and affectionate associations made with a dove, the lover's "dove" is inaccessible, hidden among the cleft of a rock. Just as she represents the pure definition of love, she is not fully available to him. In other words, there are pieces of his lover which he cannot access, pieces which belong to her alone or may only be revealed in their proper time. Even as he pleads with her to "show me your sights and let me hear your voice," he may understand that may never see all aspects of his lover.

The voice and the sights of the female lover are highlighted in verse 14, as illustrated through the construction of the verse in a balanced chiastic couplet.[87] With his lover partially hidden from him, the male lover encourages her to expose herself to the world. Whether for his own benefit or in order for her to blossom and discover the larger world, he empowers her through his language. He invites her to be seen and to be heard, to emerge from her hiding place. Far from erotic, this passage highlights the companionship associated with the lovers' relationship. It emphasizes the importance of language and imagery to link the lovers to each other and to the natural world.

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[86] Keel, 103.
[87] Exum 128.

# Song 2:16-17

2:16 דּוֹדִי לִי וַאֲנִי לוֹ הָרֹעֶה בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים׃
2:17 עַד שֶׁיָּפוּחַ הַיּוֹם וְנָסוּ הַצְּלָלִים סֹב דְּמֵה־לְךָ דוֹדִי לִצְבִי אוֹ לְעֹפֶר הָאַיָּלִים
עַל־הָרֵי בָתֶר׃

## *Translation*

2:16 – My beloved is to me and I am to him, who pastures[88] among the lilies.

2:17 – Until[89] the day blows and the shadows flee[90], turn[91] like you, my beloved, as the deer or young ram[92] about the rugged mountains[93].

## *Literary Setting*

These verses end chapter 2 of the Song and follow directly after an obscure description of foxes who raid vineyards, a negative image that contrasts sharply with 2:8-14, which include a loving conversation between the two lovers. The woman spoke in the previous section and she once again speaks in Song 2:16-17. This brief affirmation of their relationship precedes a longer monologue by the woman in which she searches for her lover.

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[88] As opposed to 'feeds' or 'shepherds'. There is some discussion about whether this refers to the lover feeding on the flowers, among the flowers, or pasturing his flock among the flowers (Pope, 405). The phrase is ambiguous.

[89] Could be translated as 'when', 'while', or 'before' (Exum, 131)

[90] Bloch and Bloch say this refers to the time just before the break of dawn (157) and Pope agrees that this is a reference to the passing of the night and the approach of morning (408). Others, however, suggest that this may refer to the coming of evening instead.

[91] Some choose to translate this as 'return' (Pope, 408). Does this refer to the woman calling her lover towards her or sending him away? It is unclear and commentators are divided.

[92] Same phrasing as found in 2:8-9.

[93] it is unclear to what *vater* refers. If related to the root *btr* (to cut, cleave, divide), this could be describing the mountains as 'jagged' or 'cleft' (Bloch, 158). Some have taken this to be a proper name while others take it as a synonym for *besamim*, 'spices' (Pope, 409). Additionally, is this a metaphor for the woman herself or is it literally referring to mountains?

The short phrase encapsulates the pattern throughout the Song in which the lovers find and release each other, then seek again.

## *Intention*

Verse 16 marks a significant moment, as the reader becomes aware of the exclusivity and mutuality of the relationship between the two lovers. The verse begins with a statement of mutual belonging[94] - "My beloved is to me and I am to him" and it is a statement not primarily of ownership, but of complete and mutual acceptance. This is not a relationship in which one partner holds power or sway over the other. As the woman points out with this statement, there is a level of commitment between the two that sets their relationship apart. This contrasts with the previous verse, in which people are compared to foxes that raid vineyards (2:15). The male lover referred to in verse 16 is one who pastures among the lilies, unlike the others. It may very well be that the pasturing and lilies refer to lovemaking and the woman's body, respectively.[95] If this is the case, we are once again introduced to the female lover as someone who is vocal about her desires and one who captures the multiple dimensions of her relationship with her male lover. The language is vague and creates playful wordplay that can suggest the woman is attempting to express two meanings. Considering that this comes directly after a description about foxes and vineyards, we may assume this refers to the uniqueness of her relationship with her lover and his special qualities, as he is among the lilies, a delicate and beautiful flower.

In verse 17, we experience the push and pull of the lovers' relationship. As the sun rises or sets (the structure and vocabulary makes it unclear to determine of which time of day

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[94] Pope, 405.
[95] Exum, 130.

this verse refers), she calls to her lover to "turn" and describes him, as in 2:8, as a deer and ram. It is unclear if "turn" refers to the man turning away from his female lover and heading out to the mountains or if this is her call to bring him close; for him to stay by her side. According to Fox, the reader is not supposed to know whether or not the woman is calling her lover to her side or urging him to go away.[96] The lack of clarity speaks to the many facets of the lovers' relationship, especially the woman's willingness to let go of her lover at times and at other times, to urge his return. There is a sense of autonomy mixed with a strong yearning to be by her lover's side.

In 2:8, the male lover is described as bounding over mountains towards his lover. The same imagery is used in verse 17, including the types of animals used to describe the lover in 2:9, but unlike 2:8, 2:17 suggests some separation. The difference may be linked to the description of the mountains as *harey bater*. Commentators disagree about the meaning of this phrase and whether or not *bater* refers to a specific location, spices, or the ruggedness of the mountains.[97] Describing the mountains as rugged or cleft offers an interesting perspective about the role of distance in the lover's relationship. Distance, while necessary, is not something that is all together negative. The imagery offered in verse 17 describes the male lover as a swift and elegant animal who can cross distances with ease. As Exum points out, this verse is linked to the final verse of the Song (8:14), with "the woman seemingly sending her lover away and calling him to her in the same breath."[98] Possibly, 2:17 offers us insight into the overall theme of the Song, with lovers struggling to balance the give-and-take; the proximity and distance of their relationship. However, this balancing act and the

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[96] Exum, 131.
[97] Exum, 132.
[98] Exum, 133.

rhythm of union and separation are not always presented as negative. Rather, they offer ways to enhance the depth and meaning of the relationship as well as ways to explore one's own potential in dialogue with the other.

# Song 3:1-5

3:1 עַל־מִשְׁכָּבִי בַּלֵּילוֹת בִּקַּשְׁתִּי אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי בִּקַּשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מְצָאתִיו׃
3:2 אָקוּמָה נָּא וַאֲסוֹבְבָה בָעִיר בַּשְׁוָקִים וּבָרְחֹבוֹת אֲבַקְשָׁה אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה
נַפְשִׁי בִּקַּשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מְצָאתִיו׃
3:3 מְצָאוּנִי הַשֹּׁמְרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי רְאִיתֶם׃
3:4 כִּמְעַט שֶׁעָבַרְתִּי מֵהֶם עַד שֶׁמָּצָאתִי אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי אֲחַזְתִּיו וְלֹא אַרְפֶּנּוּ
עַד־שֶׁהֲבֵיאתִיו אֶל־בֵּית אִמִּי וְאֶל־חֶדֶר הוֹרָתִי׃
3:5 הִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַ͏ִם בִּצְבָאוֹת אוֹ בְּאַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה
אִם־תָּעִירוּ | וְאִם־תְּעוֹרְרוּ אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה עַד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ׃

## *Translation*

3:1 – On my bed at night[99], I sought[100] the one whom my *nefesh*[101] loves; I sought him but[102] I did not find him.

3:2 – I will get up now and go about the city, in the streets and the squares. I will seek out the one whom my *nefesh* loves; I sought him out but did not find him.

3:3 – The watchmen who were about the city[103] found me; "Have you seen the one whom my *nefesh* loves?"

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[99] According to Pope, the plural form, as used here, does not refer to multiple nights of lying in bed, but rather, "a plural of composition designating nighttime". The same pattern is repeated in 3:8. Some commentators suggest that the reference to the night makes this a dreamlike sequence and not the retelling of the female lover's narrative (Pope, 415). It may also mean "night after night", referring to repeated activity, as in Ps. 16:7; 92:3; 134:1. (Bloch and Bloch, 158)

[100] Can also mean 'to desire' or 'to yearn for' (Ps. 27:4; Jer. 2:33; 5:1) (Keel, 122)

[101] Technically, 'nefesh' means 'gullet' or 'throat'. It is doubtful that 'nefesh' refers to a purely 'spiritual' component. In the Bible, its meanings are diverse – soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion, and passion (Job 14:22; 1Kgs 17:21-22; Gen. 2:7, 19; Deut. 12:23-24; Ex. 21:23; Ps. 124:7; Prov. 27:7; 18:5; Ezek. 24:21) (Fem. Companion - Deckers, 187). Possibly, translating 'nefesh' as 'my being', in linen with Deckers, captures the all-encompassing nature of the word and the woman's use of it in these verses.

[102] Lit. "and".

[103] Did she run into one group of watchmen at a specific location or did she run into watchmen throughout her wanderings through the city? It seems unclear, though most commentators believe it was one group of watchmen.

3:4 – I had just passed them[104] when I found the one whom my *nefesh* loves. I held him and did not let him loose[105] until I brought him to my mother's house and to the room of her that conceived me.

3:5 – Swear an oath to me, daughters of Jerusalem, by gazelles and deer of the field, do not arouse[106], do not arouse love until it delights[107].

## *Literary Setting*

Having expressed mutuality and equality in 2:16 and having invited her lover to "turn" in verse 17, the woman speaks again. It is unclear if chapter 3 is the start of a new, unrelated scene or aims to be construed as the next stage of the relationship and a consequence of the previous verses. The present episode in Song 3:1-5 describes the process by which the female lover seeks and finds her lover. There is a sense of immediacy in these verses[108] as the woman's retelling of her search merges with the action she describes.[109] This section is followed by verses that focus on King Solomon and seem somewhat distant from the rest of the Song[110] leading some to ask, "in a poem devoted to lovers' declarations of desire and praise of each other, what is the relevance of a description of Solomon's bed or litter (v. 7), also called his palanquin (v. 9), on what turns out to be his wedding day?"[111] In

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[104] Would suggest she only ran into one group of watchmen.
[105] This verb is used in the causative as the antonym to the verb "to hold" mentioned just before. It seems that the imperfect form refers to the 'durative aspect of her hold' (Pope, 421). According to Bloch and Bloch, the phrase could be translated as "I clung to him without letting go, until I [actually] brought him," or "[next time] I won't let go until I have brought him." (Bloch and Bloch, 158) In the negative, the verb can mean "not forsake" as in Deut. 31:6, 8, or "not let alone" as in Job 7:19. (Keel, 124)
[106] Or 'awake' or 'stir up'
[107] This verse is a repetition of Song 2:7.
[108] Exum, 134.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Exum, 140.
[111] Ibid.

these verses, the woman no longer speaks to those around her and instead, observers of some kind announce the dramatic approach of a litter.[112] Given the sudden shift that follows this section, it is best to read 3:1-5 as the conclusion of a larger sequence, in which lovers come together, separate and then unite again.

## *Intention*

Searching for and finding a lost lover is the theme of this section, linking it to other mythological stories from the ancient Near East in which goddesses seek their lovers.[113] Song 3:1-5 describes the female lover's preoccupation with her lover and her unyielding attempt to unite with him. She describes her bold journey through the city at night, her encounter with watchmen, and her reunification with her lover, all of which convey a poetic focus on conjuring.[114] In 3:1-4, the need to unite with her lover overrides all, and the language seems to support this strong desire. Certain phrases are repeated in an ordered fashion and extraneous details are omitted, all in order to focus on the unification.[115] For example, the repetition of the root בָּקַשׁ "to seek" and מָצָא "to find" create a frame around the verses and illustrate the section's theme. Unlike other parts of the Song, such as 2:10, there is little indication of narration, and, "events that belong to the reported narrative are represented as taking place even as she speaks, as though she were getting up from her bed and standing before the watchmen, and not simply telling us about it."[116] Additionally, while

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[112] Keel, 125.
[113] Keel, 121.
[114] Exum, 134.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.

dialogue between the lovers is a mainstay of the Song, in this section, the male lover is not a partner in conversation, but purely the object of the woman's affection.[117]

The woman begins in her bedroom, in 3:1, and while this is usually a place associated with rest and relaxation, her sentiments in the verse suggest "that love's desire, like other passions (Ps. 36:4; Mic. 2:1), cannot find rest even at night – when otherwise only the wild animals are up and about (Ps. 104:20-21)."[118] The female lover's need to unite with her lover is so strong that she is willing to risk her own safety to seek him out. It is for this very reason that many commentators have suggested that these verses represent a dream sequence, for it was unheard of for a woman to wander the streets of a city alone at night.[119] Exum suggests that this passage's timelessness lends itself to a dreamlike state.[120] However, because the dream does not seem to have a clear beginning or end, defining it as such may be less relevant than focusing on the theme of unification which is prevalent throughout this section.

The woman's willingness to risk her own safety in order to unite with her lover speaks to a compulsive passion and concern. Her compulsive passion is linked to her use of the word *nefesh* to describe her lover. The bed marks the beginning and end of the woman's journey to find her lover and the search is for "the one whom my *nefesh* loves".

The use of the word *nefesh* is significant, repeated four times, once in each verse. Though the most common translation is "soul", it is technically translated as "gullet" or "throat" and is linked to breath. Keel notes that the use of the phrase "the one whom my *nefesh* loves" "does not at all mean that the woman loves her beloved only spiritually or deeply, but that her whole desire, all her yearnings, her thoughts, her feelings, and her

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[117] Keel, 119.
[118] Keel, 122.
[119] Pope, 418.
[120] Exum, 136.

physical needs are directed toward him."[121] Pope and Exum seem to ignore discussion of the word *nefesh* completely. Deckers, who devotes a lengthy article to the meaning of the term, suggests that *nefesh* "denotes the essential being of the speaking woman, her vitality, her principle of life."[122] Additionally, because *nefesh* is linked four times to the verb "to seek" and twice to "not-to-find", Deckers notes that these verses represent a critical moment in the lovers' relationship.[123] The woman's actions and description of her lover solidify her loyalty and constant care for her partner. She dedicates all of her being to her lover. The use of the term "*nefesh*," sometimes rendered by translators as "soul," clearly expands the category of what love means in the Song. As Eskenazi indicates, "it underscores the encompassing nature of the woman's attachment to her lover beyond the mere physical and sensual or sexual. In Gen 2:7[124] it is the quality that constitutes the newly formed earthly creature, infused with divine breath, as a living being. In Deut. 12:23, *nefesh* refers to the life of an animal.[125] One may consider the term to suggest embodied spirituality."[126]

The woman's search takes her out of her room and into the dark streets of the city, where she encounters the watchmen. While they help her find her lover in this scene, later on in the Song, the woman's meeting with the watchmen leads to abuse. Throughout most of the Song, the lovers engage with one another in natural settings, whether it is in a field, a garden, or beneath the apple tree. In verse 4, the lovers retreat to the mother's house and we find that, "the relationship between house and city is the same as that between the garden and

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[121] Keel, 121.
[122] Deckers, 189.
[123] Deckers, 191.
[124] Gen. 2:7 – "Adonai, God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." (JPS)
[125] Deut. 12:23 – "But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh." (JPS)
[126] Eskenazi, in notes to author.

the world; between the ambivalent, seasonal terrain and the secluded matrix."[127] A city can be a scary place at night, full of dark alleys and menacing characters. The anxiety which one develops in such a setting may lead the woman to hold on to her lover and not let him go until they arrive at her mother's home. As Landy indicates, in this scene, the city "represents the emptying of consciousness, and reveals the substratum of fear, that her Lover will be lost for ever, she will be abandoned for ever."[128] But such associations may not be the only one that the scene conveys. The woman's report and her search can also be viewed as an indication of her strength and undying commitment to her lover. Instead of remaining in her bed and awaiting her lover's return, she takes initiative to unite herself with her lover once again. In a time when lovers are physically or emotionally distant from each other, this passage emphasizes the importance of making attempts to come back together. For when one's *nefesh* yearns for the loved one, distance must remain temporary.

The longing, combined with an inability to find her lover, is transformed into a motherly love once she is united with him in verse 4. A new dimension of the lovers' relationship is revealed, as the woman takes on motherly qualities and as Keel points out, the return to the mother's room "is meant to call attention to the fact that her mother, her model and her confidant (cf. 3:11; 6:9; 8:1, 5; cf. also Naomi in Ruth), has also known the passion that now controls the daughter."[129] This verse includes one of seven references to "mother" in the Song, and highlights the absence of references to "father" in the Song. Thus, the mention of the mother's house in verse 4, as well as again in Song 8:2, creates a sharp contrast to the prevalence of the "father's house" in Biblical literature. As Carol Meyers

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[127] Landy, 208.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Keel, 124.

points out, "in light of the importance of the concept of 'father's house' in Israelite society and the frequent use of the phrase in the Hebrew Bible, the appearance of 'mother's house' startles the reader...the internal functional aspect of the family and home life is rightly expressed by 'mother's house' rather than by 'father's house'."[130] Just as the female lover is the predominant speaker throughout the Song, the role of women is highlighted in verses such as this. Unlike other Biblical texts, the Song often expresses a female-centric tone. Trible notes that this is one of several features in the Song that links the lovers' world with the Garden of Eden in Genesis. She suggests that the, "arrangement recalls the stress placed upon the woman at the conclusion of Genesis 2: although equal with the man in creation, she was, nonetheless, elevated in emphasis by design of the story...women, then, are the principal creators of the poetry of eroticism."[131]

Verse 5, directed towards the women of Jerusalem, is identical to 2:7. It seems to be asking, "if love has a will of its own, how can it be roused before it wishes to be?"[132] Love seems to have a will of its own and the woman seems to be offering this information as advice to the women of Jerusalem.[133] While some commentators choose to translate this verse as referring to the act of lovemaking, others believe "love" in this verse refers to the general understanding of love and not an act.[134]

The verse includes references to animals and these reference to gazelles and deer may be linked to the woman's perception of her lover in terms of these animals. Exum suggests that it may be associated with the beauty and grace of these animals.[135] Historically, these

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[130] Meyers, Carol. "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs." Hebrew Annual Review 10(1986), 219.
[131] Trible, Phyllis. God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, 145.
[132] Exum, 138.
[133] Exum, 119.
[134] Exum, 118.
[135] Exum, 119.

animals, "belong to the larger world of love and love poetry, of iconography and of ritual in the ancient Near East."[136] These wild animals, usually not domesticated, also link the lovers to the fields and natural landscape of their relationship. The lovers are not secluded in the Song but rather, interact with the entirety of the world around them. Taking an oath by referencing gazelles and deer, rather than God, further highlights the nature-bound world invoked and recreated in the Song. A part of the lovers' relationship is wild and untamed even as it remains gentle.

Finally, one notes the reluctance to awaken love prematurely. Concern with "awakening" constitutes a theme that will reappear at the conclusion of the Song, when the woman describes how she awakened the man (Song 8:5). The poet seems to say that love, as power, must be approached with care. It has its own rhythm which must be honored.

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[136] Ibid.

# Song 4:1-7

4:1 הִנָּךְ יָפָה רַעְיָתִי הִנָּךְ יָפָה עֵינַיִךְ יוֹנִים מִבַּעַד לְצַמָּתֵךְ שַׂעְרֵךְ כְּעֵדֶר הָעִזִּים
שֶׁגָּלְשׁוּ מֵהַר גִּלְעָד׃
4:2 שִׁנַּיִךְ כְּעֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת שֶׁעָלוּ מִן־הָרַחְצָה שֶׁכֻּלָּם מַתְאִימוֹת וְשַׁכֻּלָה אֵין בָּהֶם׃
4:3 כְּחוּט הַשָּׁנִי שִׂפְתֹתַיִךְ וּמִדְבָּרֵיךְ נָאוֶה כְּפֶלַח הָרִמּוֹן רַקָּתֵךְ מִבַּעַד לְצַמָּתֵךְ׃
4:4 כְּמִגְדַּל דָּוִיד צַוָּארֵךְ בָּנוּי לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת אֶלֶף הַמָּגֵן תָּלוּי עָלָיו כֹּל שִׁלְטֵי הַגִּבּוֹרִים׃
4:5 שְׁנֵי שָׁדַיִךְ כִּשְׁנֵי עֳפָרִים תְּאוֹמֵי צְבִיָּה הָרוֹעִים בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים׃
4:6 עַד שֶׁיָּפוּחַ הַיּוֹם וְנָסוּ הַצְּלָלִים אֵלֵךְ לִי אֶל־הַר הַמֹּר וְאֶל־גִּבְעַת הַלְּבוֹנָה׃
4:7 כֻּלָּךְ יָפָה רַעְיָתִי וּמוּם אֵין בָּךְ׃

## *Translation*

4:1 – Behold you are beautiful, my friend[137]. Behold you are beautiful, your eyes are doves[138], from behind your veil[139], your hair is like a flock of goats streaming[140] from Mt. Gilead.

