

EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY:
INSIGHTS FROM ECCLESIASTES
AND THE SONG OF SONGS
ON LIVING A MEANINGFUL LIFE

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SONG OF SONGS WORKSHOP

- Part I – Love is a Many-Splendored Thing: pass out handout and play recording of Frank Sinatra’s version of Love is a Many-Splendored Thing. Have participants follow along in the lyrics on the handout.
 - There are several themes in this song that are central to the Song of Songs
 - Images of Spring
 - Images of wealth
 - Nature’s way of giving a reason to be living
 - This last phrase is especially important—because even though on it’s surface the book may seem only to be a beautiful love poem, when we look deeper we see that this counter-textual text has important things to say about the transformative power of love in making life meaningful
- Part II - Introducing the lovers
 - Complexity of the female lover: in loving relationships we glimpse the fullness of another person in all his or her complexity, and those who love us see us for all of who we are. Because of his love for her, the male lover sees—and adores—seemingly opposing characteristics in his female companion.
 - She is fearless—with him on the mountaintops and among the wild animals (handout 4:8), but also “sugar and spice and everything nice”—literally! (handout 4:13-14).
 - He declares about her that she is both closed and open (handout 4:12 and 4:15). She decides when and to whom to be open or closed.

- She later confirms his statement by describing herself using both military and peace-time imagery (handout 8:10).
 - The degree of complexity with which the female companion is described is unusual when compared with the descriptions we have of other Biblical women. It is through the lens of love that we are enabled to see her in all her complexity. In this way she is both idealized and realized.
- In this poetic world in which the female beloved is seen for all of who she is, she feels safe or confident enough to express her desire for her lover. The female companion in the Song of Songs may be the only biblical woman who shows female sexual desire. We have biblical examples of male sexual desire (e.g. King David), and of women using sex in a power-play (e.g. Tamar) but it is only in the relative safety of the Song of Songs' land of love that a woman's sensuality is expressed so openly. The opening verse of the book tips us off that this is a different world (handout 1:2) She yearns for him (handout 3:1), and calls to him to offer her love to him (handout 7:12-13). But, as we said earlier, complexity is the name of the game, so while the woman is at times open in her sexuality/sensuality, at other times she hides and her lover has to coax her from her hiding place (handout 2:14).
- Part III - Counter-textual text: why is this book in our canon?
 - The rabbis over time have explained that the book is meant to be read allegorically—the female beloved is the people of Israel and the male beloved is God. A famous quote from Rabbi Akiva in Mishnah Yadayim (3:5) shows

the extent to which they were convinced of the sacred nature of this ancient love poem, “The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”

- And, although God is not mentioned directly in the text, much like Esther, another gender-bending book of the Bible, God’s presence may be cleverly disguised in one of the central refrains of the book (handout 2:7), as well as in the thesis statement of the book (handout 8:6)
- Even when taking the Song of Songs at its literal word—where oaths are sworn on animals and lovers are individual people (not a nation and God)—as with all biblical texts, this one too has important wisdom to impart about life itself.

- Part IV - Love and permanence

- Time is an important element in the world of the lovers. The setting for the Song of Songs is spring (handout 2:11-13) when everything—including love and the lovers themselves—is blossoming. The lovers take turns, as we have seen, describing one another using images of springtime, and the world around them is unfolding in bloom.
- But spring is a fragile time, much as it is delightful, and in its comment on the importance of love for living a rich and meaningful life, the flow of the poem teaches that if we aren’t careful to hold onto these precious moments, they will pass us by. We feel this pace in the number of times the lovers call to each other to get up and run (handout 1:4, 2:10, 2:13), and in the very

perishable nature of the world around them—flowers and fruit can only be enjoyed for a brief period of time before they wither and rot.

- Ultimately the Song teaches about the importance of timing. We must savor love and our loved ones while we can, and eventually we must even let those who are most precious to us go—the only permanent thing in life is love itself (handout 8:13-14).

- Part V - Love is as Strong as Death

- Love is a powerful force—treat it with the respect with which we treat the sacred (handout 2:7 shows an oath—taken with Nature/God as witness—to treat love with care)
- Love is as strong (more so?) as death, because the feeling lingers even after the object of our love has gone. So love not only enhances life while we share it with those we love, it is the force that allows us to transcend death (handout 8:6-7). Scholar Rachel Adler writes, “If death is the triumph of time, love is the triumph of timelessness.”¹

- Conclusion: Extending the message into all love relationships—even platonic family and friendships

- In opening ourselves to another person, in becoming vulnerable enough to allow another person to see us for both our most and least attractive qualities, we stretch and grow to become the best expressions of ourselves, as the lovers of the Song do, we blossom into our fullest potential

¹ 1998:137

- When we engage in loving relationships of all kinds we further open ourselves to the extraordinary beauty of this precious life, and the world around us blooms.
- Love—potent, transformative, life-affirming and death-defying love—truly is a many-splendored thing.

SONG OF SONGS WORKSHOP HANDOUT

Part I - Love is a Many-Splendored Thing¹

Love is a many-splendored thing

It's the April rose

That only grows in the early spring

Love is nature's way of giving

A reason to be living

The golden crown that makes a man a king

Once on a high and windy hill

In the morning mist

Two lovers kissed

And the world stood still

Then your fingers touched

My silent heart and taught it how to sing

Yes, true love's

A many-splendored thing

Part II - Introducing the Lovers

ח אתי מלבנון כלה אתי מלבנון תבואי תשורי | מראש אמנה מראש שניר וחרמון ממענות אריות

מהררי נמרים:

1. Lyrics by Paul Francis Webster

4:8 Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, from Lebanon! Descend² from Amana's peak,
from the peaks of Senir and Hermon, from the lions' dens and from the leopards' mountains.

יג שְׁלַחֲיָדָךְ פְּרָדִים רְמוֹזִים עִם פְּרֵי מְגַדִּים כְּפָרִים עִם-נְרָדִים: יד נֶרְדָּ | וְכַרְפֹּס קָנָה וְקִנְמוֹן עִם
כָּל-עֵצֵי לְבוֹנָה מֵר וְאַהֲלוֹת עִם כָּל-רֵאשֵׁי בְשָׂמִים:

4:13 Your groove³ is a grove of pomegranates with delectable fruit; henna with spikenard,

4:14 spikenard and saffron, cane and cinnamon, with all [the] trees of frankincense, myrrh
and aloes, with all [the] chief perfumes.

יב גן | נְעוּל אַחֲתֵי כִלְהָ גֵל נְעוּל מַעֲנַן חֲתוּם:

4:12 My sister-bride is a locked garden, a locked wave,⁴ a sealed spring.

טו מַעֲנַן גְּזִים בְּאֵר מִים חַיִּים וְנִזְלִים מִן-לְבָנוֹן:

4:15 A garden spring, a well of living waters that flow from Lebanon.

