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Bakhtin Reads the Song of Songs

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Abstract

If Mikhail Bakhtin were to read the Hebrew text of the Song of Songs, he would likely propose three claims in regard to it, namely: (1) the Song of Songs is an Event of Events; (2) the Song of Songs represents a Genre of Genres; and (3) the Song of Songs is an Utterance of Utterances. In this article, the Song as an 'Event of Events' will be explored within the context of the Song's variegated but quite cleanly polarized history of interpretation; the Song as representative of a 'Genre of Genres' will be treated in light of the components and attributes of its Hebrew text and structure; and the Song as an 'Utterance of Utterances' will be pursued in relation to the Song's relevance and resonance within other parts of Hebrew Scripture.

Keywords: Song of Songs, history of interpretation, allegory, Bakhtin, dialogism, genre, characterization, Isaiah.

1. The Song as an Event of Events

One of the most frustrating realities of the two-thousand-year interpretive history of the Song of Song's is an inability to penetrate its presentation to the degree that its place alongside other scriptural testimonies is beheld clearly, and its coherent and structured meaning apprehended. In generalized terms, the two most common conclusions in regard to the

Song's semantic import and canonized existence are as follows. At one end of its interpretive continuum lies the theological premise that the Song, devoid of its detail, reveals the love of God for Israel, or, alternatively, Christ's devotion to the Church.¹ Situated at the other end or pole of the Song's interpretive history is the thesis that the Song, in its most literal and surface rendering, represents a hymn of praise to human love—its pleasures, delights, and complexity.

Although both of these expressed tendencies within the Song's interpretive history grant some assurance as to the Song's proper placement within Jewish and Christian canons, one cannot help but wonder whether the 'ends' achieved by such readings justify the 'means' employed. For instance, the first position sanctifies the Song's holy status via an overarching scriptural theme of God's relationship with God's people, a move that reduces a writing that is obviously diverse, complex, and contradictory into one well-rounded and common scriptural tenet. Likewise, the second position of the Song's interpretive continuum summarizes and abstracts the Song's materials into a philosophical treatise on human love, not unlike Paul's in First Corinthians. But there can be no doubt that the Song is an incredibly difficult piece to comprehend, whether one is reading it as a part of Scripture, or a work in its own right. Bakhtin's views are sympathetic to the immense task set before the translator and interpreter of any work, and certainly apply aptly to the realities encountered when attempting to understand the Song. In his perception of the act of translating generally, Bakhtin posits the necessary preservation of a 'gap' of understanding between the text itself and the interpreter, so that

two speakers must not, and never do, completely understand each other; they must remain only partially satisfied with each other's replies, because the continuation of dialogue is in large part dependent on neither party knowing exactly what the others means. Thus true communication never makes languages sound the same, never erases boundaries, never pretends to a perfect fit... Bakhtin, in fact, compared understanding itself to a sort of obligatorily imperfect translation.²

1. Within this second 'Christ and the Church' reading is also included, on a more personal level, the soul's ardent longing for God.

2. This is a reflection on Bakhtin's thought by Caryl Emerson, a translator of Bakhtin's works from Russian into English; see Caryl Emerson, 'Preface', in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson; Introduction Wayne C. Booth; *Theory and History of Literature*, 8; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

But even if one were to accept peremptorily Bakhtin's sanctioning of a loose but accurate understanding of a complex piece such as the Song, a work imbued with as much of its own personality and individuality as one can imagine any text possessing, his entire word on the Song would not yet be heard. If both poles of interpretation regarding the Song's meaning and place within Scriptures as outlined were deemed satisfactory or persuasive on the grounds that they at least furnish a limited but practical explanation for the Song's content and existence, they fall disparagingly short of another of Bakhtin's prerequisites for true interaction with a text, namely, the importance of detail. The polarized interpretive tendencies of a theological proposition, on the one hand, and abstract treatise, on the other, are disappointingly unable to account for the varied and conspicuous elements of the Song's text itself. At such a juncture Bakhtin's concept of 'text event' presents itself as an antidote to a generalized reading of any text, and in that sense, a guardian of a writing's internal integrity, as recognized apart from any extra-textual validation imposed by external and generalized lines of thought.