4:2 – Your teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep[141] that came up from being washed, that all of them are twins[142] and none are bereaved[143].

4:3 – Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth[144] lovely, like a slice of pomegranate, your brow/cheek[145], from behind your veil.

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[137] Comment on range of use of רַעְיָתִי, see discussion on 1:15.
[138] Up to this point in the verse, same as Song 1:15
[139] Occurs in Song 4:3, 6:7, and Is. 47:2. This was troubling for early commentators, though most now translate it as 'veil'. Bloch and Bloch prefer to translate it as 'thicket of your hair' based on the use of the word in the Isaiah passage, where the Daughter of Babylon must uncover a part of her body that would otherwise not be exposed in public. In ancient Mesopotamia, baring one's head was a sign of immodesty or harlotry. Based on this association and in line with Ibn Ezra's understanding of the word as 'hair', Bloch and Bloch prefer 'thicket of hair' (Bloch and Bloch, 166-168)
[140] A hapax legomenon found here and in 6:5. Based on a cognate in Ugaritic, this verb is usually explained as referring to streaming or surging of water. In modern Hebrew, the verb usually refers to gliding or sliding down mountains such as during skiing or the overflowing of liquids (Bloch and Bloch, 169).
[141] Some translate as 'ready to be shorn' based on the fact that sheep were often washed before sheering (Exum, 153).
[142] Bloch and Bloch also make note that a variant translation may be 'all of whom are identical in shape', because of the similarity being drawn between white teeth and white sheep.
[143] A 'shakulah' is an ewe that has lost her lamb.
[144] "Poetic parallelism suggests *midbar* here designates the instrument and organ of speech rather than the action or content of speech." (Pope, 463) Derived from the verb "to speak", the noun used in this verse can be

4:4 – You neck is like the Tower[146] of David, built in courses[147]; a thousand shields hang on it, all the bucklers[148] of the warriors.

4:5 – Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, pasturing[149] among[150] the lilies.

4:6 – When the day breathes, and the shadows flee[151], I will make my way, to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.

4:7 – All of you is beautiful, my friend, there is no blemish on you[152].

## *Literary Setting*

The description of the woman in 4:1-7 is preceded in 3:6-11 by a description of King Solomon on his wedding day. Debate exists upon whether the section about Solomon is connected to some specific historical event or represents a literary fiction instead.[153] In this somewhat intrusive and puzzling section, the verses are structured in a way that Solomon emerges from the distant horizon, through the wilderness, closer and closer to the speaker who is describing the procession, allowing for more and more detail as we move through the

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interpreted as a poetic word for "speaking" or "voice" or it may be translated as "mouth" as is the case with most translations. (Bloch and Bloch, 170)

[145] Also occurs in 6:7, Judg. 4:21-22, 5:26 (in the story of Yael driving a tent peg through Sisera's skull). Exum translates as 'cheek' as opposed to 'temple' or 'brow' because it is more likely that the cheek is visible through a veil (Exum, 153). Pope prefers 'brow' because it represents a wider area of the face (Pope, 464).

[146] Towers in Biblical literature refer to isolated structures in the field (Isa. 5:2; Mic. 4:9; Gen. 35:21) or strongholds of a city (Judg. 9:46-49; Neh. 3:1; 12:39). The Hebrew word is linked to numerous sites in reference to their fortified appearance. (Meyers, 213)

[147] A hapax legomenon. Commentators differ on how to translate this word, with some suggesting it refers to the armory because of the references to shields later in the verse. If we focus on the root of the word as *lpy*, meaning 'to arrange in courses', we understand the tower to be built in courses (repeated layers) so as to solidify the tower's strength (Pope, 466-467).

[148] Refers to small, round shields. The exact meaning is uncertain.

[149] See 2:16 for discussion.

[150] The fawns may be pasturing 'among' or 'on' the lilies, according to the Hebrew.

[151] The language is vague so as to make it unclear as to whether this is referring to dawn or dusk.

[152] Though this word sometimes refers to moral blemish (Prov. 9:7; Job 11:15, 31:7; Deut. 32:5), there is no hint that this verse focuses on anything other than physical blemish (Pope, 473).

[153] Exum, 140.

verses.[154] Possibly, this is the female lover's image of the wedding day between her and her lover, "on which her kingly lover comes to her in all his splendor and joy."[155] This is the only part of the Song where marriage is mentioned, though we cannot determine whether or not the marriage mentioned in these verses corresponds with the lovers of the Song.

Following the detailed description of the female lover in Song 4:1-7, the reader is taken back into the wilderness, with the male lover urging his companion to journey back from the wild places. From the "dens of lions, from the lairs of leopards," he calls her to join him (4:8). He continues by elaborating on how she has captured his heart and the impact of her physical embrace (4:8-11). This leads further into his elaborate description of her as a "locked garden" (4:12 ff.).

### *Intention*

This is one of four places in the Song where parts of the lovers' bodies are described in sequence through metaphor and simile.[156] The description of the female lover's body combines the beauty of nature with the beauty of human innovation. From eyes that are doves to a neck that is like a well-protected and ornate fortress, the male lover describes his companion in a way that leaves the reader with little information about the woman's actual physical attributes, but much in the way of the power and influence of her beauty on her lover. At times the description is sexual while at other times it is animated to the point where the imagery is disjointed and vague.

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[154] Exum, 142.
[155] Exum, 144-145.
[156] Song 4:1-5; 5:10-16; 6:4-7; 7:1-5

For example, in Song 4:5 the man offers a description of the woman's breasts as fawns and gazelles, similes that resonate with her description of him in the Song.[157] Simultaneously, he plays on the erotic nature of lilies used in other places of the Song.[158] The description of the woman's breasts is repeated in 7:3 but without the phrase, "pasturing among the lilies", leaving some debate about the meaning of the phrase in Song 4:5. The ambiguity of the phrase (the fawns may be pasturing "among" the lilies or "on" the lilies) may lead one to interpret the lilies as offering nourishment to the fawns or serving as the landscape on which they spend their time.[159] Therefore, the male lover may be suggesting his sexual urge or he may be referring to the comfort he associates with her breasts, a place on which to lay his head or listen to her heartbeat. Elsewhere, the descriptions have an immediacy that readily convey meanings even though thousands of years separate the modern reader from the original setting of the Song.

According to the man's description of his lover in Song 4:1-7, "beauty, like love, arouses a range of feelings."[160] At times, the woman's beauty is described with metaphors that blur descriptive reality. Each verse describes another physical attribute, all of which are above the waist and all but one from the neck and above. The images used to describe the eyes, teeth, lips, neck, and breasts are central to understanding these verses and speak to the somewhat disjointed, yet energizing, emotions of the male lover. As Exum suggests, "lingering over the details of her body, part by part, provides the man with a way of dealing with the powerful feelings the woman arouses in him," and, "the totality of her overwhelms

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[157] Song 2:9, 17; 8:14
[158] Lilies seem to signify the woman in 1:7; 2:2, 16; 6:2-3 (Exum, 165)
[159] Exum, 166.
[160] Exum, 160.

him", forcing him to describe her in parts as opposed to focusing on the whole.[161] At the same time, these focused and changing metaphors show the wide range of associations that the woman's body conjures up for the man and the ways in which she evokes a large and abundant world. The descriptions of the woman's body speak to the complexity of the male's understanding of beauty and his inability to capture her with one image. Rather, she appeals to him with such diversity that he must attempt to describe her as something like an amalgam of separate entities.

In 4:1, just as in Song 2:14, the dove becomes a symbol for the female lover. In addition to its connection to the goddess of love and its affectionate demeanor, the dove is known for its coyness, a characteristic that seems to be highlighted by the man in verse 1. Just as the dove hid in the cleft of the rock in 2:14, the woman's eyes hide behind a veil, masking their full beauty but simultaneously leading the man to want more. As Fox points out, "the dove's qualities – gentleness, bashfulness, 'speech' that touches the heart – combine to suggest the effect of the girl's eyes on the boy's heart."[162] Through his description of her eyes, the male lover is describing the various ways in which his lover communicates with him. Words alone do not express feelings, while body language and physical attributes impact the way the lovers express their thoughts and desires to one another.

From the woman's eyes and flowing hair in verse 1, the man moves on to describe the woman's teeth, using sheep coming up from being washed in the water as the image of choice. One imagines the "pure white of their wool"[163] as paralleling the whiteness of the woman's teeth, while "the unbroken rows of the beloved's teeth, radiantly white and well

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[161] Ibid.
[162] Fox, Michael V. The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 129.
[163] Bloch and Bloch, 169.

formed, evoke the full blessing and the friendly and cheerful festivities of a sheep shearing."[164] The detail with which the man describes his lover, going so far as to elicit images associated with her teeth, indicates the value he places on details. It is not only what his lover represents in broad terms, but the minor details of her body that entice the man. At the same time, her physical characteristics are not the focus. The man uses his lover's physical beauty to highlight the beauty of her personality and demeanor.

The woman communicates with her eyes but she also does so with her lips, as described in verse 3. After the black hair and white teeth, the man introduces the color red into his description, referring to his lover's lips "like a scarlet thread and your mouth lovely like a slice of pomegranate." Not only does the word וּמִדְבָּרֵיךְ hold the double meaning of "your mouth" and "your speech", but Fox goes further in suggesting it could mean "your wilderness", in which case, "the youth is saying, in playful hyperbole: you are so lovely, so flawless, that whatever part of you might in comparison with the other parts be reckoned a wilderness, as somehow defective – even that 'wilderness' is an oasis, fresh and refreshing."[165] In other words, even the parts of his lover that may seem unimportant or irregular are beautiful and meaningful. With the color red being introduced in this verse, "the comparison of lips to the scarlet cord would be like the metaphor comparing glances to doves, praising the ability both to articulate and to awaken the longing and readiness for love."[166]

Verse 4 includes a fascinating image, as the woman's neck is compared to the Tower of David. Through this, military imagery is introduced in the Song, something usually

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[164] Keel, 143.
[165] Fox, 130.
[166] Keel, 143.

reserved for male-focused literature. As Meyers points out, "a tower, after all, is first and foremost a military structure. Its height is greater than that of surrounding buildings. It thereby gives those on top of it a vantage point from which to see whatever may threaten them."[167] The verse goes on to intensify military imagery, referring to "shields" and "warriors." Meyers draws the comparison to Ezekiel 27:10-11[168] where references to warriors and weapons are used to exemplify splendor and beauty. The tower image reappears in Song 7:5 and 8:10, and it seems as though the military imagery used to describe the woman helps us gain a new understanding of female power. Though weaponry and defensive structures often connote destruction, "the one whom all the military allusions have been made secures the opposite of what they represent. Well-being is the outcome, rather than war, danger, or hostility."[169]

Throughout the disjointed description, however, lies a common theme of nature and doubling. The natural world serves as the backdrop for most of the man's descriptions and this natural setting seems to offer excitement and reassurance at the same time. The reference to the Tower of David shows that the man is not limited to images in nature, but rather, that the natural world serves as a fitting environment through which to present his lover.

This section ends with the man's affirmation that there is no blemish on his lover, that she is perfect. This clarifies that every aspect of the description found in verses 1-6 was entirely positive, entirely loving; completely affirming of the woman's beauty and perfection.

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[167] Meyers, 213.
[168] Ezek. 27:10-11 – "Men of Paras, Lud, and Put Were in your army, Your fighting men; They hung shields and helmets in your midst, They lent splendor to you. Men of Arvad and Helech Manned your walls all around, And men of Gammad were stationed in your towers; They hung their quivers all about your walls; They perfected your beauty." (JPS)
[169] Meyers, 215.

# Song 4:12-5:1

4:12 גַּן | נָעוּל אֲחֹתִי כַלָּה גַּל נָעוּל מַעְיָן חָתוּם׃
4:13 שְׁלָחַיִךְ פַּרְדֵּס רִמּוֹנִים עִם פְּרִי מְגָדִים כְּפָרִים עִם־נְרָדִים׃
4:14 נֵרְדְּ | וְכַרְכֹּם קָנֶה וְקִנָּמוֹן עִם כָּל־עֲצֵי לְבוֹנָה מֹר וַאֲהָלוֹת עִם כָּל־רָאשֵׁי בְשָׂמִים׃
4:15 מַעְיַן גַּנִּים בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים וְנֹזְלִים מִן־לְבָנוֹן׃
4:16 עוּרִי צָפוֹן וּבוֹאִי תֵימָן הָפִיחִי גַנִּי יִזְלוּ בְשָׂמָיו יָבֹא דוֹדִי לְגַנּוֹ וְיֹאכַל פְּרִי מְגָדָיו׃
5:1 בָּאתִי לְגַנִּי אֲחֹתִי כַלָּה אָרִיתִי מוֹרִי עִם־בְּשָׂמִי אָכַלְתִּי יַעְרִי עִם־דִּבְשִׁי שָׁתִיתִי
יֵינִי עִם־חֲלָבִי אִכְלוּ רֵעִים שְׁתוּ וְשִׁכְרוּ דּוֹדִים׃

## *Translation*

4:12 – "A locked[170] garden, my sister, bride; A locked fountain[171], a sealed[172] spring

4:13 – Your branches[173] are an orchard of pomegranates with delectable[174] fruits, henna with spikenard.

4:14 – Spikenard and saffron, cane[175] and cinnamon with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the finest[176] spices."

4:15 – "A garden's fountain[177], a well of living waters[178], flowing[179] from Lebanon."

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[170] Usually used to refer to locking or bolting a door from the inside as in Judg. 3:23 or 2 Sam. 13:17. (Pope, 488)

[171] The exact meaning of *gal* is uncertain and some translators prefer to assume this is actually *gan*, based on the use of that word earlier in the verse, but based on the use of the root of the word in Josh. 15:19 and Judg. 1:15, it seems linked to springs or water cisterns. (Bloch & Bloch, 176; Pope, 488). The literal translation of 'wave' is also possible here.

[172] The verb is used to suggest the sealing of a document for purposes of authentication (I Kings 21:8), blocking something from view (Job 9:7), or blocking access (Deut. 32:34) (Pope, 489) Sealing a water source was common in the ancient Middle East to keep strangers from drawing water. (Bloch and Bloch, 176)

[173] The verb form refers to trees sending forth roots and branches and the noun is used as 'branches' in Isa. 16:8 and for trees sending out roots in Jer. 17:8. Some translators have linked it to a part of the woman's body and therefore rendered it 'limbs' (JPS). Others have suggested it is a much more intimate part of the woman's body, linked to a translation of 'conduit' (Haupt) (Pope, 490; Exum, 176)

[174] Also translated as 'choice' or 'heavy' and the only other use besides in the Song is Deut. 33:13-16 in reference to the choice fruits of the earth (Pope, 492)

[175] Refers to the aromatic spice, cane, mentioned in Ex. 30:23.

[176] See Ezek. 27:22, where the word refers to all the finest quality of spices, precious stones, etc. Bloch and Bloch translate as 'rare' and Exum says 'finest'.

[177] Lit. 'fountain of gardens'; referring to the general sense of a fountain that is usually found in gardens (Bloch & Bloch, 177)

[178] The phrase "living waters" is also found in Gen. 26:19; Lev. 4:13, 14:50, 15:13; Num. 19:17; Jer. 2:13, 17:13; Zech. 14:8.

4:16 – "Arise[180] the north-wind[181], come south-wind, blow[182] on my garden, that the spices flow[183]; my lover will come[184] to his garden and eat the finest[185] spices."

5:1 – I came into my garden, my sister, bride; I gathered[186] myrrh with my spice; I ate honeycomb with my honey; I drank my wine with my milk."

"Eat, friends, drink and be drunk with love[187]."

## *Literary Setting*

This section stands very much at the poetic center of the Song. It is preceded by continued praising of the female lover, with emphasis on her ability to capture the heart of her male lover. The male urges his lover to come forth with him "from the dens of lions and the lairs of leopards" in 4:8 and reiterates his infatuation with parts of her body, though not in as much detail as found in verses 1-5. He does this in a way that assures her that they will come back safely. Therefore, the verses preceding this section seem to be the man's second attempt to lure his lover to him by commenting on her power over him. He does so through

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[179] Some translators suggest *nozelim* is a synonym for water as in Isa. 44:3; Prov. 5:15; Ps. 78:16 (Pope, 496) while others suggest it is modifying 'waters' in the previous clause (Exum, 155). Bloch and Bloch link the flowing of waters in this verse to the flowing of spices in the next verse, 4:16 (Bloch & Bloch, 178)

[180] The verb is used for arousal or excitation from inaction to activities that are zealous or violent in nature, such as war asin Jer. 25:32; Ps. 57:9; Zech. 13:7; Hab. 2:19. It is possible that it has a sexual connotation (Pope, 499). However, here it is best to use the *pshat* meaning related to 'rising up'.

[181] This is the only instance where the word is used as the name of the wind as opposed to just a direction (Pope, 499).

[182] Bloch and Bloch suggest that the more literal translation of 'to cause to breathe' may relate to 'to bring to life' as in Gen. 2:7 and Ezek. 37:9, in which case, "the Shulamite's garden in 4:16 is dormant and magically brought to life by the winds she summons". (Bloch and Bloch, 178)

[183] Same verb as found in the previous verse (4:15)

[184] Some translate this as 'Let my lover come' (Exum, Bloch & Bloch)

[185] Same word as in 4:14.

[186] The only other occurrence is in Ps. 80:13.

[187] Some commentators choose to translate this as 'lovers', referring to the parallel of 'friends', but according to Pope, the plural *dodim* regularly means 'love', as in Ezek. 16:8, 23:17; Prov. 7:18, and throughout the Song. Translations range from "and be drunk with love" (AT), "Drink deep of love" (JPSV), "until you are drunk with love" (NEB), to "Drink freely of love!" (NAB). (Pope, 508)

language that "describes the way *he* feels as something *she* has done to him...it seems to him as though he has surrendered control, and his autonomy is thereby challenged."[188]

The section is followed by separation, as the lovers seem to be in different places starting in 5:2. At that point, after what appears as a union in 5:1, we have the woman's second long speech of the Song in which she searches for her lover once again (as she did in 3:1-5). We thus see a variation of the story she tells in Song 2:8-3:5, but in this case, at 5:3, her encounter with the town's watchmen ends in her being beaten by them. The distance created through the language of 5:2 seems to separate 4:12-5:1 from the narrative of searching that comes afterward.

## *Intention*

The male lover introduces us to the woman as a "locked garden" in 4:12. A garden is a confined or enclosed space, requiring careful cultivation and attention. A garden is "essentially private, protected against the elements, against weeds and wildness"[189] and (in the ancient world) it tends to be an ornamental piece of land set aside for entertainment, amusement, and reflection. Additionally, it is a "contained world, intimate and limited"[190] whose scale makes it accessible. In the ancient Near East, a garden was a luxury in such a dry climate.[191] A garden is the result of the gardener's specific understanding of what flowers and trees are to fill it. As Landy points out, a garden is an ideal order, where nature begins and it is undifferentiated from culture.[192] A "locked garden" is one in which the

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[188] Exum, 172.
[189] Landy, 190.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Exum, 175.
[192] Landy, 190.

outside world is kept at bay, where aspects of nature and culture that are unappealing are locked out. The garden becomes a place of pure life and as the verses in this section describe, it is teeming with scents and sights that stir emotions. We also find a garden in the beginning of Genesis, yet the garden found in the Song is more complex and contains a greater diversity of species.[193] The locked garden also suggests it is a place to be exclusively accessed by the one with the key. In this case, the male lover seems to be declaring the exclusive access to his lover[194] in a setting where they can enjoy pleasure without interruption and without outside distractions.

In addition to referring to his lover as a "locked garden", the man calls his lover "my sister, bride." This combined epithet occurs four times in the Song (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1), "my sister" is also used in 5:2, and "bride" also appears in 4:8 and 11. Throughout the Song, the man calls his lover by a variety of names including "my friend" and "my dove" but by referring to her as both his sister and his bride, the man creates a powerful relationship between the identity of a sibling and that of a lifelong partner.

As Landy points out, "with the 'sister-bride' we find a conjunction of opposites; the sister who has shared one's life, and the bride, the stranger with whom one is about to begin and beget new life; we find an outsider, whose origins are one's own."[195] The man evokes an entire universe of modes, connecting the lovers throughout time and space, from the past to the future. As a "sister," the woman is familiar to her lover, complete with a personal and collective history that goes back to beyond their births. A familial connection or intimacy evokes shared genealogy, a biological connection that intertwines the lovers' bodies. A

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[193] Landy, 193.
[194] Exum, 176.
[195] Landy, 98.

shared history means they have grown up together, matured together, experienced life together. And the future is evoked with the word "bride." The future suggests potentiality, both emotionally and erotically. It implies an intimacy that takes the lovers to a new, extraordinary place found among lovers who commit to a shared future. While there is nothing else in the Song to suggest the two lovers are actually engaged or married, his use of the word "bride" indicates a high level of commitment and highlights potential sexual not only familial intimacy.