י אֲנִי חוֹמָה וְשָׂדֵי כַּמְגַדְלוֹת אֲזָ הָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כְּמוֹצֵאת שָׁלוֹם:

8:10 I am a wall and my breasts are like towers. But I was in his eyes like one who brings
forth⁵ peace.

-
2. A second meaning of this root is “to look” or “to gaze.” Rendered here as “descend” as in Pope, who writes (474): “In view of the preceding verb(s) of locomotion, it seems preferable to choose that sense...”
 3. Bloch & Bloch (176) note that this noun is a hapax legomenon but connect it with the verb “to send, stretch out, extend” and so render it “your branches.” I chose Pope’s translation, based on other commentaries that connect the word with a canal or chanel of water. Recognizing that the comparison to a part of the woman’s body here is made to the pomegranate, it seems less likely that the intended meaning was “limbs” and more likely, as Pope writes (490), “A more intimate portion of the anatomy...”
 4. Many manuscripts have נג here again instead of the Masoretic text’s גל. Using parallelism, various translations render this again as “garden” or, reflecting the next verse “fountain.” My choice is consistent with Bloch & Bloch’s explanation (176), “With its rich water imagery alluding to woman’s sexuality and fertility...” A *locked wave* being a forceful water image that leads one to understand that the strength of the wave may burst the lock open at any moment.
 5. Pope (684) notes that this verb can be “...construed either as the *Qal* participle of *ms*’ ‘find,’ or the *Hipil* (causative) of *ys*’, ‘go out,’ ‘one who brings forth, produces.’” In contrast to the “nuance of happy accident” (Pope: 684) that exists in the sense of one who “finds,” I chose the active causative root “to bring forth” for the woman’s contradictory answer in 8:10 to what is said about her in 8:8-9.

ב וְשִׁקְנִי מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדֹדֶיךָ מִיַּיִן:

1:2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.

א עַל־מִשְׁכְּבִי בַלַּיְלוֹת בִּקְשָׁתִי אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי בְקִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא מִצְאָתִיו:

3:1 On my bed in the nights I sought [the one whom] my soul loves. I sought him and I did not find him.

יב לָכֵה דוֹדִי נִצָּא הַשָּׂדֶה נְלִינָה בַכְּפָרִים: יג נִשְׁכַּמְתָּה לְכַרְמִים נִרְאָה אִם פָּרְחָה הַגֶּפֶן פָּתַח הַסְּמֹדָר הִנְצוּ הַרְמוֹנִים שָׁם אֲתָנוּ אֶת־דְּדֵי לָךְ:

7:12 Go, my beloved, let us go out to the field, let us stay the night among the henna. 7:13

Let us rise early [and go] to the vineyards, let us see if the vine has budded, the grape blossom has opened, the pomegranates have bloomed. There I will give my love⁶ to you.

יד יוֹנְתִי בְּחִגְגֵי הַסֹּלֶעַ בְּסִתְרֵי הַמְּדַרְגָּה הִרְאִינִי אֶת־מְרֹאֲיֶךָ הַשְּׂמִיעֵינִי אֶת־קוֹלְךָ כִּי־קוֹלְךָ עֲרֹב וּמְרֹאֲיֶךָ נְאוּהָ:

2:14 My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hideaway of the cliff, let me see your appearance, let me hear your voice! For your voice is delicious and your appearance is lovely.

Part III - So Why Is This Song in our Bible?!

ז הַשְּׂבַעֲתֵי אֲתָכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּצַבָּאוֹת אֹו בְּאֵילֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תִּעְוְרוּ | וְאִם־תִּעְוְרוּ אֶת־הָאֵהָבָה עַד שְׂתַחַפֵּץ:

2:7 I adjure you, Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the deer of the field (*tz'va'ot*

6. Bloch & Bloch (208) are even more specific, “*doday*, literally ‘my lovemaking.’” And (137) “The plural *dodim* is a comprehensive term for lovemaking, that is, kisses and caresses as well as intercourse.”

and *ayalot ha'sadeh*) that you will not rouse or awaken love until it is ready.⁷

Part IV - Love and Permanence

יא כִּי־הִנֵּה הַסִּתּוֹ [הַסִּתּוֹ] עָבַר הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף הַקֶּלֶד לֹא יִב הַנְּצַנִּים נִרְאוּ בְּאַרְץ עֵת הַזְּמִיר הִגִּיעַ וְקוֹל
הַתּוֹר נִשְׁמַע בְּאַרְצֵנוּ: יג הַתְּאֵנָה חֲנֻטָּה פְּלִיָּה וְהַגִּפְנִים | סִמְדָר נִתְּנוּ רֵיחַ קוֹמִי לְכִי [לְךָ] רַעֲיִתִי יִפְתֵּי
וּלְכִי־לְךָ:

2:11 For behold, the winter is over, the rain has passed, it has passed! 2:12 The flowers are seen in the land, the season of singing⁸ has arrived and the voice of the dove is heard in our land. 2:13 The fig tree has ripened its green fruit and the grape vines' blossoms have given a scent. Arise my companion, my beautiful-one, and come away!

ד מְשַׁכְּנִי אַחֲרֶיךָ נִרְוָצָה...

1:4 Draw me after you, let us run...

י עֲנֵה דוֹדִי וְאָמַר לִי קוֹמִי לְךָ רַעֲיִתִי יִפְתֵּי וּלְכִי־לְךָ:

2:10 Answer, my love, and say to me, “Arise my companion, my beautiful-one, and come away!”

יג הַיּוֹשֶׁבֶת בַּגְּנִים חֲבֵרִים מְקַשְׁיָבִים לְקוֹלְךָ הַשְּׁמִיעֵינִי: יד בְּרַח | דוֹדִי וְדָמָה־לְךָ לְצַבִּל אֹז לְעֹפֶר
הָאֵילִים עַל הַרֵי בְּשָׁמִים:

8:13 Woman who dwells in the gardens: friends listen for your voice. Let me hear it. 8:14 Run away, my love, and be like the gazelle or the stag of the deer on the mountains of spices.

7. The verb here literally means “to take pleasure in” or “to desire,” so readiness here is in the sense of “when it *wants* to be awakened.”

8. The root has a double meaning of “pruning” and “singing.” This may be a pun, as Bloch & Bloch note (154-55), “...the first meaning pointing backward to the spring (2:11) as the season of pruning, and the second pointing forward to the turtledove.” Pope (395) notes, “The objection to pruning is that it supposedly comes too late in the year, around July-August, to suit the present vernal setting.”

