

Abstract

“A STRANGE, STRANGE BOOK: THE STRANGE BEAUTY OF THE SONG OF SONGS”

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The Song of Songs is one of the most curious books in the Biblical canon. This thesis explores the history of exegesis of Song of Songs. Chapter One begins with an overview of modern biblical scholarship’s attempts to define and situate the elusive book within its historical context. Chapters Two through Four survey the long history of interpretation of the Song, especially the long-standing use of allegory that has dominated the Song’s interpretation for centuries. Modern exegesis also factors into Chapter Four, including the Song’s inspiration for particular theologies such as feminist, queer, and ecological readings. Chapter Five ventures a translation by the author and a new reading that looks at the Song as an intra-Trinitarian love song that takes place within Godhead itself. This thesis defends the idea that the Song of Songs is a strange, strange book, and as such it is uniquely suited to offer insights into a strange, strange God.

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A Strange, Strange Book: The Strange Beauty of the Song of Songs

by

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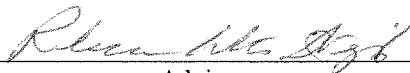
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Foreword

The Song of Songs is a strange, strange book. For millennia it has intrigued, mystified, and seduced interpreters, scholars, and the faithful. A hymn to the erotic, its presence within the Jewish and Christian scriptures is curious. Though the Song shares affinity with aspects of the canon, it cannot be said to be completely analogous with any of its literary neighbors. Much of scripture can be said to have discernable (if contested) agendas, with various passages working in conversation with other passages either to collaborate, elaborate, or contend with one another. Amidst this canonical setting, the Song of Songs seems perfectly content to do her own thing, as blissfully distracted from the strivings of theology and politics as the young lovers she portrays. Meandering in the garden of love and beauty, the Song expresses candidly both the security and peril, the bliss and sorrow to be found there. Love is a paradoxical thing; the Song of Songs is a paradoxical book. If there can be said to be a common thread within the long and mottled history of the Song of Songs treatment, it can only be that of paradox.

Interpretations of the Song vary widely. While biblical hermeneutics tend to involve a wide range of methodologies, perspectives, and conclusions, the Song of Songs seems to especially attract and beget paradox. For thousands of years, theologians maintained that the Song could only be correctly read as allegory. Modern scholars have not only deserted allegorical interpretations, but they have often worked to discredit them.¹ The Song is clearly a single, unified work²; the Song is clearly *not* a single, unified work.³ It was written very early...

¹ Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 90.

² J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 35.

³ Edwin M. Good, *The Song of Songs: Codes of Love* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 3.

or very late... or *both*. It is specifically about marital love⁴, unless it is specifically about *unmarried* love.⁵ It is a completely secular work that makes no mention of God, or it is the holy of holies itself. Suffice to say, the scholarship of the Song of Songs yields not only a great deal of nuance, but often conclusions that appear to be diametrically opposed binaries. All attempts to pin the Song down and to draw firm conclusions about her seem to come up empty. It seems safe to say, then, that one cannot truly know the Song of Songs, except perhaps in the *Biblical sense*. Much like the divine itself, we cannot fully claim to know the Song of Songs. But we can love her.⁶

This thesis then, will involve work in only the most playful sense of the term. We will frolic with the Song across time, seeing how other would-be suitors have sought to engage her through historical, allegorical, mystical, and countless other lenses of interpretation. This survey is meant to inform my own wanderings in that garden. Given the elusiveness of the Song, certainty is unlikely to be found along the way—the Song of Songs begs to be romanced rather than dissected—and that involves all the confidence, insecurity, and vulnerability that comes with being a lover.

The final interpretive chapter will involve my most original insights into looking at the Song of Songs. Revisiting the age-old methodology of allegory, I will attempt to revisit the Song of Songs as an intra-Trinitarian love song. In this reimagining, the setting of the poem occurs within the Godhead itself. God plays the role of both lover and beloved. The following thesis, then, is less a work of Biblical Studies and more a work of erotic theology. Rather than using the idea of the Trinity to explore the Song of Songs, we shall use the Song of Songs to explore the

⁴ J. Coert Rylarsdam, *The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Solomon* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 136.

⁵ A. Brenner, *The Song of Songs* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 14.

⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Evelyn Underhill (London: John M. Watkins, 1922), 88-89.

Trinity. This approach inverts the common assertion that the Song of Songs is a lock without a key.⁷ Rather the Song is taken as a key to unlock certain insights in the mystery of the Trinity. The Song of Songs is a strange, strange book which can offer new insights into a strange, strange God.

⁷ Pope, 17.

Chapter 1: A Strange, Strange Book:
Textual Scholarship on the Song

I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide... but all they want to do is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it. They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means. –Billy Collins

Though the overall goal of this thesis is not a historical analysis of the Song of Songs, it is nonetheless worthwhile to begin with a brief introduction to what scholarship has to say about the book in terms of historical setting, form, function, etc. It is human nature to want to discover all one can about a potential lover once they have caught your eye. In the case of the Song of Songs in particular, what one learns about her—or more realistically, what one *tries* to learn about her—only makes her even more mysterious. We will begin with the rather mundane inquiries: Who, when, where, what, and why?

Who? The question of authorship brings a response that will become a common refrain in this section—we do not know. Tradition holds Solomon, the son of David and King of Israel, to be the composer, which explains the commonly used title “The Song of Solomon” for the book. The text lends itself to this belief. The first verse concludes לְשֹׁלֹמֹה, which can be translated “of,” “for,” “to,” or “by” Solomon. Scholars believe that the affiliation with King Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom, including poetic acumen, bolstered the case for including Song of Songs within the canon of scripture.⁸ There are, however, numerous and legitimate concerns with this attribution, most notably the dating of the book, which many scholars conclude was written well after the time of Solomon. The possibility remains (and one can really only speak of possibilities in terms of authorship, as even plausibility seems to be a stretch) that portions of the Song may date back to the monarchial period, around the tenth

⁸ Good, 7.

century BCE.⁹ In his study of oral composition, Edwin M. Good takes interest in a passage from 1 Kings 5:12, stating, “The Hebrew text says not that Solomon ‘wrote’ or ‘composed’ proverbs and songs, but that he ‘spoke’ them.”¹⁰ If one entertains the idea that the Song of Songs began as an oral composition, for which Good makes a strong case, this draws out the progression of the Song’s composition over a longer duration of time before it was fixed in its later form. While we lack the evidence to claim Solomon as the author of the Songs, it seems safe to say that the Song itself wants us to think that, or at least to affiliate herself with the Solomonic tradition.¹¹ We may then argue that Solomon is the fictive author, similar to Beedle the Bard.

Another question that arises in the question of authorship is whether we should speak of a singular author, multiple authors, or a span of folk songs compiled by one or more editors. Scholars such as Michael D. Goulder and J. Cheryl Exum argue that the Song is a unified work, and thus the work of a single author.¹² Others, such as A. Brenner and Edwin M. Good see in the Song an anthology of individual poems, the work of multiple composers that were later gathered by an editor(s), something analogous to the work of the Brothers Grimm.¹³ All this ties into questions of the unity and dating of the poem, which will be covered in more detail below.

One last point of interest for the authorship of the Song of Songs comes from the fairly modern insight that the Song may be the work of a female composer.¹⁴ There is strong merit to this claim. Proponents observe that the Song prominently features female perspective, agency, and authority. The feminine beloved moves about with great agency, and she speaks of her mother’s house without mention of a father figure. Interactions of the lover and the beloved

⁹ Brenner, 65.

¹⁰ Good, 4.

¹¹ Rylarsdam, 135.

¹² Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986), 1.; Exum, 35.

¹³ Brenner, 65.; Good, 3.

¹⁴ Brenner, 65.

demonstrate a great equality between them. Perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, the Song offers rare insight into ancient “visions often centered not on the world of men but on the world of women.”¹⁵

Given the lack of overarching consensus about the authors(s) of the Song of Songs, there is little to be said conclusively about its composer. The author was a human... or humans... *probably*...¹⁶ While the text itself gives us few clues that would allow us to determine exactly *who* the author is, the question of who its characters are is at least somewhat clearer. However, even that has brought up a surprising number of scholarly interpretations.

The most straightforward reading of the Song of Songs would suggest a cast of two lovers, one female and one male, a chorus referred to as the “Daughters of Jerusalem,” and a smattering of background characters (brothers, a mother, etc.) Most scholars seem to work with this assumption, especially those who view the Song as a single unified work. Among such scholars there are different theories about the identity of the lovers. Some scholars are quite specific, such as Michael Goulder, who reads the Song as the love story between King Solomon and an unnamed Arabian Princess from Nativ.¹⁷ More commonly, the female lover is considered to be an anonymous rural shepherdess, and thus Solomon’s inferior.¹⁸

Still others have proposed two male lovers who are rivals for the affection of the beloved. In his own survey, A. Brenner explains, “When a romantic triangle is postulated, the third character is a shepherd, to whom the girl returns in spite of the temptation presented by Solomon’s love and his rich Jerusalem court.”¹⁹ However, for those who read the Song as an

¹⁵ David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 92.

¹⁶ Rabbi Akiva maintained that the author of the Song of Songs was Divine. See Good, 21.

¹⁷ Gould, 3.

¹⁸ Brenner, 71.

¹⁹ Brenner, 71.

anthology, this creates the potential to see a different couple for each song, thus multiplying the number of lovers. Others view the couple through an archetypal lens, so that the couple is a “type or model” for all lovers.²⁰ This effectively opens the door to an infinite number of lovers with an infinite number of identities. The lovers are you and me in our own present romances, those who have loved in the past, and those who have loved in the future. Though Francis Landry would remind us that as fictional characters, the lovers are “only images of the poet... [they share a] common identity in the poet...”²¹ However many lovers one posits, they all reduce down to one image—multiple persons, one substance. So, we have effectively narrowed the number of lovers in the Song of Songs to somewhere between one and infinity.

When? Dating the Song of Songs is notoriously difficult. Tradition would date it to the time of Solomon, as early as the tenth century BCE.²² There is a tendency in modern scholarship to reject this, due to certain linguistic peculiarities in the text. The consistent use of the *v* prefix is typically taken to indicate its late composition, though this is complicated by the fact that the Song of Deborah from Judges, which is believed to be one of the oldest pieces of biblical literature, also makes use of the same prefix.²³ Linguistic influences from other languages may also give some clue. Michael Goulder cites the use of Aramaic and Persian loanwords within the text to contend for a late date, around the fourth or third centuries BCE.²⁴ Meanwhile, A. Brenner pushes for an earlier, fifth-century date due to the limited Persian influence and complete absence of Greek influence on the language used.²⁵ A copy of the Song of Songs was discovered in the library of the Qumran community, which serves to fix the cutoff for the latest

²⁰ Rylarsdam, 136; Exum, 8; Carr, 115.

²¹ Francis Landry, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1982), 62.

²² Brenner, 58.

²³ Pope, 33.

²⁴ Goulder, 73.

²⁵ Brenner, 60.

possible dating for the book. The second century BCE is the latest possible dating.²⁶ Most modern scholars would narrow the probable dates of composition to somewhere between the fifth to second centuries BCE.

Though there is a tendency among scholars to agree regarding a post-exilic dating of the Song of Songs, there is some evidence that complicates this. Depending on the location of the Song's composition, Aramaic influence may have preceded the Persian period, as A. Brenner explains:

It is also plausible that some of the so-called Aramaic or Aramaic-influenced features are relatively early, the result of closer geographical proximity and cultural exposure of the Northern Israelites to Aramaic-speaking people, rather than proof for a later influence brought by the emergence of Aramaic as the common language of the Persian Empire in the West from the sixth century BCE onwards.²⁷

Even scholars who ascribe to the later compilation/editing of the Song of Songs may acknowledge that there are portions of the Song which seem to be far earlier. While the influence of Persian and Greek, which would support a later dating, seem to be either limited or absent, there is evidence of a much earlier influence—Ugaritic. The discovery of the Ugaritic texts and their parallels with the Song of Songs opens the potential for portions of the Song to be even older than previously thought. Dated to around 1200 BCE, the Ugaritic texts pre-date the time of Solomon by several centuries, leading scholars like Marvin Pope to conclude that, “no matter how late one places the final editorial operations, the antiquity of at least parts of the Songs cannot be doubted in light of the Ugaritic parallels.”²⁸ Thus, there is a tension in Pope's acknowledgement of early antiquity and the prevalence of “decidedly late phenomena [that] can

²⁶ Pope, 26.

²⁷ Brenner, 60.

²⁸ Pope, 27.

neither be ignored nor attributed solely to the process of compilation.²⁹ Evidence of neither the Song's early dating nor of its late dating can be explained away. This suggests an amalgamation of sources that span the ages, probably being handed down orally before being consigned to writing.³⁰ How to discern early portions from late portions, however, is not always clear.

To further complicate this complication, A. Brenner suggest an alternative explanation to the apparent antiquity of the Songs: the "poetic tendencies to archaize."³¹ Here we must depart from the more technical world of manuscripts and linguistics and enter literary realm. Poetic language tends to behave differently from prose. Rather than straightforward narrative account, poetry as an artform seeks to convey a sense of depth, essence, and feeling about its subject matter. Poetry is an art, "and art exists that one may recover the sense of life, it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*."³² A Song seeking to make love *lovely*, to orchestrate a sumptuous, romantic, opulent mystique, would likely do so by harkening back to such an age, in this case the age of Solomon's court. Allusion and imagery are key components of this phenomenon, but form plays a key part as well. When attempting to evoke an ancient ethos, employ an ancient style. Critics note that within the narrative, the Song plays with chronological and topological fluidity so that "time and place collapse."³³ Grammatically, the Song is riddled with participles. In the Hebrew this indicates an ongoing action, a perpetual present progressive, so that the actors are always standing, knocking, approaching, their "activity arrested in time and space."³⁴ Archaic form, whether an accident of transmission from ancient sources or a deliberate artistic device on the part of the author, contributes to the sense of timelessness built into the

²⁹ Brenner, 60.

³⁰ Good, 9.

³¹ Brenner, 60.

³² Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique (1917)," in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.

³³ Exum, 5.

³⁴ Exum, 5.

Song's syntax. This begs the question: Is the Song of Songs incredibly ancient, or does she want to *seem* incredibly ancient? The very ambiguity of the Song's dating serves an important literary function, rendering it redolent of the eternal. It is timeless.

There remains more question than answer, then, when it comes to dating the Song of Songs. To give due account to the full range of credible scholarship, we can safely narrow the possible range of its composition to somewhere within the first millennium BCE. This is a stunningly large range. One of the most succinct and accurate assertions regarding the dating of the Song of Songs comes from Edwin Good, "Love poetry is, perhaps of all poetry, the least dependent for style and subject matter on historical contexts... The text of the Song of Songs does not help us in that respect to date its origin."³⁵ Perhaps the safest observation we can make here then, is that the Song certainly does seem coy about her age.

Where? Location is perhaps the least contested aspect of the Song of Songs. However, it is also the vaguest in terms of scholarship. Both form and content conform to what one would expect to find in ancient Middle Eastern literature, and none seem to question that it was written in Israel. Its literary refinement and familiarity with luxury goods (indicative of a trade economy) led most to assume an urban cultural context, despite the prevalence of rural imagery within the Song.³⁶ In terms of social location, the text depicts a patriarchal milieu, even as it pushes against the norms of that milieu.

Beyond that there is little certainty, though the most common suggestion is that it was composed in northern Israel. The linguistic makeup of the Song suggests a "northernly dialectical affinity," for which the *w* prefix (noted above) is given as the prime example.³⁷ The

³⁵ Good, 10.

³⁶ Brenner, 52.

³⁷ Pope, 33.

Song's parallels with Ugaritic writings are also more easily explained by a northern provenance since the Canaanite influence appears to have been more prevalent there.³⁸ Context from within the poem itself further bolsters this claim, as most of the topological allusions are to locations in or adjacent to Northern Israel, such as Lebanon, Mount Hermon, and Tirzah, which once served as the capital of the Northern Kingdom.³⁹ There are also references to central and southern locations as well, but they are fewer in number.

Still, acceptance of the northern hypothesis is not universal. J. Exum argues that while the mention of the northern capital of Tirzah can be used for dating (i.e. to rule out that it was written during the united monarchy), it is less useful for determining the location of composition, given that most of the place names are used within the context of metaphors. The use of placenames in the Song is therefore a literary device, not an indicator of compositional setting, as Exum explains:

At the time the poem was composed, Tirzah could have had simply a legendary status... None of these geographical references has anything to do with specific historical events. Apart from Lebanon, which has a special, quasi-magical status in the Song, almost all other references to geographical locations appear in metaphors... The places mentioned in the Song could have been chosen because they were famous—Lebanon for its cedars, En-gedi for its oasis, and so forth—or for their associations and ability to evoke a lyrical, magical time and place.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the Song's primary setting is Jerusalem, in the south, and the range of place names are spread quite far. The text itself does not divulge any particular national or regional bias, which A. Brenner, who does argue for a northern composition, points out.⁴¹ Much like the ambiguities around its dating, the unfixed geography of the Songs adds another layer to its

³⁸ Brenner, 60.

³⁹ Brenner, 50.

⁴⁰ Exum, 66-67.

⁴¹ Brenner, 19.

timeless veil. Its refusal to be firmly situated in time and space “is one of its important poetic strategies for immortalizing the love it celebrates.”⁴²

While we can confidently ascribe the Song’s composition to ancient Israel, to say anything beyond that is speculation, informed speculation, perhaps, but speculation nonetheless. The Song offers little help in drilling down much further. As frustrating as this may be for Biblical scholars, the Song’s affinity for ambiguity seems to reveal something about her nature. At every level the Song leaves us with some mystery. While concealing much about the “who,” “when,” and “where,” this mystery may be our best insight into the “what” and “why.”

What: Given all its ambiguities, the “what” of Songs of Songs is, at its base level, refreshingly clear. It is Hebrew poetry. It is a clear-cut, textbook example of Hebrew poetry. Couplets of synonymous and synthetic parallelism abound throughout the verses.⁴³ In this it follows the stylistic cues of other forms of Hebrew poetry such as the Psalms, the various songs sprinkled through the narrative works (the Song of the Sea in Exodus, the Song of Deborah in Judges, etc.), and poetry found in the prophetic works. This is not to say that the Song’s use of poetic style is not without quirks. Robert Alter notes that semantic parallelism in the Song is used “with a freedom one rarely encounters in other poetic texts of the Bible.”⁴⁴ While playing with the stylistic tropes of her genre, the Song is not afraid to do her own thing. Still, idiosyncrasies aside, her status within the company of Hebrew poetry is beyond question. In this, the text itself has been unusually forthcoming—she is the שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים—the Song of Songs, the most “sublime” Song.⁴⁵ For this brief blink, she is unveiled.

⁴² Exum 67.

⁴³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985), 7.

⁴⁴ Alter, 186.

⁴⁵ Pope 17.

The structure of the Song, with its portions of narrative and dialogue, have led many to note its dramatic elements. This has led some to theorize that the Song was performed theatrically, though critics of this theory tend to outnumber proponents. The narrative of the Song forms no continuous plot, but rather fades in and out among various scenes, more like a dream than a storyline.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is little evidence of full-scale drama as a medium in Hebrew until their encounter with Hellenization.⁴⁷ Though theatrical renditions seem to have been unlikely, the prevalence of dialogue within the Song does make it unusual compared to other Mesopotamian love poetry and does generate the impression that the Song of Songs “lends itself to performance.”⁴⁸ The fact that the Song was actually performed in banquet houses is evidenced by Rabbi Akiva’s objections to the practice.⁴⁹ The back and forth between the lovers and the Daughters of Jerusalem suggests a kind of proto-theater, leading Marvin Pope to suggest it be thought of as an “aural rather than a visual play.”⁵⁰

That the Song of Songs is poetry and lyric is thus firmly established. No scholar would object to that. Where scholars are divided, however, is on the question of the nature of that poetry: Is the poem primarily secular or sacred in nature? Centuries of traditional interpreters would insist upon a solely spiritual meaning to the Song, using allegory to exegete hidden meanings from the text. Modern scholars tend to reverse this claim entirely, insisting with equal vigor that the plain meaning of the Song reveals its solely secular nature.⁵¹ Taking a particularly adamant stance in this camp, Edwin Good states, “it has nothing to do with religion... the spirituality that the Song presumes behind its every line is of a very different kind, where love is

⁴⁶ Carr, 125.

⁴⁷ Brenner, 71.

⁴⁸ Exum, 4, 64.

⁴⁹ Pope, 19.

⁵⁰ Pope, 37.

⁵¹ Brenner, 13

the highest value, over which no authority has power...’’⁵² It is easy to see why modern scholars would come to this conclusion. Nowhere in the Song is God even mentioned. Typical Biblical themes such as sin and atonement, covenantal loyalty, or cultic duty are completely absent. While other mystical traditions such as Sufiism offer examples of erotic sacred poetry, they make explicit within the text the spiritual nature of the content. The Song of Songs makes no such statement.⁵³ Taking the Song at face value, it is perfectly reasonable for a modern reader to conclude that it is a poem about human erotic love and nothing more. It is worth considering however, that the author of the Song was not a modern author, nor were its original readers modern readers.

While modern thought tends to maintain a sharp segregation between the sacred and the secular, such a divide was not prevalent in the ancient world. To read ancient texts through this lens risks projecting anachronistic assumptions that would have been foreign to the day. As J. Coert Rylarsdam explains:

Although it cannot be shown that the Song was intended as an allegory by its composers, it is also impossible to point to a time, at its very beginning, when it was understood simply as a poem of human love... The people who wrote the Bible had no equivalent for our notion of the ‘secular’; they did not separate the natural from the sacred as we often do...⁵⁴

The only point in time in which we can conclusively confirm that the Song of Songs has been interpreted as dealing only with human rather than divine themes is the modern era. It is not a worldview that is native to the ancient world. We might equally say that the allegorical method might fall into the same tendency to anachronize, especially as more and more time built up between interpreters and the Song’s composition. To claim that the Songs is *only* about human

⁵² Good 12, 26.

⁵³ Carr, 129.

⁵⁴ Rylarsdam, 138.

love or *only* about divine love misses the way in which divine and human eros “interpenetrate each other” in ancient thought and poetry.⁵⁵ In his own study of eroticism within the Bible, David Carr turns the question of allegorizing on its head: “The divine shimmers below the surface of even the Song of Songs itself,” he expounds, “the poet alludes more and less explicitly to the Biblical sacred story, reapplying specifically theological and legal motifs to the lovers’ passion in a form of reverse allegory.”⁵⁶ Is, then, the Song sacred or secular in nature? It seems reasonable to conclude that it is both.