The description of his lover as both a sister and a bride is linked to the image of her as a "locked garden." Landy expounds on the garden metaphor as a place where, "nature is humanized, like the girl, whose genetic endowment is perfected through culture. She, like the garden, is her own creation, fostered by her parents and society, secluded, both as a girl in the ancient world and as a human being with an innate sensitivity and capacity for growth."[196] Just as the man creates a dual identity with "sister-bride", he does so by referring to his lover as a "locked garden" and a "sealed spring." As a garden, she has boundaries and limitations. As a sealed spring, she is an ever-flowing force that is only subdued for a short time. The man is describing the multi-facetedness of his lover, the fact that he is attracted to both her limitations and her potential.

In 4:13, the word שְׁלָחַיִךְ is troubling for translators and commentators. Translated as "your branches" or "your watercourses," it may be referring to the garden or to the woman. While Exum suggests it is the extension of the fountain metaphor found in the previous verse, other commentators take this as an allusion to the sexuality of the female lover.[197] Regardless, the image of branches or roots shooting out in all directions connotes the

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[196] Landy, 104-105.
[197] Exum, 177.

expansiveness of the woman's influence over her lover. Her reach is an extension of pomegranate trees in a *pardes* of delectable fruits, a luxury in any ancient Near Eastern garden.[198] Keel points out that similar words in Sumerian and Egyptian poems draw associations between a garden, canal, womb, and vagina.[199] In other words, the verse may be the man's explicit description of his lover's body and his understanding of its power. Such an overt reference to his lover's sexual potential would indicate a sexual openness among the couple. As sexual allusions and metaphors permeate 4:12-5:1, we recognize a sexual freedom among the lovers that is not found earlier in the Song. The lovers' veiled, metaphoric foreplay speaks to yet another dimension of their relationship. It reveals their willingness to address their sexual desire for one another. Eskenazi notes, "we also discern their imaginative perception of who they are and what they mean to each other."[200]

The woman is not only the garden, but she is also described as a fountain within the garden, a "sealed spring", "a well of living waters", and "flowing from Lebanon".[201] The references to water fall into two categories: water that is sealed or locked, and water that is brimming over and flowing strongly. In verse 12, the woman is described as water that is subdued in one way or another. She is a source of water that is confined and unable to flow forth in its natural way. The images of a "locked fountain" and a "sealed spring" connote the withholding of power and potential. Similarly, it is a source that is withheld from those who seek it. In the ancient Middle East, springs were sealed to keep strangers from accessing the water.[202] The female lover is inaccessible to her male lover in verse 12.

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[198] Ibid.
[199] Keel, 176.
[200] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[201] Song 4:12, 15.
[202] Pope, 488.

However, this is not the case in 4:15, where she is described as a "garden's fountain", "a well of living waters", and "flowing from Lebanon". All three of these examples express water that flows freely. A garden's fountain flows steadily, a well of living waters is constantly offering water from its source, and "the streams that flow down the forested mountains of Lebanon when the snows are melting in the spring are an impressive sight and the valleys roar with the sound of tumbling waters".[203] The construct form of *mayan ganim* found in 4:15 "implies not merely that the spring is for the benefit of gardens but that it generates gardens".[204] The fountain found within the garden that serves both as a metaphor for the woman and for the lover's relationship, is a fountain of potential and rebirth. It fosters a continuous flow of life and unending possibility. Additionally, the reference to Lebanon may link the Song to the Garden of Eden, as it is "naturally luxuriant, the habitat of choice trees...it is fragrant with herbs and spices...it is the place of origins".[205] The flowing waters of Lebanon link the lovers to the primordial couple, the first relationship, the first union.

While the female lover was locked in 4:12, she becomes a fiercely flowing and living body of water in 4:15. She is like water that cannot be tamed; cannot be stopped. She is an ever-moving, ever-flowing body, full of energy and life. Not just a fountain within the garden, she now spills out of the garden and beyond. The water becomes accessible to those who wish to partake of it. The garden, with its own spring, becomes self-sufficient and nothing is needed from the outside world. In one way or another, a transformation has taken place as a result of the lovers' union.

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[203] Pope, 496.
[204] Landy, 195.
[205] Landy, 195.

The garden in the Song, both in 4:12-5:1 and again in chapter 6, is an extended and complex metaphor, serving as the setting for some of the lovers' interactions while also representing the female lover herself. Both references to a garden involve a private lover who opens up to the power of love.[206] According to Landy, the human meaning of the garden is that, "it is the self, or part of the self, that is inaccessible, apparently self-generated, that is fostered through being protected, and is the product of culture as well as nature."[207] Therefore, in the Song, the garden represents the individual as well as the couple. It is as if the lovers are gardeners, charged with maintaining, cultivating, enjoying, and protecting the garden of their relationship. In 4:12-5:1, it seems as though the garden represents the female lover more than the couple as a whole. As a locked garden in verse 12, she is somehow cut off from her lover. She is trapped within the garden while her lover may be outside, looking in. As a garden, she is full of life, full of sights and scents that invigorate her partner and "we sense her as an animating spirit, an atmosphere or personality, flowing streams or wind-stirred air."[208] It should be noted that ancient Near Eastern literature commonly refers to women as gardens to be tended or enjoyed.[209]

Verses 13, 14, 16, and 5:1 speak to the "delectable fruits" and "finest spices" found within the garden, all of which draw the man towards his lover. As Adler points out, "the lovers themselves are liquescent, and, in contrast to the pollutant body fluids of the purity laws, the juices they drip are delectable,"[210] as illustrated in 5:1 with references to honeycomb, wine, and milk. As the man eats the fruit of the garden, drinks the wine and milk, "the beloved, in other words, will be incorporated in him, as well as enclosing him,

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[206] Landy, 201.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Exum, 174.
[210] Adler, Rachel. Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 137.

assimilated in his bloodstream. There is a flow of vitality from the Beloved to the Lover, stimulating his appetite."[211]

In 4:16, the speaker suddenly shifts to the female lover as she exclaims that her lover will arrive and partake in all that she has to offer. Her call to the winds of the north and south to come towards the garden suggests that the garden is the center of the world, with a magnetic force that draws all towards it. Her lover is to have full access to her, with full access "to eat the finest spices." Immediately following this declaration, the male lover speaks once again, declaring his enjoyment at partaking in all his lover's glory. The verbs "came," "gathered," "ate," and "drank" indicate an erotic or overtly sexual experience. But it is not clear whether the man is responding immediately to what his lover said in the previous verse or whether this is taking place at a later time. Possibly, the woman is so seduced by her lover's words that she interrupts his speech to invite him to engage with her in sexual activity.[212] Her interjection may be the poet's way of reestablishing dialogue among the lovers, for it is an essential component of their love.[213] Both lovers are engaged in this erotic interaction, it is not a one-sided experience. There seems to be a merging into each other, an experience that may account for the need or sense of separation that will follow in 5:2.

The speaker for the last phrase of 5:1, "Eat, friends, drink and be drunk with love" is unclear. Commentators differ in their understanding of the speaker and intended audience. Keel believes this is the male lover's declaration to his companions, inviting them to eat and drink.[214] Bloch and Bloch believe this may be a phrase taken from a popular drinking song from the time and that "there is no compelling reason to assume that they are spoken by a

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[211] Landy, 107-108.
[212] Exum, 174.
[213] Exum, 181.
[214] Keel, 184.

different voice."[215] Gordis suggests it is the woman addressing her male lover and Muller proposes that the poet is addressing the audience.[216] With only three voices in the Song (male lover, female lover, and women of Jerusalem) it seems unlikely that this one phrase would be a voice outside one of these three. Exum believes the phrase is the voice of the women of Jerusalem and points out that, "the women's presence is ubiquitous, and they are often referred to when the poem seems to reach a climax in the uniting of the lovers (2:7; 3:5; 8:4)."[217] Their call serves to "encourage the lovers to abandon themselves to sensual delight in their mutual besottedness."[218] It may be the male lover making a declaration to the world, calling out in ecstasy after a sexual union with his lover or even just an intimate moment. Likewise, it may be the female lover calling out in joy, declaring that the entire world should attempt to become drunk off a love similar to the love she shares with her lover.

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[215] Bloch and Bloch, 179.
[216] Exum, 182.
[217] Exum, 182-183.
[218] Exum, 183.

# Song 5:2-7

5:2 אֲנִי יְשֵׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר קוֹל | דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק פִּתְחִי־לִי אֲחֹתִי רַעְיָתִי יוֹנָתִי תַמָּתִי
שֶׁרֹּאשִׁי נִמְלָא־טָל קְוֻצּוֹתַי רְסִיסֵי לָיְלָה׃
5:3 פָּשַׁטְתִּי אֶת־כֻּתָּנְתִּי אֵיכָכָה אֶלְבָּשֶׁנָּה רָחַצְתִּי אֶת־רַגְלַי אֵיכָכָה אֲטַנְּפֵם׃
5:4 דּוֹדִי שָׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן־הַחֹר וּמֵעַי הָמוּ עָלָיו׃
5:5 קַמְתִּי אֲנִי לְפַתֵּחַ לְדוֹדִי וְיָדַי נָטְפוּ־מֹור וְאֶצְבְּעֹתַי מֹור עֹבֵר עַל כַּפּוֹת הַמַּנְעוּל׃
5:6 פָּתַחְתִּי אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי חָמַק עָבָר נַפְשִׁי יָצְאָה בְדַבְּרוֹ בִּקַּשְׁתִּיהוּ׃
וְלֹא מְצָאתִיהוּ קְרָאתִיו וְלֹא עָנָנִי׃
5:7 מְצָאֻנִי הַשֹּׁמְרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר הִכּוּנִי פְצָעוּנִי נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־רְדִידִי מֵעָלַי שֹׁמְרֵי הַחֹמוֹת׃

## *Translation*

5:2 – I am sleeping and my heart is awake[219]; the voice[220] of my lover knocking[221];[222] "Open to me[223], my sister, my friend, my dove, my blameless one, for my head is dew-filled, my locks[224] with the drops[225] of night."

5:3 – I stripped off my robe; how[226] will I get dressed? I washed my feet; how will I dirty[227] them?

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[219] Most commonly translated as 'awake'. The root verb can mean 'to arouse, stir up, uncover'. The translation 'awake' parallels the sleep referenced earlier in the phrase.

[220] Also translated as 'sound' or as the phrase, 'Hark! My love knocks' (Pope, 501). The phrase *kol dodi* is also found in Song 2:8. The syntax of the phrase allows for multiple interpretations because in the Bible, "a voice or sound – *qol* can mean either – may be treated as an independent animate agent, able to 'cry out' [Gen. 4:10; Isa. 40:3,6], to 'break the cedars of Lebanon' [Ps. 29:5], or 'to follow' someone, as in 'no doubt the sound of his master's footsteps will follow behind' [2 Kings 6:32]. This sort of ambiguity was recognized in the traditional exegesis of Gen. 3:8…where either God, or his voice, or the sound of his walking, may be what is moving about." (Bloch & Bloch, 153)

[221] There are only two other occurrences of this verb in the Bible. In Gen. 33:13 it refers to driving cattle excessively or press on, while in Judg. 19:22, the *hitpael* form is used and refers to men hurting themselves or pushing themselves against a door (Exum, 185).

[222] The MT notation of this phrase is literally read, "Voice! My love is knocking;"

[223] It may be that this relates to opening a door, unstated in the text explicitly but implied, as in 2 Kings 15:16.

[224] The exact meaning of this word is uncertain and the only other time it is used is in Song 5:11. It probably refers to thick, heavy hair (Bloch & Bloch, 180), and may be related to a term that means 'bushy haired' in Midrash Rabbah (Pope, 513).

[225] The word's connection with 'drops' may be based on its root 'to moisten, sprinkle' as in Ezek. 46:14 and the use of the word *ressisim* in Amos 6:11 to mean 'tiny bits, splinters'. It is likely a poetic synonym for the word 'dew' mentioned earlier in the verse (Bloch & Bloch, 180-181).

[226] This form is only found in Esther 8:6 and it introduces a rhetorical question (Exum, 185).

[227] Hapax legmenon. It has the same sense of 'soiled, defiled' in Aramaic and Akkadian and in Arabic, the meaning of the simple stem is 'be suspect, corrupted' (Pope, 515). It seems to be an uncleanness that is somewhere between physical dirtiness and spiritual impurity.

5:4 – My lover sent[228] his hand into the hole and my insides[229] stirred[230] for him[231].

5:5 – I rose up to open for my lover and my hands dripped of myrrh and my fingers flowing myrrh[232] over the hand of the bolt.

5:6 – I opened to my lover, but my lover had turned away[233], was gone; my soul[234] went out[235] as he spoke[236]; I sought him and did not find him, I called to him and he did not answer me.

5:7 – The watchmen circling the city found me; they beat[237] me, they wounded[238] me; they lifted my veil[239] from me, guardians of the walls.

## *Literary Setting*

This scene takes place after what some consider is a scene of consummation. That scene at the end of chapter 4 describes the woman as a garden and a fountain that transforms

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[228] Pope translates as 'thrust', Exum as 'reached', and JPS as 'took his hand off'. Pope suggests this is a euphemism for a sexual act (Pope, 517) while others maintain it refers to a literal understanding of the male lover putting his hand through the keyhole of the door in order to try and unlock it (Bloch & Bloch, 181)

[229] The word refers to the internal organs of the body, such as the intestines and bowels, and poetically refers to the seat of emotions such as desire, excitement, or yearning (Jer. 4:19, 31:19; Ps. 42:6; Ps. 40:9; Gen. 42:28) (Bloch & Bloch, 181)

[230] This word particularly refers to animal noises, such as growling dogs or the murmur of doves, as well as the roar of the sea and the murmuring of prayer. The classic passage is Jer. 4:19 (Pope, 519) as well as Jer. 31:20.

[231] Also translated as 'because of him'.

[232] Or 'flowing myrrh', also in Song 5:13. Probably the same as the oil referred to in Esther 2:12 (Bloch & Bloch, 181). Technically, it refers to a liquid which flows out of the bark of the out of the myrrh and was highly valued (Pope, 521).

[233] The passive participle of this word is used in Song 7:2 and the only other occurrence in the Bible is in Jer. 31:21. Verbs that mean 'to pass, go away' in close succession tend to mark a quick departure and total disappearance, as in Song 2:11 (Bloch and Bloch, 182). The precise nature of the man's actions are unclear and only partially understood based on this phrase.

[234] Hebrew "*nefesh*." See comment on 3:1.

[235] In Gen, 35:18 and Ps. 146:4, this refers to death. Refer to earlier commentary in this thesis about the understanding of *nefesh*.

[236] May also mean 'at his speaking', 'when he spoke', or 'at what he said'. Pope suggests it is a verb of motion related to 'turning back' (Pope, 525-526).

[237] This can also mean 'strike' (Num. 22:23, 25; Job 16:10; Prov. 19:25; Exod. 5:14, 16; Jer. 20:2; 37:15).

[238] Can also mean 'bruise' or 'injure'. The combination of beating and wounding is also found in I Kings 20:37.

[239] Or 'shawl' or any article of light clothing. It is mentioned in Is. 3:23 as part of a list of fashionable attire worn by harlots in Jerusalem (Bloch and Bloch, 182)

from being closed and locked to open and free. Song 4:12 through 5:1 is the male lover's monologue directed at his lover, and the scene ends with what appears to be a union of sorts. In 5:2-7, the lovers are separated once again. As in the beginning of chapter 3, the woman will soon be seeking the man. Though she does not find him, after this passage, she speaks to the women of Jerusalem and describes her lover in detail (5:8-6:3), with descriptions similar to those her male companion uses to describe her throughout the Song. The women of Jerusalem agree to accompany her in the search for her lover but ask her to describe what is unique about him.

### *Intention*

Moving away from the imagery of Song 4:12-5:1, we enter the woman's bedroom in the dark of the night, a stark contrast to the sights and sounds of a garden. In addition to a shift in scenery, the narration shifts from the man to the woman. The sexual undertones and emotional sentiments give way to a form of anxiety, as we find the woman alone in her room. A similar scene occurs in the beginning of chapter 3, though with a more positive finale. In this section of the Song, at the start of chapter 5, a union between the two lovers is missed. From behind the door, the woman yearns for her lover yet her hesitation leads to his departure and an attempt to find him about the city. While she runs into the watchmen once again, as in chapter 3, this time, the encounter leads to abuse.

The narrative begins with the woman lying in bed, sleeping and yet also wide-awake. While her heart beats wildly for her lover, she is still in the passive state of sleep. Most likely, she is lying in bed thinking about her lover and anticipating his arrival or her next

rendezvous with him. But she may also be revisiting their time together in the scene that just ended, the garden scene in which she opened up to him.

Because her narration is in the present tense, and because she states that she is asleep even though her heart is awake, some scholars view this as another dream sequence. However, there does not seem to be enough evidence to support such a claim. Rather, the contrast between wakefulness and sleep seems to suggest the uninterrupted energy she feels towards her lover. Even as she sleeps, her passion is awake. As she reports, she cannot rid herself of her lover – he is ever-present. Though this particular scene indicates that she is lying in her bed, this may be a phrase that relates to everything the woman does. Is it that the feelings she has for her lover are so encompassing that she feels as though she is sleeping through the rest of her life? In other words, is it as if the rest of the world is a dream and he is her one reality?

The woman then states that the voice, or sound, of her lover is knocking. Though according to the narrative flow, this soon seems to relate to her lover knocking on her door in order to enter, it is possible that this phrase is connected with her aroused heart. The voice of her lover is what awakens her, not merely from an ordinary state of sleep, but in a more profound sense of awakening to life. Possibly, the voice of her lover is what causes her heart to beat and to knock against her chest. On the other hand, the connection to the phrase *kol dodi* in Song 2:8 is clear – "The voice of my beloved, here he comes, bounding over the mountains, jumping across the hills." Both verses reference her lover's voice as causing excitement and energy. Both connect to the lover drawing near, as if the sound of her lover is key to the intimacy they share.

Throughout the Song, the voices of the lovers declare their feelings for one another, more so than their actions. The sounds of the lovers ignite passion, increase awareness, communicate desire, offer vivid imagery, and draw the lovers near to one another. Verbal communication between the lovers is a key component of their relationship. Without direct dialogue between the two lovers, the Song would not exist. While the man "constructed his lover through the gaze, inviting her (and the poem's readers) to see herself though his eyes… she relies more heavily on the voice to construct her lover, controlling the way we view him by telling stories about him in which she puts words in his mouth."[240]

We hear the man call out to his lover from outside, imploring that she open to him, "for my head is dew-filled, my locks with the drops of night."[241] On the surface, his reasoning is linked to the cold, wet weather that has made his hair damp. On one level, we assume the man is knocking on the door of his lover's room or house, but there is no mention of a door. Therefore, his knocking and his actions suggest something more than just a request to open a door. From the previous section in which the man refers to his lover as a "locked garden," it is clear that some images and scenes in the Song refer to metaphoric situations. Therefore, one cannot disregard the possible double entendre associated with the phrase "open to me." Possibly sexual, the man calls out to his lover in an expression of his sexual desires. With such sexual references found elsewhere in the Song, it would not be surprising if this were the man's way of declaring his desires.

The use of the terms "my sister, my friend, my dove, my blameless" leads to another possible understanding of the phrase, "open to me." Perhaps "open to me" is the man's request that his lover open up all facets of her being to him. As his "sister," she connects him

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[240] Exum, 187.
[241] Song 5:2

to a history that goes beyond just the two of them. He is asking her to relate to him as someone who knows his entire past and whose roots shoot forth from the same tree. As his "friend," she offers emotional support and a certain level of commitment and trust. By opening to him as his friend, she can guide him to become a better person. As his "dove," she connects him to the natural world through an animal whose fluttering offers constant energy and whose association with being a messenger of love[242] is attractive. As his "blameless one," she represents the purity he desires in a partner. As he stated in Song 4:7, "there is no blemish on you." Her perfection relates both to her physical attributes but also to her personality and the way in which she relates to him. Through his request, "open to me," the woman hears the man asking his lover to open up all facets of her identity to him, to be complete in his presence. These terms may also give her a better understanding of what she means to her lover, as she plays many roles.