Part V - Love is as Strong as Death

ו שימני כחותם על-לבך כחותם על-זרועך כי-עזה כמות אהבה קשה כשאול קנאה רשפיה רשפי
אש שלהבתיה: ז מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות את-האהבה ונהרות לא ישטפוה אם-יתן איש
את-כל-הון ביתו באהבה בוז יבוז לו:

8:6 Put me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, because love is as strong as death, passion⁹ as hard as *Sheol*. Its flaming flames of fire are a mighty flame (or *are a blaze of God*).¹⁰ 8:7 Mighty waters cannot extinguish love, and rivers cannot wash it away. If a man gave all the wealth of his house in love, he would surely be despised.¹¹

9. BDB notes that this noun also means “ardor, zeal, or jealousy.” Pope (669) writes, “It is clear that the word can designate a variety of strong emotions, anger, envy, jealousy, fury, and in the present context, the sexual instinct and ardor which is one of man’s strongest propensities. *AT*’s choice of ‘passion’ seems the most apt rendering in view of the parallelism with *ahabah*, ‘love.’”

10. Bloch & Bloch (213) note, “...literally, ‘its sparks are sparks of fire, an enormous flame. The exact meaning of *resep* is uncertain...It has long been debated whether or not *salhebetyah* contains the name of the God of Israel. While it is likely that *-yah* derives from ‘Yah,’ the short form of ‘Yahweh,’ this ending long ago lost its association with God’s name, and became simply a suffix denoting intensity...” Pope agrees, writing (671), “To seize upon the final consonants *yh* as the sole reference to the God of Israel in the entire Canticle is to lean on very scanty and shaky support.”

11. Or “scorned.” The verb is in the form of the infinitive absolute, also meaning “indeed” or “utterly.”

ECCLESIASTES WORKSHOP

- Introduction: The Principle of Beginning with the End in Mind

“Before we get started we’re going to do a little visualization exercise. This exercise is based on a similar exercise from Stephen Covey’s The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.¹ Close your eyes.

Take a deep breath. And now another. In your mind’s eye, see yourself going to the funeral of a loved one. Really see yourself there—what are you wearing? How are you feeling? Who is with you? See the faces of the friends and family members who are also gathered for this somber occasion. You feel the shared sorrow of loss, the shared joy of having known that radiates from the hearts of your friends and family who are with you.

You sit down in the chapel and pick up the program. Staring back at you from the cover of the memorial booklet is your own picture. This is your funeral. And all these people have come to honor you, to express feelings of love and appreciation for your life. You open the program and notice that there are to be 4 speakers. The first speaker is a family member, someone who represents both your immediate and extended family—children, parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents. The second speaker is one of your friends, a person who represents the non-familial close relationships that you have built throughout your life. The third speaker is a coworker, someone who represents the people with

¹ 2004: 95

whom you have collaborated in your various endeavors. And finally, the fourth is a member of your PTS community.

Now think deeply. What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life? What kind of husband, wife, father, or mother would you like their words to reflect? What kind of son or daughter or cousin? What kind of friend? What kind of working associate? What kind of community member? What character would you like them to have seen in you? What contributions, what achievements would you want them to remember? Look carefully at the people around you. What difference would you like to have made in their lives?"

- Suggest that Covey's 2nd habit of highly successful people is the wisdom put forth in Ecclesiastes: if we live each day simultaneously with an awareness of life's brevity and with a focus on the way we want to be remembered, then we will find both joy and meaning in the precious time we have in this life
- Part I – What is *hevel*?
 - This word is repeated more than any other in the book of Ecclesiastes (38 times), so it is key to understanding the thesis of the book
 - Pass out handout with several different translations of 1:2
 - Conclude that Ecclesiastes' message is that life is as impermanent as vapor, passing as quickly as a single breath (and, at worst, leaving as little mark behind as a single breath)
- Part II – All is Fleeting/Transitory So Now What?
 - See 9:7-10 (on handout): pursue earthly pleasures, enjoy yourself, carpe diem!

- We know that the rabbis also saw this message in the text b/c in Pesikta de Rav Kahana 8a they “...expressed concern that the book’s commendation of pleasure might ‘encourage hedonism’ or ‘induce an inclination to heresy’” (also Rav Kahana and Kohelet Rabbah 1:3) (Fox’s JPS Commentary p. xiv)
- Further evidence of this message is the pairing of Ecclesiastes with Sukkot, the festival that reminds us of “the transience of human life, which is well symbolized by a temporary booth” (Fox’s JPS Commentary p. xv) and also “*z’man simchateinu*”—a time for rejoicing, which Ecclesiastes encourages
- Part III – Live for Today but Don’t Sacrifice the Future for the Present
 - see handout 11:9 as the book winds down we are reminded that we are always held accountable for our actions
 - see handout 12:1 even in the heady pleasure-filled days of youth we are to remember our “creators.” These might be God, our parents, our teachers, our friends—those people who care for us and shape our character over time.
 - If we keep our ‘creators’ in mind even as we enjoy the pleasures of life, we are reminded of the ideals that we were taught to live up to, and we can find balance between living for ourselves and living for others, living for today and living/giving for tomorrow
- Part IV – Begin with the End in Mind
 - Scholar Michael Fox suggests that the concluding chapter of Ecclesiastes is the description of a funeral, and, like Covey’s principle of beginning with the end in mind, the funeral is *your* funeral²

² 1988: 63

- See handout 12:1-8 and have everyone read in chevruta (or read aloud as a group)
- The extreme disruption of the natural order—of the life in this town and of natural world—is because we are each the center of our own worlds, and painting the picture of our own deaths truly does bring everything to a halt
- Part V – Conclusion – The Purpose of the Text
 - Ecclesiastes is not meant to be depressing—on the contrary, (see handout 12:11) “the words of the wise are like spurs.”
 - With our own fleeting existence always in mind, we are less likely to take life for granted and to let its precious moments pass us by

ECCLESIASTES WORKSHOP HANDOUT

Part I - What is *hevel* (הֶבֶל)?

הֶבֶל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת הֶבֶל הַבָּלִים הַפֶּל הֶבֶל:

- King James (1997): Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity.
- Bible in Basic English (1997): All is to no purpose, said the Preacher, all the ways of man are to no purpose.
- Jewish Publication Society (1917): Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
- JPS Tanakh (1985): Utter futility! -- said Koheleth -- Utter futility! All is futile!
- New Revised Standard Version (1989): Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- Christian Standard Bible (2003): "Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

הֶבֶל = vapor, breath¹

Suggested literal translation: "Vapor of vapors," said Kohelet, "Vapor of vapors, all is vapor."

Suggested poetic translations: "Utterly fleeting/transitory," said Kohelet, "Utterly fleeting/transitory, it is all fleeting/transitory."

Part II - All is Fleeting/Transitory, So Now What?