The rabbinic tradition attests that the Song of Songs was accepted as Scripture, and thus considered sacred by the first century CE. Rabbi Akiva described the Song as making the hands “unclean.” The term indicates the sacred status of the Song, because “rules required that touching any part of any canonical (by definition holy) book be preceded and immediately followed by washing the hands, because holiness makes you dangerous to yourself and others.”⁵⁷ The inclusion of the Song of Songs in library of Qumran further attests to its sacred status, for it is difficult to imagine that the Essenes, known for their asceticism and celibacy, would have preserved an erotic poem unless they perceived its sacred implications.⁵⁸ Lastly, while there is much about the Song that makes it unique among the canon, it is not wholly devoid of parallels in the Bible. Connections with both the prophetic and wisdom books have been pointed out by numerous scholars.⁵⁹

There is one last proposed identification for the Song of Songs that deserves our attention, one that offers profound insight into the Song’s persistent ability to keep our interest.

⁵⁵ Carr, 97.

⁵⁶ Carr, 146.

⁵⁷ Good, 7.

⁵⁸ Exum, 70.

⁵⁹ Brenner, 82; Rylasrdam, 141; Exum, 69.

The Song of Songs is a millennia-long seduction between text and reader. Here I rely on the work of both J. Cheryl Exum and David M. Carr. In Exum's commentary on the Song, she describes the book as a game of hide and seek in which the reader is drawn into the chase. The book's flirtation is a form of "poetic strategy" that serves to entice its readers.⁶⁰ Carr describes the Song as "a tease."⁶¹ The enduring fascination with the Song of Songs, which has drawn in admirers for over two millennia, supports their claims. For ages the poem has proven itself to be a riddle, a game, a flirtation. Here the Song is not just a poem that details the art of erotic seduction; she is a seducer in her own right.

Why? At last, we come to the "why." Why, for what purpose, was the Song of Song written? Looking at its plain sense, we can easily infer that the Song was written as an exploration and celebration of human love at the physical, erotic level. This would be enough on its own. Physical love, wherein the incarnate meets the incarnate, is a sufficiently beautiful thing filled with its own sense of delight, mystery and spirituality to merit such an undertaking as the Song of Songs. Had the Song come down to us as simply an example of romantic poetry, we would be justified in retiring ourselves to such an explanation. However, the Song, whatever the aspiration of its original composer, does not present to us simply as a piece of ancient, erotic poetry. It comes to us as scripture. We encounter the Song of Songs as a book in the Judeo-Christian canon. As such, it offers a particular perspective ensconced within a library of other spiritual perspectives and thoughts. Therefore, it is fair, even necessary, to wonder why it should be a book of the Bible rather than just a lovely bit of secular poetry.⁶² Why it is there, and what is its role within the canon? How does it support and challenge other Biblical perspectives?

⁶⁰ Exum, 6.

⁶¹ Carr, 115.

⁶² Exum, 72.

What nuance does it add to our theological understanding? How does it guide its readers in our quest to draw ever nearer to the divine? If we put the canon of scripture in conversation with itself, what does the Song of Songs have to offer to that colloquy?

Within the Song, images of the human experience known as love comprises the chief subject matter. In particular, it depicts the love between woman and man, though it should be noted that its message cannot be said to limit itself to a strictly heteronormative agenda.⁶³ The primary characters, however, as indicated by the Hebrew grammar, can generally be assumed to be male and female, typically denoted as the lover and the beloved. Also notable amidst a variety of settings is the central locational motif of a garden. Given this essential criteria—a man and a woman in a garden—it should come as no surprise that many readers see in the Song allusions to that first man and woman in that first garden, Eden. The story of Eden as found in Genesis serves to explain the fallen state of humanity, the prevalence of sin in our lives, and the phenomenon of suffering that is ever-present in the world.⁶⁴ When put in conversation to the Genesis story, the Song of Songs may offer a message of hope.

In the story of Eden, the vision of paradise was lost. In the Song of Songs, we may dare to glimpse it again: “Romance transformed the way lovers look at the world around them; suddenly the whole world becomes more beautiful, more vibrant, more wonderful... Nature in all its glory reflects and participates in their mutual delight.”⁶⁵ Romantic love, even in its imperfect, human manifestation changes the way in which we interact with the world. It gives us a glimpse, a foretaste, of a better world that awaits us in the world to come. Whenever love dares to break through into our fallen world, it breathes to life the possibility that Eden’s original

⁶³ Exum, 85.

⁶⁴ Genesis 2-3.

⁶⁵ Exum, 13.

“eros has not been lost.”⁶⁶ The message of the Song offers a “therapeutic answer” to our post-Eden grief.⁶⁷ The gentle, mutual, delighted union of the lovers reminds us of what we once were and what we can be again: our consummate selves. In his own words, J. Coert Rylarsdam beautifully describes the Song’s role and purpose in scripture: “Indeed, it is this savoring of natural life—rather than the possession and use of it, much less the misuse or abuse of it—around which the Song revolved... The presence of the Song in Scripture is the most forceful reminder that to confess God as Creator of all things visible and invisible is to deny that anything is ‘common.’”⁶⁸ Genesis reminds us that “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”⁶⁹ The Song of Songs reminds us that we are made in God’s image, and to that image we shall return.

While the Eden imagery depicts the relation of fallen humanity to God and to one another, the prophetic imagination has also capitalized on the relation between husband and wife as a metaphor for the relation between God and humanity. The books of the prophets, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel explicitly depict God as the loving husband of Israel.⁷⁰ It is characteristic of the prophetic imagination that Israel, as the bride of God, is failing in her marital covenant. In the book of Hosea, this failure is made painfully explicit:

Plead with your mother, plead— for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband— that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst.⁷¹

This language seems diametrically opposed to the tender union expressed in the Song of Songs, but scholars have rightly seen the relation between the two.⁷² Like the Eden story, the unfaithful

⁶⁶ Carr, 109.

⁶⁷ Brenner, 75.

⁶⁸ Rylarsdam, 140.

⁶⁹ Genesis 3:19.

⁷⁰ Isaiah 54:4-6; Ezekiel 16:8.

⁷¹ Hosea 2:2-3.

⁷² Brenner, 80; Exum 73.

wife of the prophetic texts reveals the current, fallen condition of the covenant between God and Israel. When taken in conversation with the prophetic texts, the Song of Songs acts as a foil, achieving the kind of antithetical parallelism that is so common in Hebrew poetry.⁷³ Again, the Song sings out the hope for a renewed relation, restored to the wholesome relationship with God to which we are called and for which we are created.

Finally, we must examine one last consideration for why the Song was written and what its purpose might be, specifically in terms of its place within the canon of Scripture. Above, when considering “what” the Song is, we entertained the idea that the Song is a seducer. If then, it is true that “the medium is the message,” we should consider that the purpose of the Song is to seduce.⁷⁴ In terms of its relationship within the canon of scripture, the Song as a seductress, presents a more abstract model, but one that has more far-reaching exegetical implications than those explored above.

The Song of Songs has attracted the attentions of the faithful for millennia. The seductive qualities of the Song transcend her erotic content—they are built into her very structure. J. Cheryl Exum expounds beautifully, so I will quote her at length:

Its resistance to closure is perhaps the Song’s most important strategy for immortalizing love. Closure would mean the end of desiring, the silence of the text, the death of love. Resistance to closure is an attempt to keep love always in progress on the page before us. Moreover, not only does the Song end without closure, it begins *in medias res*, “let him kiss me”—a design that makes the Song, in effect, a poem without beginning or end. Like the love it celebrates, the Song of Songs strives to be ongoing, never-ending. The last verse, because it signals both the lovers’ separation and their union, suspends their love in time.⁷⁵

⁷³ Alter, 178.

⁷⁴ Exum, 3.

⁷⁵ Exum, 13.

There is something about the Song that seeks woo its readers into the eternal, to draw us into the heart of the sacred itself.⁷⁶ The Song of Songs has been described as a lock for which the key has been lost.⁷⁷ I reject this claim. The key has not been lost. Rather, it has been with us the whole time, only we have had it quite backwards. For the Song of Songs is not a lock at all. The Song *is the key*. The Song's purpose, then, is to reveal all scripture, all revelation, all creation itself for what it is—a love song that echoes throughout the ages.

Throughout this chapter we have explored the usual questions with which historical critical scholars of the Song of Songs have engaged. Who wrote it; when was it written; where was it written; what it is; why was it written? We have seen that the Song of Songs is incredibly elusive in giving up such answers. It may also have become apparent that there can be a certain tendency to personify the Song, to feel as though she is playing, flirting, even seducing her readers. For all our journey thus far, we do not know much more about the Song than when we began this chapter. But one thing seems clear. The Song of Songs is a strange, strange book.

⁷⁶ Carr, 149.

⁷⁷ Pope, 17.

Chapter 2: A Strange, Strange Beginning:
Early Interpretation of the Song of Songs

*For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel.
– Rabbi Akiva*

The history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs is as curiously winding as the history of its composition. Prior to the second century CE, there is little evidence to inform us on how the Song was used and interpreted.⁷⁸ Except for a few anomalies, the translation in the Septuagint is remarkably straightforward, keeping to the plain meaning of the Hebrew as closely as possible.⁷⁹ The use of allegory to interpret the Song is firmly documented by the second century CE, from the time of the Tannaim, rabbinic sages who lived during the Roman occupation. The writings of the early Church Fathers confirm that the allegorical method was also prevalent among Christian sages, also beginning by the second century. Commentaries present the most obvious interpretive use of the Song, but there are other literary sources which demonstrate real potential of intertextuality with the Song. Based on these observations, more recent scholarship has begun to date the allegorical use of the Song a bit earlier, from the mid-to-late first century CE. The first-century dating is based on evidence found in the Christian scriptures, including the letters of Paul and the Gospels. Such references are not as clearly articulated as those found in the later writings of both synagogue and church, but they bear consideration. Perhaps the clearest first-century allusions to the Song of Songs come from the apocalyptic genre as found in 4 Ezra and Revelation.

First Century Apocalypses: Potential allusions to the Song of Songs within the earliest New Testament writings, namely the letters of Paul and the Gospels, center primarily around the

⁷⁸ Jonathan Kaplan, “The Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81 (January 1, 2010), 44.

⁷⁹ Pope, 90-91.

image of Christ as the bridegroom. Paul likens the Church to the bride of Christ in several of his letters.⁸⁰ The phrase is not stated explicitly but is alluded to more generally. Similar allusions to Jesus as a bridegroom can be found in the Gospels.⁸¹ The wedding scene at Cana, where the steward mistakenly conflated the provider of the best wine and the bridegroom himself, may also suggest Jesus's status as the eschatological bridegroom who saves the best for last.⁸² As we have seen in the previous chapter, there was already a long tradition in the prophetic texts of the Tanakh of identifying God as the husband of Israel. While the romantic images in these New Testament passages are clear, it is difficult to say whether they are *drawing from* the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs or whether they *contributed to* such an interpretation. Those lines become a little clearer (or at least a little less fuzzy) in the apocalyptic literature generated at the end of the first century.

The end of the first century apocalypses known as 4 Ezra and Revelation seem to have been written about the same time, circa 95 CE.⁸³ The two books represent two diverging traditions of the same genre, with 4 Ezra being an example of Jewish apocalypse and Revelation that of Christian. Trauma abounded for both communities: the reign of Nero had exposed both communities to persecution, the Temple had been destroyed, and tensions between the two communities had at last led to the rupture between them. Amidst these times of turmoil, the audiences of the apocalypses were seeking assurance of God's power and justice, of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. They were also seeking assurance of God's love. For this, the first century apocalypses drew their inspiration from the ultimate source—the Song of Songs.

⁸⁰ 2 Corinthians 11:2-4; Ephesians 5:22-33; Romans 7.

⁸¹ John 3:29, Mark 2:19, Matthew 25: 1-13.

⁸² John 2:1-12, Jewish Annotated New Testament, 178.

⁸³ Michael E. Stone, "The Interpretation of Song of Songs in 4 Ezra," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007), 232.

Written against the backdrop described above, 4 Ezra may be the earliest example of the allegorical use of the Song of Songs.⁸⁴ The narrator, named as Salathiel, also called Ezra, is writing while in the exile in Babylon, from whence he laments the suffering of Israel and the desolation of Zion.⁸⁵ He recounts the history of Israel from the time of Adam through King David, then goes on to lament the current situation with the familiar cry, “How long?” In his vision, the archangel Jeremiel assures him, “When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.”⁸⁶ The archangel refers to the resurrection of the dead, those who sleep who will not be awakened until the time is ready, that is, “until the remnant of the faithful has been fully gathered in.”⁸⁷ Here the author of 4 Ezra is using a linguistic parallel to a recurring refrain within the Song of Songs, found in verses 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4.⁸⁸ Later in the book, Ezra speaks desperately of God’s love for Zion, calling the “one lily” among many flowers, the “one dove” among many birds that God has chosen for Godself.⁸⁹ This passage harkens strongly to the romantic imagery used most frequently in the Song. The book of 4 Ezra plays with prophetic themes of covenant faithfulness and romantic love, pointing these themes towards an eschatological end.⁹⁰

We find the same tactic used in the Christian apocalypse of Revelation. The audience of this work would have been reading from a similar place of distress and would be similarly looking for assurance of God’s power, justice, and love. In the case of Revelation, the male lover of the Song is attributed more specifically to Jesus. Revelation 3:20 offers a prime example in

⁸⁴ Stone, 231.

⁸⁵ 4 Ezra 3

⁸⁶ 4 Ezra 4:36-37.

⁸⁷ Kaplan, “Bible to Mishnah,” 57.

⁸⁸ Stone, 230.

⁸⁹ 4 Ezra 5:23-27.

⁹⁰ Stone, 231.

the message to the church in Laodicea: Ἴδου ἔστηκα ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν καὶ κρούω ἐάν τις ἀκούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς μου καὶ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν.”⁹¹ Compare that to Song of Songs 5:2: “φωνῆ ἀδελφίδοῦ μου κρούει ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν ἄνοιξόν μοι ἀδελφί μου.”⁹² I have underlined the matching terms. The author of Revelation is tying into the image of the lover knocking on the door of the beloved as expressed in the Song of Songs, which itself was portraying a “common trope in ancient Near Eastern... literature.”⁹³ The implication here goes beyond that of a reckoning for the church that was “neither cold nor hot” to a promise of restored love between lover and beloved, as alluded to in the Song of Songs.

Later, when writing from the vantage point of the achieved victory, the writer of Revelation speaks hope into the experience of martyrdom by harkening back to the Song of Songs. Revelation 12:11-12 extols those in heaven who “did not cling to life even in the face of death.”⁹⁴ When the dragon pours forth a flood in verse 12:15, the earth swallows up the flood waters, demonstrating vividly that “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”⁹⁵ Numerous other allusions abound throughout Revelation, from the “woman robed with the sun” in chapter 12 to the marriage supper of the Lamb in chapter 19. Revelation makes the most clear and frequent allusions to the Song of Songs of all the New Testament books. Its treatment the Song as a “divine love song” told through an apocalyptic lens offers the first insight into the allegorical interpretation of the Song from a Christian perspective. This allegorical interpretation would become more explicit in both Jewish and Christian interpretation during the subsequent centuries.

⁹¹ Rev. 3:20 “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door...”

⁹² Song of Songs 5:2 “The sound of my beloved knocking upon the door. Open to me, my sister...” Note that “sound” and “voice” are the same word in the Greek “φωνη/phone.” The Hebrew term is “קול/qol” which can also be translated as “voice” or “sound.”

⁹³ Kaplan, “Bible to Mishnah,” 61.

⁹⁴ Song of Songs 8:6 – “For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.”

⁹⁵ Song of Songs 8:7.

Sages and Patristics: By the second century CE, allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs had become more overt. Both Jewish and Christian sages adopted a typological approach to reading the Song, in which the events, characters, and symbols of the Song are viewed as “types,” symbols or images that harkened back to earlier historical/mythic figures while also prefiguring current or future events. The allegorical approach was an interpretive device that came into vogue in Greek antiquity. When dealing with their own mythologies handed down from Homer and Hesiod, Greek philosophers used allegory to uncover the “hidden or covert” meanings contained within these mythic texts.⁹⁶ Immersed as they were within the Hellenized world, Jewish and Christian exegetes adopted these methods when exploring their own scriptures.

The Tannaitic Sages: The Tannaitic Sages were instrumental in the development of rabbinic Judaism as we know it. They included such figures as Yohanan ben Zakkai (30 BCE – 90 CE), a primary contributor to the Mishnah, Gamliel of Yavne, who led the Sanhedrin after the fall of the Temple, and Rabbi Akiva (50-135 CE), whose voice is prominent in midrash and who was executed following the Bar Kokhba revolt. For the rabbis of the early second century, the Song of Songs was read as a divine love song between God and the people of Israel. In his extensive study of rabbinic typology, Johnathan Kaplan describes the results as a “theology of intimacy” that would shape the interpretation of the Song for centuries to come.⁹⁷ As they read the Song, the Tannaitic rabbis saw in the intimate relation between the lovers a parallel for the intimate relation between God and God’s bride, Israel. This intimacy stemmed from the

⁹⁶ Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of the Song of Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16.

⁹⁷ Kaplan, *My Perfect One*, 3.

covenant bond forged at Sinai. Thus, the Sinai theophany would factor heavily into rabbinic readings of the Song.

In Midrashic method, interpretation proceeds with the assumption that all parts of Scripture are “inextricably connected.”⁹⁸ Thus the Song of Songs was read in light of Torah, but *also* shed light onto the Torah. In the *Song of Songs Rabbah*, Rabbi Nahman describes the Song of Songs as a guide to the maze of Torah, stating:

A smart fellow came along and took a skein of string and hung the string on the way to the entry, so that everybody came and went following the path laid out by the skein. So too, until Solomon came along, no person could comprehend the words of the Torah. But when Solomon came along, everyone began to make sense of the Torah.⁹⁹ (Songs 1:1, I:iv 3.A-E)

Frequent interplay among the Song and other scriptures is therefore common within Midrash. But the interplay between the Song and Exodus are particularly abundant, as evidenced by the Song’s use in the Passover liturgy.¹⁰⁰ When explaining the wedding procession in Song of Songs chapter 3, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel identified the “day of his espousals” with “the day on which the Torah was given.”¹⁰¹ The linking of the Sinai covenant to the espousals in the Song of Songs elevates Sinai episode from the founding of a nation to the marital union of a people with their God. The Torah becomes a kind of *ketubah* between God and Israel, so that the covenant is no mere political arrangement, or even a religious vassalage, but a truly romantic union.¹⁰²

Rabbi Akiva likewise pairs the dove in the cleft of verse 2:14 with Israel in the “recess of Sinai.”¹⁰³ In the verse’s inversion of face/voice, voice/face, he sees the breakdown of the senses

⁹⁸ Pardes, 39.

⁹⁹ Jacob Neusner, trans., *Song of Songs Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989): 1:46.

¹⁰⁰ Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, eds., *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 2:858.

¹⁰¹ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988): 316.

¹⁰² A *ketubah* is a Jewish marriage contract still in use today. They are often drawn up with elaborate artistry, including vivid colors and calligraphy.

¹⁰³ Neusner, *Rabbah*, 1:195.

in which seeing and hearing become blurred at the Mount Sinai theophany when the children of Israel “see” the voices.¹⁰⁴ The passion between God and Israel, like that of the lovers of the Song, rattles the senses. It blurs sense perceptions. It blurs all sense of chronology as well. The sensual overtones of the Song of Songs resonate through time, serving to “rekindle the fire of the holy mountain [Sinai], to re-experience the fervent passion to that grand moment of sacred history.”¹⁰⁵ The love of God had served to bring the people out of Egypt to the *chuppah* of Mount Sinai and then to the bridal chamber of the Promised Land. The bridegroom had proven true for the liberation of the bride from Egypt. He had proven true for the liberation of the bride from Babylon. He would prove true for the “final liberation from the oppressive power ‘of the present,’ Edom-Rome, that prefigures the transition between the present and future world.”¹⁰⁶ The promise of divine love encoded in the Song of Songs served not only to remind Israel of the single tone struck at Sinai, but it also would form a canon that would carry that sound ringing throughout the ages.

The Church Fathers: As the early Church began to grapple with the scriptures they had inherited from Judaism, it was necessary to discern how to reimagine and incorporate the texts of the Tanakh into the emerging Christian worldview. For Gentile Christians in particular, influenced by Roman ideals of virtue exemplified by such figures as the Vestal Virgins, the candid sexuality of the Song of Songs may have presented a particular challenge.¹⁰⁷ Much like their contemporaries in the synagogue, early Christian thinkers adopted the allegorical approach for the Song of Songs to find deeper spiritual truths beneath the plain meaning of the text. By shifting the referent of the bridegroom and bride to Christ and the Church, the early Church

¹⁰⁴ Pardes, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Pardes, 40.

¹⁰⁶ Neusner and Avery-Peck, 2:857.

¹⁰⁷ Pope, 113.

Fathers were able to find great spiritual meaning in the Song of Songs, while divorcing entirely from any of its carnal implications. Therefore, the early church curiously managed to appropriate the Song of Songs to support not only a non-sexual reading, but even an anti-sexual hermeneutic. The early church's readings constitute an interpretation that was even less sexy than that of their Jewish contemporaries.

Origen of Alexandria (185-253): Writing around the third century CE, Origen is one of the first to provide the church with a thorough investigation of the Song of Songs. His sermons and commentaries came to us through the translations of Jerome, who expressed his admiration for Origen's work by saying, "while Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his *Song of Songs* he surpassed himself."¹⁰⁸ Assuming Solomonic authorship, Origen views the Song as the greatest in the trilogy of Solomon's works of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Each work has its merit, respectively moral, natural, and contemplative virtues, and each forms a stairstep to the next, more sophisticated work.¹⁰⁹ Origen expresses highest regard for the Song, likening its title to the superlative expression found in "holy of holies" or "king of kings." As the paragon of all songs, the Song holds special blessings for those who sing it.¹¹⁰ While extolling the virtues of the Song, Origen also sees the potential for great danger within it. The Song is holy, yes, but like all holy things it should not be approached profanely. It is not a work for those newly born in Christ, but for the spiritually mature, those with "chaste ears" who are not given to lewdness or incontinence.¹¹¹ Those who would see anything of the physical, the corruptible

¹⁰⁸ R. P. Lawson, trans., *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1957), 265.