With this request, the woman is overwhelmed. Possibly, it is for this reason that she hesitates, asking the questions in verse 3. His forward and encompassing request may have triggered something within the woman that causes her to hold back a little. Complete exposure and openness can be scary and the woman may have been caught off-guard. Having made her preparations for bed, she is startled by her lover's request, the word "what" being used to support this claim. The only other place this form of the interrogative participle is used is in Esther 8:6 (also twice) and it expresses astonishment and indignation.[243] The contrast between privacy and propriety are highlighted in verse 3,[244] as the removal of her robe indicates her vulnerability. Or possibly, as Keel notes, the

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[242] Keel, 103.
[243] Keel, 189.
[244] Landy, 254.

questioning in verse 3 may be her reproach to her lover for not coming earlier; a kind of teasing or revenge for his late arrival.[245]

Her lover sends his hand into the hole in verse 4, and as Exum notes, many commentators suggest this is a euphemism for a sexual union between the lovers.[246] Coming soon after the lovers' encounter at the end of chapter 4, the link to sexual activity seems quite plausible. The use of the root of the verb "to send" in 5:4 may be related to its use in Song 4:13, where it refers to "your branches" or "your limbs," referencing the expansiveness of the woman's influence over the man[247]. The woman's use of the verb in 5:4 may be a form of her recognition of her lover's message when he referred to her as שְׁלָחַיִךְ. Just as he viewed her as the spreading branches of a tree, so too does she recognize his ability to influence her, possibly even sexually.

The word הָמָה meaning "yearn" or "stir" is used in both Song 5:4 and Jeremiah 31:20, which states, "Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, my thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why my heart *yearns* for him; I will receive him back in love —declares Adonai."[248] The word usually refers to animal noises, such as growling[249] but in the two cases cited above, the yearning seems to relate to something well beyond the sounds of animals. God's yearning for the Jewish people is described in the same language as the woman's yearning for her lover. The yearning is primal and eternal, and it is more powerful than anything else in the world. In the Song, as in 5:4, emotions have the power to impact the lover's entire being. The lover's emotions go to

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[245] Keel, 190.
[246] Exum, 195.
[247] See discussion about Song 4:12-5:1 for more about the word שְׁלָחַיִךְ
[248] JPS translation.
[249] Pope, 519.

the very core of her being, reaching the most instinctual and animalistic aspect of herself. This may be the connection between the lover's yearning and the Hebrew word's root of "growling" or "roaring" associated with animal sounds.

After some hesitation, the woman rises up to "open" for her lover as the fragrance of intimacy, in the form of myrrh, fills the air. The scene tends to be understood literally, with the woman getting up out of bed and going to the door to let her lover in.[250] With hands dripping of myrrh, the scene may also suggest, "the intimacy of touches, caresses, and bodily fluids that feature in lovemaking."[251] Earlier in the Song, in 2:10, her lover bade her to rise up and go forth, though we do not read of any action on the woman's part to respond to this request. This time, in contrast, she demurs at first but then attempts to engage in opening to her lover. After her hesitation in verse 3 and her lover reaching out to her in verse 4, she seems to feel secure enough to open up. She consents to become all that her lover requested her to be – his "sister," his "friend," his "dove," and his "blameless." The scene illustrates the challenge of finding the point at which two lovers are willing to open up to each other at the same time. In the Song, the woman's hesitation is long enough to cause a missed opportunity, because by the time the woman opens the door, her lover is gone. Possibly, this scene illustrates one of the biggest challenges of any loving relationship. One's willingness to open up is intertwined with the lover's ability to open up as well. More often that not, one lover's openness or readiness does not correspond with his or her partner's ability or willingness to open up in return.

With the missed opportunity for complete mutual openness, the woman, in turn, attempts to connect with her lover but he has turned away and gone. Her reaction is to state

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[250] Exum, 195.
[251] Exum, 196.

that her "*nefesh* went out", understood by various commentators as a sign of her bewilderment, disappointment or longing.[252] In Genesis, the going out of the *nefesh* (often translated as "soul" or "being") refers to Rachel's last breath before her death[253] and similarly, the woman, in Song 5:6, may be expressing her own sense of death. With her lover no longer in her presence, she feels an emptiness that touches the deepest part of her being – her *nefesh*. In Song 3:1, the woman refers to her *nefesh* as she seeks her lover. The *nefesh* seems to be invoked when the lovers are separate, not when they are holding each other. The *nefesh*, therefore, seems to be exposed in absence. In other words, when the lovers are together, the *nefesh* is hidden by the overt expressions of love and commitment. However, when two lovers are physically (or emotionally) distant, the *nefesh* is exposed. The *nefesh,* based on this definition, is the seat of true devotion and love. While the lovers describe their feelings for one another through concrete metaphor when they are in each other's presence (descriptions of the body, etc.), there is only one word necessary to express the missing piece when they are apart. The *nefesh* encompasses a person's entire expression of love for another. It is for this reason that the woman seeks and calls to her lover in verse 6.

In her seeking, the watchmen of the city find her, beat her, wound her, and embarrass her. This is in contrast to her previous interaction with the watchmen in chapter 3. Additionally, in contrast to chapter 3, this time, she is not reunited with her lover. In chapter 3, the woman relates her decision to go out into the streets to find her lover and describes her dialogue with the watchmen. Here, however, she is abruptly found amongst the watchmen

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[252] Ibid.
[253] Gen. 35:18 – "But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin."

and there is no dialogue. The severity of the attack on the woman is ambiguous, though the combination of physical acts, including the lifting of her veil, suggests a "contemptuous act of exposure."[254] The literal explanation, supported by Keel, posits that the watchmen mistook the woman for a harlot and responded appropriately, in line with the culture of the time.[255] However, as Exum points out, there is no historical indication that a woman would be treated so ruthlessly and that this scene reminds us that we are reading a poem and not a historically accurate tale.[256] While the verse may be interpreted as serving as a caution against women conducting themselves freely in search of love,[257] it is more likely that it speaks of the challenges of love. Exum suggests, "perhaps demonstrating one's love by undergoing hardship was a culturally recognized experience that the Song represents here poetically."[258]

More so than the personal trials one undergoes in the pursuit of a loving relationship, the watchmen may represent the culture at large, impeding the uniting of two lovers. The verse ends with a description of the watchmen as "guardians of the wall," a description not used in the woman's other encounter with them in chapter 3. The use of the word הַחֹמוֹת suggests more than just a wall, but rather, the fortifications of the city. The woman may have been perceived, or perceives herself, as one attempting to violate the boundaries of the city, unlike her previous encounter with the watchmen. Defining the watchmen as "keepers of the boundaries" suggests that the woman was violating the societal norms. After opening herself up to her lover only to learn that he had turned away, she seeks him out but without regard

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[254] Exum, 197.
[255] Keel, 195.
[256] Exum, 198.
[257] Exum, 199.
[258] Ibid.

for societal boundaries. The watchmen's suppression of her love's expression may be reflecting the view that the lovers are perceived as a danger to society. The lovers, throughout the Song, express themselves in ways that may be seen as extreme or inappropriate. This is one of the reasons that the rabbis preferred to view the Song as an allegorical love poem between God and Israel. Instead of the suffering one must undergo to seek love, this verse may be a warning against the societal barriers to healthy expressions of love. Societal norms may impede the ability for two lovers to join together, yet as the Song suggests, there are ways to overcome these challenges, for the lovers are reunited later in the Song.

# Song 5:10-16

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|---|---|
| 5:10 | דּוֹדִי צַח וְאָדוֹם דָּגוּל מֵרְבָבָה׃ |
| 5:11 | רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז קְוֻצּוֹתָיו תַּלְתַּלִּים שְׁחֹרוֹת כָּעוֹרֵב׃ |
| 5:12 | עֵינָיו כְּיוֹנִים עַל־אֲפִיקֵי מָיִם רְחֲצוֹת בֶּחָלָב יֹשְׁבוֹת עַל־מִלֵּאת׃ |
| 5:13 | לְחָיָו כַּעֲרוּגַת הַבֹּשֶׂם מִגְדְּלוֹת מֶרְקָחִים שִׂפְתוֹתָיו שֽׁוֹשַׁנִּים נֹטְפוֹת מֹר עֹבֵר׃ |
| 5:14 | יָדָיו גְּלִילֵי זָהָב מְמֻלָּאִים בַּתַּרְשִׁישׁ מֵעָיו עֶשֶׁת שֵׁן מְעֻלֶּפֶת סַפִּירִים׃ |
| 5:15 | שׁוֹקָיו עַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מְיֻסָּדִים עַל־אַדְנֵי־פָז מַרְאֵהוּ כַּלְּבָנוֹן בָּחוּר כָּאֲרָזִים׃ |
| 5:16 | חִכּוֹ מַמְתַקִּים וְכֻלּוֹ מַחֲמַדִּים זֶה דוֹדִי וְזֶה רֵעִי בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלָ͏ִם׃ |

## *Translation*

5:10 – My lover is radiant[259] and ruddy[260], conspicuous[261] among the myriad[262].

5:11 – His head is pure gold[263], his locks [of hair] are luxuriant[264], black[265] like the raven[266].

5:12 – His eyes are like doves by watercourses[267], bathing in milk, sitting among bathing pools[268].

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[259] The adjective צַח is used in Isa. 8:14 and Jer. 4:11 to describe hot, shimmering air and in Isa. 32:4 for clear, lucid speech. In Arabic, it is used primarily to describe health and glowing complexion (Pope, 531). Based on the reference to precious stones and metals later in the passage, the term 'radiant' seems appropriate here.

[260] One's face as having a healthy, red color. This is a regular adjective used for the color red as applied to blood in II Kings 3:22, the juice of grapes in Isa 63:2, pottage in Gen. 25:30, a cow in Num. 19:2, and a horse in Zech 1:8, 6:2 (Pope, 531). Bloch and Bloch translate this phrase as 'milk and wine' because both as associated with "health, youthful strength, earthiness, and marvelous fertility" in the Bible, as in Gen. 49:11-12 and Joel 4:18 (Bloch & Bloch, 185). Milk and wine also evoke sweetness and intoxicating sensuality, according to Bloch and Bloch.

[261] Related to *degel*, meaning 'banner' as in Song 2:4. Translated as "chiefest" (KJ), "distinguished" (NRSV), "preeminent" (JPS), and "outstanding" (NJV). Exum suggests "He stands out" to capture the sense that he is distinguishable from others and visually distinctive (Exum, 203).

[262] Apart from the word 'innumerable', a 'myriad' is the largest number offered in the Bible (Pope, 532). It designates an exceedingly large number as in Deut. 33:2, 17; I Sam 18:7; Mic 6:7; Pss 3:6; 91:7.

[263] Both words, כֶּתֶם פָּז refer to special kinds of gold and the combination of the two words is not found elsewhere (Pope, 534). Referencing I King 10:18 and II Chron. 9:17 suggest the term 'pure gold' for this combination.

[264] Hapax legomenon but occurs in rabbinic writings as 'curls' in connection to 'locks'. Based on the Akkadian word *taltallu*, Fox translates this as "fronds of a date palm" (Bloch & Bloch, 185) while Pope mentions its similar pattern to three other hapax legomena which designate shoots or branches – Isa. 18:5; Jer. 6:9; 7:9 (Pope, 536).

[265] Same as the word used in Song 1:5, 6. This is the usual word used for blackness. Pope links the word to youthfulness and childhood, based on Eccl. 11:10 as well as Muslim literature (Pope, 536)

[266] This is the only time a raven's blackness is mentioned, as opposed to its uncleanness (Lev. 11:15; Deut. 14:14) or its role as a scavenger (Prov. 30:17; Job 38:41) (Pope, 537).

[267] A brook, stream, or artificially constructed water channel.

5:13 – His cheeks[269] like beds[270] of spices, towers[271] of perfume; his lips lilies[272] dripping myrrh and nard[273].

5:14 – His arms[274] rods[275] of gold, inlaid with *tarshish* [precious stones][276], his loins[277] smooth[278] ivory[279] covered in sapphires[280].

5:15 – His legs are pillars of marble[281] set upon gold pedestals[282], his appearance like Lebanon, a young man[283] like cedars.

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[268] KJV and NRSV translate as "fitly set" and NIV translates as "mounted like jewels", based on מְקֻלָּאת referring to the setting or inlay of precious stones in Ex. 25:7; 28:17; 35:9, 27; 39:13, and I Chron. 29:2 (Exum, 205). However, the context seems to favor dove baths and other translations reflect this, including "at rest on a pool" (JB), "Set by a brimming pool" (JPSV) and "as they sit where water is drawn" (NEB).

[269] Same word used to describe the woman's cheek in Song 1:10.

[270] Some commentators note the plural form of the word (Pope, 540) while others disregard the importance of translating in the plural form (Bloch and Bloch, 186).

[271] Pope and Exum read the word as a verb as opposed to the MT's reading of it as a noun (*megaddelot* vs. *migdelot*). This is based on the root of the word associated with growing plants and children, leading them to translate the phrase as "pouring forth" or "burgeoning". Other translations include "yielding fragrance" (NRSV), "yielding perfume" (NIV), "putting forth aromatic blossoms" (Murphy), or "burgeoning aromatics" (Pope).

[272] Lilies are also mentioned in Song 2:1, 16; 4:5; 6:2; 7:3.

[273] Also mentioned in Song 5:5.

[274] Though literally 'hands', biblical usage of the word can mean the area from the fingers to the armpit and shoulder (Pope, 542) – Gen. 24:30, 47; Ezek. 16:11; 23:14; Jer. 38:12.

[275] In I Kings 6:34, the term refers to part of the doors of the inner sanctuary of Solomon's Temple, with the only other biblical reference found in Esther 1:6, where the word is connected to the fastening of curtains and draperies in the royal palace (Pope, 542).

[276] *Tarshish* is both the name of a city, as mentioned in the book of Jonah, as well as a precious stone of unknown nature. It is mentioned in Ex. 28:20, 39:13; Ezek. 1:16, 10:9, 28:13; and Dan. 10:6.

[277] Translated as "insides" in Song 5:4. The word refers to the internal organs of the body, such as the intestines and bowels, and poetically refers to the seat of emotions such as desire, excitement, or yearning (Jer. 4:19, 31:19; Ps. 42:6; Ps. 40:9; Gen. 42:28) (Bloch & Bloch, 181).

[278] Hapax legomenon. In Mishnaic Hebrew it refers to a work of artistic craftsmanship, specifically a polished block or bar (Bloch & Bloch, 187). The verb form is used in Jer. 5:28 where it means "become fat" and therefore, loosely connected to smoothness and sleekness (Pope, 543-544).

[279] The word also means 'teeth', and in this case, referring to the tooth of an elephant (ivory) (Pope, 544). Ivory is not just plain white, but also includes "rosy flesh tones, treasured in ancient Israel as a rare and beautiful material" (Bloch & Bloch, 187). Referenced in Amos 3:15, 6:4; I Kings 22:39, Ps. 45:9.

[280] Some translations suggest "lapis lazuli" (Exum, Bloch & Bloch).

[281] Or possible "alabaster".

[282] The term designates various sorts of sockets, bases, and pedestals used of the bases for the frames of the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:19), the bases of pillars (Ex. 27:11; Num. 3:36), and the foundation of the earth (Job 38:6) (Pope, 546).

[283] Understands the word as a noun as in Deut. 32:25; Amos 2:11, Eccles. 11:9. Bloch & Bloch recognize "distinguished" as another possible translation (Bloch & Bloch, 188) while Pope suggests "choice" (Pope, 546).

5:16 – His mouth[284] is sweet[285] and all of him is desirable[286]; this is my lover and this is my friend[287], daughters of Jerusalem.

## *Literary Setting*

This chapter of the Song began with the woman's search for her lover, leading her to a troubling encounter with the watchmen who abuse her in some fashion. That scene is a repetition of the "seek and find" theme that previously occurred in chapter 3, but without the "finding" part. After the assault by the watchmen of the walls, the woman enlists the women of Jerusalem to help her find her lover. The women respond by asking her to clarify what makes her lover special, what sets him apart from the rest. It is to this question that the woman responds in the current verses, elaborating on her lover's physical attributes and in the process, relaying to the audience why her lover is unique and how she perceives him. Her description closes chapter 5 and chapter 6 begins with the women of Jerusalem asking the woman where her lover has gone. She indicates that he has "gone down to his garden," and in Song 6:3, declares the lovers' mutuality with, "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me."

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[284] The word designates the inside of the mouth, the gums and the palate, as the origin of taste and speech (Pope, 549).
[285] The word is used in a similar way to Neh. 8:10, where it refers to sweet wine.
[286] Referring to taste and not aesthetic, though the word is used in Ezek. 24:16 to refer to the "desire of your eyes."
[287] Or "companion", "neighbor", or "mate". It is frequently used in expressions of reciprocity (Pope, 549) and this is the only time the woman uses this term while the man uses it throughout the Song to describe his lover (Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4).

## *Intention*

On request from the women of Jerusalem to describe her lover's unique characteristics (5:10), the female lover literally describes him from head to toe. Throughout the Song, the man offers descriptions of his female lover when speaking to her; but here, as the woman describes her lover, she does so in third person, speaking to the women of Jerusalem and not to her lover. This has the effect of offering a new perspective on the lovers, for we are no longer listening in on a private conversation. The reader now becomes a partner with the women of Jerusalem in hearing the description. And yet, by characterizing her lover to a larger audience, we have to assume that part of the intimacy may be missing, for she may not reveal all of her emotions and thoughts to outsiders. Still, the woman's words attempt to bring us into her world while she is describing her lover's uniqueness and beauty.

Her description encompasses his entire body, moving from his head to his toes, with thirteen cola devoted to his head and face, six to his torso, and two couplets devoted to praising him in his entirety.[288] Her description centers on precious metals, including gold and precious stones, all of which seem to focus the reader on the man's value more so than his physical beauty. While she describes some of the same body parts as he uses in his description of her (eyes, hair, lips, mouth), her comparisons differ from his. In Song 4:3, he describes her mouth as "lovely" while she describes his mouth as "sweet" in 5:16. While he concludes that "all of you is beautiful" (Song 4:7), she declares, "all of him is desirable" (Song 5:16). As Exum points out, "he concentrates on the outward appearance (lovely, beautiful), she on what he is to her. His mouth is not sweet in itself, and to say that he is

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[288] Exum, 202.

desirable means that *she* desires him."[289] Therefore, while the man's focus is on highlighting the physical attributes of his lover, the woman seems to be using the physical description to emphasize her lover's value to her.

The woman begins by highlighting her lover's uniqueness. Not only does his skin show his youth and fine coloring (he is "radiant and ruddy"), but also he stands out amongst the masses. She is attracted to his uniqueness. He is not like other men. In particular, his physical attributes are secondary to something deeper within him. His radiance does not only apply to his countenance, but she seems to be suggesting that his physical appearance is linked to his personality. It is this mix of physical and emotional beauty that allows him to stand out among the myriads. Bloch and Bloch translate the beginning of Song 5:10 as "my beloved is milk and wine" in order to capture the "sweetness and intoxicating sensuality" that seems to flow through this verse, as milk and wine "are associated with health, youthful strength, earthiness, and marvelous fertility."[290] As Adler points out, "the lovers imbibe each other thirstily."[291] Wine and milk, both mentioned throughout the Song, (1:2, 4; 4:10, 11; 5:1, 12; 7:3, 10; 8:2), characterize red and white, which speak to the purity and eroticism that constantly occupy the lovers. Descriptions and actions speak to a love that is idyllic, and even possibly perceived as innocent, while currents of erotic pleasure also flow throughout the Song. In the Song, love is intoxicating but it is also life giving. It can blur the line between reality and fantasy but it can also reflect the motherly love that sustains a growing human being.

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[289] Exum, 203.
[290] Bloch and Bloch, 185.
[291] Adler, 138.

Song 5:11 through 5:13 focus on the man's head, including his hair, eyes, cheeks, and lips. The woman begins her description by stating that her lover's entire head is "pure gold" and like gold, "the man is rare, precious, and desired for his worth and beauty."[292] This is the first of many associations the woman makes between her lover and precious, valuable metals. His hair, she announces, is "black like the raven," and while the raven is usually associated with impurity, as in passages in Leviticus, as well as its identity as a scavenger,[293] the woman uses the raven to show the complexity of her lover. While in the following verse she compares his eyes to doves who bathe in milk, her lover's hair highlights another side of her lover. His eyes do not only show his gentleness and his peaceful qualities, but he also possesses a wild side. Possibly, her reference to the raven suggests his sexual prowess. As Keel points out, "While gold, as the purest and most cultured material known to humankind, is the stuff of which the gods are made, the black raven belongs to the realm of the hairy goat-spirits and the wild demons (Isa. 34:11; Zeph. 2:14). In the context of the descriptive song, it depicts the mysterious and uncanny side of the beloved."[294] The doves, who bathe in milk and among waterways full of water, suggest happy times of abundance, especially since most waterbeds in Israel remain dry for most of the year.[295] The raven and dove, therefore, show the complexity of the lover. He has the ability to be devious and mysterious while simultaneously his eyes express his ability to be gentle, loving, and reassuring (note, too, their role in the story of Noah in Gen 8:7-12, where they signal the end of the Flood).