לֵךְ אֲכַל בְּשִׂמְחָה לַחֲמֹד וְשִׂתֵּה בְּלֵב-טוֹב וַיֵּדַע כִּי כָבֵד רִצָּה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-מַעֲשָׂיךָ: בְּכָל-עֵת יִהְיֶה

1. BDB definition

בְּגִדֵיךָ לְבָנִים וְשִׁמּוֹן עַל-רֹאשְׁךָ אֶל-יַחְסָר: רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם-אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר-אָהַבְתָּ כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֵּי הַבָּקָר
אֲשֶׁר נָתַתְּ לָךְ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ כָּל יְמֵי הַבָּקָר כִּי הוּא חֶלְקֶךָ בְּחַיִּים וּבַעֲמָלְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אָתָּה עֹמֵל תַּחַת
הַשָּׁמֶשׁ: כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחַד עֲשֵׂה כִּי אֵין מַעֲשֵׂה וְחִשְׁבוֹן וְדַעַת וְחִכְמָה בְּשֵׂאוֹל
אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה הַלֹּךְ שָׁמָּה:

(Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

9:7 Go, eat your bread in joy and drink your wine with a happy² heart, because God has already approved³ your actions. 9:8 In every season may your clothes be white and your head never lack ointment. 9:9 See life with a woman you love all the fleeting/transitory days of your life that [God] gave you under the sun--all your fleeting/transitory days. For that is your portion in this life and out of your toil that you toil under the sun. 9:10 Whatever is within your reach⁴ to do, do with all your strength, because there is no action, nor accounting, nor knowledge in Sheol where you are going.

Part III - Live for Today but Don't Sacrifice the Future for the Present

שִׂמְחָה בְּחַיֵּיךָ בְּיַלְדוּתְךָ וְיִטִּיבֶנָּה לְבָבְךָ בַּיּוֹמֵי בְּחֻרוֹתֶיךָ וְחַלְדֶּךָ בְּדַרְכֵי לְבָבְךָ וּבְמַרְאֵי עֵינֶיךָ וְדַע כִּי
עַל-כָּל-אֵלֶּה יְבִיאֶךָ הָאֱלֹהִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט:

11:9 Be joyful, youth, in your childhood, and make your heart happy⁵ in the days of your youth. And go according to the ways of your heart and the sights of your eyes. But know that God will bring you in judgement for all of this.

וּזְכֹר אֶת-בְּוִרְאֶיךָ בַּיּוֹמֵי בְּחֻרוֹתֶיךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָבֹאוּ יְמֵי הַרְעָה וְהִגִּיעוּ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵין-לִי

2. Literally, "with a good heart"
3. Literally, "wanted" or "desired"
4. Lieterally, "your hand finds"
5. Again, literally, "better your heart"

12:1 So remember your creators in the days of your youth before the bad days come, and [before] the years arrive of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'

Part IV - Begin with the End in Mind

עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִחַשְׁדָּה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהָאוֹר וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְהַכּוֹכָבִים וְשָׁבוּ הָעֵבִים אַחַר הַגֶּשֶׁם: בַּיּוֹם שֶׁיִּזְעַגוּ שְׁמַרְי הַבַּיִת וְהִתְעַזְוּתוֹ אֲנָשֵׁי הָחַיִל וּבִטְלוּ הַטְּחִנוֹת כִּי מֵעַטּוֹ וְחִשְׁכוּ הָרְאוֹת בְּאַרְבּוֹת: וְסִגְרוּ דְלֵתַיִם בְּשׂוֹק בְּשֹׁפֵל קוֹל הַטְּחִלָּה וְיָקוּם לְקוֹל הַצֶּפּוֹר וְיִשְׁחוּ כָּל־בָּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר: גַּם מִגְּבֹהַ יִרְאוּ וְחִתְחִתְוּ בְּדָרְךָ וְיִנְאֲצוּ הַשִּׁקְדָּה וְיִסְתַּבֵּל הַחֲגַב וְתִפְרַר הָאֲבִיוֹנָה כִּי־הִלְךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ וְסָבְבוּ בְּשׂוֹק הַסִּפְדִּים: עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־[וְיָרַח] [וְיָרַח] תִּבֵּל הַכֶּסֶף וְתִרְצַח גִּלְתֵּי הַזָּהָב וְתִשְׁבַּר כֶּד עַל־הַמְּבוּעַ וְנִרְצַח הַגִּלְגָּל אֶל־הַבּוֹר: וְיָשֵׁב הָעֶפֶר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נִתְּנָה: הַיָּבֵל הַבָּלִים אָמַר הַקּוֹהֶלֶת הַכֹּל הַבָּל:

(Ecclesiastes 12:2-8)

12:2 Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars go dark⁶ and the clouds return after the rain. 12:3 On the day that the guards of the house tremble, and the men of valor are bent, and the grinding-maids, diminished, are idle,⁷ and the [female] lookers through the window go dark, 12:4 and the doors in the market are closed in the lowering of the sound of the mill, and the sound of the bird rises, and the daughters of song are bowed low. 12:5 They will also be afraid of the high places,⁸ and the horrors⁹ on the road, and the almond tree will

6. Literally, “do not go dark”

7. Literally, “ceased”

8. The root **אָרַא** is often applied to God, and means “to be in awe of.” Here, the “high places” could be a reference to God, which would yield translation, “They will also be in awe of God.”

9. The root also has the meaning “under” or “below” and may be in parallel meaning with “the high places.” In echoing this meaning, and expanding on note 8 above, the secondary association is that the people are

bloom, and the grasshopper will bear a load, and the caperberry will burst forth, because a human being goes to his [or her] eternal home, and the lamenters in the market are all around. 12:6 Before the silver cord is broken and the gold bowl is crushed, and the jar is shattered at the spring, and the wheel is crushed into the pit, 12:7 and the dust returns to the land, as it was, and the wind¹⁰ returns to the God who gave it. 12:8 “Utterly fleeting/transitory,” said Kohelet, “Utterly fleeting/transitory, it is all fleeting/transitory.”

Part V - Conclusion - The Purpose of the Text

דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים כְּדַרְבָּנוֹת וְכַמְשֻׁמְרוֹת נְטוּעִים בְּעֵלֵי אֲסָפוֹת נִתְּנוּ מִרְעָה אֶחָד:

12:11 The words of the wise are like goads, like nails planted [by] masters of collections,¹¹ given by one shepherd.

afraid (or in awe) of both God and *Sheol*, the underworld.

10.Or “breath”

11.Fox (2004: 83) explains, “These are the experts in proverb collections, parallel to ‘the wise.’”

WOMEN, LOVE, AND LIVING A MEANINGFUL LIFE IN THE SONG OF SONGS AND ECCLESIASTES

Introduction

Many biblical texts are difficult to redeem from their misogyny. In the Hebrew Bible we find many stories of undervalued, silent, and even violently abused women. Some feminist biblical scholars have spent their careers highlighting the tragic tales of women in the Bible, while others have dedicated their professional time to redeeming these texts. The Song of Songs, however, does not need to be redeemed. In its complex and realistic—though poetically abstract—portrayal of women, the book offers a respite from the common patterns of the stories of biblical women.