¹⁰⁹ J. Robert Wright, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Book IX, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 287.

¹¹⁰ Lawson, 266.

¹¹¹ Rowan A. Greer, trans., *Origen: The Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 218-219.

within the Song are not ready to read it. The Song is not a treatise on the natural world or sexual ethics, rather it demonstrates the contemplative inner world of the Spirit.¹¹²

It becomes readily apparent in Origen's writings on the Song that what *seems* to be is in fact *not*—the husband is not a husband, the bride is not a bride, and kisses are not kisses. Taking the allegorical approach to its extreme, Origen sacralizes every element of the Song's plain meaning. Much like the book itself is not *a song* but *the Song*, the bridegroom of the Song is *the Bridegroom*, that is, Christ, and the bride is *the Bride*, either the individual soul in union with Christ, or the wider community of the Church being perfected for union with the Bridegroom. Though Origen tends to reject the physical, sensual elements of the Song, his interpretation is not devoid of romance, at least at the spiritual level. The Song holds an intense intimacy for him, stripping away all other mediators to bring the soul in direct communion with the divine lover. This unmediated access to the divine is what sets the Song apart from all other songs. He contrasts the Song from other examples, such as the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) and the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). All other songs in scripture were sung by “prophets or by the angels... friends of the bridegroom.”¹¹³ Only in the Song of Songs does the voice of the Bridegroom come to the Bride directly, immediate and unveiled, as close as the “kisses of His mouth.”¹¹⁴

Though he adopts and adapts the allegorical methods begun by his Jewish counterparts, Origen also pushes back hard against Jewish conclusions. He understands the Bride as the Church to exclude the possibility of the Bride as Israel. In describing the Bride as “black and beautiful” he finds allusions to an “Ethiopian beauty,” who becomes the apex of his Christianizing of the Song. He states:

¹¹² Rowan, 232.

¹¹³ Greer, 236.

¹¹⁴ Song of Songs 1:2.

Moses weds an Ethiopian wife, because his Law has passed over to the Ethiopian woman of our Song. Let Aaron of the Jewish priesthood murmur, and let the Mary of their synagogue murmur too... Ethiopia [has] been healed while Israel is still sick. By their offense salvation has been effected for the Gentiles, so as to make them jealous... The Bridegroom loves me more and holds me dearer than you, who are the many daughters of Jerusalem; you stand without and watch the Bride enter the chamber.¹¹⁵

In calling the Church the Bride, Origen is not merely the drawing in the Gentiles but also pushing out the Jews, at least until their jealousy draws them to conversion. We see here how early supersessionism had become cemented in Christian thought, even in regard to the greatest love song of the Jewish scriptures. As one of the earliest and most extensive Christian commentators on the Song of Songs, Origen's interpretation would set the tone for subsequent Christian engagement with the Song. Christian posterity would play second fiddle to his lead.

Gregory of Nyssa (335-395): Writing over a century after Origen, Gregory of Nyssa follows very much in the footsteps of his predecessor. His writings on the Song of Songs adheres faithfully to the allegorical method. Like Origen, he takes the Song as the culmination of a trilogy which "transcends both [Proverbs and Ecclesiastes] by its loftier teaching."¹¹⁶ There are, nevertheless, important distinctions between Gregory's interaction with the Song and that of Origen. Delving deeper into the realm of mysticism, Gregory's approach is far more personal than Origen's. He pays little attention to the Bride as the wider Church and focuses almost exclusively on the Bride as the individual soul seeking "spiritual union with God as the perfect and blessed way to salvation."¹¹⁷ The gift of the Song, then, is its ability to stir its reader towards the purest love for the divine.

¹¹⁵ Lawson, 279.

¹¹⁶ Wright, 287.

¹¹⁷ Pope, 118.

Perhaps because of this more personal approach, Gregory is more willing than his predecessor to open the Song's use to all Christians, not merely those who have achieved a certain level of spiritual maturity.¹¹⁸ For those new to the faith, there is the strong possibility that their conversion could be predicated simply on the fear of hell. While this would be natural inclination, for Gregory it falls short of a greater good. Likewise, conversion motivated by desire for heavenly reward equally misses the point. Gregory explains:

The person who pursues perfection in the soul, however, drives out fear (for a fearful disposition is servile; it does not abide with the Master for love's sake but out of fear or scourging does not run away). Moreover... to make the reward [of heaven] a gain more previous than the gift-giver does not seem right. He loves, with his whole heart and soul and strength, not something else, something that comes from the Giver, but the very One who is the source of the good things.¹¹⁹

While other books of scripture can teach sound doctrine, moral virtue, or relational duty, the Song of Songs is unique in the lesson she imparts, namely, how to fall in love with God. To be sure, some scripture does bid the faithful to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength.¹²⁰ But the Song of Songs *shows* us how, demonstrates it. It provides a more experiential sort of learning. The book “philosophizes by means of things not to be spoken.”¹²¹ By presenting bare the love between God and human, secondary distractions—heaven, hell, prosperity, divine favor—are stripped away to reveal the one necessary thing: love God.

By maintaining an intensely personal interpretation of the Song, Gregory of Nyssa manages, more so than Origen before him, to spiritualize the romance of the Song without diminishing its sensuality. This leads to a tendency towards paradox in Gregory's writings. The

¹¹⁸ Emily R. Cain, “Mystical Wounds, Eastern Patristic Authors on the Song of Songs,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Boston: Brill, 2021), 23.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris (n.p.: Society for Biblical Literature, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkpbq.7>. 17.

¹²⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37.

¹²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, 25.

Song of Songs is lofty yet accessible to Christians at any level of spiritual maturity. Her narrative uses carnal imagery to transcend carnal understanding. She causes her readers to “see invisible things and hear unspeakable words.”¹²² This use of paradoxical tension will have important ramifications on both his anthropology and his theology.

Perhaps the greatest distance between Origen and Gregory of Nyssa shows up in their anthropology. Origen takes the lower view of humanity, tending to be more skeptical of anything fleshly, as seen in his strict spiritualization of the Song. Gregory, however, emphasizes the prized place of humanity within creation, demonstrated most vividly in the *imago dei*. He notes that for all their beauty, neither heaven nor the cosmos, the sun, moon, and stars in all their splendor—none of them were made in the image of God. Humans alone have this trait. In his second homily on the Song, Gregory states of humanity, “only you came into existence as a copy of the Nature that transcends every intellect, a likeness of the incorruptible Beauty, an impress of the true Deity... None of the things that exist is so great as to be compared to your greatness.”¹²³ And God, creator of all that is, who is so vast as to hold all creation in His hand, condescends to dwell in you. In this phenomenon, Gregory marvels.

Despite his lofty view of humanity, Gregory is not blind to human limitations. Humans are created, not creator. They are finite, mutable, far from impassable. These very facts lead to Origen’s lower anthropology as revealed in his own work on the Song. Particularly on the question of humanity mutability, Origen takes a hard line—mutability is an enemy to spirituality, something to be sloughed off along the way to sanctification.¹²⁴ For Gregory, human mutability, rather than the antagonist of human perfection, is the very means towards achieving human

¹²² Gregory of Nyssa, 43.

¹²³ Gregory of Nyssa, 75.

¹²⁴ Cain, 24.

perfection. Despite having been made in the image of the perfect God, humanity is indeed finite. Thus, to pursue the changeless perfection of the infinite One, finite, human perfection must involve the “unending change in the direction of a Good that has no limit.”¹²⁵ Gregory expressed this paradox in his first homily on the Songs, “For what could be more incredible than to make human nature itself the purifier of its own passions, teaching and legislating impassability by words that are considered to be tinctured with passion?”¹²⁶ He goes on to describe this process in terms of transformation, even transfiguration. Through the passionate pursuit of God, the reader of the Song is no longer the same, but is changed. They are “not any longer human beings... they have been changed in nature into something more divine by the Lord’s instruction...”¹²⁷ Here human passions become the instrument of refining those very passions towards greater holiness. On the road to sanctification, changing human nature need not be erratic flitting about, but rather perpetual progress.¹²⁸

This phenomenon of transformation can be seen in a particularly charming passage in which Gregory exegetes Song of Songs 1:15, which states “your eyes are doves.” He describes the way in which the gleam of the human eye reflects back that at which it looks. As the beloved gazes upon the lover, the beloved’s eyes become a mirror for the beloved’s face. Here, the eyes are mirroring the image of a dove, which Gregory reads as the Holy Spirit, into whose face the beloved stares. He says, “this person [the beloved] has become wholly spiritual, neither natural nor carnal.”¹²⁹ The line between the metaphorical and the literal blurs as the beloved’s eyes receive and give back the image of the dove through seeing and reflecting. The paradoxical gaze

¹²⁵ Cain, 24

¹²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, 31.

¹²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, 31.

¹²⁸ Cain, 38.

¹²⁹ Wright, 308.

effects a shift in her very identity, bringing her finite self into closer union with the divine, infinite lover.

His reliance on paradox in his exegesis of the Song points to an important aspect of Gregory's theology. By resisting clear, simple, closed off, interpretations, he denotes a "dual possibility of exegesis" an element of uncertainty and unknowability regarding the text and the God to whom the text points. However much the Song draws us into the center of the divine, we can only understand, only articulate, in part. Gregory spends significant time in his first homily on the Songs discussing the mysteriousness of God which is "inaccessible and incapable of being contained by human thought processes... our theological vocabulary refer[s] to a slight remnant of the vapor of the divine fragrance."¹³⁰ What we can comprehend about the Song of Songs tells us much about the divine. What we *cannot* comprehend about the Song of Songs is equally, if not more, important to our understanding of the divine. For Gregory of Nyssa, the Song of Songs seems to point to that central tenet of mysticism: we cannot *know* God, we can only love Him.

Ambrose of Milan (339-397) and Jerome of Stridon (342-420): The interpretation of the Song of Songs takes a similar track in the hands of Sts. Ambrose and Jerome, so we will look at them together. An interesting twist to their interpretations is that they take the bride of the Song not merely to be the church or even the individual Christian soul, but a particular kind of soul—the *virgin* soul. The use of an apparently erotic song to signify virginity specifically is clearly a paradox. Yet the groundwork laid by their predecessors had served to uncouple the Song's erotic elements from its carnal denotation by allegorizing it in an entirely spiritual way. Building on this tradition, Ambrose and Jerome take it a step further. Not only is the Song of

¹³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, 39.

Songs *not* about sex, it is actually a celebration of abstinence. This complete reversal feeds into their thoughts about Christian vocation, particularly female vocation.

In his work *On Virgins*, Ambrose associates the beauty that is without blemish of Song 4:7 to the “perfect and irreproachable beauty of a virgin soul, consecrated to the altars of God.”¹³¹ While extolling the virtues of marriage, he insists that still greater virtue must be afforded to the one who espouses herself to God, the most beautiful of husbands, through dedicated virginal chastity.¹³² Thus, Ambrose’s use of the Song is more specific than that of Origen’s or Gregory of Nyssa’s, and he circumscribes it with an even greater level of asceticism than his predecessors.¹³³ The vocation of chastity serves to seal the virgin in a state of suspended erotic (spiritually erotic, of course) tension. Ambrose describes the consecrated virgin as “ever a bride, ever unmarried, so that neither does love suffer an ending, nor modesty loss.”¹³⁴ In this state, one finds the magnetism of love and the restraint of modesty in perpetual orbit to one another. Hence the spiritual vigor of virginity is embodied in the erotic vigor of the Song of Songs.

Jerome taps into the same enthusiasm for virginity as Ambrose, using the Song of Songs to support his claims. As exemplars of this virtue, he looks at the virginity of both Mary and Jesus. In his letter to Eustochium, he likens Mary to the rod out of the stem of Jesse, stating, “The rod is the mother of the Lord — simple, pure, unsullied; drawing no germ of life from without but fruitful in singleness like God Himself.”¹³⁵ Her birthing of Jesus from her virginal state involves the pinnacle of holiness, because it renders her most like God. Continuing the

¹³¹ Ambrose of Milan, *On Virgins* (n.p.: New Advent, 2023), 7:38, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34071.htm>.

¹³² Ambrose, 7:36-39.

¹³³ Karl Shuve, “A Garden Enclosed, a Fountain Sealed: The Song of Songs and Ritual Purity in Early Latin Christianity,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Boston: Brill, 2021), 55.

¹³⁴ Ambrose, 7:37.

¹³⁵ Jerome of Stridon, *Letter 22*, (n.p.: New Advent, 2023), 19, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>.

allegorical reading, he describes Jesus as the “flower that shall grow out of its roots.” That flower is the “rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys” of Song 2:1. In addition to the common practice of extoling the virginity of Mary, Jerome also goes on to extol the virginity of Christ as being especially worthy, describing him as a “virgin born of a virgin.”¹³⁶ This opens the way for virginal vocation of both genders, a vocation which Jerome encourages parents to support that they may become a “mother-in-law of God.”¹³⁷

Augustine of Hippo (354-430): Writing in the early fifth century CE, Augustine serves as a representative of the western, Latin Church’s engagement with the Song. Like his eastern predecessors, Augustine does approach the Song allegorically, especially its representation of the “nuptial relationship” between Christ and the Church hidden behind the veil of allegory “to make us yearn for it more ardently.”¹³⁸ Augustine does not appear to have written extensively on the Song of Songs, certainly not in comparison to the volumes of commentaries and homilies left by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. His contribution to the history of the Song’s interpretation is nevertheless interesting due to the drastic difference in tone and purpose with which he engages with it. While earlier exegetes, both Jewish and Christian, tended to focus on the relationality between the human and the divine across time, Augustine’s concern was more precisely situated to the particulars of his day. Gregory of Nyssa took up the Song to pursue union with God.

Augustine took up the Song to battle Donatists.

The use of the Song within the context of a doctrinal controversy made for a “distinctly North African tradition of Song exegesis.”¹³⁹ In brief, the controversy began with the problem of apostasy, those who renounced the faith in the face of persecution, and *if* and *how* they might be

¹³⁶ Jerome, 19.

¹³⁷ Jerome, 20.

¹³⁸ Wright, 294.

¹³⁹ Shuve, 46.

readmitted to the fold should they repent and return. Different bishops came to different answers to this problem, forming schisms within the church in Carthage. These ruptures within the church led to the crux of Donatist controversy—baptism. The question was this: if one were baptized in a heretical church then switched to an orthodox church, should one be re-baptized in the orthodox church? The Donatist position would say yes. The position that would become the orthodox position, represented by Augustine, would say no. To fully flesh out the nature of the debate, and more importantly for our interests, the role of the Song within it, we must take a brief aside to look at the Donatist position as represented by a predecessor of Augustine, Cyprian of Carthage.

The bishop of Carthage, Cyprian (210-258 CE) taught what would become the Donatist position. He did so using the Song of Songs as justification for this position. Citing 4:12-15, he described the bride, that is, the Church, as an “enclosed garden” and a “sealed fountain.” As a unified, enclosed garden, there can only be one Church, “indivisible and belong[ing] only to those in apostolic succession.”¹⁴⁰ The other “churches” that fell outside of this strict enclosure could not be counted as churches at all. Therefore, they could not be said to have access to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, their baptisms could not be said to be baptisms. Therefore, converts to the true church would have to be rebaptized, though Cyprian would probably argue that this would in fact be their first actual baptism. Cyprian’s use of the Song does not engage with the romantic or erotic qualities of the Song. He uses it solely for doctrinal purposes, namely, to establish the boundaries of the true Church and its monopoly on true and efficacious Baptism.

The Donatists took up Cyprian’s rationale and adopted the use of the Song in other ways as well. Citing 1:6-7, they would seek to bolster the claim of their authenticity, arguing, “the real

¹⁴⁰ Shuve, 47.

church is situated in Africa, because Africa is in the south.”¹⁴¹ In this interpretation, it is not the Donatists who are heretical or schismatic. They have remained within the proper enclosure of the garden, while others have strayed from it. They did not leave the orthodox Church; the “orthodox” Church left them. Furthermore, Song 6:9 describes the church as “my dove, my perfect one... flawless.” How, then, can apostates be valid administrators of the sacraments? Both the purity and unity of the church, as detailed in the Song of Songs, would support their position.

In addressing them, therefore, Augustine would take up the same tool, the Song, to refute their claims. He takes the other side of the “rebaptism” question, asserting that the bond of baptism is indissoluble, and the integrity of the sacrament is complete, even in the face of apostasy, heresy, and sin.¹⁴² In response to the Donatist use of the Song of Songs, he refutes their claims by delving into the Song itself. As for the claim that the bridegroom will lie “in the south,” Augustine responds by correcting the translation to “in the noonday.” He continues to verse 1:8, which he posits as a warning to the heretics: “*Unless you recognize yourself... go out.* Going out is what heretics do. *Go out... and feed your goats*, not sheep anymore. You know where the goats will be, brothers. On the left hand is where all those will be who have gone out of the church.”¹⁴³ By pairing the goats of Song 1:8 with the goats of Matthew 25, Augustine adds an element of danger to the Donatist interpretation. If the Song is referring to the “south” as the Donatist church, it does so as a warning to the African church to “avoid the Donatists as heretics who are going to be damned by God.”¹⁴⁴ Though Augustine would affirm the integrity

¹⁴¹ Rafal Toczko, “Augustine’s Use of *Status legales* in the Anti-Donatist Exegesis of the Song of Songs 1:6-7,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 30, no 4 (Winter 2022): 506. Note: Song of Songs 1:7, usually translated “where you lie down at noon,” is read by the Donatists as “where you lie down in the south.” Augustine refutes this translation, as will be shown below.

¹⁴² Augustine of Hippo, *An Augustine Reader*, ed. John J. O’Meara (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1973), 207.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Toczko, 530.

¹⁴⁴ Toczko, 530.

of the Baptismal sacrament administered by even a heretical church, he would nevertheless call upon the church to repent and return to the catholic fold.

It may seem strange that Augustine would both uphold the efficacy of Baptism by heretics while also threatening their damnation, but there is a logic to his reasoning. While he would agree with the Donatists about the purity and unity of the “enclosed garden” of the church indicated in the Song, his understanding of what constitutes this “enclosed garden” is defined very differently. In making his argument, he again turns to the Song of Songs, this time 2:2, “like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the maidens.” Like the wheat and the tares of Matthew 13, Augustine acknowledges that even in the Catholic church, there are wicked who grow up with and share Baptism in common with the just.¹⁴⁵ Thus, for Augustine, the perfect one, the enclosed garden, is neither the Donatist church nor even the Catholic church at large. Rather, it is the “eschatological church.”¹⁴⁶ That is to say, the elect. The church as it exists in the present world is a mix of thorns and lily, a fact that is upheld rather than undermined in the Song.

Conclusion: From its beginning, interpretation of the Song of Songs was dominated by allegory. Few examples of a literal interpretation of the Song’s erotic imagery were put forth, and those that did, were expunged from the record, deemed “unfit for Christian ears.”¹⁴⁷ While religious qualms against anything overtly sexual was surely a factor in this phenomenon, it cannot account for the sheer volume of engagement with what was acknowledged as being a challenging book of scripture. In both Jewish and Christian circles, exegetes sought to uncover the deeper, spiritual meaning that lay behind the teasing veil of the Song of Songs. In the vigor

¹⁴⁵ Augustine of Hippo, “De Baptismo Contra Donatistas Libri Septem,” in *The Seven Books of Augustin, Bishop of Hippo, on Baptism, Against the Donatists*, trans. J. R. King (Oxford: Merton College, n.d.), http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430_Augustinus_De_Baptismo_Contra_Donatistas_Libri_Septem_%5bSchaff%5d_EN.pdf.

¹⁴⁶ Shuve, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Pope, 119. Theodore of Mopsuestia’s commentary involving an erotic reading of the Song has been lost. We only know of it from records of attacks against it.

and vitality of the Song's erotic message, readers saw a parallel to their own intense spiritual longings. The longing to know and love God with passion, and to be known and loved passionately by God, animate each of the commentaries. The referents seem to be in a constant state of flux—Israel, the church, the soul, virgins, ecclesial integrity, and sound doctrine. This serves to demonstrate both the flexibility of the Song and its stability. Early allegorists saw all their dearest hopes, their dearest values, their dearest loves illuminated within the Song of Songs. The allegorical Song served to bring readers back, time and again, to their first love. While the particulars might shift, the underlying principles held steady. The allegorical method would continue to dominate and be adapted by readers throughout the Middle Ages, as we shall explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: A Strange, Strange Middle:
Medieval Interpretation of the Song of Songs

And he knows that out of love for him she revealed herself, for that one moment to awaken love in him. – The Zohar

Exegesis on the Song of Songs continued in the allegorical tradition throughout the Medieval era, but with ever-expanding flourish. Hermeneutics based in radically different camps—from traditionalist, to rationalists, to mystics—would appropriate allegory towards surprisingly varied conclusions. Whether the theologians' goals were practical, romantic, or intellectual, allegory remained the tool of the trade. We will begin where we left off, bridging the Christian Patristic Fathers to their medieval posterity, before turning to their Jewish contemporaries as they all continue their pursuit of that most elusive Song.

Gregory the Great (540-604): Considered the first medieval Pope, Gregory the Great serves as a kind of fulcrum between the early Patristic Fathers and the medieval Latin Church. His interpretation of the Song of Songs demonstrates this, as it both relies on the interpreters who came before him, especially Origen and Augustine, and contributes to the enthusiasm for the Song of the Middle Ages. He contributes to the works of his predecessors, adding sophistication in the Song's interpretation by both his thoroughness and intense use of abundant cross referencing with other scriptures. In Gregory's work, we see evidence of the growing centralization of the Church as an institution. His reading of the Song reveals a continued concern with the inner state of the individual soul and a concern for clerical discipline. Thus, his writings are both deeply mystical and deeply pastoral. The telos of his Biblical exegesis is to edify the community of the faithful.¹⁴⁸ To this end, the Song of Songs is taken as a guide towards spiritual wholeness.

¹⁴⁸ Mark DelCogliano, *Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 67.