5:13 focuses on the man's cheeks and lips, adding his scent to the visual images of previous verses. Myrrh and nard, mentioned in this verse, have been mentioned in other

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[292] Exum, 204.
[293] Pope, 537.
[294] Keel, 199.
[295] Ibid.

places of the Song[296] and tend to have a sexual connotation associated with them. Because both lovers mention myrrh when describing the other, we gain a sense of their mutuality through this spice. The woman goes even further by rephrasing her description of her lover's scent as if to say "a bed of...no, towers of!"[297] suggesting that his scent is almost indescribable and grows stronger in her presence. Her description of the spices goes from the singular to the plural, adding to the image of "abundant and palpable fragrance."[298] Additionally, referencing towers links the woman's description of her lover with his description of her in which he likens her neck to the Tower of David in Song 4:4 and again in 7:4. Like gold, spices were considered precious and kept in special storehouses with other valuables.[299]

As the woman continues describing her lover, she does so with consistency for the value he holds from her perspective. Shifting from his head and face to his body, the woman indicates a shift in energy. The man's face is alive with activity, eyes that dart like doves in a bath, hair that moves with the agility of the raven, and lips which ooze exotic scents. The rest of the man's body is statuesque and solid, lacking the movement and energy of his face. In this way, the woman describes her lover's strength as resting not only in his shapely and hard body, but also in the attentiveness and liveliness of his face.

Having focused on his visage for most of the verses, the woman now moves downwards, describing her lover's arms and torso. Witnessing her use of gold, precious stones and other materials to describe these parts of his body, we begin to see the man as a beautiful statue or at least some form of architectural magnificence. Keel notes that

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[296] Myrrh is mentioned in Song 1:13; 3:6; 4:6; 5:1, 5, 13 while nard is also mentioned in Song 5:5.
[297] Bloch and Bloch, 186.
[298] Exum, 205.
[299] Bloch and Bloch, 186.

descriptions of this kind are linked with descriptions of gods, which were also made of the finest materials.[300] As Exum points out, "his body is also hard, solid: his hands are rods of gold, his torso an ivory bar, his legs marble pillars on gold pedestals."[301] These are images of strength and stability as well as luxury, and as Eskenazi indicates, "to say he is 'precious' to her is an understatement."[302] Beyond describing her lover's physical attributes, she is describing her lover's body as she experiences it.[303] Focus on the hands or arms (it is unclear whether or not the verse refers only to the hand or the entire arm) may be related to the lover's touch, the power of which invigorates the woman. The woman's description of her lover has less to do with his physical beauty, "not the purity, the divinity, or the artistry of these materials"[304] and more to do with the value he holds.

This is punctuated by her description of his torso, or "loins", in verse 14. Earlier in chapter 5, the woman describes her "insides" as stirring for her lover, connoting the intense emotional attachment she feels towards him, especially in his absence. Now, she describes his "insides" as "smooth ivory, covered with sapphires." Some commentators believe the reference to ivory and precious stones refers to the color of the man's skin, the clothing he wears, or his genitals,[305] but by linking the use of the word מֵעָיו in verse 14 to וּמֵעַי in verse 4, the connotation seems to be more emotionally and sexually based than physically representative of the man. Just as she yearns for him from the deepest place within her, his

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[300] Keel, 202.
[301] Exum, 207.
[302] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[303] Exum, 207.
[304] Keel, 204.
[305] Exum, 208.

insides shine with the luminescence of ivory and the sparkle of precious stones. Her yearning is closely tied to his yearning for her, "but he is calm where she is stirred."[306]

The woman's description of her lover concludes with his legs and feet, which are likened to marble on gold pedestals. Though this continues to equate her lover with a fine statue of great value, it also adds an allusion to the Temple and to the abundance of Lebanon (a connotation that the rabbis explore when they apply these descriptions to the Temple or the Tabernacle). In I Chronicles 29:2, marble is among the materials collected to build the Temple and the word אַדְנֵי־פָז "pedestals of gold" designates the sockets or pedestals used for the frames of the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:19) and the foundations of the earth (Job 38:6).[307] Additionally, cedars from Lebanon adorned the Temple as a component of the roof, annexes, and walls, as noted in I Kings.[308] By connecting the building blocks of the Temple to her lover, the woman is elevating him to unprecedented heights. He is, according to her description, made of the same materials by which God ordained the building of the Temple. He holds within him the architecture of God's dwelling place on earth.

Just as the man concludes his description of his lover by stating "all of you is beautiful, my friend,"[309] she concludes her description of him by stating, "all of him is desirable; this is my lover and this is my friend."[310] Summing up her lover's attributes for the woman of Jerusalem, the woman shows their mutual desire and attraction by using parallel statements to describe the relationship. Additionally, she focuses on his sexual and emotional desirability, not just his physical beauty. He is not just her lover, but also her

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[306] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[307] Pope, 546.
[308] I Kings 6:9, 10, 15, 16, 18.
[309] Song 4:7
[310] Song 5:16

friend. This is the only time in the Song where the woman describes her lover as such, whereas the rest of the Song is full of the man's references to his lover as his "friend."[311] The term is frequently used in "expressions of reciprocity,"[312] and the woman's use of the term in verse 16 signifies, once again, mutuality among the lovers. Not only do they swoon at the sight of the other, but also they recognize the many identities with which they view one another. Not just objects of sexual pleasure or someone beyond the ordinary, the lovers also perceive one another as companions.

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[311] Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4.
[312] Pope, 549.

# Song 6:3

6:3 אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי הָרֹעֶה בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים׃

## *Translation*

6:3 – I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me, pasturing[313] among the lilies.

## *Literary Setting*

This verse concludes the woman's conversation with the women of Jerusalem, ending her description of her lover. Earlier, after describing her lover in detail in Song 5:10-16, the women of Jerusalem ask her where her lover is, to which she responds that he is in his garden, "to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies."[314] The woman's separation from her lover ends at this verse and it is followed by the man's description of her, paralleling an earlier description in the beginning of chapter 4. Just as she praised his physical attributes in 5:10-16, so in 6:4-9 the man praises his lover's body. Exum treats Song 6:4 through Song 7:9 as the man's second long speech, including two descriptions by the man and one short "cryptic first-person narrative about a visit to the nut garden" of which the identity of the speaker is questionable.[315] When the woman was looking for her lover in the beginning of chapter 5, it was because he had left suddenly. As noted earlier, that section describes an experience which may have been a dream or an actual missed encounter. Either way, it suggests uncertainty. This makes the man's adoring description of the woman in the verses that follow all the more significant. They affirm his commitment to her as he celebrates her

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[313] Can also be translated as "to tend" (for flocks) or "to graze, feed" (referring to sheep) as in Ex. 34:3 (Bloch and Bloch, 157).
[314] Song 6:2.
[315] Exum, 214.

attractiveness. 6:3, then, give us her concluding comment after having experienced a sense of loss.

### *Intention*

This verse is the "classic solidarity formula"[316] in which one lover expresses his/her mutual love, affection, and commitment to the other. The same verse is found in Song 2:16 but with the inverse of the first clause ("My beloved is to me and I am to him"). Its use here solidifies the sense of mutuality between the lovers. Keel likens it to Gen. 2:23 ("This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.") because it "expresses the feeling of deepest and most intimate connectedness."[317] The verse implies a sense of mutual possession, in which one lover does not hold more power or control over the other. The fact that this is the inverse of Song 2:16 expresses the woman's understanding that just as she is completely committed to her lover, he is just as committed to her. This recognition is key for creating equality in the lovers' relationship.

Additionally, the woman's lover pastures among the lilies, which Keel compares to ancient Canaanite and Egyptian tales of gods in which lotus flowers signal life-renewing power.[318] The image of the lily leads to the verse's use of double entendre, drawing on the sexual implications of the two lovers joining together. This is especially apparent because of the continual connection between the woman's body, her lover's lips, her lover's actions, and lilies throughout the Song.[319] "Pasturing among the lilies" suggests, at the very least, his exploration of her body. As Landy points out (using "Lover" to designate the man and

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[316] Keel, 114.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.
[319] Song 4:5; 5:13; 6:2; 7:3.

"Beloved" for the woman), "the fawn is a persona of the Lover (2:9, 17; 8:14), the lily of the Beloved (2:1); the fawn nibbling among the lilies is a lover metaphorically feeding among women...[Song 6:3] amounts to an affirmation that she possesses him, absolutely and mutually, even though he is 'he who feeds among the lilies.'"[320] In fact, despite the fact that her lover is able to "pasture" among the greater female population, he is committed to her just as much as she is committed to him. Despite the freedom offered to the man by a male-dominated society, he does not use this position against his lover.

This verse completes the woman's search for her lover. Now that she has found him, Exum writes, "the woman excludes her companions and the poem's readers from the garden of intimacy. 'I am my lover's and my lover is mine,' the refrain of mutual possession, expressed the lovers' total absorption in each other and leaves no room for company."[321] Having described her lover to the women of Jerusalem, the woman is now ready to reunite, privately, with her lover. For this reason, we perceive in the Song the ability of the lovers to express their feelings for each other to the greater community, yet come to recognize the importance and need for privacy.

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[320] Landy, 203.
[321] Exum, 210.

## Song 7:9-14

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| 7:9 אָמַרְתִּי אֶעֱלֶה בְתָמָר אֹחֲזָה בְּסַנְסִנָּיו וְיִהְיוּ־נָא שָׁדַיִךְ כְּאֶשְׁכְּלוֹת הַגֶּפֶן |
| וְרֵיחַ אַפֵּךְ כַּתַּפּוּחִים: |
| 7:10 וְחִכֵּךְ כְּיֵין הַטּוֹב הוֹלֵךְ לְדוֹדִי לְמֵישָׁרִים דּוֹבֵב שִׂפְתֵי יְשֵׁנִים: |
| 7:11 אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְעָלַי תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ: |
| 7:12 לְכָה דוֹדִי נֵצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה נָלִינָה בַּכְּפָרִים: |
| 7:13 נַשְׁכִּימָה לַכְּרָמִים נִרְאֶה אִם פָּרְחָה הַגֶּפֶן פִּתַּח הַסְּמָדַר הֵנֵצוּ הָרִמּוֹנִים שָׁם |
| אֶתֵּן אֶת־דֹּדַי לָךְ: |
| 7:14 הַדּוּדָאִים נָתְנוּ־רֵיחַ וְעַל־פְּתָחֵינוּ כָּל־מְגָדִים חֲדָשִׁים גַּם־יְשָׁנִים דּוֹדִי צָפַנְתִּי לָךְ: |

### *Translation*

7:9 – "I said[322], I will climb up[323] the palm tree[324] and I will grasp[325] its branches,[326] like clusters of the vine; and the scent of your breath[327] like apricots/apples[328].

7:10 – And your mouth[329] like good wine" –

"flowing[330] to my lover[331] smoothly[332], rousing lips of the sleeping.[333]

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[322] In the sense of "I thought" as in Gen. 20:11, 44:28. This is a rhetorical device common in the Bible to indicate an inner thought process. The phrase "I said in my heart" is found in Ecclesiastes and Isaiah – Eccl. 1:16, 2:1, 3:17, 18; Isa 14:13, 49:21. (Bloch & Bloch, 205) Can be translated as "I thought". It could also apply to the present or the immediate future. (Pope, 635)

[323] Lit. "go up". Pope points out that this is the cohortative or voluntative form and therefore, indicates intense feeling. (Pope, 635)

[324] Lit. "palm" but the word "tree" is implied.

[325] Or "lay hold on"; the preposition *bet* used with this verb indicates "a certain vivacity or violence" as in Ex. 4:4; Judg. 16:3; II Sam. 4:10. (Pope, 635-636)

[326] The term occurs only here but a variant is found in Jer. 6:9 where it refers to branches or tendrils of a vine. (Pope, 636)

[327] Lit. "scent of your nose". Pope translates this as "scent of your vulva" based on Ugaritic writings. (Pope, 636-637) Exum translates as "scent of your breath." (Exum, 212) Bloch and Bloch link the nose to the source of breath and find support in the common Biblical phrase "breath of his nose" in Gen. 2:7, 7:22; Isa. 2:22; 2 Sam. 22:16; Ps. 18:16. Additionally, they point out that "nose" may be a metonymy (called by the name of something intimately associated with that thing) for "breath" as in Isa. 52:7. (Bloch & Bloch, 206)

[328] It is not clear if the Hebrew word is associated with apples or apricots, which were abundant in the land of Israel during that time period.

[329] Lit. "palate". The word designates the inside of the mouth, the gums and the palate, as the origin of taste and speech. (Pope, 549) KJ translate as "the roof of your mouth", AT as "palate", Gordis as "thy kiss", JB as "your speaking", NEB as "your whisper", and JPSV and NAB as "your mouth". (Pope, 638)

[330] The woman now takes over as the speaker. This verb is "used of the movement of liquids both in the Bible and in Ugaritic; cf. Eccles. 1:7; Joel [3E] and especially Prov. 23:31 where it is applies to smooth flowing wine." (Pope, 639)

7:11 – I am my beloved's and his desire[334] is for me.

7:12 – Go, my beloved, let us go to the field; stay overnight among the henna bushes[335].

7:13 – Let us rise early to the vineyards; we will see if the vine budded, the vine blossom[336] opened, the pomegranates bloomed; there I will give you my love.

7:14 – The mandrakes[337] have given off a scent and at our openings[338] are all choice things[339], new and old, my beloved, I have stored away[340] for you."

## *Literary Setting*

Prior to this section, the man gives two speeches of descriptive praise (6:4-10 and 7:1-10), highlighting his lover's perfection from head to toe and again from toes to head. He first goes through this litany of praises in chapter 4 (4:1-9) but clearly, the repetition of such

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[331] Gordis suggests "to lovers" based on his understanding that *ledodi* is an apocopated plural for *ledodim*, as in Isa. 5:1. (Pope, 639) The use of this word also adds support that the woman is now the speaker since she uses this term to describe her lover throughout the Song.

[332] The word is also found in Song 1:4. It frequently refers to ethical rightness (lsa. 33:15; 45:19; Ps. 9:8; 96:10, 98:9) but it is connected to wine in this verse as well as in Prov. 23:31 where it is understood to describe wine that flows 'smoothly.' (Exum, 96) Gordis posits "that gives power" or "for strength" as possible translations. (Pope, 640)

[333] Bloch and Bloch translate the phrase as "rousing him even from sleep", Exum as "gliding over my lips and teeth", and Pope as "stirring sleepers' lips". Rashi and Ibn Ezra suggest "[wine] that causes the lips of those that are asleep to speak or move." (Bloch & Bloch, 206) This form of דּוֹבֵב is hapax legomenon and Pope states that "the choice between 'speaking' or 'flowing' is determined by the reading of the last word of the line." (Pope, 640)

[334] This word is only used in two other places in the Bible – Gen. 3:16 and 4:7.

[335] Some translate as "in the villages" based on I Chron. 27:25. Bloch and Bloch draw a parallel between Song 1:13-14 and Song 7:12-13 in order to translate the phrase as "lie all night among the flowering henna." (Bloch & Bloch, 207) Pope points out, "one does not go out to the field in order to lodge in a village" as support against the use of 'village' as the translation for בַּכְּפָרִים.

[336] The word סְמָדַר is also found in Song 2:13 and 2:15. The word is used only in the Song as a collective noun for buds or blossoms of the vine. (Bloch & Bloch, 208)

[337] The only other occurrence of this word is in Gen. 30:14-16. Another name is "mandragora."

[338] Though the literal translation is 'our openings', most commentators choose to translate this as "our doors", referring to the doors of homes.

[339] The word only occurs in Deut. 33:13-16 in the singular, referring to the choicest bounties given to humanity by nature. (Bloch & Bloch, 208) It is mentioned in Song 4:13, 16 in association with fruits, so the reference in this verse probably refers to choicest fruits.

[340] The verb means "to hide, treasure up".

praise is important to the man and to the sequence of the passages. His reaffirmation of her special beauty gains significance after the unsettling search and uncertainties of 5:2-8. The descriptions are not just physical descriptions, "the man does not just look. He loses himself in the vision of beauty he sees before him when he surveys the body of the woman he loves."[341] Just as in chapter 4, the man ends his speech this time with a metaphor of his lover as something of which he hopes to partake. In chapter 4, she was a garden of delicacies and in 7:9, she is a palm tree he will climb. Within the man's speech that precedes his lover's interruption in 7:10, there are snippets of dialogue, a central component of the Song. In 6:11-12 she mentions the nut garden, she may be the speaker in 7:1, and she may also be the speaker again in the obscure line about smoothly flowing wine in 7:10.[342] By including the woman's voice in the man's long speech, "the poet further ensures that genuine dialogue is always maintained."[343]

Following this section, the lovers engage in a series of shorter speeches, where voices of the lovers and the women of Jerusalem intermingle among abrupt transitions. In chapter 8, these interactions about the various aspects of love are categorized by Exum as follows: "its determination to express itself (vv. 1-4), its arousal (v. 5cde), its urgency and profundity (vv.6-7), its playfulness and its worth (vv. 8-12), its endless eager anticipation of gratified desire (vv. 13-14)."[344]

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[341] Exum, 215.
[342] Exum, 216.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Exum, 244.

## *Intention*

In these verses, the lovers entwine themselves in erotic imagery while intertwining their speech. After having described his lover from head to toe in the preceding verses, the man concludes his speech by declaring his steadfast commitment to entangling himself within the branches and delicacies of his lover. It is important to note that he does not describe his lover as something to which one has easy access. Rather, he declares her as a palm tree, whose heights he must climb in order to partake in its bounty. Though 7:9 is clearly linked to sexual activity, he does not describe himself as overcoming his lover or putting her into a position of submission. Rather, he is the one who must rise to her; the one who must strive to engage with her. With palm trees reaching upwards of 80 to 100 feet and serving as an important source of food and drink in the ancient Near East,[345] its link to the woman indicates a connection to her as a life force and sustainer for her male lover. Referencing branches and "clusters of the vine," the man highlights the woman's appendages and breasts, two parts of her body that he has mentioned at other points in the Song. Additionally, the reference to clusters on a vine "opens a space for introducing the inebriating effect of wine"[346] which the lovers speak about in verse 10. It also signals a sense of bountifulness.

The man does not just record the woman's physical attributes when he compares her to a palm tree. He also introduces her scent at the end of verse 9, linking it to apples or apricots, which are referenced elsewhere in the Song as a treatment for the woman's lovesickness and are associated with the man (see Song 2:3 and 8:5).[347] Generally, apples

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[345] Exum, 238.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Exum, 239.

were considered a fruit that arouses love and with the scent of her breath, the woman awakens and arouses her lover. The climb up the palm tree thus becomes "nourishing, refreshing, and intoxicating."[348]

The intensity of the male lover's description in 7:9 leads to a climax of excitement in 7:10, in which the woman interrupts her lover and continues the arousing description of their forthcoming sexual encounter. Commentators differ on whether or not the woman does in fact take over in the middle of the verse, with Exum suggesting verses 9 and 10 form a triplet spoken by the man.[349] Fox, on the other hand, "proposes that the man's desire and the woman's are in such harmony that they are uttered in a single sentence."[350] In verse 10, the use of the word *dodi*, the female lover's "pet name" for her lover, suggests her interruption. Bloch and Bloch find that she completes his sentence in verse 10 with a "knowing endearment...[that] beautifully captures the intertwining speech of lovers".[351]

Completing her lover's idea corresponds to the mutuality found throughout the Song. This marks the one time in the Song when one lover seems to interrupt the other. Therefore, the verse may indicate a significant milestone in the relationship. Whereas up until now the lovers were able to respond to each other with similar language and imagery so as to show their mutual affection and understanding, the lovers now take on the characteristics of the delectable, natural objects of which they have described. In other words, besides describing vines and delicate fruit, the lovers are now physically and verbally acting out these characteristics. The dialogue between the lovers is no longer just back and forth with one lover expressing his or her desire for the other. Here, the woman's completion of her lover's

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[348] Keel, 246.
[349] Exum, 239.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Bloch and Bloch, 17.

sentence indicates an emotional union. Even though we have earlier indications that the lovers were engaged in some form of sexual union, the Song takes the idea of mutuality to a different level in 7:10.