The Song of Songs does not only break free from our usual expectations when it comes to the portrayal of women. It is further revolutionary in the statements it makes about the value of love and sensuality in bringing meaning to human existence. Following an examination of the Song's description of women, love, and sensuality, this paper will compare the book's conclusions with Ecclesiastes, another biblically anomalous book. And though many casual readers would never think to pair the messages of these two books, we will see that in their answers to the question of what makes life worth living, the authors of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs offer the same reply.

The Fairest Among Women: A Countertextual Woman

The female beloved in the Song of Songs speaks more than any other female character in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. She has both the first and last words of the book, and her voice is heard most often throughout the book. But in spite of how much

we hear from her, it is difficult to see a clear picture of her. We do not know, for example, whether she is rich or poor, a country girl or a city-dweller, nor do we know her age, although various clues in the text point us to the conclusion that she is young. We can only learn about her from the few words she says about herself, and from the description of her that is offered by her beloved. But even these approaches have their challenges, as many scholars have pointed out.

Michael Fox instructs us, “The reader of Canticles must quickly abandon the attempt to form a picture of the girl and boy from the sum of the images and become open to the new meaning produced by the metaphors.” He continues, “The imagery of the praise thus shows us not how the lovers look but how they see.”¹ We are reminded not even to attempt to piece together a clear picture of either of the beloveds. Rather, the Song invites us to see them through each other’s eyes, and to see their world as they do: through the lens of a love poem. Thus, perhaps counter intuitively due to the language of the Song, we are to be less interested in the physical characteristics and social status of the beloveds than we are to be in their personalities, their emotional experiences, and the world they create through their love.

Alicia Ostriker identifies the Song as a countertextual text. She defines the term as meaning, “...any biblical text, brief or extended, which in some sense resists dominant structures of authority, divine and legal, as defined by the Bible as a whole and by the history of its interpretation.”² Ostriker offers many examples to support her argument that the Song is countertextual, but it is Carol Meyers, in her article “Gender Imagery in

¹ Fox (1988: 227)

² Ostriker (2000: 43)

the Song of Songs,” who most develops our understanding of the countertextuality of the Song through an examination of the imagery that is applied to the beloveds.

Drawing on common gender roles, associations, and stereotypes, we would expect the female beloved to be described using delicate and sweet imagery, or, at the least, imagery from the domestic sphere. But Meyers points out that it is the female, and not the male beloved, who is most often compared with architectural structures that are not easily separated from military associations.

Meyers notes that the female lover’s neck and nose are compared to towers (4:4, 7:4, 7:5), and that, “A tower, after all, is first and foremost a military structure.”³ Later in the Song (8:10), countering the voices of the brothers, the female beloved declares that her breasts are towers. Meyers writes, “...the Song as a whole presents a significant corpus of images and terms derived from the military—and hence the male—world. Without exception, these terms are applied to the female.”⁴ And so one part of the personality picture of the female beloved resolves into focus. By both her own and her beloved’s account, she is to be associated with military prowess. Perhaps we are to understand that she is strong, or even formidable. Or perhaps the comparative imagery is meant to inform us that she is confident, and that her beloved feels secure in her presence. As with all good poetry, we of course cannot know with certainty the author’s intent. But it seems most likely that we are at least meant to understand her strength as a source of security and as an attractive feature rather than a threat. And what could be more countertextual than a *male* beloved who finds security in the strength of his *female* beloved? He is drawn to her because of—not threatened by—her power, whether it is to

³ Meyers (1986: 213)

⁴ Ibid. p. 215

be understood as physical or emotional. And, more surprising still, through the eyes of her beloved (8:10), much as she is likened to images of military might, she is also a source of peace. “I am a wall and my breasts are like towers. But I was in his eyes like one who brings forth peace.”

In keeping with our understanding of the female beloved as a source of peace, Meyers notes that while “The eyes of each of the lovers are compared to doves...only the female as a person (in 2:12 and 6:9) is metaphorically related to a dove. The general association of doves with love and peace is surely a dominant enough motif in ancient art and literature...”⁵ And though Meyers explains that this association with the female beloved “would conform to gender stereotyping,”⁶ in the context of the earlier military imagery that is also connected with the female beloved, the association of the female with the dove serves only to make our understanding of the female beloved more complex. She is neither all military might nor all dovish peace. In associating her with both strength and serenity, the poet simultaneously idealizes and realizes her. No woman—no person—can be described by any one attribute. More often, human beings bear character traits that fall on opposite ends of various spectra. In this way, perhaps more than any other woman in the Bible, the poet-author of the Song of Songs has painted a picture of a *real* woman. In describing her using contrasting imagery, the female beloved jumps off the page in three dimensions. She is fully realized, even as she remains abstract.

The complexity of the imagery used to describe the female beloved can be seen in several other notable examples. First is another set of images associated with

⁵ Ibid. p. 216

⁶ Ibid.

“...wildness, danger, might, strength, aggressiveness...”⁷ The female beloved is compared by her beloved to both lions and leopards (4:8). Or, if she is not meant to be understood as being compared to a lion or leopard, he at least associates her with the wild places in which these powerful animals dwell. Meyers writes, “Nothing would be further from a domestic association for a female...All the figurative biblical appearances of the lion underscore the masculinity of the imagery, insofar as the attributes of aggression and power are stereotypical male qualities.”⁸ So here again the female beloved is surprisingly—countertextually—associated with the masculine qualities of physical strength and wildness.

It is a striking contrast then, when, only a couple of verses later (4:11), the male beloved describes her mouth as being sweet with honey and milk. Sweetness is certainly an attribute that is most commonly associated with femininity, and milk is quite naturally a symbol of woman-ness. Meyers, however, explains, “Images drawn from the world of food, for example, betoken no special nuances for understanding gender. The nourishing sweet aspects of pomegranates or nectar, of honey or milk are not related to any inherently gendered qualities.”⁹ While it is true that in the gender-bending world of the Song, symbols like milk, which might otherwise naturally only be associated with the female lover, are also used to describe aspects of the male beloved, the pomegranate is only ever related to the female lover.

