The Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon, or Canticles) is ancient Israel’s contribution to the literature of love. If it were not for the fact that this sequence of ancient Hebrew erotic love poems was preserved in Scripture, one might be given to believe that Israel, among all peoples, wrote no love poetry. But the Song of Songs was included as part of the biblical canon and so was saved from the oblivion suffered by other ancient Hebrew literature, since nearly all writings from ancient Israel not preserved in the Bible simply disappeared over the course of the centuries. It seems likely that there would have been other examples of love poetry in Israel—how could there not have been?—but whether any other examples would have matched the poetic art of the Song of Songs seems less likely. For in the Song of Songs we find one of the very finest examples of ancient Hebrew poetry coupled with a distinctive vision of the nature of love.
Although the superscription to the book, “The Song of Songs which is Solomon’s,” associates it with King Solomon (who lived in the tenth century B.C.E.), the language of the poetry represents a much later form of Hebrew, making clear that Solomon is not the author. The poems were probably written between the fifth and third centuries B.C.E., and their author or authors are anonymous. Although many scholars treat the book as an anthology of short poems by different hands, a strong consistency of diction, theme, voice, and poetic technique suggests a single author behind most of the poetry. The book became associated with Solomon perhaps because of his dual reputation as both an extravagant lover of women (1 Kings 11:1-3) and a prolific composer of poetry (1 Kings 4:32).
There is a long history, among both Jewish and Christian commentators, of reading the Song of Songs as if it were a theological treatise and a significantly shorter history, among biblical scholars, of reading it as if it were a treatise on love or sexuality, but the book is neither: the Song of Songs is not a treatise of any sort, but is rather lyrical poetry. Indeed, the Song of Songs is arguably one of the highest achievements of ancient Hebrew poetry, and to do it justice means to read it as poetry, rather than turning it into something it is not.

In reading and appreciating the Song of Songs we should not look for information about or a representation of God’s relationship to Israel (it is not theology), nor should we look for a story with plot and real characters (it is not narrative), and neither should we look for explicit reflection on the
sources and nature of love (it is not philosophy). Rather, to appreciate fully the Song of Songs requires that one pay close attention to its poetic art, including the structure of both individual lines and larger poems, word-choice, sound-play, metaphor, tone, and voice. Some of these elements, most especially sound-play, are less obvious or even unavailable in translation, but one can still get a very strong sense of how the Song of Songs works as poetry even in translation.

Like nearly all ancient Hebrew poetry, the Song of Songs makes primary use of short “parallel” lines, which mostly occur in a couplet form with the second line often heightening emotionally, making more concrete, or otherwise modifying the first; occasionally a third line is added to complement or extend the image or metaphor. Thus, to the two classically parallel lines in 6:4, “You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, / comely as Jerusalem,” is added a third line, “terrible as an army with ban-
ners” (NRSV). Elsewhere the poetry of the Song of Songs exhibits a greater freedom than most ancient Hebrew poetry in relating the parallel lines. In 2:2, for example, as a male voice describes his female lover, the poet pairs a simile in the first line with its referent in the second: “As a lily among brambles, / so is my love among maidens.” Part of the task—and the fun—of reading and interpreting the poetry of the Song of Songs is to ponder and to try to work out the relationship between the lines.

The book alternates between a male and a female voice, with occasional interruptions by a female group voice (e.g., 5:9; 6:1) and a male group voice (e.g., 8:8-9). The primary male and female voices represent two young, apparently unmarried lovers, who spend most of the poem expressing their erotic yearnings and describing each other’s physical attractions in lush, sometimes hyperbolic imagery. Thus, a quote from the male voice: “Your breasts are like
two fawns, / twins of a gazelle, / that feed among the lilies. // Until the day breathes / and the shadows flee, // I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh / and the hill of frankincense” (4:5-6). And from the female voice in 2:3: “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, / so is my beloved among young men. // With great delight I sit in his shadow, / and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” As these quotes indicate, much of the poetic imagery is drawn from the natural world, and it often seems to contain double entendres (e.g., “his fruit was sweet to my taste”; or “Let my beloved come to his garden, / and eat its choicest fruits” [4:16]). But even though the poetry is frankly erotic, it is never graphic or crassly explicit, preferring to rely on suggestion and metaphor to convey its erotic charge.