In Song 7:11-14, the woman once again expresses her desire for her lover and invites him to enjoy the love they share. As in Song 2:10-14, "there is a professed intention (let's enjoy nature) and there is the heart of the matter (let's enjoy each other's company); the one enhances the pleasure in the other."[352] With her lover having praised her from head to toe and expressing his desire to be with her, she offers herself to him. The passage begins with a variation of Song 2:16 and 6:3 but in 7:11, the focus is not on possession (whom is committed to whom) but on desire. One could imagine the woman shouting out to the world, "he wants me and only me!" Her statement suggests that she recognizes his sole commitment to her and no one else; that his love and desire is directed purely in her direction. It is this recognition on her part that seems to lead her to invite him out to "stay overnight among the henna bushes" and go to the vineyards "where I will give you my love."

The verse also contrasts sharply with the only other two instances of the word תְּשׁוּקָה in the Torah (Gen. 3:16 and 4:7).[353] In Genesis 3:16, the woman's desire is directly linked to the man's domination over her and nothing is said about whether or not the man's desire must be directed towards his wife. In Genesis, תְּשׁוּקָה is a threat. This word has led commentators to draw comparisons between the creation story of Genesis 2-3 and the Song. As Trible notes in relation to the use of the word תְּשׁוּקָתֵךְ ("your desire"), in Gen. 3:16 the

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[352] Exum, 241.

[353] Gen. 3:16 And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."
Gen. 4:7 Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right Sin couches at the door; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master." (JPS)

woman, "still yearns for the original unity of male and female."[354] The punishment decreed by God can be described as follows - "oppression resulting from transgression is actualized by a design that emphasizes the man and minimizes the woman."[355] While disobedience of man and woman lead to their exile from the Garden of Eden and lead to the dissolution of mutual responsibility, the Song overturns this notion, returning lovers to the garden, one of Eros. In the Song, desire is expressed as mutual. The woman's desire for the man is matched by his desire for her and they have equal responsibility and voice within their relationship. In this way, the Song returns us to the Beginning. As Trible characterizes it, "the Song of Songs redeems a love story gone awry...the voices of the Song of Songs extol and enhance the creation of sexuality in Genesis 2"[356]

Though references to fields, vineyards, and gardens in the Song tend to be associated with the woman's body, the field in verse 12 most likely refers to a large, open expanse in which the lovers can interact freely. The sequence of associations "to pass the night", "henna bushes", and "vineyards" in Song 7:12 and 13 can be compared to Song 1:13-14 in which Hebrew phrases also refer to "passing the night", "henna cluster", and "vineyards of Ein Gedi".[357] However, the invitation to "rise early to the vineyards" in verse 13 "intends something other than an early morning garden tour."[358] The sexual symbolism of the vineyard is addressed early on when the woman states, "My own vineyard I did not guard" in Song 1:6 and the blossoming effect in 7:13 implies the woman's openness to sexual intimacy with her lover. The blossoming of buds and vines occur at certain times of the year, under certain physical conditions. Similarly, the woman seems to be using this agricultural

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[354] Trible, 128.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Trible, 144, 145.
[357] Bloch and Bloch referencing Fox, 207.
[358] Pope, 646.

imagery to invite her lover to explore her body and determine whether or not she is ready to reveal herself to him. Words such as "blossomed," "opened," and "budded" suggest the opening of something delicate.

Verse 14 begins by recalling the scent of mandrakes, the Hebrew word of which is closely linked with the word for "caress" in Song 1:2, 4; 4:10, and 5:1, as well as the "pet name" the woman uses for her lover, *dodi*.[359] It is unclear whether the reference to this plant is based on the structure of the word itself or on the importance of the plant in the culture of the time. Mandrakes have been associated with love-goddesses and fertility and were sometimes used as an aphrodisiac.[360] The only other Biblical reference to the plant is Genesis 30:14-16 in which the plant seems to have value as a love charm and fertility plant.[361] The focus in this verse, however, is on the scent of the plant, considered to be "pungent and distinctive and was presumably pleasant or exciting."[362] The fragrance of the mandrake, which seems to be received by the lovers as something pleasant, may "mirror and participate in the woman's gift of love".[363] Just as she has offered herself to her lover in the previous verses, the natural world responds with signs and smells of approval. At the lovers' doors, the choicest fruits are awaiting them. The result of their union is a natural world in which all sounds, sights, and smells offer parallel joy.

At the "openings", the choicest fruits, both new and old, await the male lover, for the woman has stored them away for him. Some commentators prefer to translate פְּתָחֵינוּ as "our doors," connecting this verse to the reference to the house in Song 8:2,[364] but the more literal

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[359] Exum, 242.
[360] Pope, 648.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Pope, 649.
[363] Exum, 242.
[364] Ibid.

translation relates to the idea of openness found in other parts of the Song, particularly in chapter 5.[365] Exum points out that "nature too provides an abode for the lovers, as in 1:17, where 'the beams of our house are cedars.'"[366] The "openings" in verse 14, therefore, can easily refer to the vast open space in which the lovers find refuge. Whether the field in verse 12, the vineyards in verse 13, or the garden mentioned elsewhere, the lovers use the natural world to enhance their relationship. Nature becomes an integral part of their lovemaking, their descriptions of one another, and their meetings. As Eskenazi notes, "'openings' also evoke the worlds that open up because of the relationship, the liminal space that leads to new discoveries that are integral to the love relationship in the Song."[367] The lovers open one another to a world where they are able to experience the self and the other in new, illuminating ways. The imagery used by the lovers allows the body to take on new significance. The emotional openness leads to moments of tender embrace and self-reflection. And there seems to be a spiritual openness, though not overt, which leads to the lovers to view one another through lenses that shine light on a world of potentiality and possibility.

When the woman declares that she has stored both new and old of the choicest fruits for her lover, she is not only referring to the age and ripeness of the produce, she is also declaring her willingness to offer the entire "spectrum of delights" to her lover.[368] As Eskenazi notes,

> The physicality in the descriptive language needs to be taken only literally. In the world of the lovers, a world where metaphors best convey meanings, the numerous dimensions inevitably comes into play. The metaphors should not be reduced to a

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[365] Song 5:2, 5, 6.
[366] Exum, 242.
[367] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[368] Exum, 242.

> single, corporeal equivalent but lead to additional possibilities. Only if we assume that the lovers prefer euphemisms to specifics, may we simply stop by identifying physical equivalences. But poetry, and especially poetry of love such as the Song, communicates through metaphors that open rather than restrict meanings."[369]

Along these lines, Haupt views the phrase as meaning "the sweet remembrance of former kisses and caresses" while Pope envisions it as referring to "the titillating prospect of erotic exploits new and old."[370] The woman is not only willing to offer herself to her lover, but she indicates in this verse that his enjoyment should have no boundaries. Her lover is to enjoy only the best of what she has to offer him. She opens up to him in all respects, offering herself to her lover in a way that indicates all her potential. And as he climbs the palm tree, climbing to the heights of his lover, he indicates the same.

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[369] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[370] Pope, 651.

# Song 8:1-2

8:1 מִי יִתְּנְךָ כְּאָח לִי יוֹנֵק שְׁדֵי אִמִּי אֶמְצָאֲךָ בַחוּץ אֶשָּׁקְךָ גַּם לֹא־יָבוּזוּ לִי׃
8:2 אֶנְהָגֲךָ אֲבִיאֲךָ אֶל־בֵּית אִמִּי תְּלַמְּדֵנִי אַשְׁקְךָ מִיַּיִן הָרֶקַח מֵעֲסִיס רִמֹּנִי׃

## *Translation*

8:1 – If only[371] you were like a brother to me, who nursed on my mother's breast; I would find[372] you outside, I would kiss you, yet no one would[373] scorn me.

8:2 – I would lead you, I would bring you[374] to my mother's house; she will teach me[375]; I would have you drink[376] spiced wine, the juice[377] of my pomegranate[378].

## *Literary Setting*

Immediately preceding the start of chapter 8, the woman had eagerly expressed her desire to give herself completely to her lover (7:11-14). Images of fields and vineyards offered playful and erotic associations, and the woman's offering of "choice fruits" solidified her commitment to give herself entirely to the one she loves. The excitement and confidence

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[371] Lit. "who will give..." Commonly used to introduce a fervent wish (Bloch and Bloch, 209) as in Jer. 9:1 or 2 Sam. 19:1 (2 Sam. 18:33 in English).
[372] Defined as "to find", "to meet", "to encounter".
[373] The masculine plural in the generalizing sense can mean "everybody" and the word *gam* in the adversative sense is "yet". See Ps. 129:2. (Bloch and Bloch, 210)
[374] An example of asyndeton, the joining of verbs without an expected conjunction; compare to Song 2:11 and 5:6. (Bloch and Bloch, 210)
[375] If follow LXX or Syriac, this could be translated as "to the chamber of her who conceived me", mirroring Song 3:4 (Exum, 242). The actual meaning is unclear. This word can be translated as "she will teach me" or "you (masc. sing.) will teach me". Because of the reference to the mother's house, I am choosing to translate it as "she will teach me", referring to the mother's participation in the woman's development.
[376] The phonetic similarity between אֶשָּׁקְךָ and אַשְׁקֵךְ establish a link between kissing and drinking in the Song. See also, Song 1:2. (Bloch and Bloch, 210-211)
[377] The term עֲסִיס designates what is pressed out of something and is a poetic term for wine or other intoxicating juices; compare to Isa. 49:26; Joel 1:5, 4:18 (3:18 Eng.); Amos 9:13. (Pope, 659)
[378] Translations include "of the juice of my pomegranate" (KJ), "of my pomegranates" (RSV), or "of my pomegranate juice" (JPSV). (Pope, 659)

of those verses quickly gives way to a sense of yearning as the woman points out the limitations of her public expressions of affection for her lover.

The Song moves into its final chapter with a series of short, intermingling speeches by the man, woman, and women of Jerusalem. As Exum points out, the chapter offers "a kind of montage, with alternating voices expressing various aspects of love," from its self-expression to its playfulness and its worth.[379] The yearning found in Song 8:1-2 leads to the climax in verse 6, where the immutable power of love is reinforced.

## *Intention*

After having eagerly offered all of herself to her lover at the end of chapter 7, the woman now turns to the reality of the social environment in which she lives. While the lovers can dash across fields and frolic through vineyards, their love is not as easily expressed in the streets. As the woman points out in verse 1, if her lover were her brother, public affection would not be questioned and no one would give it a second thought to see the two of them embracing. The woman's wishfulness should not be misunderstood as the woman's attempt to equate her lover with a brother-like figure. There is no indication in this passage or elsewhere to suggest she wants her lover to transform into her kin. Her yearning in 8:1 may very well be the result of the excitement associated with what occurred at the end of chapter 7, where she declared her unending commitment to her lover. Now, she realizes in Song 8:1 that she cannot fully express that commitment under the current cultural circumstances. For a brief moment, the reader is taken out of the microcosm of the world created by the lovers and is introduced to the social constraints of the lovers' actual world.

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[379] Exum, 244.

The phrase "I would find you outside" connects the passage to the two previous incidents in which the woman searched for her lover, in chapter 3 and 5. In the woman's wishful world of public access, she would have no trouble finding her lover in public; there would be no place from which their love could hide. In a world of free expression, kissing would no bring scorn. One could imagine the woman picturing a scene similar to that of the famous photograph of the soldier and the woman in Times Square in 1945, entitled "VJ Day: The Kiss" by Alfred Eisenstaedt.[380] Or possibly the "The Kiss by the Hôtel de Ville," taken in Paris in 1950 by Robert Doisneau.[381] Both are free and exuberant public expressions of delight. As much as the woman is able to express her love, she wants to declare it to the entire world, without negative repercussions. But we are made aware that contempt and scorn are likely to be heaped upon a woman who dares flaunt her passion in public.

The public square is left as quickly as it was entered, for 8:2 moves into the private sphere, more specifically, the privacy of the mother's house. The outside world disappears as the reader is once again immersed in the private world of the lovers where safety and nurturing seem to be promised. The mother's house is also mentioned in Song 3:4 when, after searching for her lover, the woman brings him back to her mother's house. (Further discussion about the implications of the "mother's house" are found in the section related to Song 3:1-5) Within the confines of her mother's house, the woman once again expresses her desire to reveal herself to her lover. It begins with the woman's statement of her confidence and dominance. In verse 2, the woman does the leading. She serves as the guide for her lover, not the follower. And as we know, her lover appreciates her leadership. Once again,

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[380] http://www.gallerym.com/artist.cfm?ID=16
[381] http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/08/06/that-times-square-smooch-right-to-the-kisser/

the mutuality of the relationship is revealed, including the sharing of power and responsibility.

Elsewhere in the Song, the lovers frequently escape to fields, gardens, and vineyards. But now the woman hopes for a different destiny. She states, "I would bring you to my mother's house" (as in 3:4). The verse is complicated by the phrase which ensues, given that the verb "to teach" can be understood in a number of ways. If one follows the Masoretic text, it reads, "she will teach me" or "you [masc. sing.] will teach me" which seems odd. However, the LXX (Septuagint) and Syriac texts lead to the translation "to the chamber of her who conceived me," following the pattern found in Song 3:4. The chosen translation leads to different implications. Eskenazi notes that, "no matter how we render the verb, the emphasis falls on love as also a learned art. Nature is not sufficient."[382] Regardless of the chosen translation ("she", "you", or the LXX and Syriac translations), the verse focuses on the role of learning. The translation "she will teach me" focuses on the mother's role in educating her daughter, whether it be education about fostering loving relationships, caring for another person, or sexually satisfying a partner. As Landy notes, "the mother may teach her either literally or metaphorically; either as a real mother, worldly-wise and experienced, or as the spontaneous feminine gift."[383] By focusing on the translation, "you [masc.] will teach me," the education becomes a part of responsible partnership. Educating one's partner becomes central to establishing a relationship of mutuality and dialogue, the central components of the lovers' relationship in the Song. The LXX and Syriac translations, a variation of the Masoretic text, links education through the Hebrew root, י.ר.ה which means,

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[382] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[383] Landy, 100.

"to instruct" and the root ה.ר.ה which means "to conceive."[384] In this way, the word הוֹרָתִי meaning "my conception", found in Song 3:4 and used in the LXX and Syriac versions of Song 8:2, is not merely about conception, but also evokes instruction and being taught.

Verse 2 ends with reference to spiced wine and the "juice of my pomegranate", both of which speak to the intoxication and eroticism of the sexual encounters between the lovers. This is highlighted by the wordplay between אַשְׁקֵךְ in verse 2 and יַשְׁקֵנִי in Song 1:2. Throughout the prophetic writings, the word עֲסִיס is used as a poetic term for wine and other intoxicating juices.[385] Its use here indicates a double entendre, with the woman inviting her lover to drink intoxicants, both of the vine and of the body. Fox goes so far as to suggest that the pomegranate refers to the breasts and spiced wine to kisses.[386] While the text may make it unclear exactly what body parts the fruit and liquid refer to, it does seem clear that the woman is creating a play on words similar to her lover in previous passages. As elsewhere in the Song, images from nature link the romance and sexuality of the lovers to the world around them.

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[384] Eskenazi, through discussion with author.
[385] Compare to Isa. 49:26; Joel 1:5, 4:18 (3:18 Eng.); Amos 9:13. (Bloch and Bloch, 211)
[386] Exum, 248.

# Song 8:5-7

8:5 מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ תַּחַת הַתַּפּוּחַ עוֹרַרְתִּיךָ שָׁמָּה׃
חִבְּלַתְךָ אִמֶּךָ שָׁמָּה חִבְּלָה יְלָדַתְךָ׃
8:6 שִׂימֵנִי כַחוֹתָם עַל־לִבֶּךָ כַּחוֹתָם עַל־זְרוֹעֶךָ כִּי־עַזָּה כַמָּוֶת אַהֲבָה קָשָׁה
כִשְׁאוֹל קִנְאָה רְשָׁפֶיהָ רִשְׁפֵּי אֵשׁ שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה׃
8:7 מַיִם רַבִּים לָא יוּכְלוּ לְכַבּוֹת אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה וּנְהָרוֹת לָא יִשְׁטְפוּהָ אִם־יִתֵּן אִישׁ
אֶת־כָּל־הׇוֹן בֵּיתוֹ בָּאַהֲבָה בּוֹז יָבוּזוּ לוֹ׃

## *Translation*

8:5 – Who is that[387] rising from the desert, leaning[388] on her lover?

Under the apricot/apple tree I aroused[389] you, there your mother went into labor[390] for you, there she went into labor, gave birth to you[391].

8:6 – Set me as a seal[392] upon your heart, as a seal on your arm; for love is fierce[393] as death, jealousy[394] is hard[395] as Sheol; its sparks[396] are sparks of fire, a mighty flame[397].

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[387] A stylized formula of dramatization. See Isa. 60:8, 63:1; Jer. 46:7; Job 38:2. (Bloch and Bloch, 159)

[388] This form of the verb is hapax legomenon, but the root is known in post-biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic. (Pope, 662)

[389] or "awakened".

[390] The root of this word, חבל, can mean "pledge", "bind", "cord", "territory", "band", "pain", or "pang". (BDB) It is used in reference to labor pains in Isa. 13:8, 26:17; Jer. 13:21; and Hosea 13:13. Bloch and Bloch refer to the Pi'el form as meaning "conceive, get pregnant," as in Ps. 7:15. Therefore, their translation of this verse reads "there, beneath the apricot tree, your mother conceived you, there you were born, in that very place, I awakened you." (Bloch and Bloch, 111, 211) Exum notes that the root of the verb refers to labor pains, as is noted in the translation above, but also refers to Ps. 7:15 as support for her translation of "under the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you conceived." (Exum, 243-244) Translators who prefer to translate the verb as "conceive" rely on the idea of the "relatively painless and even pleasurable process of conception", though in the current verse, "the repetition of the verb could refer to the same phase of the generative process, or to different phases, i.e. to conception in both instances, or travail in both, or to conception in the former instance and travail in the latter." (Pope, 664)

[391] Bloch and Bloch refer to the final phrase in this verse as "coordinate verbs joined asyndetically, as in 8:2," and note three possible translations – "there she conceived, gave birth to you," "conceived and gave birth," and "there you were born." (Bloch and Bloch, 111, 210) . Another possible translation could be "there your mother conceived you, there she went into labor, gave birth to you," which offers both meanings of *chevel* – labor and conception.

[392] or "signet".

[393] Also "strong" or "mighty". For use of עז as "fierce", see Deut. 28:50 and Judg. 14:18. (Bloch and Bloch, 213)

[394] some translate as "zeal" or "passion" (Pope, 669). Examples of קִנְאָה are found in Num. 5:14, 29-30; Deut. 32:16, 21; Ps. 73:58; Eccl. 4:4; Prov. 6:34; Ezek. 16:38.

[395] The root means "hard", "tough", "severe", or "obdurate" or "fierce".

8:7 – Mighty waters[398] are not able to extinguish love and rivers[399] cannot sweep it away[400]; if a man gave all the wealth of his house for love, he[401] would surely be despised[402].

## *Literary Setting*

After declaring her unending love for her lover and imagining unimpeded expression of that love within the sanctuary of the mother's house (8:1-2), the Song reaches its climax in verse 6, as love is compared to death and its transcendence is highlighted. As in previous verses, Song 8:4 repeats the woman's urging that the women of Jerusalem "not arouse love."[403] With these words, the woman is speaking about her lover rather than directly to him.[404] This strategy draws the reader into the intimacy of the lovers' feelings for one another. And just as in chapter 3, this plea is followed by the women of Jerusalem's question; this time it is about the woman: "Who is that rising from the desert, leaning on her lover?" (8:5) This leads directly into the heart and climax of the Song. Following this central section of 8:6-7, the Song proceeds with short expressions of the lovers' desire for

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[396] The exact meaning of רִשְׁפֶּיהָ is unclear, but referring to the use of the word in Job 5:7, it seems to refer to sparks rising from a fire. (Bloch and Bloch, 213) May also be "wings", "flames", or "darts." (Pope, 670)
[397] Some translators, such as Ben Asher's or Ben Naphtali vocalize שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה to indicate the inclusion of the name of God– Yah. (Pope, 670) Others focus on the ending of the word to indicate intensity as in Jer. 2:31 ("thick darkness") or Ps. 118:5 ("great relief"). (Bloch and Bloch, 213) Other translations include "a most vehement flame" (KJ, RSV), "furious flames" (AT), "fiercer than any flame" (NEB). The word שַׁלְהֶבֶת is used in Ezek. 21:3 and Job 15:30 to mean "flame".
[398] The phrase מַיִם רַבִּים occurs 28 times in the Tanakh. The phrase is used to describe abundant waters, flood waters, mighty rivers, or the raging waters of the sea. (Exum, 254) Pope translates it as "mighty waters" (Pope, 672) while Bloch and Bloch translate as "great seas." (Bloch and Bloch, 111)
[399] Pope translates as "torrents." (Pope, 674)
[400] The root of the verb means "overflow," "rinse," or "wash off".
[401] It is unclear whether this should be translated as "it would surely be despised" in reference to the offer to buy love, or as translated above referring to the man himself and the scorn he would receive for making such an offer.
[402] The repetition of the root בּוּז suggests a strong affirmation. Some translate it as "scorned".
[403] See Song 2:7 and 3:5.
[404] Trible, 146.

one another, "he, by asking to hear her voice (v.13), and she, by answering in a way that does not allow the dialogue to end, though the poem comes to its close (v. 14)."[405]

## *Intention*

This section begins with the two lovers, arm in arm, "rising from the desert," an image we might imagine is accompanied by a setting sun or the dawn. It is an image of romantic love, capturing the interconnectedness of the lovers as they rise above the vast, arid, empty desert and enter into a luscious and green garden of mutual love. Unlike a similar phrase in Song 3:6, when the woman emerged alone,[406] Song 8:5 captures the lovers coming up from the wilderness together and thereby, indicates the intertwining so clearly highlighted throughout chapter 8. Additionally, this phrase, attributed to the women of Jerusalem, "reminds us of the presence of an audience, onlookers who participate in the unfolding of the lovers' relationship, and so encourages the readers' involvement."[407] While much of the Song focuses on the lovers in an intimate setting, there are passages, such as the phrase in the beginning of 8:5, which help place the lovers in a larger context, allowing us, as the readers, to relate the Song to universal notions of love-seeking.