Twice (6:11 7:13) during the course of the Song the woman wanders in the pomegranate orchard, once calling to her lover to join her there. Twice (4:3, 6:7) the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p. 216-217

⁹ Ibid. p. 212

male beloved compares her cheek to the red curve of the pomegranate. The final two uses of the pomegranate are more directly sexually linked to the female beloved. In 4:13 he says that *shelachayich* are a pomegranate orchard. While most translators render this as *your branches* or *your limbs*, Pope chooses *your groove*, explaining: “The verb *slh* is used of trees sending forth roots...and branches...and the noun *seluhah* is used of branches...A more intimate portion of the anatomy has been imagined by members of ‘l’ecole naturiste.’ Haupt...rendered ‘thy supply’...Jouon took *selah* here as designating a canal...”¹⁰ In 8:2 the woman imagines bringing her lover to her mother’s house and giving him a drink from, as Pope renders it, “the juice of my pomegranate.” In the note on this verse he writes, “Since the pomegranate was a symbol of fecundity, ‘my pomegranate’ may be suggestive of eroticism...”¹¹

The pomegranate, when ripe, splits open in a distinctly vaginal shape, revealing the red, juicy fruit inside. Spices, wine, flowers, and trees are not so clearly associated with one or the other of the beloveds in the Song, but the pomegranate is only connected with the female beloved. In this way, in contrast with the imagery of the wild lions and leopards—or at least with their inaccessible and treacherous dwelling places—the female beloved further becomes multi-dimensional. She is both sweet femininity and strong and wild masculinity. In portraying her with so many contrasting images, the poet renders the female beloved as a complex, and therefore more realistic woman.

J. Cheryl Exum, in her article “Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs,” points out that feminists seem inclined to identify with the female beloved. “The fact that names are not provided for the lovers of the Song is, I think, a

¹⁰ Pope (1977: 490-491)

¹¹ Ibid. p. 659

poetic way of identifying them with all lovers, facilitating our identification with this strong-willed woman.”¹² While I agree that the namelessness and facelessness of the beloveds allows readers to put themselves into the text perhaps more so than in other Biblical texts, I offer that it is the poet’s multi-dimensional descriptions of the female beloved that encourage women readers to relate to her. Certainly other female characters in the Bible are also multi-dimensional, but the female beloved is both multi-dimensional and abstract in a way that many of the other biblical women are not. With the veil of metaphor cast over her words and actions, she is a realistic any-woman.

Accordingly, Exum cautions readers that “There are no real women in this text. The Song is not a transcript of a lovers’ tryst. It is not a record of the words real women spoke to or about their lovers...the man and woman/men and women are literary personae, literary constructs.”¹³ This is of course equally true of all of the women described in the Bible. While it is certainly possible that some of those women really did exist, it is far more likely that *all* of the Biblical characters are literary constructs to a greater or lesser degree. This may be more true of the woman/women in the Song of Songs, but it is certainly not unique.

Exum continues by pointing out that “The woman, or women, in this text may be the creations of male authors.”¹⁴ Exum writes these words to problematize the way that many feminist scholars have held up the portrayal of the female beloved in the Song as being pro-women. She quotes David Clines’ proposal that the depiction of the female beloved in the Song is perhaps “...a male fantasy in which a male author has created his

¹² Exum (2000: 26)

¹³ Ibid. p. 27

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 28

ideal dream woman...”¹⁵ I do not see this as problematic. On the contrary, this proposal renders the portrayal of the female beloved all the more surprising. The poet’s dream woman is multi-dimensional! Her description cannot be limited by stereotypically feminine imagery, nor is she limited to traditional female spheres or roles. How wonderful that a male poet’s ideal dream woman is so complex!

Phyllis Tribble reminds us, “Never is this woman called a wife, nor is she required to bear children. In fact, to the issues of marriage and procreation the Song does not speak.”¹⁶ The woman in the Song exists equally in the home and in the wild places. Her sexual appetite is celebrated—not feared, as female sexuality so often is, both biblically and beyond—and the Song offers no hint that her sexual encounters with her beloved will result in motherhood, nor that the beloveds are married. As with all, or at least most female representations in the Bible, she is a literary construct. Regardless, she is a remarkably countertextual literary construct. And, whether she was created by a male or a female author, I agree with Exum’s final point in her article: that feminists should celebrate the presence of this multi-dimensional, countertextual, fantasy woman in our Bible.¹⁷ I appreciate Rabbi Akiba’s statement: “The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”¹⁸ How refreshing to meet such a simultaneously real and abstract woman in the pages of our Canon.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the rabbinic sages did not read the Song as a poem between two human lovers. Instead, they understood the female beloved as the People of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tribble (1978: 162)

¹⁷ Exum (2000: 35)

¹⁸ Quoted in Ostriker (2000: 38), from Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

Israel and the male beloved as God. Shir Ha'Shirim Rabbah meticulously relates each of the beloveds' poetic comparisons to a characteristic of the People of Israel, an event in Israel's history, an aspect of the relationship between God and Israel, or a *mitzvah* or ritual that Jews perform. In many cases the rabbis offered multiple referents for a single phrase in the Song. For example, Song of Songs 2:6 is interpreted in 4 different ways: the tablets of the 10 commandments, *tzitzit* and *t'filin*, the recitation of the *Shema* and the *Amidah*, and the presence of God in the tabernacle and in the world to come.¹⁹ Regarding the female beloved, the rabbis interpret her first statement about herself (1:5) to mean either that Israel is dark because of the peoples' own wrongdoings but beautiful because of the actions of Israel's ancestors, or dark in the peoples' own eyes but beautiful to God, or dark as slaves in Egypt but beautiful in the blood of circumcision and of the Passover offering.²⁰

The extent to which the rabbis dismantled each phrase in the Song to apply in multiple ways to Israel and God has led many—and I agree—to suggest that the rabbis themselves understood what a countertextual text this is. In response, they overcompensated. Ostriker writes, "... every rabbinical protest that the Song is not to be understood in its 'simple' sense seems to confirm that it inevitably was so understood."²¹ In the case of the Song of Songs, however, I am grateful for their allegorical acrobatics. Were it not for their perhaps overzealous interpretations of the Song, it seems unlikely that this book, with its abstract, multi-dimensional, and countertextual depiction of a woman, would have been included in our Bible. And now, since the book has been

¹⁹ Midrash Rabbah: The Song of Songs 11:19

²⁰ Midrash Rabbah: The Song of Songs 1:34

²¹ Ostriker (2000: 38)

preserved for us, we are free to say, as Exum suggests, "...to the ancient authors and traditionists who preserved it for us, 'thanks for your text, and I'll decide how to read it.'"²²

Other Women in The Song

The female beloved is not the only woman in the Song of Songs. In fact, in its emphasis on women's roles and voices over men's, the Song further sets itself apart from other books of the Bible. In addition to the female lover, the daughters of Jerusalem also speak frequently in the Song. And finally, although the female beloved herself is never portrayed in a maternal way, the word 'mother' appears 7 times in the Song, while fathers are never mentioned.