A strong proponent of the allegorical method, Gregory begins his exposition on the Song with an essay about the necessity and benefit of allegory. He describes allegory as a “crane whereby [the soul] may be lifted to God.”¹⁴⁹ Rather than something esoteric, Gregory views scripture’s use of allegory as an inherent element of revelation. He states, “let us ponder how great God’s mercy is... He has gone so far as to embrace the language of our vulgar love in order to enkindle our heart with a yearning for that sacred love... For surely the spiritual meaning is concealed under the veil of the letter.”¹⁵⁰ Because humans, with our fallen and finite faculties, would be unable to understand divine language laid bare, God lovingly reveals his mysteries through language and concepts with which we are already familiar. To point to the ecstasies of divine love, scripture uses the analogy of human love with all its erotic intensity. For Gregory, then, “the plain sense of the Song of Songs *was* its figural interpretation.”¹⁵¹ As a Christian writing in the early Middle Ages, the key for Gregory’s interpretation is Christ. All scripture, both of the Old and New Testaments, convey the overarching story of salvation leading up to and stemming from the saving work of Christ in his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Much of Gregory’s commentary on the Song echoes his predecessors. He contributes to the understanding of the Song, however, by embracing the fluid nature of allegory as an asset to be fully tapped, rather than a complication to be ironed out. Symbols within the Song are regularly given multiple interpretations in Gregory’s works. He allows this polyvalence to hold without the need to fix upon any one interpretation.¹⁵² For example, the phrase “kisses of his mouth” from Song 1:1 points to Christ’s Incarnation, his union with the believer, and the virtue

¹⁴⁹ Gregory the Great, in DelCogliano, 109.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory the Great, 110-111.

¹⁵¹ DelCogliano, 70.

¹⁵² DelGogliano, 81.

of humility. This multifaceted layering of meaning takes the reader beyond doctrinal cognition into the more spiritual *experience* of God. We see this played out in Gregory's description of *kenosis* which he explores in Song 1:2, "Your name is ointment poured out." As he explains, "when ointment is stored in a small bottle, there is no odor outside it... because he poured himself out exteriorly from his immeasurable divinity into our nature, [he made] himself visible from his invisible being."¹⁵³ Likewise, with the Ascension, Gregory takes Song 8:14 as the Church's loving encouragement for Christ to "escape" from our senses to return to the fullness of his divinity, a fullness which we will one day join.¹⁵⁴ While the great doctrines of the Church, such as *kenosis*, Incarnation and Ascension, may be difficult to comprehend and articulate, the Song of Songs gives the faithful a means of smelling, tasting, and touching such lofty truths.

In addition to making tangible the great mysteries of the faith, Gregory gives great attention in his commentary to pastoral exhortations of the church. Looking at Song 6:3, which describes the bride as "beautiful... and terrifying as an army's front poised for battle," Gregory resounds the call for unity and charity within the Church. Using the language of spiritual warfare, he assures the Church, when is united in charity, causes evil spirits to "tremble with fear at the multitude of the elect."¹⁵⁵ Later, he uses Song 7:4 "your nose is like the tower which is in Lebanon," to remind clergy of their duties to "preserve the truth of preaching [with] a loftiness of conduct."¹⁵⁶ One finds in Gregory's interpretation a balancing of mystical romance and practical morality. His emphasis on morality is most fervent when addressing Church leadership. This concern for clerical integrity adds a new element to the Song's interpretation, probably inspired by his role as Pope during a time of great growth and great turmoil for the Latin Church.

¹⁵³ Gregory the Great, 125.

¹⁵⁴ Gregory the Great, 180.

¹⁵⁵ Gregory the Great, 175.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory the Great, 177.

Subsequent interpreters of the Song would tap into this ecclesial concern, as we shall see in the next section.

The Venerable Bede (672-735): A monk and priest living in North Umbria, England, the Venerable Bede would echo and intensify Gregory the Great’s ecclesial outlook on the Song of Songs. Like his predecessors, Bede rejects any sort of literal, carnal sense of the Song.¹⁵⁷ He relies on pure spiritual allegory. Throughout his commentary, concerns with the life and work of the Church abound to the extent that it can be rightly described as “a love song for an institution.”¹⁵⁸ This is not to say that Bede’s intentions are aggressively authoritarian. There is a deep concern for the cure of souls within his work. Nevertheless, his reading of the Song does not particularly emphasize the Song as a guide for individual spirituality or for the individual soul to seek union with God. His exegetical lens seems to be one of pastoral theology, rather than mysticism.¹⁵⁹ The impact of this kind of reading of would prove influential, so that the Song “played a formative role in a developing sense of clerical identity in the early medieval West.”¹⁶⁰

For Bede, the pastoral imperative centered around preaching and teaching. His commentary on the Song is packed with references preaching—he sees a call to it at every turn. Through his allegorizing, Bede sees symbols of preachers and/or teachers in the following: shepherds, necks, cedar beams, turtledoves, the daughters of Jerusalem, vineyard keepers, the sentinels of the city, strong men, the eyes of the bride, towers, breasts, and teeth. The list goes on. Near the close of the commentary, Bede identifies preaching as “that greatest

¹⁵⁷ Arthur Holder, *The Venerable Bede: On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 10.

¹⁵⁸ Hannah W. Matis, *The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 57.

¹⁵⁹ Holder, 27.

¹⁶⁰ Hannah W. Matis, “The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages: From Gregory the Great to the Gregorian Reform,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 73.

commandment, which [Christ has] given me as a last farewell.”¹⁶¹ The Great Commission, then, would be the marching orders for all Christians, especially the pastors among them. Preachers are cautioned to fully commit themselves to the living of a homiletical life, preaching faithfully *and* living out those teachings in their own life.¹⁶² This homiletical life is a heroic one, rescuing souls by converting the lost, edifying the young and weaker members, and exhorting the strong towards ever upward progress along the spiritual journey. It is also a richly rewarding life, for preachers “receive the crown of life not only for themselves but also for those whom they have acquired for the Lord.”¹⁶³

While Bede does affirm the “sublimity of the contemplative life,” he cautions against the temptation to unbalance one’s ministry by neglecting the more active forms of prayer enacted through preaching and good works.¹⁶⁴ While the bliss of contemplation is indeed a gift given to those strong in the faith, it can never be achieved in its fullest sense this side of heaven. The limits of human faculties demand that, for now at least, God must ultimately be “comprehended as being incomprehensible.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, there is a time for contemplation and a time for active work. Scripture and the Christian life command both.¹⁶⁶ The charism of preaching is both a gift and a responsibility. Pastors who neglect this duty fail their flock, mother Church, and God. The stakes are high, especially when threats to the faithful abound in a most pernicious form—heresy.

Right orthodoxy, and the need to defend it against heresy, features prominently in Bede’s commentary on the Song of Songs. When identifying the cedar beams of the house from Song

¹⁶¹ Bede, in Holder, 11.

¹⁶² Bede, 149.

¹⁶³ Bede, 120.

¹⁶⁴ Bede, 75.

¹⁶⁵ Bede, 180.

¹⁶⁶ Bede, 76-77.

1:17 with holy preachers, Bede sees preachers as nurturing, protective figures who shelter their flocks from tempests, drive away serpents, and “ward off the poisonous doctrines of heretics with the power of the heavenly word.”¹⁶⁷ It should come as no surprise, then, when the little foxes who ruin the vines in Song 2:15 become the “heretics and schismatics” against which preaching serves to defend.¹⁶⁸ Though Bede mentions the Donatists specifically in his commentary on the Song, there seems to be an even stronger anti-Pelagian strain within the work.¹⁶⁹ At times, Bede’s abhorrence of heresy comes across as deeply personal. He employs the Song’s most militant images against the scourge of false doctrine.¹⁷⁰ His reaction may be intensified by the proximity of the Pelagian threat, that “bad fruit produced by the bad tree, the British.”¹⁷¹ The British “church,” as distinguished from the English Church by Bede, were heretics and schismatics. Thus, heresy proved to be a threat not merely to sound doctrine, but also to ecclesial integrity.

Throughout his commentary, Bede maintains a high ecclesiology. For him, the Church is integral to salvation. He warns, “every soul that tries to seek Christ apart from the fellowship of holy church is thenceforth not rightly classed among the daughters of Jerusalem but... the daughters of Belial.”¹⁷² Thus, his concerns for catholic unity are of soteriological import, and therefore, align with the pastoral concerns laced throughout his writings. He affirms the unity of the Church by appeal to Song 6:9: “my dove, my perfect one, is the only one... she is her mother’s only one.” He explains, “she is one because she admits no schismatic division... so

¹⁶⁷ Bede, 62.

¹⁶⁸ Bede, 83.

¹⁶⁹ Bede, 188; Holder, 28.

¹⁷⁰ Bede, 178; Song of Songs 6:3.

¹⁷¹ Matis, 31.

¹⁷² Bede, 173. Note, Bede references Belial in light of 1 Samuel 1:16, in which Hannah distinguishes herself from the “daughters of Belial.” The term Belial is used in the Old Testament to refer to various forms of sinners, including idolaters, the sons of Eli, and the violent men of the city in the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19:22. It connotes shocking wickedness.

there is one catholic company of all the elect,” a union that encompasses the Church across time and space.¹⁷³ Schismatics not only disrupt the unity of the Church, they imperil the souls whom they lead astray.

Bede’s commentary on the Song of Songs reads as an exemplar of orthodoxy. Elements of ecclesiology, soteriology, and spirituality can be found in his commentary. Still, his primary telos in writing seems center more pastoral and practical theology. Being mindful of the need to raise up suitable clerics for the Church, the Song become his clarion call for church reform, Christian education, clergy discipline, and practical living out of the faith. With Bede, it is as though the Church’s interpretive relationship with the Song of Songs has left its honeymoon flame and settled into the steady, dedicated ember of married vocation.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153): During the height of the Medieval era, interest in the Song of Songs revived with vigor. Secularly, the genre of courtly love literature flourished.¹⁷⁴ Love was in the air. Within the church this manifested in the flowering of monastic mysticism, a movement that pursued the pleasures of this romantic movement, while divorcing it from its carnal aspects. The founder and abbot of the Cistercian monastery, a French monastery in the Benedictine tradition, Bernard of Clairvaux may be one of the Song’s most renowned interpreters. Known for their ascetic rigor and deep spirituality, the Cistercians, under Bernard’s teachings, sought “intense union with God, from summits of contemplative prayer.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, the Cistercian method was an experiential enterprise, centering around contemplative

¹⁷³ Bede, 187.

¹⁷⁴ Pardes, 100.

¹⁷⁵ Catherine Rose Cavadini, “The Cistercian Song, Reception of Bernard of Clairvaux’s Exegesis in Later Cistercian Interpretations of the Song of Songs,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 101.

pursuit of union with the divine. The ultimate goal of Bernard's monastic endeavors was to turn a monk into a bride.¹⁷⁶

Given the romantic spirituality of Bernard, it is hardly surprising that the Song of Songs features prominently in his writings. Like his predecessors, he would disavow any carnal or worldly interpretation of the Song. His approach is entirely spiritual. Nevertheless, his reading of the Song contains an intensely paradoxical tension. The real meaning of the Song is asexual; Bernard's preaching on the Song is *super sexy*. Cistercian life is stringently ascetical; Cistercian spirituality is deeply sensual. It is as though all the physical sacrifices of the spartan discipline that comes with monastic life is poured into a sumptuous spirituality. In his commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, Bernard describes the Rule as the path towards "access to Christ" in very sensual terms, citing the Song of Songs multiple times as he cites love as the "central course on Solomon's table."¹⁷⁷

While previous interpreters had cautioned that reading of the Song should be reserved for the spiritually mature, Bernard seems to circumscribe this further by shrinking the definition of who constituted the mature. As the "greatest riddle of Scripture," the Song could best be deciphered by monastics, as they were the ones wedded to the Bridegroom.¹⁷⁸ Thus, with the advent of a deeper mysticism in regards to the Song, one finds also a tightening of the reins. Much as the medieval church would constrict the limits sexuality within the confines of marriage, so too would the medieval monastery constrict the pursuit of spiritual intercourse to

¹⁷⁶ Cavadini, 101.

¹⁷⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride," Richard Conlin Files, 2016, <https://richardconlin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/st-bernard-of-clairvaux-the-twelve-degrees-of-humility-and-pride.pdf>.

¹⁷⁸ Pardes, 98.

the confines of the cloister.¹⁷⁹ In his opening sermon on the Song, he warns the assembled brothers:

[The Song of Songs is] a book which opens with the token of peace, with a kiss. Take note too, that by this kind of opening only men of peaceful minds, men who can achieve mastery over the turmoil of the passions and the distracting burden of daily chores, are invited to the study of this book.¹⁸⁰

This opening kiss of Song 1:1 becomes a focal point for Bernard's reading of the Song. He dwells on it for multiple sermons, even giving a prelude of kisses before engaging with the first verse. Basically, this breaks down into three forms of kisses with which a spiritual lover can approach the Lord. The first is to kiss his feet, a form of penance, and the second is to kiss his hand, a sort of amendment of life. Only then, having advanced by degrees can one aspire to the most "sacrosanct kiss."¹⁸¹ This third and highest kiss is the kiss of the Song.

In his granular sifting of Song 1:1, Bernard parses the grammar of the opening to a nearly microscopic level. He deconstructs the phrase "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" in a way that is, frankly, weird. In his second sermon on the Song he makes the curious distinction, "Note how I do not presume that it is with his *mouth* that I shall be kissed... [but] with the *kiss of his mouth*."¹⁸² The distinction between kissing his mouth and kissing his kiss seems unnecessarily pedantic, but the payoff is worth it, if one can hang for the six more sermons it takes to get there. The grand reveal, given in Sermon 8 is worth quoting at length:

And hence the bride, although otherwise so audacious does not dare to say: "Let him kiss me with his mouth," for she knows that this is the prerogative of the Father alone. What she does ask for is something less: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." ...the Holy Spirit, that favor given to the newly-chosen

¹⁷⁹ See Mark Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* for an overview of the ways in which various forms of even married, heterosexual intercourse were deemed "sodomy" by the church.

¹⁸⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons on the Song of Songs," 342.

<https://web.mit.edu/aorlando/www/SaintJohnCHI/Readings/BernardClairvauxSongofSongs.pdf>

¹⁸¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons," 347.

¹⁸² Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons," 346. Emphasis added.

Church, was indeed a kiss... the Father is he who kisses, the Son he who is kissed... the kiss [is] the Holy Spirit...¹⁸³

What Bernard has done here is something remarkable, and it is something completely new within the canon of interpretations on the Song. While previous Christian commentators have seen in the Song of Songs the union between Christ and Bride (be it the Church or the individual Soul), Bernard transports the Bride right into the very heart of the *Trinity itself*. Where previous commentators had promised union with Christ, Bernard promises union with *God*.¹⁸⁴ There is, of course a paradox in this. The Bride has been slightly distanced from the Son, for she does not touch his mouth. However, she comes into direct contact with the Spirit, centered squarely between the mouth of the Father and the mouth of the Son. By taking a slight distance from the Son, she gains still greater proximity to the Father and Spirit, a more perfect union, the “sacrament of endless union with God.”¹⁸⁵

Bernard’s commentary is but one example of the abundance of medieval courtship with the Song of Songs. A veritable cornucopia of mystics engaged with the book, including titans of the faith like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. During this time, adoration for this ancient, erotic poem reached its zenith, perhaps rendering the mystic’s Song the holiest of the holy of holies. The mysticism movement gave new amorous vigor to the Song’s interpretation. This phenomenon would serve the spiritual romanticism not only of the Church, but of Jewish paramours as well.

Medieval Rabbinic Exegesis: For Jewish interpreters of the Song, the Middle Ages were a time for prolific engagement with the Song of Songs. Over 130 commentaries were

¹⁸³ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,” 25.

<https://www.themathesontrust.org/papers/christianity/StBernard-SongOfSongs-1-43-A4.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermons,” 346.

¹⁸⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermons,” 344.

produced, most of them anonymous, about fifty of them with known authors, and some, unfortunately, lost.¹⁸⁶ Hermeneutical engagement with the text ranged along four basic tracks: literal, Midrashic, philosophical, and mystical.¹⁸⁷ In some ways, this represents a break from the previous tendencies of the ancient Midrash. However, allegory would continue as a dominant method of interpretation, even as it was used to draw new conclusions and referents along the way.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164): A medieval innovation in the tradition of Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs involves the use of *Peshat*, the literal, plaintext reading of the book. Among these innovators were the famous French Rabbi Rashi and Ibn Ezra in Spain. While some scholars view the development as “anticipating the methodologies of modern biblical criticism,” this conclusion requires a significant asterisk, given that Ezra himself states in the preface to his *Peshat* exposition, “far be it, far be it that it should be understood as an erotic poem, but it is to be taken allegorically...”¹⁸⁸ The willingness to even engage with the literal sense is a new development, one likely tied to the Rabbis’ stepping away from reliance on Talmud to engage with the scripture on their own terms.¹⁸⁹ So, the medieval Rabbis tended to de-allegorize the Song from the confines of earlier Midrash, only to re-allegorize the Song within their own context.

Ibn Ezra’s commentary is divided into three separate expositions. The first is a grammatical examination. The second is *Peshat*, a fairly straightforward literary analysis in

¹⁸⁶ James Kalman, “The Beautiful Men of the Song of Songs? Replacing and Erasing the Female Beloved in Ancient and Medieval Jewish Interpretation,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 210.

¹⁸⁷ Pardes, 41.

¹⁸⁸ Pardes, 63; Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Canticles, After the First Recension*, trans. H. J. Matthews (London: Trübner and Co., 1874), 10,

<http://www.ericlevy.com/Revel/Song/Ibn%20Ezra%20on%20Songs%20First%20Recension%20-%20English.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Kalman, 211.

which he assigns speakers to the verses and lays out the basic plot of the narrative. The third offers up his own Midrash, which reflects the situation of the Jewish people in his own day. While Midrash of the Tannaitic Sages tended to emphasize the Exodus/Sinai history, Ibn Ezra's Midrash begins with Abraham and carries through to the Messianic Age, with particular emphasis on the various captivities along the way. Egypt, Babylon, and Greece, are all mentioned by name, while the Roman occupation and continued aftermath is alluded to.¹⁹⁰ He gives a new commentary for a post-Temple community once again living in diaspora and longing for the ultimate return to Jerusalem.

The allegory of Ibn Ezra maintains the format of the Song as a conversation between God and Israel, but with an interesting twist. He lists the speakers as “the *synagogue* of Israel,” and the “*Shekinah*.”¹⁹¹ The *Shekinah* is a term that denotes the presence of God, usually with feminine connotations (though this fully masculinized in Ibn Ezra's commentary). In Ibn Ezra, the distinction between God as יהוה is not emphasized as it would be in later mystical interpretations. If there is a distance between God and *Shekinah*, it may be slight. The mention of the “synagogue of Israel” as the Bride of the Song, however, is interesting. Centuries after the fall of the second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism had become the mainstay of Jewish orthodoxy, and with it an even greater emphasis on Torah. This is reflected in Ibn Ezra's regular reference the breasts of the Song as signifying either the law and commandments or the written and oral Torah.¹⁹² Being cut off from Temple sacrifice, other particulars of Jewish observance, such as the wearing of *talith* and Torah study take the center stage of religious observance for the faithful. Even among the reality of exile, however, the promise of the Temple glimmers.

¹⁹⁰ Ibn Ezra, 18, 23, 25-

¹⁹¹ Ibn Ezra, 18. Emphasis added.

¹⁹² Ibn Ezra, 19 and 21.

Ibn Ezra does allude the three Temples, that of Solomon (the palanquin of Song 3:9-10), second Temple (the door of chapter 5), and the Messianic Age (the gardens of 8:13).¹⁹³ Each marks the culmination of a return from captivity, with the Temple to come being the most glorious of all. At the Song's culmination, Ibn Ezra, though the words of Solomon, assures his readers that, "Even if all the nations of the world should assemble together, they would not be able to hurt the synagogue of Israel... the ten tribes shall return to thee... king Messiah... Jehovah hath commanded his blessing, life forevermore."¹⁹⁴ It is a deeply pastoral message for his people. In his re-allegorizing of the Song of Songs, Ibn Ezra finds a new assurance for the Jewish people—an echo of that most ancient message—the Messiah is coming. Keep the faith.

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204): Within the philosophical camp of medieval Jewish exegesis, there was a shift from the external to the internal. Rather than seeing the Song as national romantic history between Israel and God, the philosophers read an ode to the longing of the intellect for knowledge, or, more spiritually, the soul that yearned for union with the divine. Chief among these philosophers was Moses Maimonides, a "religious rationalist... in the Aristotelian vein."¹⁹⁵ At first glance, Maimonides may seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a study of the Song of Songs. He never wrote a commentary on it, and he mentions it only sparsely in his works. Nevertheless, his use of the Song, even as a micro-dose, would leaven the whole loaf of his *Guide of the Perplexed*.

The Guide of the Perplexed is long and complicated, and it is unapologetically *not* directed at the novice reader. Its target audience is the intelligentsia, namely those well versed in philosophy. *The Guide* is addressed particularly to those who, by course of their elevated study,

¹⁹³ Ibn Ezra, 21, 23, and 29.

¹⁹⁴ Ibn Ezra 28-29.

¹⁹⁵ Kalman, 232.

struggle with the apparent absurdities of scripture, such as the anthropomorphizing of God throughout the Torah. Such intellectuals inevitably find themselves perplexed, torn between two poles: abandon their intellect for the sake of their faith, or abandon their faith for the sake of their intellect.¹⁹⁶ To this conundrum, Maimonides brings a solution—Solomon’s Song of Songs.

As we have seen, the Song already had a long history of allegorical interpretation. Because of its erotic nature, it could not just be taken literally, otherwise its inclusion in scripture would be absurd. Therefore, the same solution for the absurdity of the Song’s eroticism could be applied to the other absurdities of scripture.¹⁹⁷ Make it parable. It is *all* parable. In the introduction, in which he explains his purpose for and method of writing, Maimonides explains, “Know that the key to understanding of all that the prophets, peace be upon them, have said... is an understanding of the parables, of their import, and of the meaning of the words occurring in them.”¹⁹⁸ Rather than writing a commentary on the Song, he uses the Song as the key with which to interpret the rest of scripture. He appeals to Solomon as the “inventor of the parabolic method” to bolster his claim.¹⁹⁹ The Sages, too, utilized this method. In fact, anyone who deals with “matters which are ultimate” is forced to deal in “riddles and analogies.”²⁰⁰ The details of the parables are but husks, vehicles for the real kernel of truth hidden within.

Maimonides serves as a kind of apologist for intellectual pursuits, seeking to debunk what he perceived as a sort of religious fundamentalism of his day. Rather than being a threat or a distraction from the study of scripture, the study of philosophy was imperative to truly

¹⁹⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 5-6.