The rhetorical question raised by the women of Jerusalem is immediately followed by the woman's declaration. She now recounts how she had aroused or awakened him under the apple tree, the place where his mother went into labor and the location of his birth. Speaking directly to her lover, the verse immediately shifts back to the intimacy of the lovers' world, returning us to the garden setting, noted throughout the Song as a place where their passions

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[405] Exum, 254.
[406] Song 3:6 – "Who is she that comes up from the desert Like columns of smoke, In clouds of myrrh and frankincense, Of all the powders of the merchant?" (JPS)
[407] Exum, 248-249.

and mutuality are vividly expressed. While this probably is not a literal statement, the woman connects the arousal of her lover to his birth. However, the eroticism of the statement, "under the apricot/apple tree I aroused you" is contrasted with the maternal, "there you mother went into labor for you, there she went into labor, gave birth to you."

The verb used for "aroused" or "awakened" in this verse is also found elsewhere in the Song, implying the importance and power of moving from a state of repose to a state of activity. Elsewhere in the Song, the root ע.ו.ר is used in the woman's adjuration to the women of Jerusalem not to arouse or awaken love until it is time.[408] It is also found in Song 5:2, describing the woman's heart as she lies in bed before her lover knocks. Unlike the other uses of this verb in the Song, (עור is applied to love, in general, or it is imposed upon the woman's heart) in 8:5, the woman is awakening or arousing her lover; playing an active role in having an impact on her lover. Now, the woman controls the impact of arousal, bestowing it upon her lover. As the verb is used in the past tense, we recognize a dual understanding – erotic arousal of her lover, as implied through earlier encounters between the lovers; and emotional arousal, void of sexual connotations and based more on the woman's ability to bring out something in her lover that was not present earlier.

As Eskenazi points out, the use of the word "arousal" or "awaken" in the Bible also leads to powerful spiritual or political transformations, examples of which are found in the books of Isaiah and Ezra-Nehemiah.[409] In Isaiah, chapter 41, God speaks to Israel about God's ability to arouse change among nations and their actions. God calls on Israel to mirror such arousal in order to re-establish justice, a sentiment that is repeated again in chapters 51

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[408] Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4.
[409] Eskenazi, in discussion with author.

and 52.[410] In the first chapter of Ezra, the verb for "arouse" refers to spiritual arousal, as God elicits an arousal of spirit among the Judean exiles, leading them to build God's house (the Temple) in Jerusalem.[411] Therefore, the arousal or awakening that occurs in Song 8:5 is not to be confined to the emotional or erotic; it is also a form of empowerment. In the Song, awakening or arousing the other is a way in which one lover empowers the other to become more fully alive and to enhance the relationship, to recognize new aspects of their love, or create new forms of interaction.

The arousal takes place under an apple or apricot tree, referenced earlier in the Song as a place where the woman enjoys its shade and tastes its fruit.[412] Love under an apple tree is a familiar motif in ancient love poetry.[413] It is in this setting, under a tree, that her lover's mother gave birth to him. It is in the place where he was born that the love between the two lovers was also born. Referencing the conception, labor pains, and actual birth in 8:5, speaks to multiple levels of birth, just as the word "aroused" speaks to an erotic and emotional awakening. As Eskenazi points out, there are two births in the latter part of this verse – the actual, biological birth of the male lover and the birth of an emotional connection between the two lovers.[414] An important key lies in the word חבל, which refers to both "labor pains" and "cord" or "band." Twice, the female lover uses the root חבל, emphasizing its centrality. The erotic or sexual connotations found earlier in the verse give way to the binding nature of birth. The birth of the male lover creates a bond between him and his lover, a cord of sorts, tying the two of them together, via his mother. The reference to the birth, therefore, becomes

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[410] Isa. 51:17, 52:1
[411] Ezra 1:5.
[412] Song 2:3.
[413] Exum, 249.
[414] Eskenazi, in discussion with the author.

a link to the man's history and his entrance into the world. It also symbolizes the birth and connection created between the two lovers.[415]

Song 8:6 is often understood as the climax of the Song, with the preceding and following verses setting the stage for the description of the power of love. Exum proclaims, "love in these verses is virtually personified as a force that contends with cosmic powers."[416] The verse begins with the woman proclaiming her desire to be a "seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm." Historically, seals or signets were worn on the neck or on the arm, made of precious metals and stones, serving as a sign of identification. Often, they were a person's most valuable possession and also served as one's legal signature.[417] Biblical examples include a seal worn on a cord around the neck in the story of Tamar (Gen. 38:18), or as a ring on one's hand, as in the case of Joseph's acquisition of the Pharaoh's signet ring (Gen. 41:42). In Jeremiah 22:24, the value of one's seal is illustrated through a divine oath. As Bloch and Bloch point out, "a seal on the heart and arm implies belonging, physical closeness, and intimacy."[418] And to be a seal on another's heart suggests, "the woman wants to inscribe herself on the very core of her lover's being."[419]

It is not enough to express his love through words, according to the female lover in this verse. Rather, she wants to become a physical sign of his identity, found on the most important part of her lover's body. As a seal, she becomes the symbol of who he is and his role in society. Both internally as well as overtly expressed to the world, the lovers are to declare their commitment and mutual value.

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[415] Ibid.
[416] Exum, 249.
[417] Pope, 666.
[418] Bloch and Bloch, 212.
[419] Exum, 250.

Love is described as "fierce as death" in 8:6, leading commentators to question its exact meaning. The word for "fierce" can also be translated as "strong" or "mighty" and as Bloch and Bloch point out, translating עַזָּה as "fierce" is based on two biblical passages. In Deuteronomy 28:50, the phrase עַז פָּנִים, "fierce of countenance," is defined by the latter part of the verse as a nation that shows no favor for the young and no regard for the old.[420] In other words, a fierce nation is one that does not distinguish between the specific needs of certain groups of people; a nation which is in some respects, amoral. In Judges 14:18, in describing a lion, the translation of עַז מֵאֲרִי as "fierce as a lion" makes more sense than "strong as a lion", for the lion is not being referenced for its strength, but rather for its ferocity. From these two uses of the word עַז, we come to understand that עַזָּה in Song 8:6 speaks to the fierceness, not only the strength, of love. Love, as described in verse 6, holds characteristics that do not make it a completely selfless and pure emotion. Rather, there is a hint of biting intensity associated with love. As Exum points out, "death is as strong as love, and lovers, flesh-and-blood ones, do not live forever."[421] The Song indicates that death is not the only ultimate force, for it finds its match with the force of love.

The phrase "love is fierce as death" is followed immediately by the phrase, "jealousy is hard like Sheol." As Pope illustrates,[422] the word קִנְאָה carries different meanings throughout the Bible, ranging from a man's suspicion that his wife may be unfaithful,[423] God's jealousy and anger at Israel's use of idols,[424] the envy and rivalry among neighbors,[425]

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[420] Deut. 28:50 – "a ruthless nation, that will show the old no regard and the young no mercy." (JPS)
[421] Exum, 251.
[422] Pope, 669.
[423] Num. 5:14, 29-30.
[424] Deut. 32:16, 21; Ps. 73:58.
[425] Eccles. 4:4.

and its use in parallelism or association with words of anger and other strong emotions.[426] Commentators differ in their understanding of what is meant by the use of the word קְנָאָה in this phrase, with some suggesting that jealousy is being used as a synonym for love. Exum believes that the generality of the first phrase is made more explicit with the second phrase - "That love and death are indeed involved in a struggle is vividly illustrated in the rivalry between their counterparts, *qin'a* (jealousy) and Sheol (the netherworld, the abode of the dead), each seeking to posses the same object, the loved one."[427] On the other hand, Bloch and Bloch suggest, "what is meant here [in verse 6] is not jealousy as an independent force, but the jealousy that is a by-product of love, the jealousy ignited by love."[428] Some translate קְנָאָה as "passion" but this is misleading and probably the result of insecurity with such a negative word being associated with love. Eskenazi prefers the translation of "zeal," for it "preserves the dual nature of this emotion."[429]

Jealousy, according to verse 6, is as "hard" as Sheol, the Hebrew (קָשָׁה) of which is also translated as "strong" or "difficult". Exum clarifies the use of "hard" in this verse:

> 'hard,' which is equivalent to 'strong' and has here the sense of hard to withstand or (too) hard to prevail against. A battle that is 'hard,' for example, leads to the defeat of one of the combatants (Judg. 4:24; 2 Sam. 2:17); God wields a 'hard' and great and strong sword against which the sea monster Leviathan cannot prevail (Isa. 27:1); and none can stand against the force of the powerful ('hard') wind sent by God (Isa. 27:8). In 2 Sam 19:43 the words of the Judahites are described as 'harder' than the words of the Israelites, which is to say that the Israelites could not prevail against them.... Like death, Sheol, the netherworld, cannot be withstood or resisted. It is too strong.[430]

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[426] Ps. 119:139; Job 5:2; Isa. 37:32; Prov. 14:30; Ezek. 5:13, 16:38,42, 23:25, 36:5, 38:19; Deut. 29:19.
[427] Exum, 251.
[428] Bloch and Bloch, 213.
[429] Eskenazi, in discussion with author.
[430] Exum, 252.

Regardless of whether or not jealousy is being equated to love or is being defined as a component of love, its use in verse 6 implies the trying nature of love.

Love, as defined through the dialogues and actions in the Song, is a force that holds power equal to that of death. With death comes a form of completeness; physical life ends yet memories and one's 'spirit' lives forever. The ferocity with which death seizes the living and does not relent is similar to that of love, a force that envelops its subjects and maintains a forceful grip. Additionally, love, like death, asserts itself without remorse or regret. The use of the word "fierce" in the phrase, "love is fierce as death" supports this notion. Love is not described as a purely gentle, innocent emotion but also contains many facets, one of which is jealousy. Rather than focusing exclusively on more "positive" aspects of love, verse 6 reminds the reader of the negative impact that may result from loving another. While the first phrase, "love is fierce as death," asserts the intractable power of love, the second phrase, "jealousy is hard like Sheol" attempts to warn what happens when one misinterprets love for another emotion.

The final phrase of verse 6, "its sparks are sparks of fire, a mighty flame" may refer to love, to jealousy, or to both. With love as the focus of verses 6 and 7, most likely, the sparks of fire refer to love and not jealousy, especially since 8:7 refers to the impossibility of extinguishing love with water. The last word, שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה is understood in two ways by commentators. Based on Ezekiel 20:47 and Job 15:30, some believe the word means something along the lines of "a mighty flame." Others take the ending, *yud* and *hey*, as a reference to *Yah*, one of the names of God, leading to a translation of "flame of Yah."[431] It is this latter translation that leads some to see the verse showing a link between human love and

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[431] Exum, 253.

divine love.[432] Though there may be some ancient link between a *yud/hey* ending and God's name (Yah – short for Yahweh), the ending became a suffix associated with intensity, such as found in Jer. 2:31 and Ps. 118:5.[433] Bloch and Bloch suggest, "the image moves from the sparks to the flame: love is so powerful that even its tiny sparks burn like great fires."[434] The image of sparks turning into leaping and mighty flames may be an attempt to illustrate the growing intensity and power of love. There is a progression from the small sparks of initial attraction to flames of overwhelming connection, engulfing all.

Support for the power of love is offered in verse 7, where it is described as being more powerful than any large body of water or the raging force of rivers. The mighty flame of love cannot be extinguished nor can it be swept away. The phrase, מַ֣יִם רַבִּ֔ים is used throughout the Bible to describe flood waters, mighty rivers, and raging oceans, and "it provides yet another cosmic allusion, this time to the waters of chaos that only God can subdue (Pss. 24:2; 77:19; 93:4; Isa 51:10)."[435] Besides "numerous waters", the "rivers" cannot stop love and some commentators, such as Pope and Keel, believe the word נְהָרוֹת refers to the rivers of the underworld.[436] This would support the idea that this verse is "lending cosmic proportions to the struggle between love and death."[437] With natural imagery playing such a prominent role throughout the Song, it seems more likely that the author is illustrating that even nature itself is limited when it comes to the power of love. Even though gardens and waters have served as catalysts for the lovers throughout the Song, those environmental factors are secondary to the great and innate power of love.

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[432] Exum, 254.
[433] Bloch and Bloch, 213.
[434] Ibid.
[435] Exum, 254.
[436] Pope, 674; Keel, 276.
[437] Exum, 254.

Finally, verse 7 offers a warning to anyone who would attempt to obtain love through monetary or political means. Using an idiomatic expression found in I Kings 13:8 and Prov. 6:31 to indicate complete or significant financial obligation, the verse states that anyone who attempts to purchase love will be met with scorn and even shunned, for love is unobtainable through such methods. Love is beyond any material value, cannot be bought, and anyone who attempts to do so is considered foolish. The phrase is not focusing on the ignorance of such people but rather, on the ability of love to stand above such attempts. Just as the natural world cannot squelch the fires of love, neither can humanity use physical treasures to control or commodify it. Love's only competitor is death, for it remains the one force that can create distance between two lovers. However, even death has its limitations, for there is a part of love that is immortal and immutable.

# Song 8:14

8:14 בְּרַח ׀ דּוֹדִי וּדְמֵה־לְךָ לִצְבִי אוֹ לְעֹפֶר הָאַיָּלִים עַל הָרֵי בְשָׂמִים׃

## *Translation*

8:14 – Flee[438], my love, and be like a gazelle or a young ram upon the mountains of spices.

## *Literary Setting*

The Song comes to an end with a series of short vignettes, after both lovers have described the other to an unknown audience. It is difficult to identify some of the exchanges and speakers. In 8:8-9, the women of Jerusalem or some other group of people (commentators disagree about whether it is the woman's brothers speaking, the women of Jerusalem, or some other group) describe a young girl who we can assume is not the female lover.[439] 8:10 is a woman's response to the unknown group, stating how she is different than the girl they described, for she physically stands out. Exum, who assumes that the previous speaker is the female lover, suggests 8:11-13 represent the male lover's response to her speech: "his lover has just described the way she imagines he perceives her: like a fortified city suing for peace. Now he describes how he perceives her: like a vineyard to be tended by him alone."[440] Verse 13 includes the man's description of his "garden," used metaphorically here to represent his lover. "Companions" are listening and while it is not clear who these

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[438] The verb means "to flee" but many modern translations focus on the sense of "be swift", such as "Make haste" (KJ and RSV), "Hasten" (AT), "Haste away" (JB), "Hurry" (JPSV), and "Be swift" (NAB). On the contrary, NEB translates as "Come into the open," which is not true to the nature of the word. (Pope, 697) The root of the verb can only mean to flee away from someone or something, not towards something or someone.
[439] Exum, 256-258.
[440] Exum, 259-260.

people are, the importance of listening is highlighted. Having heard her lover speak, it is the woman who offers the last words in the Song.

## *Intention*

The Song ends by mirroring a similar sentiment found in Song 2:17, where the woman declares, "Until the day blows and the shadows flee, turn like you, my beloved, as the deer or young ram about the rugged mountains."[441] Unlike the verse found in chapter 2, though, the woman uses language that is even more declarative, telling her lover to "flee" as opposed to "turn". Her request is one that indicates distance between her and her lover; but it is not done in a negative way. Rather, her request is uttered with love, as indicated by her use of the "pet name" she has for him, *dodi*. The order to "flee" combined with the "mountains of spices," "signals both the lovers' separation and their union. 'Mountains of spices' is a double entendre for the woman herself. She is a mountain of myrrh and hill of frankincense in 4:6 and a pleasure garden of spices in 4:13-14."[442] In this way, the Song ends with a continued cycle of lovers engaged in "love's game of seeking and finding,"[443] and of distance and closeness. Landy, who reads some of the Song as the inner dialogue of a male poet, suggests the following:

> "At the end of the poem the composer must bid farewell, and leave the Beloved singing in her garden; the poem must be left to its own devices. The separation of the poet from his Muse, that part of himself to which he is compelled to listen, and which is all we know of him, is represented as a fantasy of freedom: "And be like a fawn or young gazelle on the mountains of spices,'...we, like him, are both inside and outside the poem."[444]

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[441] Author's translation, annotated in an earlier section.
[442] Exum, 262.
[443] Exum, 263.
[444] Landy, 270-271.

In the text, however, it is the female lover who coyly urges the male lover to "flee." She has the last word just as she had the first. At the beginning she spoke about a desire for closeness ("Let him kiss me . . ." 1:2). Now she releases him. But she is not dismissive. The ending anticipates a future meeting between the lovers, as if the separation is just another element of creating a loving partnership. A loving relationship, according to the woman's words at the end of the Song, is one in which lovers enjoy time apart as well as their time together. As we have seen throughout the Song, the lovers vacillate between moments of interdependence and moments of independence. It is through this cycle that they renew their emotional and sexual desire while also coming to speak to each other in evolving language. Stagnancy is not found among the lovers in the Song. Dynamic interaction and creative imagery drive them to discover each other in new ways.

# Conclusion

The Song of Songs transports the reader into the intimate and imaginative world of two lovers, whose passion and commitment to one another are manifest through images and dialogue that highlight mutuality, interdependence, creativity, and depth. Through interactions that combine direct and metaphoric language, these lovers celebrate life and nature emotionally, sexually, erotically, and spiritually. In the process, they affirm and nurture each other while enhancing their relationship. Their dialogues of love help one understand Rabbi Akiva's praise of the Song. If the Song is, as Rabbi Akiva declares, the "Holy of Holies"[445], then close attention to the Song illustrates how such holiness can be understood in terms of human interaction. In the Song, the lovers do not experience one another in a bubble. Rather, their relationship leaps and bounds across the surrounding landscape as birds, animals, plants, and trees are integrated into the meeting places and descriptions of one another. The lovers are intertwined with the natural world and they do not separate themselves from its power or allure. Eskenazi notes that the lovers, "express and enact love that has multiple dimensions, which combine to embody wholeness that nevertheless preserves the distinctive 'voice' and being of each partner."[446] In this and other ways, they offer clues to a deeper understanding of the potential for love to inspire and sustain relationships. In what follows, I draw out key insights gained from the preceding exegetical analysis of the Song. I will highlight and explore further elements and characteristics of the lovers' relationship which illustrate its uniqueness in biblical literature and its relevance for today's relationships.

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[445] Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5
[446] Eskenazi, in notes to author.

## *The Caress of Language*

The language used by the lovers throughout the Song uncovers the intricacies and sophistication of their feelings for one another. Though sometimes elusive, leading the reader to guess whom the speaker might be, language serves as the foundation for the lovers' interactions. Actions are secondary to the words shared between the lovers and rarely do we read of narrative scenes in which action takes place. The few examples include the woman's search for her lover in chapter 3 (3:1-4) and chapter 5 (5:2-7). Most of the time, it is language which conveys the needs and desires of the two lovers. As Trible notes, the Song "speaks from lover to lover with whispers of intimacy, shouts of ecstasy, and silences of consummation...through expansions, omissions, and reversals, this poetry recovers the love that is bone of bone and flesh of flesh."[447]

Beyond the language offering vivid illustration of the thoughts and feelings of the lovers, the lovers' voices caress one another with palpable intensity similar to physical interaction. Their verbal exchanges conjure up vibrant sensations and recreate primal experiences. For example, when the woman recounts that she had awakened the man in the very place where his mother gave birth to him (8:1-3), her speech possesses a maternal quality, leading us to imagine the woman holding her lover in her arms and stroking his hair. Or, when the man declares, "I will climb up the palm tree and I will grasp its branches, like clusters of the vine; and the scent of your breath like apples" (7:9), the very words enable the man to hold on to his lover, grasping her, and drawing so close as to smell the sweetness of her breath. The language is action in itself. It allows the lovers to move through worlds of verbal expression as if they were walking through the physical world, holding hands.