If, due to the conflicting metaphors that are used to describe her, a clear picture of the female beloved never emerges, then we have an even less focused view of the daughters of Jerusalem. They serve to echo the words and emotions of the female beloved, and as an audience within the text to which the female beloved speaks. Chana and Ariel Bloch explain that "...the daughters of Jerusalem represent the social milieu in which the lovers move, answering their need for public testimony and public validation."²³ This is similar to one of the functions of a Greek chorus in classical Greek plays. Another function of the Greek chorus, and more interesting for our reading of the Song's attitude toward women, is to suggest the audience's *ideal* response to the drama as it unfolds. If we apply this role to the daughters of Jerusalem, then the poet has created a female lens through which the Song is meant to be viewed. Each time that the female beloved speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem, she is speaking to us. And each

²² Exum (2000: 35)

²³ Bloch & Bloch (2006: 6)

time that the daughters of Jerusalem respond to her, the poet is suggesting *our* response to her. Unlike many other narratives and poems in the Bible in which our only view into the scene is through the eyes of a male character, the author of the Song of Songs seems to be suggesting that we should understand the poem from two separate female perspectives. For male and female readers alike, in addition to identifying with the nameless and faceless beloveds themselves, we can enter the Song through the daughters of Jerusalem. This contributes to the possibilities of a gynocentric reading of the book.

Further, the women through whose eyes we watch the poem unfold are perhaps themselves meant to be understood as countertextual. Though we can, of course, never be sure what the author intended, it is significant that the female chorus is called the daughters of Jerusalem. They are not, for example, referred to simply as ‘girls’ or ‘young women.’ No, these are the daughters of *Jerusalem!* And if we are to understand the female beloved through the characteristics of the metaphors that are applied to her, then we must do the same for the daughters of Jerusalem. Like the towers to which the female beloved’s anatomy is compared, Jerusalem was a fortified city, regardless of the uncertain dating of the Song. As described through the Southern bias of other biblical texts, Jerusalem was the center of biblical experience—the capital of the kingdom and the location of God’s dwelling on earth.

So women associated with this powerful and sacred place must also bear these characteristics. Like the female beloved, their referent conjures images of strength (walls), luxury (the wealth associated with the capital), and perhaps even a connection to the Divine (the Temple). It is conceivable that the author intended us to understand the female beloved’s repeated refrain for the daughters of Jerusalem to swear by the *tzva’ot*

(gazelles) and the *aylot ha'sadeh* (deer of the field) as a play on the familiar biblical names of God *Adonai Tzva'ot* and *El Shaddai*. Most often, when Biblical authors make reference to animals, they use the male animal (in either singular or plural form, unless of course the animal is being compared to a female person or object). The *tzvi* (gazelle), for example, is used as a referent in the masculine plural in I Chronicles 12:8 and in II Samuel 2:18. Given that the author seems to have made a clear choice to use the feminine plural in the woman's refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem, it is indeed plausible that he or she intended for us to read in this adjuration a reference to or at least an echo of God. This is not so far-fetched if we see the daughters of Jerusalem in the context of the holy city to which they belong.

There is one more female figure in the Song who is worthy of examination: the mother. The word 'mother' appears seven times in the Song, whereas fathers are never mentioned. Phyllis Tribble notes, "Unquestionably, these seven references to mother, without a single mention of father, underscore anew the prominence of the female in the lyrics of love."²⁴ In the Song, mothers play several important roles, some stereotypical, some truly unexpected. Mothers bear children, bringing new, precious, beloved, life into the world (3:4, 6:9, 8:5), and then mothers nourish that life (8:1). Mothers are the reference point for family units (1:6), and they are responsible for their children's futures (3:11). But perhaps surprisingly in our contemporary Western context, mothers (and, by extension, the mother's house) are not only a source of security (3:4, 8:2), but they also seem to be a source of sensual knowledge for their daughters (8:2).

²⁴ Tribble (1978: 158)

Alicia Ostriker writes, “In 8:2, where the mother’s house is a place of maternal instruction, the ensuing fantasy...suggests that mother may have taught daughter the rites of lovemaking.”²⁵ It should be noted that the verbal construct *t’lamdeini* could mean one of three things: either, as Ostriker renders it “she would teach me,” or, speaking to the male beloved, “you would teach me,” or, referring to her mother, “she who gave birth to me.” Given the context, we can eliminate the middle choice. The woman would not need to bring her lover back to her mother’s house in order to have him teach her. He could teach her anywhere. It is more difficult to definitively choose between the first and third possible meanings. Pope suggests, “her who bore me,”²⁶ but the Blochs support Ostriker:

Commenting on this verse, Landy...sees the mother as participating in “the lovers’ amorous education.” Compare Ruth 3:1-5, where Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law to wash and anoint herself, and put on her best clothes, in preparation for her expected encounter with Boaz. This custom has ancient antecedents: The Sumerian goddess Inanna, at her mother’s command, “bathed herself, anointed herself with goodly oil,” before her meeting with Dumuzi...²⁷

So although we certainly cannot be sure exactly what the female beloved suggests that her mother would teach her, using this translation suggests that wisdom about sensuality and sexuality is passed between women. In the world of the Song, young women do not fearfully go to their marriage beds to learn for themselves about the intimate exchanges between spouses. Rather, young women first select their male beloveds and then bring them back to the seat of female wisdom—the domestic sphere, the house—so that they may learn the sensual arts from their mothers. Again we must

²⁵ Ostriker (2000: 46)

²⁶ Pope (1977: 12)

²⁷ Bloch & Bloch (2006: 210)

heed Exum's warning that these are not the historically documented actions of real people. We cannot know how much of the interaction between mothers and their daughters as recorded in the Song was true to life at the time of the Song's composition. Again, in the words of David Clines, this may be an ideal dream portrait of mothers' roles. But in the world of the Song, like the other female characters, mothers are described as being strong, nurturing, and as possessing unexpected—countertextual--wisdom.

Women and Love Relationships in Ecclesiastes

Although Ecclesiastes is also understood as a countertextual book of the Bible, the central character of the book has little to say about women or about love relationships. What he does say, however, is striking in its directness. The statements are simple declarations about the way of the world, without making use of the book's common rhetorical style of proposal and refutation. And so we must pay closer attention to these statements in an attempt to understand just what exactly the author claims *is* most important in life.

Ecclesiastes offers a positive command in 9:9, contrasting time spent with a woman who one loves with the fleeting nature of one's life. Though life is transient, time spent with a beloved woman makes that limited time worthwhile. Time spent with a beloved woman is one of the pleasures that Ecclesiastes unequivocally endorses, like food and drink. It is not clear from the Hebrew whether, as in the Song of Songs, the emphasis is on love, regardless of marital status, or whether the woman with whom Ecclesiastes suggests that a man spend "all the fleeting days of your life" must be his wife.