¹⁹⁷ Maimonides, *Perplexed*, 11.

¹⁹⁸ Maimonides, *Perplexed*, 10.

¹⁹⁹ James Arthur Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 14.

²⁰⁰ Maimonides, “Sanhedrin,” in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (New York: Behrman House Publishers, 1972), 409.

understand it.²⁰¹ Those who fail to grow in knowledge of the natural sciences fail to attain knowledge of the divine sciences. In doing so, he also provides a sort of pastoral care for the philosopher who may find their faith challenged by their intellectual pursuits. One does not have to choose between one's intelligence and one's faith. Indeed, one *cannot* choose between them. He assures the intellectual, "One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge will be the love."²⁰² For the philosopher, the Song illumines the path of knowledge of God from myth to science.

The Kabbalah – In medieval Judaism, the path of mysticism experienced a surge of interest and an explosion of allegorical imagination. Against the cold, utter transcendence of the God of the philosophers, mystics longed for deeper intimacy with the divine, a way to meet the "human need to contact God."²⁰³ The blanket term for these writings is *Kabbalah*" or "receiving."²⁰⁴ Originally, the term denoted that which was handed down by tradition, however by the medieval era, the term had come to indicate a particular set of esoteric teachings. Much like the Cistercians who would have been their contemporaries, the Kabbalists had a particular fondness for the Song of Songs. They would regularly cite from the book and its midrash, and the Song's erotic imagery in particular would strongly color their mystical theology.

The primary text of the Kabbalistic writings is the Zohar. Much like the Song itself, the Zohar was attributed to what modern scholars would deem a pseudepigraphic author, the second century Rabbi Shimon. Most likely it is the word of a Jewish mystic who lived in Spain, Mosche de León (1240-1305).²⁰⁵ Written in the form of a narrative midrash, the Zohar covers the five

²⁰¹ Maimonides, *Perplexed*, 9.

²⁰² Maimonides, "Knowledge," in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (New York: Behrman House Publishers, 1972), 85.

²⁰³ Daniel Chanan Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 22.

²⁰⁴ Matt, 5.

²⁰⁵ Pardes, 82.

books of Torah. In the book on Exodus, it gives an exposition on the Song of Songs.

Connecting the Song's composition with the construction of Solomon's Temple, it describes how the Song "poured forth" from Solomon "when the Temple was erected and all the worlds, above and below, had reached their perfect consummation."²⁰⁶ Temple mysticism factors heavily into Kabbalistic thought, as Pinchas Giller explains, "the Western Wall... is the point of divine conjunction, the actual point at which Heaven and Earth meet and exchange energies."²⁰⁷ When Solomon completed the Temple, the presence of God, the *Shekinah* entered the world in her fullness. The result of this exchange of energies was the Song of Songs itself—the holiest book of all scripture.

Like earlier midrash, the Zohar would affirm the Song of Songs as the Holy of Holies of scripture which contained the whole of Torah. The Zohar makes this even more dramatic, claiming that the Song begins with creation and continues through the building of the Temple and far, far beyond:

It contains the crowning of the Holy Name with love and joy, the prophecy of Israel's exile among the nations, of their redemption, of the resurrection of the dead, and of all else until that Day which is "Sabbath to the Lord." *All that was, is, and shall be, is contained in it*; and, indeed, even that which will take place on the "Seventh Day," which will be the "Lord's Sabbath," is indicated in the Song.²⁰⁸

The gift of God's most intimate presence, the Song contains the entirety of Israel's story, past, present, and future—"eternity to eternity, the mystery of the whole Faith."²⁰⁹ It is the ultimate

²⁰⁶ *The Zohar*, trans. Maurice Simon and Paul P. Levertoff (London: The Soncino Press, 1956), IV:3.

²⁰⁷ Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001), 13.

²⁰⁸ *The Zohar*, 6. Emphasis added.

²⁰⁹ *The Zohar*, 7.

revelation of a God who wants to be known. The Song, then, was given as a gift to “assist the mystic in uniting with the divine.”²¹⁰

How then, did the Kabbalists envision union with the divine? To fully unpack the breadth of the Kabbalist writings is a practically impossible task, but it is worth exploring a bit of their curious theology in order to get an idea of their particular use of the Song. Basically, it seeks to bridge the gap between the transcendence and immanence of God. On the side of fully transcendent and unknowable, God was known as *Ein Sof*, the eternal, the infinite. In order to interact with the material world, a series of ten emanations known as *Sefirot* trickled down, the last of which was known as the *Shekhinah*, a feminine aspect where God was her most immanent self.²¹¹ It was the *Shekhinah* who was personally involved with Israel. The depths of *Shekhinah*'s immanence could be intense. As Daniel Chanan Matt explains it, “God [*Shekhinah*] shares Israel’s suffering and yearns along with them for reconciliation and redemption.”²¹² Though the Kabbalists continued to strongly assert the Oneness of God, the *Sefirot* served to create enough distance *within* God to generate themes of longing union among the *Sefirot*, particularly between the masculine and feminine aspects of God. In describing the sort of cosmic anatomy of the highly anthropomorphized divine person known as *Adam Kadmon*, Kabbalists asserted that *Adam Kadmon* could only stand when the masculine and feminine aspects were united.²¹³

Whenever the Kabbalists describe this union, it is unabashedly erotic. The creation of the world stemmed from an “orgasm in the process of the divine.”²¹⁴ Creation had stemmed from

²¹⁰ Kalman, 238.

²¹¹ Matt, 35.

²¹² Matt, 17.

²¹³ Giller, 131.

²¹⁴ Giller, 72.

the divine union. This union had been disrupted by Adam's sin and continued to be disrupted by ongoing human sin.²¹⁵ *Shekinah* was in her own kind of exile from her beloved. The power given to Solomon when he received of the Song of Songs was to "lead the Bride to the Bridegroom."²¹⁶ That power had been passed down through esoteric tradition to the mystics. Thus, the Kabbalists were not passive devotees awaiting a savior. They were active players in the striving to "mend the separation between *Shekinah* and the blessed Holy One, as well as between *Shekinah* and the human sphere."²¹⁷ They sought to reunite the celestial masculine and feminine, and by doing so, to repair the world.

This noble, if somewhat heterodox goal, stemmed from Kabbalistic cosmology. Viewing the cosmos as a mirrored reality, the Zohar explains that "this world is formed on the pattern of the world above, and whatever takes place in this earthly realm occurs also in the realm above."²¹⁸ The concept of *tikkun olam*, of repairing the world, has cosmic implications. Human sin perpetuates the rift between *Shekinah* and the Holy One, as well as the rift between God and humanity. The means of repairing the breach and saving the world then, is a fairly straightforward one—Torah. Study it. Keep it.

This was quite a long journey to essentially get us back to what rabbis have been saying for millennia: study and observe Torah. But what the Kabbalists have certainly achieved in their vision is a highly romantic, highly heroic push towards that end. When the mystic keeps Sabbath, when he makes love to his wife on Sabbath Eve, he is not only obeying Torah, he is bringing *Shekinah* to closer union with the Holy One.²¹⁹ When the mystic madidates on the

²¹⁵ Kalman, 244.

²¹⁶ *The Zohar*, 9.

²¹⁷ Pardes, 91.

²¹⁸ *The Zohar*, 8.

²¹⁹ Matt, 36.

emanations of the *Sefirot*, he not only draws himself into deeper union with God, it is as though he is pulling all the *Sefirot* a little closer together in his embrace. When the mystic studies scripture, he not only brings himself a little closer to the divine—he brings the divine a little closer to *itself*.

All this brings us back to scripture and the Song of Songs specifically. For the Kabbalists, Torah study is especially vital for the mystical work with which they have been tasked. While the Jewish sages had always affirmed the holiness of scripture, highlighting that of the Song of Songs, the Kabbalists elevate this even further. In the face of the philosopher's rationalist approach to scripture, "the Zohar responds by saying that not only does the Torah come from God; her words and letters are permeated with God. Study flowers into revelation."²²⁰ The Zohar depicts exactly how the faithful should approach Torah study, using the Song of Songs as a setting for the allegory. The Torah is a lover who veils and unveils herself, peeking through the lattice to entice her lover, to arouse his love. The faithful paramour can become the "husband of Torah," set "as a seal upon your heart."²²¹ This mystical union with Torah is nothing short of union with the divine, which in turn brings the divine masculine and feminine into closer union "as one under the Highest King."²²² This is more than the philosopher's "divine science" or even the Sage's marriage between God and Israel. For the Kabbalist, the Song takes one on a transcendent journey into God directly from *wissen* to *kennen* to ידע.²²³

Conclusion: During the Middle Ages, we see some surprising shifts in the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Though all the theologians surveyed here continue to use the method of

²²⁰ Matt, 23.

²²¹ Quoted in Matt, 125-126.

²²² *The Zohar*, 13.

²²³ *Wissen* – to know factually; *kennen* – to know with personal familiarity; ידע - to know intimately, sexually.

allegory which they inherited from their forbearers, they take up the tool with very different concerns, motivations, and intentions. Mystics, seeking a more intimate union with the divine, look to the erotic union of the Song to map out their journey. Rationalists look to the metaphorical poetics of the Song to unlock the literary nature of scripture, and thus assuage their conflict between intellectual advancement and seemingly superstitious tradition. If there is a common thread among them, aside from the use of allegory towards their ends, it seems to be this: pastoral concern.

For Bede, the Song's imperative was to preach the Word to a laity that yearned for instruction. For Bernard and the Kabbalists, the Song teaches them and their followers how to pursue God with the indefatigable ardor of a lover. For Maimonides, the Song provides a way for even the most rigid skeptic to hold onto something of their faith. Ibn Ezra and the Kabbalists see in the Song renewed hope for their people in exile, that hope for the Messianic Age is not lost. While elements of the sex-shy, tribalistic interpretations remain, they seem to no longer be the driving force of Song exegesis. Something more personal has begun to blossom, bringing with it a more intense, more romantic sensuality. The practices that these pastors prescribe do not differ much from their predecessors. Prayer, ritual, and study all remain key elements of faithful living. However, the motives have shifted. Appeasement, rote habit, blind obedience, or hope for gaining divine favor are increasingly insufficient. The medieval message of the Song of Songs seems to be this: When approaching God, love is the journey *and* the destination.

Chapter 4: A Strange, Strange End
The Song of Songs in the Modern Era

No one can read the Song of Songs without seeing the poetry as analogy for the love he or she holds most dear. — Jacob Neusner

The Modern Era brought with it the greatest challenge to the allegorical method of interpreting the Song. With the rise of the Reformation, traditional Catholic interpretations were eschewed as popish superstition. Yet, despite their protestations, many reformers found it difficult to fully break away from allegory altogether and instead changed variables to more reform-friendly symbols. Those who did away with allegory completely tended to question the Song's suitability as scripture altogether. The worldview and methodologies of the Enlightenment brought forth the most stringently literal approach to the Song. Interest in the Song's literary merit took center stage, with little need to sacralize it through metaphor. This led to the surge in academic study of the Song, during which scholars took more interest in the ethnographic background of the Song as a historical artifact. Much of what we have learned, or more accurately, grappled with concerning the who, what, when, where, and why of the Song of Songs (which we explored in depth in chapter 1 of this thesis) came out of the highly academic, anti-allegorical methods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There would, of course, be outliers who continued to approach the Song allegorically, as we shall see. Even within the academy itself, where the overt use of allegory was eschewed, allegorical impulses tended to crop up. As the academy has continued its own attempts to court the Song, a curious thing has happened. While scholars tended to disparage the use of allegory for being too arbitrary and unstable, the allegorical interpretation of the Song had yielded quite consistent results for over a millennium, seeing the lovers as some version of the love between God and humanity. Modern scholarship, however, has produced a veritable cornucopia of

interpretations of the Song, a rich harvest of referents for each seed of signifier within the text. This has brought about an astonishing diversity of fields which find themselves reflected in the Song of Songs. No matter how fastidiously we attempt to analyze the Song, to pin down her “plain meaning,” to figure her out, she continues to surprise us. As we begin our survey of the Modern Era, we will find a similar tune sung in a different timbre—the allegorical method, but sung by a woman’s voice.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): Writing at the cusp of the modern era, the Spanish Carmelite abbess and mystic, Teresa of Avila, was the first woman to write a commentary on the Song of Songs. In the opening of her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, she expresses an affinity for the book that transcends its cognitive, literary effect. She expresses intense delight in the Song of Songs, so that “without my understanding the vernacular meaning of the Latin my soul is stirred and recollected more than by devotional books written in language I understand.”²²⁴ When she did hear the Song translated into her own language, it had no bearing on her understanding and appreciation of the book. It seems then, that her interaction with the Song was, for her, mystical from the start.

Teresa writes her commentary for the benefit of the sisters of her monastery who are under her charge.²²⁵ Thus, like the Venerable Bede before her, she has some pastoral motivation that drives her work. Her guidance is similar to his own, in that she advises the sisters about the desirability to balance the active and contemplative aspects of the spiritual life.²²⁶ Describing the two poles as “Martha and Mary,” Teresa sees not only the cooperation between them, but even a

²²⁴ Teresa of Avila, “Meditations on the Song of Songs,” in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980), 215.

²²⁵ Teresa of Avila, 215.

²²⁶ Bernard McGinn, “Women Interpreting the Song of Songs: 1150-1700,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 265.

certain blurring between the two boundaries. For those who are well advanced in spiritual matters, “the active—seemingly exterior—work of the soul is working interiorly.”²²⁷ While the soul naturally longs for the sublime bliss of contemplation, there remains work in this life to be done, so the “flowers” of Song 2:5 act for Teresa like smelling salts to bring the mystic back from the state of “heavenly inebriation” to continue their God-given strivings in the present world.²²⁸

A significant part of such strivings involves suffering. In her second chapter, Teresa warns her readers against nine kinds of false peace, such as the “peace” of those whose consciences have grown too hardened to be troubled by their wickedness, or those who are so lax in their faith that the devil need not bother to attack them. Such peace is an illusion. For those on the spiritual path, “there must be war in this life.”²²⁹ When the faithful share in Christ’s sufferings by taking up their own cross, they are all the closer to the union the mystic so seeks, that ecstasy of being “dissolved in You.”²³⁰ While the ultimate consummation of this union will occur in the world to come, God does allow us foretastes even in our present life.²³¹ Such communion is not something that can be understood with the intellect—Teresa repeatedly extols intellectual humility. What the Song of Songs teaches us in Teresa’s reading is that union with God is not something to be understood. It is something we experience.²³²

Writing as a Catholic mystic of the early modern era, Teresa’s engagement with the Song remains quite traditional. She writes with allegory, humility, and piety, in great deference to her spiritual forbearers. One of her contemporaries, however, would begin the long line of

²²⁷ Teresa of Avila, 257.

²²⁸ Teresa of Avila, 257 and 244.

²²⁹ Teresa of Avila, 223.

²³⁰ Teresa of Avila, 242.

²³¹ Teresa of Avila, 246.

²³² Teresa of Avila, 243.

rethinking the tradition of the Song of Songs. When it came to the allegorical method, the writers of the Reformation were not impressed.

Martin Luther (1483-1546): With the increasing accessibility of scriptures thanks to printing and vernacular translations, Reformation theologians were keen to engage with scripture for themselves and took that work very seriously. Of course, each reader would bring their own insights to interpretation, often informed by their personal doctrinal predilections. Still, the Reformation brought with it a keen concern for “textual accuracy, historical context, and the plain literal sense” of scripture.²³³ Reformers tended to strongly resist allegorical interpretation of scripture, part and parcel with their tendency to resist anything redolent of popish Roman superstition. Luther himself referred to allegory as a “beautiful harlot... specially seductive to idle men.”²³⁴ When it came to the Song of Songs, however, even the most ardent reformers found themselves giving way to the wiles of allegory.

Being such an unusual book of scripture, the Song proved a challenging work for literal interpretation among the reformers. Even if one were not squeamish about its erotic tenor, it would be difficult to account for it as scripture if taken at face value. Most of the reformers were not prepared to exclude the book from the canon, and the few who sought to expel it on account of its literal sense, found themselves expelled instead.²³⁵ Reformers sympathetic to the Song therefore argued that God must sometimes accommodate human limitations by condescending to our level through story.²³⁶ They used the Song as a kind of parable to demonstrate such doctrines

²³³ George L. Scheper, “Reformation Attitudes toward Allegory of the Song of Songs,” *PMLA* 89, no. 3 (1974): 551.

²³⁴ Quoted in Scheper, 551.

²³⁵ Scheper, 556. The reformer Sebastian Castellio argued that the Song was simply about Solomon and the Shulamite, and that it had no spiritual sense and should not be considered scripture. John Calvin had him expelled from Geneva as a result.

²³⁶ Timothy H. Robinson, “The Banquet of Love: The Song of Songs in Reformed Sacramental Piety: 1586-1792,” in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in this History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2021): 332.

as irresistible grace, the incarnational union between Christ's divine and human natures, or the longing for the Second Coming.²³⁷ Like his peers, Martin Luther would use allegory in his own commentary on the Song of Songs. His extrapolations, however, were very unlike those of any commentator before or since.

Luther begins his commentary by criticizing those that had come before as "immature and strange," full of "absurd opinions."²³⁸ Having taken his strong stance against wild speculation in regard to the Song, Luther then lays out the Song's most obvious interpretation: it is about temporal government. To anyone familiar with the subject matter of the Song of Songs, this may seem a strange conclusion. That would be because it is. Luther does not really give a satisfying explanation as to how or why he comes to this conclusion, but his commentary is certainly thorough. Nearly every verse has something to do with the tranquility of God-ordained governance, and the usual suspects of symbols make their appearance. The opening kiss is the "show [of] favor to this government."²³⁹ The angry brothers are seditious rebels, the stallions of Pharaoh's chariots represent the right use of civil force, the bride's mother is the state, and so on.²⁴⁰ In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Jacob Neusner points out that people have a tendency to see their most cherished concerns analogized in the Song.²⁴¹ Luther certainly demonstrates that here. His work on the Song articulates "the importance of Luther's political thought as a major branch of his theology."²⁴² The role of temporal government as a gift from God was an important aspect of his understanding of scripture and theology, so much so that he

²³⁷ Robinson, 328-330.

²³⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David*, eds. Jaroslav Pelkian and Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972), 15: 191, 194.

²³⁹ Luther, 196.

²⁴⁰ Luther, 203, 206, and 257.

²⁴¹ Neusner, 2.

²⁴² Jarret A. Carty, "Matrin Luther's Political Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 452.

sees it in even the most unlikely of places such as an erotic love song. While Luther's commentary would not have much discernable impact on overall interpretation of the Song, it does serve as an early example of a trend that would develop later in the postmodern era. In the late twentieth century, when activists for diverse causes would see their own concerns reflected in the Song of Songs, they were following in Luther's footsteps.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1788): The period of the Enlightenment gave the first real break in ranks with the tradition of the Song's allegorical interpretation. Though this was true for both Christian and Jewish exegetes, perhaps the most celebrated example of this was the eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Renowned as the founding father the *Haskalah*, or "Jewish Enlightenment," Mendelssohn and other Enlightenment thinkers helped to cultivate religious sensibilities in a way the stressed the Enlightenment ideals of "tolerance, the value of secular knowledge, and worldly happiness."²⁴³ Mendelssohn's approach to translation and interpretation favors *peshat*, the plain or intended meaning on the part of the text.

In his analysis of Biblical poetry, he sees the need to explain the nature and rhythms of ancient Hebrew poetry to an audience who would have prized rhyme and syllabic meter as the hallmark of poetry worth the name. German romantics like Johan Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Gottfried Herder had praised Hebrew poetry for its "primordial means of expression."²⁴⁴ Though they prized the poetry as beautiful, they did so through an Orientalizing lens that valued it for its primitive nature. Mendelssohn defends against this bias, asserting that such poetic trappings often privilege auditory flourish at the expense of deeper meaning. He expounds, "our

²⁴³ Michah Gottlieb, introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn, Writings on Judaism, Christianity, & The Bible*, ed. Michah Gottlieb, trans. Curtis Bowman, Elias Sacks, and Allan Arkush (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2011), xi.

²⁴⁴ Yael Almog, "The Song of Songs in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany," in *The Song of Songs Throughout the Ages: Essays on the Songs Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Schellenberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 349.

ancestors left aside this meager excellence in favor of a more noble excellence. This is the excellence that arises from arranging content and statements in a beautiful way intended for the *end* desired in poetry—namely, that the words enter not only the listener’s ear, but also his heart.”²⁴⁵ He describes the benefit of short, repeated clauses for catching one’s attention, imprinting on the memory, and opening the heart.²⁴⁶ The metric of ancient Hebrew poetry then, is not the rhyming of words, but the rhyming of meaning. This he terms “sweetness of content” reminding the reader that “the ways of sacred poetry [are] elevated high above secular poetry.”²⁴⁷ Despite its structural differences from classically styled poetry, Hebrew poetry had the same ability to stir the senses.²⁴⁸

The aesthetic sense that he describes comes across in Mendelssohn’s translation of *Leid der Leider Schelomos*:

Er küsse mich
Küsse seines Mundes;
Deine Liebe ist köstlicher als
Wein.²⁴⁹

He kisses me
Kisses of his mouth
Your love is more delectable than
wine

The famous line near the Song’s close reads:

Ah seze mich
Wie ein Siegel auf dein Herz!
Wie ein Siegel auf deinen Arm!
Stark ist die Liebe, wie der Tod

Oh set me
As a seal on your heart
As a seal on your arm
Love is strong, like death.

²⁴⁵ Mendelssohn, “The Bi’ur,” in Gottlieb, 212. Emphasis added.

²⁴⁶ Mendelssohn, “The Bi’ur,” 214.

²⁴⁷ Mendelssohn, “The Bi’ur,” 215.

²⁴⁸ Moses Mendelssohn, “Von der Lyrischen Poesie,” *Lyriktheorie*, Uni Wuppertal, accessed March 30, 2024. http://www.lyriktheorie.uni-wuppertal.de/texte/1778_mendelssohn.html.

²⁴⁹ Moses Mendelssohn, “Das Hohe Lied Salomos, In der Übertragung von Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786),” *Deutsche Liebeslyrik*, accessed March 30, 2023. http://www.deutsche-liebeslyrik.de/lieh/h_1_mendelssohn_1771.htm. English translations are my own.