Despite the presence of alternating voices, the poetry is not fundamentally dramatic—there is no overarching plot, and little narrative development—but rather remains squarely within the realm
of lyric, a form of poetry that works with anonymous voices or personae rather than attempting to represent full-blooded, identifiable characters. And one should not mistake the poetic voices of the young speakers as representing the real voices of ancient Israelite adolescents. No, clearly this is the language of a master poet who has chosen to represent what it is like to be young and in love by inventing the voices of two speakers who are young and in love. It is not unlike Shakespeare putting his highly polished poetry into the mouths of Romeo and Juliet. Teenagers, whether in Shakespeare’s day or in ancient Israel, did not speak this way, no matter how in love they might have been.

**Love in the Song of Songs**

One striking consequence of the alternation of female and male voices in the Song of Songs is an underscoring of the egalitarian nature of erotic love with
regard to gender roles. The intermingling of voices works against the gender stereotypes that would assign the active role of “lover” to the man and the passive role of “beloved” to the woman. The two voices are given roughly equal amounts of space in the book. Each describes the body of the other, and each expresses the desire they feel for the other. This mutuality is exhibited also in the range of imagery with which the lovers are imagined: both lovers (not just the young woman) are associated with the beauty and grace of doves, lilies, and fawns or gazelles; and both lovers (not just the young man) are described in terms of power and strength, the man being associated with marble columns and cedar trees (5:15) and the woman with ramparts and towers (8:10).

The poetry of the Song of Songs is, for the most part, a positive celebration of the pleasures of erotic love. Yet it does acknowledge, if only briefly, the dangers of Eros—not only those
dangers that arise from outside the erotic relationship and threaten the young lovers, but also those dangers that are inherent to the nature of Eros itself. With regard to the former, see especially 5:2-8, where the young woman imagines herself wandering the streets at night searching for her lover, only to be met and beaten by the “sentinels of the walls.” With regard to the latter, see 8:6: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, / as a seal upon your arm; // for love is strong as death, / passion fierce as the grave. // Its flashes are flashes of fire, / a raging flame.” Though thoroughly rooted in the body, Eros here takes on near-cosmic dimensions. The language of the body, elsewhere in the Song of Songs so positive, teeters in this instance on the brink of obsession.

The comparison of love to death gives us a chance to think about how important metaphor is to the poet’s presentation of the nature of love, and how metaphor and other figurative
language differ from straightforward theological or philosophical assertion. The way metaphor (or to be more precise in this case, simile) tends to work is to generate multiple possible meanings. In what does the hardness of passion consist? How do mere sparks burst into flame? And, most centrally I think, how are we to understand the relationship between love and death? These questions are generated by the metaphorical language of the poetry, but they are not answered. Rather, the work of interpretation is left to us, and the question of what it means to say that “love is as strong as death” resists a definitive answer.

To say that the poetry resists a definitive answer is not to say, however, that we are absolved of the work of interpretation. Quite the contrary, for the function of metaphor is to force the reader to explore the possibilities of meaning-making that it provides. For example, though the verse does not say that “love is stronger than death,” it is
possible to read it this way since any force that is as strong as death is a force capable of resisting death. To take the line this way would mean to affirm that love is somehow able to pull off the impossible act of defeating time and death. Such a theme is by no means foreign to love poetry.

But it may also be that instead of taking love to be a force of resistance against death we are meant to understand love as actually being somehow like death. But how? Is it that love, like death, makes all possessions and worldly concerns moot? Or that love, like death, is inevitable: it always gets its object. Or that love, like death, is fierce and unpredictable: it gets us all, but we never know when or where. Or that love, like death, is permanent: it gets us all, sometimes when one least expects it, and once it has us it never lets us go.

Just as we do not have to choose between these possible ways (and there are no doubt others that we could think of) that love may be thought of as “as
strong as death,” so too do we not have to choose between seeing love as a force of resistance against death (a force that survives or immortalizes the lovers) and love as a force like death (a force complicit in death’s dissolution of one’s being and identity). Love, and most especially erotic love, can be and perhaps must be understood as both. On this understanding, Eros is a fierce, unpredictable, and irresistible force for destruction; it is also a fierce, unpredictable, and irresistible force for life.