The Hebrew word *ishah* could either mean “a woman” or “a wife.” Michael Fox points out the rabbis’ discomfort with this ambiguity, and again, as we saw in their interpretation of the Song of Songs, they explain that the author really did intend to say ‘wife’ and not simply ‘woman.’ Fox himself writes, “Still, the only woman who would be a life-companion is one’s wife, and Koheleth does not say ‘women.’”²⁸ But much as later commentators may strive to read their own interpretations into the author’s word choice, the text is not definitive. In fact, the absence of the definite article before the word ‘woman’ underscores the ambiguity of the message. Whereas the addition of the definite article would render the phrase “with *the* woman that you love,” and thus give the reader the sense that Kohelet intended us to understand ‘wife’ or at least ‘life partner,’ the text simply states “with *a* woman that you love.” In this way, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs offer a similar countertextual message about the importance of love relationships in life. Neither directly refers to a marriage, the result of which might be children, or the exchange of property. Both are more concerned with the pursuit of love and pleasure as important in-and-of themselves.

We will return to this theme in a moment, but first we must address Ecclesiastes’ other mention of women, which stands in stark contrast with 9:9. In 7:26, Ecclesiastes portrays a woman as a trap, as being more bitter than death. Fox mentions that there is an alternative way to read this verse: “I find more bitter than death the woman who is all traps, whose hands are fetters, and whose heart is snares.” He also notes that many commentators, both modern and ancient, including R. Judah in Koheleth Rabbah as well

²⁸ Fox (2004: 64)

as Rashbam, and Sforzo, read the verse this way.²⁹ Fox ultimately rejects this translation, but he does write that the verse is

...clearly hyperbolic. If Koheleth truly believed that all women were this malign, he could not have urged the enjoyment of life ‘with a woman you love’ (9:9a), for any such enjoyment would be impossible. Perhaps he intends his remark in 7:25-8:1a as a wisecrack rather than a solemn statement. Verse 29 suggests self-directed irony, as if to say: ‘See what strange things happen when men have engaged too much in reasoning!’ Anyway, he doesn’t think too highly of men either.³⁰

This interpretation ultimately serves to underline the importance that Ecclesiastes places on a beloved female partner. After all, if reasoning leaves one bitter, and the wrong woman is a painful trap, how much more precious is a beloved woman, and is a loving relationship itself?! In examining these two verses side-by-side—as the only two verses in the book that make declarative statements about women—the author of Ecclesiastes seems to make an even stronger statement about how crucial time spent with a loving female companion is in bringing joy to one’s life.

Further, though Ecclesiastes returns several times throughout the book to eating and drinking and enjoyment of one’s wealth as sources of pleasure, the author only refers to the benefits of (male) companionship in one other section of the book. In 4:7-12 Ecclesiastes is clear that it is not good for a person to be alone. So we understand that while time spent with an unloving woman is a fate worse than death—especially given the limited time that each person has in life—time spent with a beloved woman is necessary for the enjoyment of life. And it is a life well-lived that is the ultimate goal of both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 51

³⁰ Ibid.

Transience, Permanence, and Finding Meaning in Life

Despite their starkly contrasting tones, both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are ultimately books whose message is *carpe diem*. Life is short, Ecclesiastes tells us bluntly, and both books answer this statement by saying, ‘so live well.’ For both books, a necessary component of a life well-lived is finding and enjoying love relationships. Both books encourage readers to engage in sensual pleasures, especially of taste, and to seek out the joy that comes from keeping company with a beloved companion.

Ecclesiastes makes these statements relatively directly. The book opens and closes (before the Epilogue) with a declaration that everything is transient, like mist. Fox writes, “*Hevel* literally means ‘breath’ or ‘vapor.’”³¹ And although many translators choose to render *hevel* as “vanity,”³² or “futility,”³³ the root, as Fox indicates, clearly means “breath” or “vapor.” The book is a search for something in human experience that is as permanent as the earth’s natural rhythms, as enduring as some of God’s other inanimate creations. And though Ecclesiastes’ search for permanence is ultimately in vain, he concludes that, precisely because there is nothing permanent in human existence, what is worthwhile in life is joy and pleasure. Fox explains,

“At best, one can choose to indulge in agreeable and pleasant activities, and this is what Koheleth recommends: the embrace of pleasure or enjoyment—eating and drinking and such activities as listed in 9:7-9. Happiness is, by its very nature, meaningful and gratifying. Thus Koheleth is more a ‘preacher of pleasure’ than a ‘preacher of joy,’ as some commentators consider him.”³⁴

³¹ Ibid. p. xix

³² Attridge (2006: 892)

³³ Berlin & Zvi Brettler (1999: 1606)

³⁴ Ibid. p. xxi

Fox later continues, "...Kohleth comes to realize that despite all its unfairness and absurdity, life itself is good, to be grasped all the more eagerly for its brevity, given death's finality (9:7-10, 11:7).³⁵ It is no coincidence that in each of these global statements about Ecclesiastes' ultimate message, the verse about enjoying the companionship of a beloved woman is cited. This is because one of Ecclesiastes' few clear conclusions is how important time spent with a beloved woman is in an effort to make life worthwhile. The love of a woman is paramount.

While it may at first be easier to see these messages in Ecclesiastes than in the Song of Songs, there they also appear quite clearly. Even the casual reader of the Song can easily see that the author deeply valued the pleasures of love and sensuality. We have examined these themes already. Now we must see how the Song of Songs also sings to us of life's preciousness in its brevity.

The Song is set in a fragile and transient moment, when the natural world is in bloom. Nearly all of the imagery from the natural world that is either used in metaphor to refer to the beloveds or as the backdrop for their love play is fleeting. Spring blossoms flower and then fade quickly. Fruit ripens and soon rots. Many of the animals that are repeatedly mentioned in the Song (gazelles, deer, etc.) are known for their speed—being here and then gone. And all of the fragrances of spring gardens, flowers, and fruit are, as Ecclesiastes says of life itself, like vapor. We cannot hold onto any of these beautiful and delicious things for very long. Like the beloveds in the Song, if we hesitate to enjoy the sensual pleasures in life, to luxuriate in love itself, it may be too late. The seasons of our

³⁵ Ibid. p. xxxi

lives will turn, and we will come into winter without having tasted the pomegranates, or enjoyed the security that is to be found in the arms of our beloved.

In both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, not only is love valued for the pleasure it brings us in our fleeting lives, but also from the perspective of heterosexual men, women are all-important in a man's search for happiness. Both books encourage men to find—and to enjoy!—the company of a loving woman. The Song elaborates on this message by suggesting that a loving woman is many things at once. She is complex, and her complexity is to be appreciated. Unlike many of the other biblical accounts of women, women are celebrated in these books for the joy they can bring to their loving partners. These books seem to answer the question posed in Proverbs 31:10, “Who can find a woman of valor?” Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs sing in one voice, “She is real, she is out there, and *you* can find her! Now go and search for her—search for love itself—because when you find her, you will find meaning in life.”

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