Throughout his German version of the Song, Mendelssohn keeps a faithful translation in both meaning and form. Though he maintains the legitimacy of the Song as a part of sacred scripture, Mendelssohn's use of the Song, at least in the German, has less to do with its spiritual applications than with its merit among the great works of literature, as a cultural asset worthy of a modern state in which Jews could be regarded for their cultural contributions to a liberal society.²⁵⁰ This more secular, literary analysis of the Song would become the norm as Enlightenment ideals and the academy gained hegemony. This trend would continue influence interpretation of the Song of Songs to the present day.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929): Though the literal approach to the Song of Songs came to dominate the late modern era, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were instances of resistance to the trend, even among intellectuals. One of the most eloquent of these conscientious objectors was the German Jewish philosopher and theologian, Franz Rosenzweig. Writing over a century after Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig “offers a fascinating critique of Enlightenment views of the Song,” particularly against Mendelssohn's contemporaries, Herder and Goethe.²⁵¹ In his 1921 magnum opus *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig describes how the reduction of the Song to something “purely human” would necessitate one to ask “what strange error allowed these pages to slip into God's word...”²⁵² Furthermore, reduction to the literal

²⁵⁰ Gottleib, xi.

²⁵¹ Pardes, 153; Samuel Moyn, “Divine and Human Love: Franz Rosenzweig's History of the Song of Songs,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2005): 200-204.

²⁵² Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston: 1971): 199.

robbed the Song not only of its scriptural integrity, but also of its poetic vivacity. He describes modernism's ossification of the Song thusly:

Once the Song of Songs was understood as “purely human,” the step from “purely human” to “purely worldly” was also possible... The goal was always to transform the lyric I and Thou of the poem into an epic-graphic He and She... The language of the revelation of the soul... now petrified into the dead objectivity of the third person.²⁵³

Rather than explore the Song as a lover, modernists sought to examine it, like a frog on the dissection table. Thus, the reduction of the Song to a “purely human” artifact led, paradoxically, to both its desacralization *and* its dehumanization.²⁵⁴

Rosenzweig calls for a return to recognizing the Song as an interaction between divinity and humanity. He concurs with the conclusion of centuries of allegorists, yet there is something very different about his work from that of his predecessors. While criticizing the modern trend of Song scholarship, Rosenzweig adopts the vernacular of the academy even as he re-mystifies the Song. In discussing the word of God as revelation he states, “the analogue of love permeates as analogue of all revelation.”²⁵⁵ The Song of Songs, as the word of God, is not merely an analogy to love, be it divine love or human love, but is itself the analogue. In other words, the medium is the message.

While the Song, at the literal level, depicts human love between a man and a woman, human love is itself an analogy to something higher. The Song *cannot* point only to human love, because “love simply cannot be ‘purely human...’ Like speech itself,

²⁵³ Rosenzweig, 200.

²⁵⁴ Moyn, 211.

²⁵⁵ Rosenzweig, 199. Note: Here Rosenzweig uses the term analog in the literary sense as being differentiated from an analogy. The analog is the source meaning from which an analogy can be derived. This is similar to Saussure's semiotics in which the signified (the thing itself) is differentiated from the signifier (the sign or symbol that points back to the signified).

love is sensual—supersensual... simile is its very nature and not merely its decorative accessory.”²⁵⁶ Love between humans is itself an analogy that points back to the analogue of divine love. Without the outpouring of divine love to creation, human love cannot exist. Human love stems from, echoes, and participates in the preexisting love of God. While the words of the Song of Songs may be a metaphor for human love, all human love is Metaphor for the Love of God. The Song as given *is* an act of revelation. Therefore, it *is* an act of love.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Rosenzweig’s interpretation of the Song occurs in his grammatical analysis. This is where his mystical theology and his academic scholarship meet. Rosenzweig’s attention is particularly rapt with the Song’s frequent use of the first-person present tense. He notes that the word “I” occurs more in the Song of Songs than any other book in the Bible.²⁵⁷ The present, or the “transitory in its temporal form,” as Rosenzweig describes it, is the “bearer, visible or invisible, of all the sentences of the Song of Songs in the root-word I.”²⁵⁸ The present is a challenging concept to wrestle with, both philosophically and theologically. Humans live in their particular present, but the present can never be fully captured or defined. As soon as one manages to capture a moment of the present, say in a snapshot or a diary entry, it is already the past. Even to contemplate the present is to watch it slipping away, moment by moment, into the past. Thus, for human cognition, the present is always a muddy delta of past and future, either one of which are easier to grasp conceptually than the present itself is. In the Song, however, the constantly present “I” sounds “like a single

²⁵⁶ Rosenzweig, 201.

²⁵⁷ Pardes, 156.

²⁵⁸ Rosenzweig, 201.

sustained organ note, it runs the whole melodic-harmonic texture of mezzo-sopranos, now in one voice, now, switching to the Thou, in another.”²⁵⁹ Thus, the Song’s constant use of the present points to a temporal anomaly even within scripture itself. It points to something of the eternal.

Rosenzweig’s conclusions about the Song of Songs echoes that of mystical exegetes, but he has managed to sing it in a new song—his work cannot quite be called allegory. His work, however, would be the anomaly of his day. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, typical engagement with the Song would involve literal, historical, ethnographic readings that sought to uncover the who, what, when, where, why of the Song. Since we have covered that thoroughly in the first chapter of this thesis, we will not revisit it here. There is, however, a new trend worth mentioning. Though the allegorical method would never quite regain a toehold in the academic world, late twentieth and early twenty-first century scholars, influenced by reader-response theories of literary criticism, would shift the perspective for engaging with the Song. Rather than asking what the author of the Song meant to say, they wondered about what the reader, each with their own personal *sitz im leben*, might hear. This would lead to a renewed interest in the Song of Songs and would bear much fruit for those whose voices had too often been marginalized in the field of Biblical Studies.

Feminist Criticism: A movement that works towards advancing the equality of the genders, feminism takes particular interest in advancing the causes of women in society. As a movement aimed specifically at dismantling patriarchy, feminism has had at best a complicated relationship with scripture. Often the relationship has been more

²⁵⁹ Rosenzweig, 201.

hostile—in both directions. Scripture, at least in the hands of a long line of mostly male interpreters who were perfectly happy to accept and perpetuate patriarchal interpretations, has not always lent itself towards the cause of women’s liberation. As more women, through sheer valiant struggle, asserted their place in the field of Biblical Studies at the academic level, their perspectives served to uncover—not to invent, but to reveal—the very real liberating voices for women within the canon that were present in the canon of scripture. The mother of feminist biblical criticism is Phyllis Trible (b. 1932), who warned that feminism “errs when it dismisses the Bible as inconsequential or condemns it as enslaving. In rejecting Scriptures, women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting.”²⁶⁰ Women ignored the Bible—with all its enduring social capital—at their peril. Furthermore, if women ignored the Bible, they would be abandoning its interpretation to those whose viewpoints blinded them to some of its more liberative truths.

In her 1978 work *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Trible highlights the Song of Songs as a text in conversation with the story of humanity’s fall found in Genesis. If the fall from Eden marks the beginning of gender oppression, then the Song of Songs offers a roadmap for returning to a state of equality. Trible believes that the Song “redeems a love story gone awry.”²⁶¹ The parallels between Genesis and the Song are both thematic and structural, as she explains:

Originally, the creation of humanity found its fulfillment in the creation of sexuality: the earth creature became two, male and female, and those two became one flesh. With such an erotic completion, the Song of Songs begins, continues, and concludes.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Quoted in Pardes, 164.

²⁶¹ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978): 144.

²⁶² Trible, 146.

Genesis shows how gender relations became skewed by patriarchal dominance. The patriarchy is not natural to gender relations but, rather, is a result of sin—it is a perversion of the natural order established in creation. The Song of Songs shows the true nature of gender relations as established in creation, without dominance or subordination or stereotyping.²⁶³ It is human sin that gave birth to the battle of the sexes when what God actually gave us in the genders was meant to be a “symphony of love” as played out in the Song.²⁶⁴ Tribble’s work with the Song has been a landmark and rallying call for subsequent feminist scholars.

Common themes in feminist theory involve embodiment, power dynamics between the sexes, and sexual relations. With its celebration of the body, the mutuality of the female and man partners, and the unabashed delight that the lovers take in their erotic uniting, the Song of Songs has become a cornerstone of feminist theology. Feminist theorists note that, “The Song of Songs celebrates the human body... the Song cherishes the flesh of a woman and a man... sheer delight in the embodied being of the beloved suffuses the entire ambiance.”²⁶⁵ While celebration of the sexual is not unusual in erotic poetry, the complete mutuality, equality, and compatibility between the lovers is remarkable in the Song of Songs. Even in the woman’s veiling (Song 4:1) and her seclusion in the cleft of a rock (2:14), typically viewed as aspects of her submissiveness, can reveals something more complex when viewed through a feminist lens: “She is not automatically available to his beck and call or his look and gaze. She retains not simply

²⁶³ Tribble, 161.

²⁶⁴ Tribble, 161.

²⁶⁵ Nicholas Ayo and Mienrad Craighead, *Sacred Marriage, The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 37.

her modesty but also her independence.”²⁶⁶ With its prominent female voice and rich mine of complex gender imagery, the Song of Songs has become the prime example of what Phyllis Trible calls a “depatriarchalized text.”²⁶⁷ Following her lead, generations of feminists would take up the Song of Songs not just as a song of love, but a song of freedom. This liberative Song would inspire other advocate of gender and sexual minorities as well.

Queer Theology: The LGBT+ community has had an especially burdened relationship with the Church and its scripture. As such, many queer theorists, perhaps even more adamantly than their feminist counterparts, had given up on scripture entirely. For those who stayed with the church, or at least longed to stay, the pull between the eros of their natural physical attractions and the agape of their faith was often a paradox at its best, or a painful experience of cognitive dissidence, even self-loathing, at worst. It takes a special kind of fidelity to maintain one’s faith in the midst of the outright hostility engendered in what had been the traditional readings of scripture. Their faithfulness, however, offered up new insights into the scripture that had so often been weaponized against them, helping to uncover a renewed message of freedom, of self-confidence, and most vibrantly, of love.

In their engagement with scripture, the erotically charged Song of Songs seems to be both an obvious and not-so-obvious choice. Of course, the Song is an affirmation of the sanctity of desire, either divine or human desire, or both. Especially in its more literal

²⁶⁶ F. Scott Spencer, “Song of Songs,” in *The Wisdom Commentary Series* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002,) 25: 92.

²⁶⁷ Pardes, 164.

interpretations, the Song presents a “fervent, unashamed enthusiasm for human eros.”²⁶⁸

However, the literal approach also served to solidify the hetero-amorous nature of the text in ways that the allegorical method had not. In some ways, the feminist reading of the Song, with its intense emphasis on the Song as an exemplar of equality between the sexes, served to amplify the heterosexuality of the couple. In his essay “The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality,” Stephen D. Moore surveys the ways in which the literal interpretation of the Song transformed it into a “homiletic of heteronormativity.”

He explains:

Is it entirely by chance that the emergence of heterosexuality, with its sharply delineated and strictly policed sexual borders, should coincide with the decline of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, with its blurry and poorly policed sexual borders? “Before” heterosexuality, “normal” men could get up to things with other men that they could not easily get up to “after” heterosexuality... The consummately queer body of allegorical commentary on the Song of Songs... presupposes a lack of homosexual panic in the cultures in which it was conceived.²⁶⁹

Moore maintains that the allegorical use of the Song was rife with queerness, both in terms of erotic attraction (the attraction between a presumed masculine deity and male theologians) and gender identity (the feminizing to the point of androgyny of monastics and clerics and even the masculine God).²⁷⁰ There certainly have been queer theologians who are less skeptical about the queer potential of literal readings of the Song. But one of Moore’s major accomplishments in his historical survey of the Song’s interpretation is how aptly he demonstrates that the queering of scripture is not a new phenomenon. On

²⁶⁸ Christopher King, “A Love as Fierce as Death: Reclaiming the Song of Songs for Queer Lovers,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 127.

²⁶⁹ Stephen D. Moore, “The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality,” *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 348-349. Here Moore is using Michel Foucault’s observation in *The History of Sexuality* of the ways in which sexuality made the shift from *activity*, something one *does*, to *identity*, something one *is*.

²⁷⁰ Moore, 331 and 335.

the contrary, it has been happening for centuries, beginning with the Church Fathers themselves.²⁷¹

Though the allegorical use of the Song proves itself remarkably compatible with a queer reading of the Song, even at the literal level the Song has sung to the experience and concerns of queer theologians. Honing in on the celebration of pure erotic love, queer theologians like Christopher King have noted that the Song “celebrates the gift of human love itself, apart from any external measure of its worth—its procreative value, its conformity to natural law, its place in the right relationship of the sexes.”²⁷² So while the Song happens to depict a heterosexual couple, there is nothing particular to the sex or gender of its protagonists that suggest that their casting is prescriptive rather than descriptive. The Song unilaterally focuses on the desire of the couple, without concern for reproduction, familial obligations, social norms, or even marital status.²⁷³ The genders of the lover and beloved could easily be reversed or changed without any impact on the Song’s effect, narrative, or poetic beauty. Indeed, sometimes it can be a challenge to tell who is speaking to whom within the text. The formula remains the same, whatever the variables.

The figure of the Shulamite (who tends to be assumed to be the same female beloved throughout the text in most, but not all, interpretations) also attracts interest as a love interest who may be seen as taboo. This figure who is both dark and beautiful (Song 1:5) seems to draw attention as object of the collective gaze of the daughters of Jerusalem. King sees in this encounter a theme familiar to the queer experience. He

²⁷¹ Moore, 329.

²⁷² King, 128.

²⁷³ King, 131.

writes, “The Shulamite [is the] focus of a problem of identity, marginalizing discourses, fascination, and repulsion... at once fascinating and forbidden.”²⁷⁴ The couple is wholly undistracted from one another by whatever social pressures exert themselves, neither the Shulamite’s kindred, not her apparent status as an outsider, whether that marginalization stems from racial or class differences. The irresistible pull between the lovers is so overpowering that it holds no regard for how transgressive their love might be. It goes beyond “matters of individual preference. This is no ‘lifestyle choice’ for the lovers.”²⁷⁵ For its queer admirers, the Song of Songs is at its core the story of unbridled, life-altering, death-defying love. It speaks to all who experience such a love, social sanction be damned. In that, the Song is not just queer scripture. It’s queer gospel.

Eco Theology: The Song of Songs, with its unchecked lushness, presents a world in which nature intensely present, intensely connected, intensely intermingled with the experience of the lovers. Much as queer theologians have noticed the way love breaks down boundaries within the Song as means of affirming the sanctity of all love, environmental theologians have also noticed within the Song the “playful dissolution of the boundaries that separate humans, animals, vegetation, and landscapes.”²⁷⁶ The Song helps to bridge the separation between the human and non-human parts of creation, reminding us that as incarnate beings, we are very much a part of the natural world, as it is a part of us. For this reason, many eco-theologians regard the Song as “the most deeply ecological text of the entire biblical canon.”²⁷⁷ In an era increasingly riddled with

²⁷⁴ King, 128.

²⁷⁵ King, 130.

²⁷⁶ Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 158.

²⁷⁷ Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, *Toward a Holy Ecology: Reading the Song of Songs in the Age of Climate Crisis* (Rhinebeck, New York: Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2024), 3.

the concerns and realities of ecological devastation, the Song of Songs may offer us a better way.

In her work *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, Mari Joerstad notes the polysemy baked into the Song's poetics. Especially when dealing with nature and the landscape, the lovers frolic in, merge with, and are nourished by creation around them. Here we see "metaphor and nature walks blend into each other; the lovers are in a garden, the lovers are gardens, the lovers eat from the garden."²⁷⁸ Noting that it can often be difficult to decipher between the literal and the metaphorical in the Song, she believes that impressionistic blur to be by design. The grammatical ambiguities within the text, so often the bane of modern scholarship, are far from accident, but result from a master of the poetic craft who used the intricacies of the Hebrew language to produce tensions never meant to be resolved. Joerstad explains:

The invitation exploits the possibility that the preceding poem is a metaphor for the woman, but also the earlier theme of the landscape as a place where the lovers find each other... To see this poem *either* as a metaphorical depiction of the woman *or* a nonmetaphorical description of a luxurious garden is unnecessary; the man and the woman playfully evoke both possibilities.²⁷⁹

It is at this point of both/and that false binaries fall apart, revealing the interconnectedness of "human and more-than-human, between character and setting, between metaphor and reality."²⁸⁰ The Song reminds us that we are created in the image of God *and* we are dust—*Adam* (אָדָם) from the *Adamah* (אֲדָמָה). In remembering of our unity

²⁷⁸ Joerstad, 186.

²⁷⁹ Joerstad, 188.

²⁸⁰ Andrew R. H. Thompson, *Reconsider the Lilies: Challenging Christian Environmentalism's Colonial Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 100.

with nature as told by the Song, eco-theologians see the best hope for real environmental change by remembering the “intimacy between us and the earth.”²⁸¹

The sense of intimacy with nature is being increasingly eroded in modern society. While climate science has given us a great deal of knowledge about what our way of living is doing to the planet, science alone is ill equipped to inspire society towards the amendment of life required to bring us back to a real love of the earth and all of its creatures. In her pursuit to move us *Toward a Holy Ecology*, Rabbi Ellen Bernstein explains the shortcomings of environmentalism alone. As she laments, “sadly, much of today’s environmentalist rhetoric can reduce the textures, the stories, the aliveness of the natural world into a simplistic environmental equation. It can unintentionally come across as preachy or self-righteous and can alienate as much as motivate.”²⁸² When the main message of environmentalism revolves solely around the damage we have done and the colossal mountain of work involved to undo that damage, people are more apt to become mired in guilt, despondence, and anxiety—hardly the tools of inspirational change. If we hope to save the planet for future generations—generations of all life, human and non-human—we cannot guilt our ways out of the mess in which we find ourselves. We must fall in love with nature again, to see the world with enamored eyes. Love, of course, is the Song’s native tongue.

In her environmental commentary on the Song, Rabbi Bernstein notes the fullness with which the lovers live in accordance with the natural rhythms and seasons of nature. The lovers experience periods of nearness and distance, winters and springs, and abide by

²⁸¹ Bernstein, 4.

²⁸² Bernstein, 5.

the cadences of the earth so as to not “awaken love before its time.”²⁸³ She terms this harmony as a sense of wholeness and holiness using the neologism “wholiness.”²⁸⁴ Thus the coming together of the lovers in the Song of Songs depicts not only the reunion of lover and beloved, but the wider, cosmic-divine comedy of reunion between man and woman, the human and natural worlds, between creation and Creator. In other words, the Song is the story of *tikkun olam* itself.²⁸⁵

When looked at through an ecological lens, the Song of Songs invites us to fall in love with creation all over again. It brings nature “before us with an intensity and beauty and bids us to savor it with all of our senses, so that we may turn from the poem to see the natural world with renewed clarity and love.”²⁸⁶ Rather than giving an apocalyptic warning of the destruction to come if we fail to mend our environmental desecration, the Song of Songs calls for change through the “intense urgency of desire.”²⁸⁷ In calling for the restoration of creation, the Song offers what environmentalist Jeremiads cannot—a sense of breathless wonder at the sacred that is already all around us in the beauty of the earth.

Conclusion: The Modern Era proved to be the most unwieldy for the interpretation of the Song of Songs. As the strict use of allegory waned, interpretations of the Song became more diverse, more imaginative. Modern theologians, working in tandem with the sacred and the secular, have brought to us interpretations that are both steeped in close readings of the text, contemporary social concerns, *and* religious

²⁸³ Song of Songs 8:4.

²⁸⁴ Bernstein, 8.

²⁸⁵ Tikkun olam literally means “repair of the world.” It is a concept in Judaism that today is often equated with social justice work. It has its roots in Kabbalistic principle of humanity’s ability to participate in restoring the broken pieces of the cosmos in order to literally save the world.

²⁸⁶ Bernstein, 3.

²⁸⁷ Thompson, 99.

imagination. It could be said that the allegorical method has not disappeared so much as evolved. In her unparalleled ability to break down barriers, the Song has also broken down the binary between allegorical and literal readings. Modern readings delve deeply into the text, allow the text to take more of a lead, and as a result yield more sophisticated forms of metaphorical imagination. But the imprint of allegory is not entirely vanished—its perfume still lingers on the wind. Modern exegesis, despite its devotion to the literal, has once again succumbed to the Song's seductive tendency to reveal to us our own deepest loves. Whether that love is of a nation, a divinity, social activism, or environmentalism, the Song has a way of bringing our deepest desires to the fore. Rather than uncovering the mysteries of the Song through our studies, it is we who are unveiled by her.

In the next and final chapter, I will invite you into my own dance with the Song of Songs. Whether this will be more allegory or analysis, academy or ecclesia, is uncertain at best. We have seen the way the Song tends to challenge such binaries. Taking to heart Rabbi Akiva's belief that the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies, we will let the Song take us to the very heart of Christian theology itself, the Trinity. This seems a dangerous enterprise. Dabbling in Trinitarian theology is a notorious gateway to heresy. Dabbling in Song translation is a notorious gateway grammatical frustration. Dabbling in Song exegesis is a notorious gateway to academic absurdity. But then, faint heart never won fair lady.

Chapter 5: A Strange, Strange God
The Song of Songs as a Trinitarian Love Song

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. —1 John 4:8

Having traversed the long history of interpretation of the Song of Songs, we have seen the many ways in which the Song is a strange, strange book. I will now invite you to journey through my own interpretation: the Song as an intra-Trinitarian love song. I will argue that this strange, strange book is in fact the love song of a strange, strange God who is a Unity of three and a Trinity of one. If we think back to the who, when, where, what, and why questions of chapter 1, the responses become more succinct in this interpretation. Who? God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When? In the eternity of the Trinity. Where? Within the heart of the Trinity itself. What? A glimpse into the love-life that is the divine. Why? Because God is Love. It should be noted that what we are doing here is not historical criticism. The earthly authorship, dating, and socio-geographical minutia about the Song all fall beyond the scope of this particular reading. We may be dabbling in theology or biblical exegesis or literary interpretation of a keenly post-modern sort. What we are most definitely doing here is flirtation. We are flirting with the Song to see if our repartee may coax her to reveal any secrets she may know about the divine, particularly that most perplexing of Christian mysteries, the Trinity. If, as Jacob Neusner suggests, the Song tends to reveal our own deepest loves, why would a Trinitarian Christian *not* see Trinitarian allusions in the Song?²⁸⁸

Before we delve into the texts itself, it will be useful to stop and ponder for a while—to prepare for the courting, as it were. After all, to suggest that the Song is to, from, about, and within the Trinity raises obvious challenges and potentials. Best

²⁸⁸ Neusner, 2.

practices demand that we address these directly if we can go about our work with due seriousness and due playfulness.