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[447] Trible, 144.

The most powerful and common method by which language illustrates the lovers' feelings is through the images the lovers convey when speaking to each other. These metaphors, generally related to plants or animals in nature, penetrate deep into the emotions of the lovers, as Fox notes, "a metaphor depends for its meaning...not only on the traits shared by image and referent but also on the 'metaphoric distance' between these terms...greater metaphoric distance produces greater psychological arousal, a component of aesthetic pleasure."[448] The lovers experience deeper levels of arousal, both sexually and emotionally, through the use of these metaphors, for the images typify emotions. For example, the leaping and bounding gazelle in 2:8 offers more to the reader than the image of an energetic animal; it draws the reader into the many ways in which a leaping gazelle mimics unending joy and freedom. When the man describes his lover by means of goats gliding down the mountain or fawns grazing (as, for example, in 4:1-7), he does so with images that reveal his feelings not only about her physical beauty, but more so about her temperament and inner strength. The dynamic imagery of the Song draws us into the relationship of the lovers more so than their physical attributes. Our attention shifts from the parts of the body to the meanings behind the images used to describe those physical characteristics. We are drawn into a world that is constructed by the lovers. In a sense, the physical body serves as a medium through which the lovers access emotions and feelings that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to describe.

Beyond guiding us into the relationship of the lovers, the imagery used throughout the Song also allows us to view the world as the lovers do. We, as the reader, are invited to see, smell, and taste the world and by doing so, we enter into the details of the lovers' lives. We

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[448] Fox (1985), 276.

are not supposed to "enjoy the pleasant connotations of the imagery in its totality,"[449] but rather, we are supposed to internalize and experience the images. While some of the images are at times incongruous, as in 4:4 with the juxtaposition of the woman's neck and the Tower of David, these images are necessary to support the Song's vision of love.[450] The imagery shows us not how the lovers look, but how they see and also interact with the world around them. They are people who find their natural surroundings to be essential components of their relationship. The imagery they include supports this, as the landscape serves as the medium through which they can describe some of their feelings to their lover.

Certain images reappear throughout the Song, such as the voice of the loved one (2:8, 12, 14; 5:2; 8:13), the gazelle and young deer as similes for the lovers or aspects of them (2:9, 17; 8:14), feeding on lilies (2:1, 2, 16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2, 3; 7:3), and bringing a lover to one's chamber (1:4; 3:4; 8:2). These repetitions highlight important characteristics of the lovers' relationship. Dialogue, freedom, eroticism, and protection are elements of the relationship that get expressed through the images and language of the lovers. The lovers are not passive, allowing themselves to be ruled by the natural world. Rather, "the imagery shows us a world *created* by love, for it comes into being and is unified only through the lovers' vision of each other."[451]

The lovers spend most of the Song speaking to one another in dialogue. Even during parts of the Song that appear to be monologues, there is always a listener within the poem.[452] The lovers listen intently to one another, clear through their responses, for example, the man's elaboration on his lover's words in 2:1-2. Here, she first declares that she is a "rose of

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[449] Fox (1985), 277.
[450] Fox (1983), 227.
[451] Fox, (1983), 227.
[452] Fox (1985), 317.

Sharon, a lily of the valleys," to which he responds, "Like a lily between the thorns, thus my friend is among the young ladies." The lovers hear the meaning behind the words uttered by their lover and they respond accordingly. Beyond just listening and responding, the lovers influence each other. As Fox notes, "what each says and does depends in large part on what the other says...the poet further brings out the interaction of the lovers and establishes the reciprocity of their communication by the use of *echoing*, in which the words of one lover are patterned on the other's and thus recall them."[453] Examples of this are found in the lovers' descriptions of the landscape (2:12-13 and 7:13), the sweetness of each other's lips (4:11 and 5:13), and the power of one's caress (1:2-3 and 4:10).

In the Song, communication constitutes the central feature of love. The dialogue not only serves as the main form of communication throughout the Song, but it also serves as a model of the lovers' relationship. The lovers in the Song rely on interwoven and crafted communication to express their love and desire for one another. They also use language to help shape each other in mutually enhancing ways. Thus, language also transforms. The voice of the lover is not only soothing to the ear, but it is also soothing to the soul.

## *Nefesh*

The Song contains numerous references to physical contact between the lovers, from caressing to kissing to climbing. These, often erotic, interactions serve an important purpose in the Song (to be discussed below). However, they represent only one level on which the lovers connect. The deepest level of connection is indicated by the repeated use of the word *nefesh* throughout the Song (1:7; 3:1, 2, 3, 4; 5:6; 6:12). The word *nefesh* is often translated

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[453] Fox, (1985), 317-318.

as "soul," although the English term hardly represents the full range of the word's meaning. As indicated in the section about 3:1-5, Keel notes that the use of the word *nefesh*, "does not at all mean that the woman loves her beloved only spiritually or deeply, but that her whole desire, all her yearnings, her thoughts, her feelings, and her physical needs are directed toward him."[454] In other words, the lovers are completely committed to one another from the deepest part of their being. As Deckers states it, *nefesh* "denotes the essential being of the speaking woman, her vitality, her principle of life."[455] And *nefesh* is a key part of how "love" is defined in the Song, as, "love in the Canticles [Song of Songs] is not only feeling. It is a confluence of souls, best expressed by tightly interlocking dialogue, and it is a mode of perception, best communicated through the imagery of praise."[456]

Beyond the *nefesh* as the innermost part of one's being, the life force, it also represents wholeness. When the woman searches for her lover in chapter 3 (3:1-4) and in chapter 5 (5:2-7), she is searching for the "one whom my *nefesh* loves." She is searching for the other with whom her whole being is connected. Within the Song, "the poet has created a woman whose first care is for the other person, and who intuitively understands that this existential instinct is one of her strongest characteristics. And the tenacity of love (the poet points out) is not only a characteristic of the woman, but also characteristic of her people, which gives them nobility."[457] Additionally, "the conjunction of *nefesh* with the repeated references to body combine to convey the song's emphasis on what we might call 'embodied

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[454] Keel, 121.
[455] Deckers, 189.
[456] Fox (1983), 228.
[457] Deckers, 196.

spirituality.' The physical self is inseparable from a deeper self, both of these aspects are integrated in the relationship of lovers."[458]

## *Seeking and Finding*

Within the Song, the word *nefesh* is oftentimes connected with the verbs "to seek" and "to find". The book of Proverbs also describes a woman as seeking and finding her lover (Proverbs 7:10-13), although there is a marked difference between it and the Song's understanding of lovers seeking and finding one another. Whereas, "the teacher in Proverbs condemns the woman's erotic behavior in terms of power and property,"[459] the woman in the Song is depicted as seeking out her lover, her companion, and "the one whom my *nefesh* loves."

In the Song, searching and finding are the result of a central component of the lovers' relationship. The lovers are not attached at the hip, constantly by each other's side. Rather, distance plays an important role in their relationship and in cultivating growth. The lovers experience periods of physical and emotional distance, and these are addressed as normal parts of their relationship. For example, the woman, "wavers between distance and intimacy,"[460] in the way she addresses her lover. At times, she speaks to him directly while at other times she turns her attention away from him as when she addresses her female companions with the "refrain of adjuration" in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4.

But the word which most clearly captures the value of distance is the root הלך used in Song 2:10, 11, 13; 4:6; 6:1; 7:10, 12. At various points in the Song, both lovers indicate the

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[458] Eskenazi, in notes to author.
[459] Deckers, 191.
[460] Trible, 151.

need for the other to "go", away from the one he/she loves. At certain points, the "going" means going forth, thus, in 2:10, the male lover says, "Rise up, my companion, my beauty, and go forth!" With the changing of the seasons and the songs of the birds, the man indicates the need for his lover to explore the world, to have her own experience. Distance does not serve to separate the lovers from their attachment to one another, but rather, it allows each of them to have experiences which only serve to strengthen their relationship. An even stronger verb is used in the final verse of the Song, where the woman declares "בְּרַח" (translated as "flee") and tells her lover to leave her for the "hills of spices." So even at the end, when one would assume the final joining of lovers in some form of joyous celebration, the lovers, instead, separate.

And yet, even at the end of the Song, the distancing is not conclusive. There are limitations to the distance created between the lovers. At the very beginning of the Song, the woman calls to her lover, inviting him to her with her words, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your caresses are better than wine." (1:2) In the first part of the verse, it is as if her lover is not in her presence; she is imagining the feeling of his lips on hers. And yet, the second part of the verse indicates his presence by the mere fact that she refers to "your caresses." Whether in her imagination or in her reality, the woman calls on her lover to be present with her, to come back from wherever he may be. He does the same when he invites her to "show me your sights, and let me hear your voice," in 2:14. As Landy notes, "the union of the lovers, and that of the Self in the poem, is accomplished by the poem that parts them; at the same time they are indissoluble, sealed in each others' hearts, and unattainable. They are absent when present, and present when absent."[461]

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[461] Landy, 272.

Both lovers indicate a need to reunite after some distancing and a willingness to take risks in order for the reunification to occur. Both in chapter 3 and again in chapter 5, the woman leaves the comfort of her home to search for her lover. Both searches take place at night and one ends with abusive action against her. Nothing however, neither the walls of the city nor the men who guard it, can keep her from searching for her lover. As Fox notes, "each lover invites the other to come away, each goes out to find the other, each knows moments of hesitation, each desires the culmination of their love as intensely as the other. This egalitarianism reflects a metaphysics of love rather than a social reality of even a social ideal."[462] The lovers' commitment to one another becomes clear not only through their attempts to find and reunite with one another, but also through the value they place on personal distance; the time to experience the world on their own, separate from their lover. The drive towards complete union is paradoxically enhanced by the need and capacity for differentiation.

### *Private and Public*

The Song allows the reader to enter into the world of the lovers, experiencing what they experience and feeling what we can assume they are feeling. This is most clearly illustrated throughout the Song by references to all five senses. We taste the fruits and liquids of the Song (2:3; 4:16; 5:1, 13). We smell the spices and flowers that fill the landscape (2:13; 3:6; 4:11; 5:13; 6:2). We can almost feel the gentle caresses or soft kisses (1:2; 2:3-6; 4:10-11; 5:1; 7:6-9; 8:1, 3). We see the vines of the garden (4:9; 6:11) and we hear the man knocking at his lover's door (5:2). The Song has a powerful way of drawing us

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[462] Fox (1983), 228.

into the most intimate of moments between the lovers and yet, there is also something about the way they speak to one another that keeps us at a distance, allowing for them to share private moments even as the reader looks in on them.

The man's descriptions of his lover's body parts and the incongruous nature of the comparisons serve as an example. When he compares her neck to the Tower of David or her teeth to a flock of sheep coming up from washing, the modern reader is left wondering the exact meaning of such comparisons. These statements seem to hold a hidden language with which only the lovers can connect; a secret world of images and experiences which only they share. Therefore, while the reader can venture his/her own understanding of these relationships of objects and body parts, the true meaning is left to the lovers alone; only they can truly decipher what the other is saying.

### *Attraction as Sexual and Emotional*

According to the Book of Proverbs, sexual attraction between a man and woman is considered one of the wonders of the world.[463] The Song is replete with sexual allusions. But it is not primarily or only sexual in its understanding of the attraction between lovers. The better term for identifying the passion in the Song is "Eroticism." The late African-American poet Audre Lorde articulates the meaning of the erotic in a useful way: "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a source within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." [464] Although she focuses on women for her

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[463] Prov. 30:18-19 – "Three things are beyond me; Four I cannot fathom: the way of an eagle in the sky; the way of a snake on a rock; the way of a ship in the heart of the sea; the way of a man with a woman."
[464] Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 53.

definition, the Song equally applies this capacity or power to both the man and the woman. The erotic for Lorde elicits tapping a source of joy and sharing it with others. It is the opposite of using oneself or another as we would use a Kleenex.[465] Rachel Adler's title for her chapter on the Song of Songs encapsulates some of this significance: "Two Subjects. One Love."[466]

The Song goes beyond sex as eroticism is expressed through metaphor, innuendo, and double entendre. "Eros is celebrated as the most powerful of human pleasures,"[467] and in the Song, the focus is on the erotic and not the sexual; on the evocative power of intimacy and not the physical acts associated with sex. As Carol Ochs points out, "you can learn, through the Song of Songs, to delight in your body because your beloved delights in it despite its imperfections. But the eroticism in the Song of Songs has a meaning beyond simple sexuality. Eros is the core longing of the self for connecting with others."[468]

The lovers influence one another through their erotic language, speaking and responding to each other with images that connote desire, passion, and the unification of bodies and spirits. Desire goes beyond enjoying the body of the other, as "the language of sexual longing differs from that of aesthetic appreciation in its function at precisely this edge. Rhetorically, it insists on a response from the beloved. The woman responsible for the man's ravished state is invited to ease his longing and maybe share her own."[469] In the Song, desire is ascribed to both lovers, with each of them bearing some responsibility in fulfilling the

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[465] Lorde. 57.
[466] Adler, 133.
[467] Bloch and Bloch, 19.
[468] Ochs, Carol. Our Lives as Torah: Finding God in Our Own Stories. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2001. 124-125.
[469] Walsh, 75.

needs of the other. The lovers expect this from each other. Moreover, the desire does not cease to exist –

> "the eroticism in the Song zeroes in on a desire that does not get relieved. It has the blunt, annoying force of shaking a reader awake, compelling us to feel our own desires, to ignite them...for in the end, we lose the leisure to merely sympathize with the lovers in some been-there complicity of past memories. Instead, when the Song is finished with us (and not we with it), we have come to empathize with these people caught by want."[470]

In addition to their desire for one another, the lovers are pleased by the fact that others are attracted to their lover. For example, the man is pleased by the fact that other men, as well as women, delight in beholding his partner, as demonstrated by his words in 6:9 and 8:13. Additionally, the woman, "herself exults that other women, as well as men, adore her mate. In their attraction for him, she finds joy, not jealousy...throughout the Song, Eros is inclusive; the love between two welcomes the love and companionship of many."[471] The lovers are attracted to each other not only for sexual reasons, but also because of the emotional satisfaction they get from one another. In fact, they find satisfaction in the fact that others applaud their lover. Their relationship, therefore, is one in which they find joy in being attractive to other people without feeling threatened that their own relationship might thereby be in danger.

### *Harmony*

The Song illustrates a relationship of gender equality and mutual respect. The male lover does not dominate his lover and she does not dominate him. Their voices are given equal attention. There is a balance between male and female that does not give one voice or

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[470] Walsh, 79-80.
[471] Trible, 159.

personality more advantage over the other. As Trible and other interpreters note, the Song reverses the hierarchy that is initiated in Gen 3:16, in which the woman is subordinated to the man. The Song of Songs functions as a reclamation of the parity and harmony ascribed to life in the Garden of Eden.[472]

Equality in the Song is linked to the fact that it is literature which depends on women just as much as it relies upon men, for "in the erotic world of human emotion, there is no subordination of female to male."[473] The Song is an antidote to stories like those of Tamar (2 Samuel 13) and Dinah (Genesis 34) and others in the Bible that include instances of the subordination of women, whether sexually or emotionally. It decidedly breaks from this tradition:

> "The man's sexual feelings and behaviors are not privileged above those of the woman, nor is her sexual subjectivity portrayed as violative. Both are subjects of desire: givers, gazers, and wooers. The lovers of the Song are a match, not because one opposes the other or complements the other or possesses the other, but because each acclaims the other."[474]

Beyond their voices having equal weight, the love exhibited between the two lovers is harmonious, with no possessive qualities about it. Male power does not dominate and the woman is able to proclaim her desire for her lover with equal boldness. She is not expected to be passive in the relationship but rather, shows how full engagement is not only possible, but desirable. As Fox notes, "the Song thus goes beyond the expression of feelings to present the interanimation of two souls."[475] These are lovers who wish to explore the world together, as noted by their use of the first person plural throughout the Song – "our bed," "our roof

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[472] Trible, 144.
[473] Meyers, 220.
[474] Adler, 135.
[475] Fox (1983), 222.

beams," "our rafters," "our wall," "our land," and "our doors." The lovers share the world that they inhabit.

The harmony does not only exist between the lovers, but also in relation to the world around them. The lovers invoke the natural world in order to fully express themselves; they do not separate themselves from the objects and people around them. The women of Jerusalem, for example, the only other clear voice in the Song beside the two lovers, may represent the relationship between the lovers and the greater community; "like the young women who accompany Jephthah's daughter in her mourning, or the women of Bethlehem who come out to greet Naomi, the daughters of Jerusalem represent the social milieu in which the lovers move, answering their need for public testimony and public validation."[476] The young men mentioned briefly in 1:7 may play a similar role in the Song.

However, harmony is not the only result of the love shared between the two lovers. As illustrated in chapter 5, there is the possibility of danger. When the woman searches for her lover for the second time, the watchmen attack her. Whereas in chapter 3 the woman's search led to the reunification of the lovers, the incident in chapter 5 illustrates the fact that, "point and counterpoint shape the rhythm of love."[477] At times, the yearning for fulfillment is left unfulfilled and the lovers must retreat from the forces that pose a threat to their union.

In order to secure and recreate the relationship after challenges to their harmonious interactions among the alleys and streets of the city, the lovers turn to the garden. In Genesis 2-3, the garden is the location of disobedience, but it is also the place where male and female "become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24) for the first time. In the Song, the woman is described as a "garden" while it is also a prime location in which the lovers express themselves. Both

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[476] Bloch and Bloch, 6.
[477] Trible, 149.

lovers discuss the joys of enjoying its fruits as, "'my garden' and 'his garden' blend in mutual habitation and harmony. Even person and place unite: the garden of eroticism is the woman."[478] Therefore, the garden is a place of both physical and emotional security. In the garden, with access to all its plants and fruits, the lovers are uninhibited, with no prohibitions to disturb their harmony.

### *Revelation*

The Song is about two lovers' disclosure of the innermost feelings and thoughts for the one they love. This disclosure also functions as an invitation or opportunity for each of them to blossom into their fullest selves (see especially 2:8-14 and 8:1-3). Speaking directly to each other, the lovers reveal their deepest desires and their understanding of a world where the love they feel for the other is the primary lens through which they see everything around them. Nature reveals love, other people reveal love (or the barriers to love as with the watchmen in chapter 5), and the lovers' bodies and actions reveal love. As it states in 6:3, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." The mutuality of the lovers allows for a revelatory process to occur as the lovers open up their hearts and whole beings (*nefesh*) to each other. This new openness not only allows each to discover who he/she is, but also to open up to new possibilities and even create new ones.

God is not explicitly mentioned in the Song of Songs,[479] leaving the reader to determine where, if at all, God is found within the text. As noted previously, the woman is predominant in the Song, serving as the primary speaker. According to Landy, she is

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[478] Trible, 153.

[479] But see שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה (*shalhevetiah*) in 8:6, here translated as "a mighty flame." As indicated in the section of Song 8:5-7, the word is understood by some to mean "the flame of Yah," invoking God's name. If that is a reasonable rendition of the noun, this would still be at best an allusion rather than explicit reference to God.

"associated with the celestial bodies, the land and fertility."[480] Landy takes this phenomenon to indicate that she is, "metaphorically aligned with the feminine aspect of divinity," and that she thereby, "reverses the predominantly patriarchal theology of the Bible."[481]

The ramification of the Song as "Holy of Holies" is explored by Franz Rosenzweig for whom the Song is key to understanding Revelation, i.e., the disclosure of the Divine presence in the human realm. As Rosenzweig writes in his book, *The Star of Redemption* "the Song of Songs was an 'authentic,' that is, a 'worldly' love lyric; precisely for this reason, not in spite of it, it was a genuinely 'spiritual' song of the love of God for man. Man loves because God loves and as God loves."[482] The Song represents an I-Thou relationship, according to Rosenzweig, and through the language employed by the lovers in the Song, "love already becomes superhuman, for the sensuality of the word is brimful with its divine supersense. Like speech itself, love is sensual – supersensual."[483] Because the lovers expose the eternal elements of love through their language and dialogue, they also expose the Divine, another eternal element of our world. Through revelation of the self and emotional disclosure, the lovers access the Divine and add a hidden, yet valuable layer to the Song's power and richness. But they do more; through their dialogue of love, they reach for and make transcendence perceptible. In this manner, God is revealed through the love fostered by the two lovers in the Song.

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[480] Landy, Francis. "The Song of Songs." The Literary Guide to the Bible. ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987, 317.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Rosenzweig, Franz. The Star of Redemption. Trans. Barbara E. Galli. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, 199.
[483] Rosenzweig, 201.

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