**Love Poetry and God**

Given that the Song of Songs is preserved as a part of Jewish and Christian Scripture, the question is often asked, Where is God in all this? In fact, God is never mentioned in the book. Nevertheless, for centuries complex allegorical interpretations of the poetry—in which the two young lovers are taken to be ciphers for God and humanity—have prevailed. In traditional Jewish
interpretation, Israel is cast as the female lover and God as the male lover. For Christian interpreters the lovers of the biblical book are taken to refer variously to God and the church, or Christ and the individual soul, or even to Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Modern scholars have tended to dismiss these allegorical interpretations, since they so obviously do violence to the literal sense of the text. It is true that such a mode of interpretation spiritualizes the Song of Songs, and thus tames its potentially subversive role in a Bible that has so often been taken as shoring up borders and fencing in sexuality. It is also no less true that such interpretation eroticizes theological discourse, with potentially very interesting results for doing theology, especially if one is willing to imagine God as not only an object of desire but subject to its throes as well. Although it seems clear that the poetry was not written with a theological intent, it is worth pondering why later interpreters found the erotic
metaphor to be such a compelling way of talking about God and how the lyrical presentation of Eros that we find in the Song of Songs might contribute to such God-talk.

Although it is true that God is never mentioned in the Song of Songs, there are some close calls, places where the poet seems to come intentionally very near to naming God, without quite doing so. For example, in the twice-repeated oath, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, / by the gazelles or the wild does: // do not stir up or awaken love / until it is ready” (2:7; 3:5), there would seem to be a pun or word-play on two common epithets for God. “Gazelles” in Hebrew is šēbāʿōt, which puns on Yahweh šēbāʿōt, or “LORD of hosts.” And “wild does” in Hebrew is ʾayēlōt hasšādeh, which puns on ʾēl šadday, or “God Almighty.” By having her companions swear on these erotically-charged animals (gazelles and wild does are frequently associated with the goddess of love in ancient Near
Eastern iconography and inscriptions) rather than on a name or title of God, the female speaker both celebrates the natural world as a primary source for erotic symbolism and makes an indirect theological claim. The nature of this claim depends on how one construes the tone of the speaker here. It is certainly possible to take the tone as ironic and intentionally subversive of theological claims, with erotic love pointedly replacing God as ultimate referent. But it is also possible that, rather than subverting piety in favor of love, the poet is vaunting the power of love precisely by associating it with God.

We find the same ambiguity of tone with the second instance of a near-miss in naming God, found in 8:6. This famous verse represents a crescendo of sorts for the poetry, offering for the first time a second-order reflection on the nature of love, even the metaphysics of love, rather than the first person declarations and descriptions that fill the rest of the book. Here the female voice
declares: “love is strong as death, / passion fierce as the grave. // Its flashes are flashes of fire, / a raging flame.” We may note how, in a move typical of Hebrew poetry, the second term of each of the three syntactically matched pairs in the first couplet (“love/passion,” “strong/harsh,” “death/grave”) serves to intensify, specify, or concretize the first. The next couplet makes this heightening of terms even more acute with the progression from “flashes” to “fire” to “a raging flame.” In Hebrew, the final line, translated in the NRSV as “a raging flame,” is a single word, šalhebetyāh. Given the equally weighted lines that precede it and their syntactical parallelism, this abbreviated final line pulls the reader up short, causing one to pause and dwell on the effect of that “raging flame,” love. The sense of emphasis on this final line is bolstered by the occurrence here of a fragment of the divine name: –yah. The last syllable of the last word of the verse, is a shortened form of Israel’s personal
name for God, Yahweh, and serves grammatically as an intensifying particle; it is what justifies the translation “a raging flame.”

The question is whether this fragmentary allusion to God is only a grammatical intensifier, or whether it might represent a genuine, if muted, theological claim. If the latter, one still must negotiate the tone of the claim, in the same way as the punning oath in 2:7 and 3:5. Is it a theologically subversive replacement of God with erotic love, or an attempt to exalt human love by adding a poetic whiff of divinity? One need not finally decide, of course, since with poetry—unlike theology or philosophy—lack of precision is often a virtue, and the ambiguity may well be intended by the poet.

**Conclusion**

It is reported that, in the first century C.E. when Jewish religious leaders were debating the holiness of certain
ancient writings and whether or not they should be considered a part of Scripture, the great Rabbi Akiva declared that “while all the Scriptures are holy, the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” The “holy of holies” is that innermost part of the Jerusalem temple, where God’s holiness is thought to be most palpable. On the one hand, Akiva is punning, perhaps playfully, on the title of the book: the Song of Songs is the holy of holies, or in Hebrew šîr haššîrîm is qôdeš haqqôḏâšîm. But he is also making a serious statement about the importance of the Song of Songs, which is here being imagined as the Bible’s innermost sanctum. The Song of Songs is read once a year in most Jewish synagogues, as part of the Passover festival, but by all evidence it is read only rarely in Christian churches. It is interesting to imagine how different our view of the Bible might be if we took Akiva’s statement seriously and gave the Song of Songs
the sort of attention it deserves as part of Scripture.
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