God is never mentioned. How can a book that never once actually mentions God be taken as the book that gives us the most intimate of gazes into God? The practice of seeing intense divine insights in the Song is nothing new. We have seen how Rabbi Akiva believed that while all scripture is holy, the Song of Songs is the “Holy of Holies.”²⁸⁹ I content that God *is* mentioned in the Song, that God is mentioned *a lot* in the Song, and that God *always has been* mentioned in the Song. While other books of scripture are written primarily in the third person, the Song is unique in its superlative use of the first person. Franz Rosenzweig describes the present “I” “like sustained organ note, it runs under the whole melodic-harmonic texture of mezzo-sopranos and sopranos, now in one voice, not switching to the Thou, in the other.”²⁹⁰ More than any other book of scripture, the Song is absolutely saturated with “I AM.”²⁹¹ As the speaker of the Song, the Triune God does not name Godself, but speaks in the first person.

Problem of mutuality. The mutuality that exists between the lovers has been repeatedly noted, especially by feminist critics. Within the haven of their love, the lovers are very much equals in terms of desire, respect, independence, and interdependence. This very mutuality raised problems for the traditional allegorical method. The lovers are on such equal terms that it presents a challenge to the notion of love between the divine and humanity, as traditional theology would maintain that God is supreme, while humanity is subaltern. Thus, as a divine-human love song, the Song fails to account for

²⁸⁹ Quoted in Neusner, *The Mishnah*.

²⁹⁰ Rosenzweig, 201.

²⁹¹ Exodus 3:14.

“the kind of basic division between the divine and the human assumed by religion.”²⁹² If, however, the Song is to be sung to, from, and among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who alone are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, the problem of mutuality vanishes. It is impossible to locate a more perfect exercise of mutuality than that which occurs within the Trinity itself.

Heraclitian Tension: The primacy of paradox is a concept I refer to as “Heraclitian tension.” A Greek philosopher of the 6th century BCE, Heraclitus described the tension between (apparent) opposites as the tension within a lyre string. Contrary to Hegelian synthesis, Heraclitian tension resists the urge to resolve tensions, but rather respects, values, and maintains such tensions. For the instrument to function, the tension cannot be resolved in favor of either polarity but must be maintained. If the tension becomes too lax, there is no music. If the tension is pulled too tightly, the string will break and there is no music. Modern philosophy echoes this concept in the Jacques Derrida’s *différance*, the difference and deferral of meaning between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the thing described).²⁹³ Paul Ricoeur’s explorations of polysemy, in which the tensions between multiple potential meanings are left intact rather than resolved, is redolent of this as well.²⁹⁴

The Song is noted for its paradoxical tension. Robert Alter notes the frequency of “semiotic blur between illustration and referent” which can make it difficult to distinguish who is speaking to whom or about what.²⁹⁵ Franz Rosenzweig notes that in

²⁹² Good, 25.

²⁹³ Jacques Derrida, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing (1967),” in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 101.

²⁹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 65.

²⁹⁵ Alter. 193-194.

the Song “the distinction between immanence and transcendence disappears in the language.”²⁹⁶ As we have noted, when we engage with the Song, boundaries tend to blur and binaries tend to collapse. The same phenomenon occurs when we engage with Trinitarian theology.

The Proximity of Distance: Paradox will be a constant feature of our examination of the Song, especially as we consider the phenomenon of *eros*. Desire, that which serves to draw in and attract, requires distance, a differentiation, an otherness between lover and beloved. It is the nature of desire to long to bridge the gap of distance through contact—touch, caress, intercourse. It is the nature of desire that it never fully accomplishes this goal, as Gerard Loughlin explains: “Between one body pressed against one another... there is still a space, a distance, a hair’s breadth... he is still beyond your grasp, a stranger to the caress of your flesh.”²⁹⁷ Sexual phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas describes this complete/not-quite tension within sexual gratification as the “pathos of voluptuosity.” He describes voluptuosity as that which “discovers the hidden as hidden... the discovered does not lose its mystery in the discovery.”²⁹⁸ The disrobing of the lover reveals not only their flesh, but veils upon veils; the solving of the mystery reveals the answer as mystery itself. Commenting upon Levinas’s work, Mayra Rivera explains transcendent desire as that which “does not aim as appropriation or consumption, nor even consummation... A relational transcendence [is] where the irreducibility of difference is not in conflict with desire, and where desire does not seek

²⁹⁶ Rosenzweig, 199.

²⁹⁷ Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 4.

²⁹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 260.

the elimination of difference.”²⁹⁹ When balanced in a healthy and holistic manner, the centripetal drawing in of desire does not degrade the centrifugal integrity of otherness. Unity and alterity are balanced, as they are so beautifully balanced in the Song of Songs. It is within this wholesome state that sexual desire provides a “precious clue woven into our created being reminding us of our rootedness in God.”³⁰⁰

Distance within the Trinity: That there exists a permanent distance between lovers, however slight, that accounts for the desire that draws them together easily makes sense in finite terms. Once we turn our gaze to the infinite, however, notions of space become more constrained, more difficult to account for. To describe the Trinity without stumbling into polytheism requires daring the tightrope and accepting the “noetic slippage” entailed as the infinite draws our finite minds into the realm of nonsense—or more accurately the realm beyond sense.³⁰¹ However agile our theologizing, we will eventually succumb to the apophatic safety net. Here we will lean upon the guidance of one who has walked this tightrope before, the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

In his multi-volume work *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Balthasar makes his attempt at “neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Essence.”³⁰² Balthasar holds that God only has one self-consciousness, so that the Persons of the Trinity “cannot address each other as “Thou.”³⁰³ Hence their unity. Nevertheless, in the distinction of Persons, we must posit an “absolute, infinite ‘distance’ that can contain and

²⁹⁹ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 85.

³⁰⁰ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2013), 309.

³⁰¹ Coakley, 325.

³⁰² The Creed of Saint Athanasius.

³⁰³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), IV: 321.

embrace all the other distances that are possible within the world of finitude, including the distance of sin.”³⁰⁴ All earthly distance and distinction between and among creatures, exists as a participation in the infinite Distance and Distinction with the Trinity. Like all love stems from divine Love, our very distinction from one another as creatures stems from the distance between the Persons of the Trinity. This effusion of both unity and distance allows us to engage seriously in God’s immanence without collapsing into pantheism, as well as God’s transcendence without drifting into deism. It is the playing out of Heraclitian tension on the metaphysical scale—the centripetal meeting and centrifugal holding of Alpha and Omega into their sustained orbit. This is the eternal erotic ecstasy sung out in the Song of Songs.

Notes on Translation: The translation used in this thesis is my own, done under the careful supervision of my Hebrew Professor, Dr. Rebecca Abts Wright. Consultation with other translators will be indicated by footnotes, however, for the most part I have simply allowed perplexing passages to dwell in their perplexity. If anything, it is the misty nature of the Song that recommends it for Trinitarian playfulness. The lefthand column is a very wooden translation that clings tightly to the Hebrew text, even at the expense of English grammar. Second person plurals will be indicated by Southern colloquial “y’all.” This gives some insight into the enigmatic rhythm of the text, which at times feels more like spinning around in an art gallery, with images being blurred at a glance, disappearing then reappearing, rather than rigorously following a narrative arc. The righthand column takes more poetic liberty to try and communicate the essence of the Song to an English-speaking audience.

³⁰⁴ Balthasar, 323.

Notes on the Commentary: The commentary will be interspersed after relevant verses. Verses will be indicated by numbers and bold italics, while my commentary will be set off by bullet points and in plain font. Echoes of the same or similar concepts will not be commented upon repeatedly but should be considered to hold up throughout. Many verses will go uncommented upon, as I will focus my attention on verses that would seem to complicate, contradict, or add insight to a Trinitarian interpretation.

Chapter 1

1. Song of the songs which is of Solomon.

1. The song of songs, for Solomon.

- I translate the ל as “to” or “for”, suggesting that the work is directed at Solomon, rather than written by him. Here we have the book’s title and dedication. The Song proper begins in verse 2.

2. He will kiss me from kisses of his mouth, for good is your love from wine.

2. Let him kiss me, touching me—his mouth to mine. For your love is better than wine.

- We might consider Bernard of Clairvaux’s interpretation of the opening kiss as occurring between the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit being the kiss shared between them.³⁰⁵
- The Song begins with a summons, indicating the absence of the lover. We see something here of the Distance within the Trinity, as described by Balthasar. The very concept of “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity” requires a certain paradox of distance and proximity if we are to understand the credal description “neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance.”³⁰⁶ While the lover is not currently present, the beloved remembers him vividly—his taste and scent. This intense remembering brings him into presence. Thus, the song begins with an act of *anamnesis*.

3. For the scent of the oils of you is good, oil she will pour out, oil of you. Therefore, maidens love you.

3. For the scent of your cologne is pleasure, it pours forth your fragrance, and thus the maidens love you.

- Gregory of Nyssa likens the “ointment” to the Holy Spirit.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,” 25.

³⁰⁶ “The Creed of Saint Athanasius,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 864.

³⁰⁷ Quoted in DelCoglian, 119.

4. Draw me after you, let us run; he, the King, will cause me to enter his chamber. Let us rejoice and be glad with you. Let us cause to be remembered*, your love from wine, from songs—they love you.

4. Draw me after you, let us make haste! The King will bring me into his chamber. Let us rejoice together and make merry. Let us memorialize* tonight with wine and songs—they revere you.

- *The verb is in the Hifil, the causal stem. To “cause to be remembered” has overtones of Eucharistic memorial, anamnesis. Within the Eucharist, we call upon the Father to “sanctify [the bread and wine] by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son.”³⁰⁸ “The King” is especially suggestive of the Father, but all three persons can be seen to be alluded to here.

5. Black I am and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem. Like the tents of Kadar, like the awe of Solomon.

5. I am dark and dazzling, daughters of Jerusalem. As the tents of Kadar, as the splendor of Solomon.

- The mystical tradition often speaks of the “bright darkness or dazzling darkness” of God. Sarah Coakley describes this as the “apophatic turn, a principled commitment to divine mystery and unknowability.”³⁰⁹

6. Do not see me, I who am blackened, I whom you burned, the sun. The sons of my mother were angry with me. They glowed with anger at me. They strove me, watching the gardens. My garden, which is mine, I have not watched.

6. Do not look upon me, I, whom am blackened, whom you burned, oh sun. My brethren were angry with me—they burned with anger against me. They drove me to keep their gardens, so that my own garden I could not tend.

- The question of God’s suffering is a controversial one, in which Balthasar seeks to rigorously balance the concept: “[we must employ] a negative theology that excludes from God all intra-mundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the possibility of such experience and suffering—up to and including its Christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God.... To think in such a way is to walk on a knife edge, it... is bound to say that something happens in God that not only justifies the possibility and actual occurrence of all suffering in the world but also justifies God in sharing the latter, in which he goes to the length of vicariously taking on man’s God-lessness.”³¹⁰ Here, as in the latter passage in which the beloved is beaten by the guards, may hint at the mystery of suffering within the Trinity.

7. Declare to me, to me, that love, my nephesh, alas! He will be a friend. Alas! You will cause to lie in the midday,

7. Alas, my soul, declare unto me that love: will he be a friend? Lay me down

³⁰⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, 363.

³⁰⁹ Coakley, 312.

³¹⁰ Balthasar, 324.

lest I will be like one veiled upon the flocks of your company.

at the noontide, or I will be as one veiled among the flock of your companions.

- God rested on the seventh day, ordained sabbath-taking.³¹¹ As a Trinitarian concept, we would assume that all our sabbaths stem from and participate in the Sabbath within the Godhead.

8. If you do not know, you who are beautiful among women, go out yourself in the footsteps of the sheep, and tend your goats among the families of the shepherds.

8. If you do not know that you are beautiful among women, go out among the sheep, tend your goats among the families of the shepherds.

9. For my mare in the chariots of Pharoah, I will compare you, I shepherded.

9. For you are like a mare, whom I have tended among Pharoah's chariots.

10. They are fitting: your cheeks with ringlets, your neck with strings of pearls.

10. The ringlets upon your cheeks, the pearls strung upon your neck—how they suit you.

11. Ringlets of gold we will make for you, with the studs of silver.

11. For you we will fashion ringlets of gold studded with silver.

12. As far as the king who is on his divan, my nard he gave his fragrance.

12. As for the king upon his divan, he is perfumed with my nard.

- Scholars have debated whether the lover, who appears to be a shepherd, and the king are one in the same or two separate characters. From verses 8-12 it is difficult to say. The Song's blurring of boundaries has been well established. While the Persons of the Trinity are neither confounded nor divided within the Trinity itself, it is certainly fair to say that *we* are constantly confounded when attempting to understand the Trinity, lapsing into modalism, Arianism, and/or partialism.³¹² If we consider the figure of King David, the boundary between shepherd and king are not so absolute. There need be no contradiction between "Christ the King" and the "Good Shepherd."

13. The bag of myrrh. My love for me will abide between my breasts.

13. To me, my love is like a bundle of myrrh lodging between my breasts.

14. The cluster of henna flower is my love to me, in the garden of the spring of the little goat.

14. To me, my love is a cluster henna flowers in the gardens of En Gedi.

³¹¹ Genesis 2:2-3.

³¹² Lutheran Satire, "St. Patrick's Bad Analogies," YouTube video, 3:49, March 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>.

15. Behold you are beautiful, my friend; Behold you are beautiful, your eyes are doves.

15. Behold how beautiful you are, my darling, behold your eyes are beautiful doves.

- Gregory of Nyssa makes a beautiful exposition on this verse in which the eyes that are doves are the mirroring of the Holy Spirit in the eyes of the human beloved who gazes upon him.³¹³ For our reading, this would be the reflecting gaze of Father and/or Son as they gaze upon the Spirit.

16. Behold you are beautiful, my love, yet lovely, yet our bed is green.

16. Behold you are beautiful, my love—more than loveliness itself. Our bed is lush.

17. The rafters of our house are cedar; our beams are beams of fir.

17. Our house is of cedar beams, our rafters are rafters of cypress.

- The wood used in building the Temple was cedar.³¹⁴ This invokes images of the *Shekinah*, the presence of God.

Chapter 2

1. I am the lily of Sharon, the lily of the valleys.

1. I am a flower of Sharon, the lily of the valley.

2. Like a lily among the thorns, so is my friend among the daughters.

2. As a lily amidst the thorns, so is my dearest among the daughters.

- Here we see a Christological image, the Son incarnate whose head was literally encircled with thorns.

3. Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my love among the sons. And I dwell in his shadow, his fruit is sweetness to my palate.

3. As an apple tree amidst the trees of the forest, so is my love among the sons; I dwell in his shadow with delight, for his fruit is sweetness on my tongue.

4. He caused me to come to the house of the wine. And his banner upon me is love.

4. He led me to the winehouse, his banner upon me is love.

5. Y'all support me with cakes, y'all refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.

5. Sustain me, all of you, with cakes and revive me with apples, for I am swooning with love.

³¹³ Quoted in Cain, 38.

³¹⁴ 1 Kings 6:9-36.

- Levinas’s “pathos of voluptuousness” could apply here, with its intensity of longing. While for the finite lovers such longing may constitute a sense of suffering, within the Infinite Trinity, it may closer resemble Levinas’s “suffering without suffering, it is consoled already... a suffering transformed into happiness.”³¹⁵ Thus their impassioned longing is always already fulfilled within the Eternal. Rather than God’s impassability, that is, God’s inability to experience passion, we might consider that God is omni-passionate, the source of all holy passion. This would require a redefining of our notions of typical human passions, which are often fleeting, capricious, and violent. Much like human lust is a perversion of right-ordered divine Eros, suffering passion, with all its grasping and desire to control, possess, and consume, would be a perversion of divine Passion, which would not be subject to such mutability.

6. His left hand under my head, and his right hand will embrace me.

6. His left hand cradles my head, and his right hand will embrace me.

7. I will bind y’all with an oath, daughters of Jerusalem, with the gazelles, with the does of the field if you rouse and if you excite the love until she desires.

7. Swear to me, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and roes of the field, do not rouse love until it so desires.

8. Behold, the voice of my beloved which comes leaping upon the mountains, springing upon the heights.

8. Behold! The voice of my beloved! It comes leaping upon the mountains! Springing upon the hills!

- The “leaping” of the beloved’s voice plays with sensory experience of sound. At Sinai, the people “saw the voice” of thunder, which the rabbis interpret as the voice of God. In Trinitarian thought this would most likely refer to the Father.

9. My beloved is resembling a gazelle or a young deer of the bucks. Behold, he is standing behind our wall, gazing out from the windows, looking from the lattice.

9. My beloved yet resembles a gazelle or a young buck. Behold him standing behind our wall, gazing out from the windows, watching from the lattice.

- The speaker here is typically assumed to be the masculine lover summoning the feminine beloved. This is a role reversal from most of the Song, in which it is usually the feminine beloved who goes about seeking the masculine lover (which is itself a role-reversal from typically assumed gender roles). In Sarah Coakley’s work on Trinitarian Theology, she speaks of the receptiveness of the Father, who is traditionally thought of as the giver or source: “...we would also need to speak of the Father’s own reception back of his status as ‘source’ from the other two ‘persons,’ precisely via the Spirit’s reflexive propulsion and the Son’s creative

³¹⁵ Levinas, 259.

effulgence. Here, in divinity, then, is a ‘source’ of love unlike any other, giving and receiving and ecstatically deflecting, ever and always.”³¹⁶

10. My beloved answered said to me, “Arise to you, my beautiful friend, to walk to you.”

10. My beloved answered me, saying, “Arise, my beautiful one, go!”

11. For behold the winter, the winter has passed, the rain has passed away to go to him (walked itself).

11. For behold, the winter of winters has passed. The rain has hastened past. Go to him!

12. The blossoms appear in the land, the time of pruning has arrived, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

12. The earth has blossomed, the time for singing has arrived, for the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

13. The fig-tree³¹⁷ has ripened its unripe figs, and the vines [are in] blossom, they give fragrance. Arise, walk my beautiful friend, go.

13. The fig tree has ripened its green figs, and the vines blossom, giving fragrance. Arise, my beautiful friend, and go. Go!

- The vision in Ezekiel 47 describes the fruit trees that are downstream from the Temple. Because the trees are watered by river from the Temple, they never wither nor fail to have fruit, but give fresh fruit every month, with the promise of feeding and healing. The Temple reference invokes images of the *Shekinah*, the divine presence of God on earth.

14. My dove is in the cleft of the rock, in a shelter in the height. Show yourself, for the sight of you caused me to hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and the sight of you is lovely.

14. My dove is in the cleft of the rock, in a high shelter. Reveal yourself. Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and the sight of you is lovely.

15. Grasp for us the foxes, the little foxes are destroying our gardens, and our gardens in bloom.

15. Catch the foxes! Those little foxes that are destroying our gardens, when our gardens are in bloom.

- The most obvious garden referent would be to Eden. In which case, the little foxes spoiling it would be the humans at the Fall. Note that the text does not mention the destruction of the foxes, but “catching” them up (אָפּהאַנגן) “to” or “for us” (לָנוּ). This “grasping” or “catching” of humanity is exactly what happened in the incarnation when the Son did not count equality with God “something to be

³¹⁶ Coakley, 333.

³¹⁷ The root תִּאָנַח is similar to תִּאָנַח “copulation.”

grasped, but emptied himself.”³¹⁸ At the Ascension, that humanity was fully caught up with Christ into the Godhead.

16. My beloved for me and I am for him, the delighting in the lilies. *16. My beloved is mine and I am his, delighting in the lilies.*

- Again, we see the complete giving over that occurs within the Trinity which leads to no diminishment of the persons. Per Balthasar: “The Father, in uttering and surrendering himself without reserve, does not lose himself. He does not extinguish himself by self-giving, just as he does not keep anything back from himself either.”³¹⁹ While in this verse the one gives herself to another so as to completely be his, she nevertheless maintains enough structural integrity of personhood to also claim him as “mine.”

17. At the breath of the day and the shadows escape, surround. Compare you, my love, to a gazelle or a young deer of the rams upon the Mountains of Bather. *17. At the cool of the day, when the shadows escape, gather around. My love resembles a young gazelle or a buck among the rams upon the Mountains of Bather.*

Chapter 3

<p><i>1. Upon my bed in the evenings, I searched for that beloved of my nephesh. I searched for him and I found him not.</i></p> <p><i>2. I will arise now, and I will go around in the city, in the streets, and in the plazas. I will search for that beloved of my nephesh. I searched for him and I found him not.</i></p> <p><i>3. They found me, the watchers making rounds in the city that love of my nephesh y'all saw.</i></p> <p><i>4. A little [after] I passed from them, until whom I found that love of my nephesh, I grasped him, and will not desist until that I have brought him to the house of my mother and to the chamber of my conception.</i></p>	<p><i>1. In the evening I searched for he whom my very being loves; I sought him, but I found him not.</i></p> <p><i>2. Pray, let me arise, and I will make rounds in the city, the streets, the plazas. I will seek the one I love with all my being. I searched for him, yet I found him not.</i></p> <p><i>3. They found me, the watchmen making rounds in the city. My beloved... you have seen him.</i></p> <p><i>4. Upon my passing them by, I found the one whom my very being loves! I cleave to him and will not let us tarry until I have brought him to the house of my mother, to the chamber where I was conceived.</i></p>
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³¹⁸ Philippians 2:6.

³¹⁹ Balthasar, 325.

- In verses 1-4 the theme of separation, seeking and finding, which is present throughout the Song, is elaborated most clearly. Here we clearly glimpse the distance and ‘Otherness’ between the Persons, which Balthasar calls the “infinite distinction between Father and Son.”³²⁰ Mayra Rivera describes the dynamic as play of Otherness with transcendent relationships, “irreducible difference [is an] elusive mystery in the whole body of the Other. The Other is not merely one who summons and judges, but incites feelings of wonder, that preserves the difference necessary for the unfolding of desire.”³²¹

5. I will make you all swear, daughters of Jerusalem, among the gazelles or among the does of the field, if y’all will awaken and if y’all will arouse the time of love until she is pleasing.

5. I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the field, should you waken or stir up love before its proper time.

6. Who [is] this going up from the desert, like pillars of smoke, kindling of myrrh and frankincense, from all of the dust going about as a trader?

6. Who is this going up from the desert? Going about like a merchant, seeming like pillars of smoke, kindling myrrh and frankincense, a fragrant dust.

- In the book of Exodus, pillars of cloud indicate God’s presence, the *Shekinah*, or Holy Spirit.³²² Frankincense, reserved for temple use, is also redolent of God’s presence.

7. Behold, his divan this is for Solomon, sixty strong surrounding it, the strong ones of Israel.

7. Behold, Solomon’s divan—around it, sixty strong—the mighty ones of Israel.

8. All of them grasping sword, trained-in-war man, his sword upon his thigh out of fear of the nights.

8. Every sword in hand, each man trained in warcraft, his sword upon his thigh, out of dreadful nights.

9. He made for himself a sedan [fancy chariot], King Solomon, from the trees of Lebanon.

9. King Solomon has made for himself a sedan from the trees of Lebanon.

10. He made his pillar of silver, his couch of gold, his chariot seat of purple cloth, his middle was arranging love from the daughters of Jerusalem.

10. Its pillars he made of silver, its couch of gold, its chariot seat of purple cloth, its center was arranged with leather from the daughters of Jerusalem.

11. Go forth and see, daughters of Zion, with the King, Solomon, with the crown,

11. Go forth, daughters of Zion, and see the King, Solomon, wearing the crown

³²⁰ Balthasar, 326.

³²¹ Rivera, 97.

³²² Exodus 13:20-22.

that she crowned him with, his mother, on the day of his marriage and on the day of the festival of his heart.

with which his mother crowned him on the day of his marriage, the festal day of his heart.

Chapter 4

1. Behold you are beautiful, my friend, behold you are beautiful. Your eyes are of doves. From a distance for your veil, your hair [is] like a flock of she-goats that are lying down from the mountain of Gilead.

1. Behold you are beautiful, my friend, behold you are beautiful. Yours are the eyes of doves. Behind your veil, your hair is like a flock of goats lying upon the mountain of Gilead.

2. Your teeth are like a flock of goats, the ones being sheared which are going up from the washing. All of them being twinned, there is no bereavement in them.

2. Your teeth are like a flock of goats, sheared and going up from washing. Each is twinned, without loss among them.

3. Like a thread of scarlet [are] your lips, and your mouth [is] lovely. Like a piece of pomegranate [is] your cheeks, behind your veil.

3. Your lips are like scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Behind your veil, your cheek is like a piece of pomegranate.

4. Like the tower of David is your neck, being built as a terrace for a thousand shields, mounting up all of the shields of the mighty ones.

4. Your neck is like the tower of David, built as a terrace mounting all the shields of the mighty—a thousand shields strong.

5. Your two breasts are like two young deer, twins of gazelles shepherding among the lilies.

5. Your breasts are like two young deer, twin gazelles grazing among the lilies.

6. Until the day cools and the shadows flee, I will walk to the mountains of myrrh and to the heights of frankincense.

6. At the cool of the day, when the shadows flee, I will go to the myrrh mountains and frankincense hills.

7. Your perfection is beautiful, my friend. There is no blemish in you.

7. Your beauty is perfect, my friend. In you there is no blemish.

8. With me is bride from Lebanon. From Lebanon you will come. You will travel from the head of Amanah, from the head of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions and from the mountains of leopards.

8. To me, bride of Lebanon! From Lebanon you will come—you will travel from the top of Amanah, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from lions' dens and the leopards' mountains.

9. You have bewitched me, my sister; bride, you have bewitched me. With one of your eyes, with one necklace from your neck-chains.

9. You have me entranced, my sister, bride, you have entranced me with one glance from your eyes, with but one strand of your necklaces.

10. How beautiful are your loves, my sister; Bride, how pleasing are your loves from wine, and the scent of your oils from all of spices.

10. Your affections, how beautiful they are, my sister, bride, your affections give more pleasure than wine, the scent of your perfume surpasses that of all spices.

11. Your lips will drip honey, Bride; honey and milk are under your tongue, and the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.

11. Your lips shall drip honey, Bride, milk and honey under your tongue, and the garments shall be scented like the fragrance of Lebanon.

12. The garden was locked⁺, my sister; Bride, the well has been locked⁺, hidden from my eyes⁺.³²³

12. The garden was secured, my sister, Bride, the well has been fastened, ever-hidden from my eyes.

13. Your sprouts [are] a paradise of pomegranates with fruit of choicest fruit, like fruits with fragrant grasses.

13. Your buds are a pomegranate's paradise, with choicest fruit, fruit with nard.

14. Nard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all of the woods of frankincense, myrrh, and aloe-wood, with all of the heads of Balsam-scent.

14. Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all manner of wood: frankincense, myrrh, aloe-wood, and fragrant balsam.

15. From springs of gardens, a well of living water and flowing from Lebanon.

15. From garden springs, a well of living water is flowing from Lebanon.

16. Wake north and go south, breathe. My garden will flow its fragrance. My love will come to his garden, and he will eat the fruit of his choicest fruits.

16. Wake ye in the north and go south. Take a breath. My garden will pour fourth its fragrance. My love will come to his garden, where he will eat the choicest of fruit.

Chapter 5

1. I entered into my garden, my sister bride, I plucked off my myrrh with my balsam-scent, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk;

1. I came into my garden, my sister bride, I collected my myrrh and aromatic spices, I ate my honeycomb with honey, I drank my wine with milk. Eat, friends.

³²³ The use of participles+ here denotes ongoing action.

Eat, friends, drink and be intoxicated, my loves.

Drink, my loves, and let yourselves be drunk.

2. I [was] sleeping, but my heart waking, the voice of my beloved knocking, “Open to me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one. For my head is covered [with] mist, my locks, with drops of night.

2. I slept, but my heart was waking. The voice of my beloved knocking: “Open to me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one. For my head is soaked with mist, my hair with the night’s dew.

3. I stripped my tunic. How will I put it on? I washed my feet. How will I soil them?

3. I had stripped my garment. Shall I don it? I had washed my feet. Shall I soil them?

4. My love sent his hand from the hole of his bowels and they murmured upon him.

4. My love clenched his belly, for his bowels wrenched.

5. I rose to open for my love, and my hands, they dripped myrrh, and my fingers myrrh, palms passing over upon the lock.

5. I rose to open to my love, my hands and fingers dripped myrrh, my palms pressing upon the lock.

6. I opened to my love, and my love went away, he passed over; my nephesh went out at his speaking. I sought him and found him not, I called him and he did not answer me.

6. I opened up to my love, but my love had gone, scurried off. My mind reeled at his words. I sought him but did not find him. I called to him, but he did not answer me.

7. They found me, the watchers, the circling ones in the city, they beat me, they wounded me. And they lifted my garment from me, keeping watch of the wall.

7. The watchmen making rounds in the city found me, they beat me and wounded me. They took my garment from me, the sentries of the wall.

- Verses 2-7 are another instance of separation and distance, probably the most acute of the Song. This sounds similar to Balthasar’s understanding of the separation within the Trinity: “God the Father can give his divinity away in such a manner that it is not merely ‘lent’ to the Son: the Son’s possession of it is ‘equally substantial.’ This implies such an incomprehensible and unique ‘separation’ of God from himself that it *includes* and ground every other separation—be it never to dark and bitter.”³²⁴
- We addressed the question of suffering within the Trinity above, and we see it here more acutely. More specifically, verse 7 is familiar to Christ’s passion in which he was beaten, wounded, and stripped of his garments.

³²⁴ Balthasar, 325.

8. I make y'all swear, Daughters of Jerusalem: If y'all find my love, what you will declare to him, that I am weak with love.

9. How is your love [different] from lovers, beautiful among women? How is your love [different] from lovers, that thus you will cause us to swear?³²⁵

10. My love is dazzling and red-cheeked, being distinguished from the great ones.

11. His head is fine gold, pure gold, his locks of hair are black like the raven.

12. His eyes like doves upon the streams of the waters, being washed with milk, sitting upon settings.

13. His cheeks like garden beds, the fragrance of flower banks from his cheeks, his lips lilies, dripping with myrrh passing over.

14. His hands cylinders of gold, being filled with topaz; his belly a plate of ivory being covered [with] sapphires.

15. His legs standing alabaster being founded upon a foundation of pure gold, a vision of him like Lebanon, being chosen cedars.

16. His mouth becoming sweet and all of his desiring; this my love and this my friend, Daughters of Jerusalem.

8. Swear it to me, Daughters of Jerusalem: if you find my beloved, declare to him, that I am weak with love.

9. How does your love differ from other lovers, fairest of women? How does your love differ from other lovers, that you bid us to swear?

10. My love is dazzling and ruddy, more illustrious than the nobles.

11. His head is fine gold, purely refined gold; the locks of his hair are black as the raven.

12. His eyes are like doves upon steams of waters, having been washed in milk, lodged in their settings.

13. His cheeks are like garden beds scented of flowers, his lips are lilies, dripping with myrrh trickling down them.

14. His hands are reems of gold, filled with topaz; his abdomen is a plate of ivory covered with sapphires.

15. His legs are chiseled like alabaster, founded upon a pedestal of pure gold, a vision of him, like the choicest cedars of Lebanon.

16. His mouth is sweetness, all that he is stirs desire; this is my beloved and my friend, Daughters of Jerusalem.

Chapter 6

1. Where did your love go, beautiful among the women?; Where did your love turn? And we will seek him with you.

1. Where did your beloved go, fairest of women? Whence did your love turn? We will seek him with you.

³²⁵ Referenced the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh to help me clarify this translation.

2. My love came down to his garden, to garden terraces of the balsam tree; in order to tend in the gardens, in order to gather lilies.

3. I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me, the one tending among the lilies.

4. You are beautiful, my friend, like Tirzah, comely like Jerusalem, formidable as the setting up of banners.

5. Turn your eyes before me, those which excite me; your hair is like a flock of goats that are going down out of Gilead.

6. Your teeth are a flock of ewes that went up from the washing; being paired, and childlessness there is not in them.

7. Like a piece of pomegranate [is] your cheek from behind your veil.

8. They [are] sixty queens and eighty concubines; and maidens there is not number.

9. One, she is my dove, she is the perfect one of her mother, she is pure from her bearing; Daughters seeing her will pronounce her honorable, queens and concubines praise her.

10. Who is this one being seen like the dawn? He was beautiful as the moon, pure as the sun, terrible as the setting of banners.

11. To the garden of the nut tree will I go down to see by the green of the wadi; to see if there are blossoms on the vine, if the pomegranates had bloomed.

12. I knew not, my nephesh, the chariots of my noble people gladden me.

2. My love came down to his garden, to terraces of the balsam tree, to tend the gardens, to gather lilies.

3. I am my beloved's and he is mine, the one who tends the lilies.

4. My friend, you are beautiful like Tirzah, comely like Jerusalem, as awe-inspiring as banners raised.

5. Turn your eyes to me, how they entice me! Your hair is like a flock of goats that are descending from Gilead.

6. Your teeth are a flock of ewes freshly washed and bearing twins, there is none lost among them.

7. Cloistered in your veil, your cheek is like a slice of pomegranate.

8. There are sixty queens and eighty courtesans; and maidens innumerable.

9. She is my one dove, she is the flawless one of her mother, she was pure from birth; seeing her, daughters declare her honor, queens and courtesans acclaim her.

10. Who was this emerging like the dawn? He was as stunning as the moon, sparkling as the sun, tremendous as firmly set banners.

11. I will go down to the grove of the nut tree to watch by the verdant brook; to see if there are blossoms on the vine, whether the pomegranates have bloomed.

12. I did not know, my soul, the chariots of my noble people hearten me.

Chapter 7

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Return, return, the Shulamite, return, return and be seen in you; what will you see in the Shulamite, like a dance of the camps.</p> | <p>1. Encore! Encore, Shulamite, encore! Encore and perform; what will you watch with the Shulamite? A dance like that of armies.</p> |
| <p>2. How beautiful are your feet in the sandals, daughter of a prince; your thighs curving like an ornament, the work of the hands of an artist.</p> | <p>2. How beautiful are your feet in their sandals, prince's daughter; your thighs curve like a garland, the work of an artisan's hands.</p> |
| <p>3. Your navel is a vessel of roundness, no lack of spiced wine; your belly is a heap of wheat, drawing back among the lilies.</p> | <p>3. Your navel is a goblet, filled with wine; your abdomen a dune of wheat hedged among the lilies.</p> |
| <p>4. Two of your breasts are like two of young deer, a pair of gazelle.</p> | <p>4. Your breasts are like two young deer, a couple of gazelle.</p> |
| <p>5. Your neck is a tower of ivory; your eyes are pools in Heshbon upon the gate. Daughter of great ones, your nose is like a tower of Lebanon watching the face of Damascus.</p> | <p>5. Your neck is a tower of ivory; your eyes are pools in Heshbon upon the gate. Daughter of nobles, your nose is like the tower of Lebanon overlooking the face of Damascus.</p> |
| <p>6. Your head upon you is like Carmel, and the hair of your head like purple cloth; king being bound in your locks.</p> | <p>6. Your crown is like Mount Carmel, and your hair like purple silk; the king is ensnared by your locks.</p> |
| <p>7. What beauty? And Who? You are lovely, love in delights.</p> | <p>7. How beautiful you are! You are lovely, lovely in delights.³²⁶</p> |
| <p>8. This, your height resembles a palm tree and your breasts a cluster of grapes.</p> | <p>8. Your stature is like a palm tree and your breasts as a cluster of grapes.</p> |
| <p>9. I said, "I will go up in the tree, grasping by its twigs; and they will ??? your breasts are like a cluster of grapes of the vine, and the exhalation of your nose is like apples.</p> | <p>9. I said, "I will climb into the tree, by grasping its twigs; and your breasts are like a cluster of grapes from the vine, and the breath from your nose is like apples.</p> |
| <p>10. Your mouth is good wine, going to my love for honesty; causing to speak the speeches of sleeping.</p> | <p>10. Your mouth is a fine wine, going straight to my truest love, making him murmur as in sleep.</p> |

³²⁶ Consulted the JPS Tanakh to help me clarify this translation.

11. I am for my love and upon me is his longing.

12. Go, my love, to the field we will go out, we will pass the night in the villages.

13. We will rise early to the gardens, we will see if the vine has blossomed, the bud opened, the pomegranates bloomed; there I will give my love to you.

14. The mandrakes gave fragrance, and released upon us all of the choice fruit, new and old; My love, I concealed you.

11. I am my lover's, and he longs over me.

12. Go, my love, we shall go out to the countryside, we will pass the night among the henna flowers.

13. We will rise early to the orchards, we will see if the vine has blossomed, the bud opened, the pomegranates bloomed; there, I will give my love to you.

14. The aromas of the mandrakes wafted and showered all precious things upon us, new and also old; my love, I have cherished you.

Chapter 8

1. Who will give you as a brother to me, a child sucking at the breast of my mother; I will find you in the street, I will kiss you, yea, they will not despise me.

2. I will carry you away, I will bring you to the house of my mother, she will teach me; I will give you drink of wine that has been mixed with new wine from my pomegranates.

3. His left hand under my head, and his right hand embraces me.

4. I will bind y'all by oath, daughters of Jerusalem; what y'all waken and what y'all lay bare the love until she desires.

5. Who is this going up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I will bare myself to you, there she was in labor with you, your mother, there she was in labor, she bore you.

6. Set me like a seal upon your heart, like a seal upon your arm, for strong as death

1. Who will give you to me as a brother, a child nursing at my mother's breast? I would find you in the street, I would kiss you, yea, they would not despise me.

2. I will carry you away, I will bring you to the house of my mother, she will instruct me; I will give you wine to drink that has been mixed with new wine from my pomegranates.

3. His left hand cradles my head, and his right hand embraces me.

4. Swear to me, daughters of Jerusalem, why awaken love or disclose it before it is ready?

5. Who is this going up from the wilderness reposing upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I will bare myself to you. There your mother was in labor with you, she birthed there, she bore you.

6. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong

is love, heavy as Sheol's zeal; her flames are flames of fire, flame of God. *as death, as grave as Sheol's zeal; her flames are the flames of fire, the flame of God.*

- Per Balthasar, “‘Love is as strong as hell,’ no, it is stronger, for hell is only possible given the absolute and real separation of Father and Son.”³²⁷ Elaborating on Balthasar’s eschatological views, John Seward describes interaction between love, fire, and Sheol: “The Trinitarian God is a consuming fire, a living flame of love. When a Christian has died as the martyrs die, fully surrendering himself through Christ in the Spirit to the Father, the flame is heavenly bliss; when his surrender is real but incomplete, the flame burns to heal and purify; when the surrender is definitively rejected, when self is loved to the final contempt of God, the same fire is eternal torment.”³²⁸ Whatever one’s thoughts on heaven, purgatory, and hell, in Christian thought the ultimate destiny of death remains the same. God, through the Son’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection has utterly transformed death—it is no longer humanity’s ultimate horizon. Death has now become the gateway through which we pass to resurrection.

7. Great water cannot quench love, and steams cannot wash her away; if a man gives all of the wealth of his house in love, they despising despise him. *7. Boundless water cannot quench love, and steams cannot wash it away; if a man gives all the wealth of his house for love, they will utterly despise him.*

- This may reference the waters of chaos which were drawn back at creation and unleashed to cause the Flood. Again, this references the Trinity’s role in salvation.

8. Our sister is small and without her breasts; what will we do for our sister on the day that he will be spoken with her? *8. Our sister is small, a maid; what will we do for our sister on the day that she is spoken for?*

9. If we will build upon encampments of silver; and if we will form a door upon planks of cedar. *9. What if we build a wall of silver around her, and if we confine her with a door of cedar planks?*

10. I am a chaste maiden, and my breasts like banks of flowers, then I will be in his eyes like the finding of complete. *10. I am a chaste maiden, and my breasts are like flower banks, so in his eyes I will be found whole.*

11. An orchard was for Solomon in Baal Hamon³²⁹ he gave the orchard to the *11. Solomon’s orchard was in Baal Hamon, he gave the orchard to the*

³²⁷ Balthasar, 325.

³²⁸ John Seward, *The Mysteries of March: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Incarnation and Easter* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 125.

³²⁹ Literally, “Lord of tumult.” Rabbi Ellen Bernstein translates it as “Lord of money.” Bernstein, 130.

keepers; a man will bring with his fruit a thousand silver. *keepers; a man would give a thousand pieces of silver for his fruit.*

12. My orchard before; the one thousand is for you, Solomon, and two hundred for guarding his fruit. *12. My orchard is before me; Solomon has a thousand. Two hundred are guarding his fruit.*

- If, as Ellen Bernstein suggests, this is a criticism of Solomon's excesses, the contrast between Solomon's lavish gardens and the beloved's garden (her body), this may suggest something about the economy of the Kingdom, an economy that values widow's mites and mustard seeds. The kings of this world may have thousands, even billions. Their excess pales in comparison with the divine One.

13. The ones sitting in the gardens, communities harkening to your voice, make me heard. *13. Growers, communities who hearken to your voice, make me heard.*

14. Make haste, my love, and resemble a gazelle or young deer, the stags upon mountains of balsam trees. *14. Go forth, my love! Be as the gazelle or young stags among the mountain balsam.*

- Again, we return to the theme of departure and distance. In his work on desire and theology, Gerard Loughlin, describes the paradox of "Trinitarian *Excursus*" in which "the Father is always arriving because always departing, as also Christ, who departs in order to return. 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.'"³³⁰ Throughout the Song of Songs we see not only departure and reunion, but the blurring of the two.

An End and a Beginning: If the Song began with a summons, it ends with a dismissal, the conclusion to the *Misa*, the close of the Mass: "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you..."³³¹ Thus the lovers end exactly where they began, apart for a time, returning once again to the longing of "Let him kiss me..." The last verse brings us back to the first.³³² The Song is an unending loop, going from a "beginning without a beginning" to an ending without an

³³⁰ Loughlin, 17.

³³¹ "The Holy Eucharist: Rite Two," *Book of Common Prayer*, 366.

³³² Exum, 45.

ending.³³³ It is often observed that the Song begins *in media res*. It seems to end that way as well, a convergence of alpha, omega, and all the alphabet in between.

The idea of the Song of Songs played on repeat has a satisfying symmetry to it, and we could conclude here easily enough. But I have one last proposal to make that feels both risky and worth considering. I suspect that between Song 8:14 and Song 1:2 there is a bridge that occurs in the midst of the Song's loop. Church Fathers, Origen among them, believed that God made the world through an immense erotic outpouring at the beginning of time.³³⁴ On that note, there is another book of scripture that begins *in media res*, in the middle of a sentence, in fact:

:בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.³³⁵

In his own musings on creation, Balthasar maintains, "...any world only has its place within that distinction between Father and Son that is maintained and bridged by the Holy Spirit. The drama of the Trinity lasts forever... it is nonsense to imagine a point of time within infinity when the triune God decides to create a world."³³⁶ If, then, this Trinitarian love song has a bridge, it must start something like this: "יְהִי אֹרֶךְ —Let there be Light!"

Conclusion: In this chapter, which will conclude the overall thesis, we have explored the Song of Songs as an erotic love song that takes place within the Trinity. I do not posit that this is the only, or even the best way to read the Song of Songs, but that it is a new lens to add yet one more layer on the Bible's most veiled and unveiled book. Like the Trinity itself, scholars and theologians will never manage to resolve the mysteries of the Song of Song—thanks be to God. The Song is no mere academic riddle to be solved.

³³³ Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted in Pardes, 101; Carr, 137; Exum 12, 41.

³³⁴ Carr, 142.

³³⁵ Genesis 1:1.

³³⁶ Balthasar, 327.

She is a mystery to be relished, to be delighted in for what she reveals to us and where she utterly confounds us. As a strange, strange book, she may be the best tribute we have to our strange, strange God. Encounter with the Song may well leave us a little strange as well. In our journey through the ages of Song interpretation, many things have been said about the Song—she clearly is/is not about sex, she clearly is/is not about the divine, she clearly is/is not about ecclesiology, missiology, creation, feminism, queer love, the Trinity. Truly, there is little that can be said about the Song without controversy—certainty is not one of the gifts she affords her lovers. So much like the Song itself, this thesis can only end where it began... The Song of Songs is a strange, strange book. For millennia it has intrigued, mystified, and seduced interpreters, scholars, and the faithful.

Amen.

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