Bakhtin warns cogently against collapsing the multiple dimensions, voices and complexities of a text into one single thought or plane of meaning. He addresses this in reference to the realities of 'language' where he emphasizes that every language has a multiplicity of devices for conveying meaning, and its own irreducible 'speech energy'. Bakhtin observes that although the very word 'language' is a common denominator between these individualized means of speaking, it actually escapes all relevance, for there is no singular dimension on which all these 'languages' might straight-forwardly be juxtaposed one to another.³ The multiple features of any 'text' or linguistic production, then, might be perceived similarly as owning its own multi-layered means of mediation and semantic revelation. Bakhtin indeed protects and preserves such a textual reality when he states that

Each novel presents an opposition, which is never cancelled out dialectically, of many consciousnesses, and they do not merge in the unity of an evolving spirit... Within the limits of the novel the heroes' worlds interact by means of the event, but these interrelationships... are the last thing that can be reduced to thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.⁴

3. Emerson, 'Preface', p. xxxii.

4. Bakhtin is here speaking against an Hegelian dialectical approach to literature as espoused by Engelhardt; see Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 26.

Bakhtin then announces a bulwark behind which any interpreter can remain intensely and cognitively engaged with even the most diverse and apparently inconsistent or contradictory of texts, namely, through focused, avid, and continuous attention to textual event, as well as the interrelationships between those events. A text, then, must be acknowledged as an Event of Events.

This may not be pain-free, or mentally gratifying (at least in the beginning), but it is, according to Bakhtin, the only way to approach properly and respectfully a body of text as thoroughly 'other' and completely individual as any 'language' or 'being'. The careful acknowledgment of contradiction, friction, opposition, and impasse within that all-embracing textual Event will ensure that one's steps are well-grounded and moving towards encounter with another complex and unique entity.

To be able to behold the Song as an 'Event of Events', then, involves appreciating all of its features. For instance: Exactly how many voices are speaking within the Song? Do they have genders? What genders are they? Why is there a man continually 'hieing' over the mountains? How is it that there is a man addressed consistently as 'My Beloved' throughout the work? Who are the women addressed as 'The Daughters of Jerusalem'? Who are the women addressed as 'The Maidens'? Why is the historical name 'Solomon' appearing throughout the Song? How is it that the mountains are referred to as 'The Mountains of Cutting'? Who is the woman consistently appealed to as 'O Betrothed One'? Who is the woman called repeatedly 'O Fair One'? Why are Solomon and his 'Warriors of Israel' depicted as returning from a long journey? What does their journey have to do with the acquisition of spices and an exotic bed? Why is there no woman mentioned within this party, even though the text states clearly that Solomon has just been betrothed? How is it that there are as many references to Lebanon as there are to Jerusalem within the Song? What could the phrase 'The Dance of the Double-Camped One' mean?

Surely Bakhtin would sink his mind into all of the seemingly disparate, contradictory, yet sophisticatedly developed realities within the Song; indeed, all of its intricacies would be beheld as essential, and consequential. Emerson assures that a 'close reading' of a text for Bakhtin requires astute apprehension of 'the smaller shapes: voice zones, shifts in speakers, the overlapping boundaries between various characters' fields of vision', to the degree that 'specific organization of parts and their necessary presence as part of a whole are all of secondary interest to

Bakhtin'.⁵ Emerson concludes provocatively, though aptly, that for Bakhtin, 'The larger shape might be absent, but the smaller shape is crucial'.⁶

Bakhtin's dedication to the 'smaller shapes', even in preference to or absence of a larger one, might be best qualified by his claim that truth is engendered not by the harmonization of voices within a piece, but rather a hearing of its unharmonized yet engaged polyphonic realities. The following reflection on Bakhtin's 'dialogic truth' provides much promise for one's encounter with a text as profoundly dense, variegated, and many-voiced as the Song:

[Bakhtin's] distinction between dialogic and monologic conceptions of truth is most important. Monologic truth is based on propositional statements that...are congenial to being organized into a system (e.g., the kind of truth characteristic of critical thought, philosophy, systematic theology, and much literature). Even if such propositions or systems of thought are actually the product of many minds, they can be represented as capable of being spoken by a single voice or comprehended by a single consciousness. Not so dialogic truth. It exists at the point of intersection of several unmerged voices and 'requires a plurality of consciousness...' Instead of the unity of a system, dialogic truth has the unity of an 'event', such as a conversation. To summarize a conversation is to reduce it to the unit of a proposition and so to lose the dynamic structure of its dialogic nature.⁷

When the multiplicity of smaller events is apprehended, though not necessarily understood, the larger overarching event remains alive, conversive, meaning-filled, and accessible, that is, devoid of closure and monological abstraction. For Bakhtin, an authentic and truth-bearing textual encounter cannot inhibit one plane of meaning—one dialectical synthesis. As Emerson writes, 'Bakhtin was not sympathetic to the ultimate fusion or erasing of differences. He had little use for grand nineteenth-century schemes of philosophical evolution toward a disembodied truth. For it must be remembered that for Bakhtin "dialogic" does not

5. Emerson, 'Preface', p. xxxviii.

6. Emerson, 'Preface', p. xxxviii.

7. Carol A. Newsom, 'Bakhtin', in A.K.M. Adam (ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2000), 24; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 81. Newsom has worked extensively with the Bakhtinian approach to biblical texts, particularly that of Job; see her 'Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth', *JR* 76 (1996), pp. 290-306, and 'The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text', *JSOT* 97 (2000), pp. 87-108, for Newsom's extended articulation of Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogical' as opposed to 'monological' truth, as well as this notion's consequences for a reading of Job.

mean “dialectic”.⁸ Here Emerson is addressing Bakhtin’s repulsion toward the Hegelian tendency to derive a flat unidimensional dislodged ‘premise’ from a living and breathing body of utterances and responses, hence stifling its true bearing and unique contribution. In deference to Bakhtin’s conviction of the intrinsic and irreplaceable worth of each textual component, however challenging, toward the text’s multi-faceted conveyance of meaning, an attempt will be made to read the Song as an ‘Event of Events’. If all the ‘smaller events’ are allowed to stand, perhaps the ‘Event’ of the Song’s unfused realities might be apprehended, and unique contribution heard. Such an approach to the Song is resumed further in Section 4, in tandem with a study of the lexical recurrences within its Hebrew text.

2. The Song as a Genre of Genres

Another dimension of the Song that would capture Bakhtin’s attention, and relate further to his question as to the ‘Event’ or truth being portrayed polyphonically within its telling, would be that of the Song’s genre. Origen, the first person to address explicitly this reality within the Song, deduced that the Canticle manifests the form of a marriage-song expressed through drama. Robert Lowth,⁹ who supports the ‘drama’ portion of Origen’s form-identification, employs Platonic terms to argue more specifically that the Song embodies a ‘lesser’ rather than ‘greater’ drama. Though it contains the prerequisite of dialogue which technically terms it a ‘drama’, the Song nonetheless lacks the overarching framework of a storyline which would deem it a ‘full’ or ‘complete’ drama. Roland Murphy, a proponent of the ‘human love’ thesis in regard to the Song’s meaning, concludes similarly that this piece contains dialogue which he characterizes as ‘love talk’, but no plot.¹⁰

Likewise, many scholars have provided insights regarding the specific genres represented within the various verse groupings of the Song, for instance, the common identification of the *wasf*, a poetic form employing extravagant similes and metaphors to describe a lover’s physical features—the parable, the proverb, adjuration speech, and didactic address. Bakhtin’s ease with forms of speech, and confidence in the potential of

8. Emerson, ‘Preface’, p. xxxii.

9. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (trans. G. Gregory; 2 vols.; London: J. Johnson, 1787).

10. Roland E. Murphy, ‘Form-Critical Studies in the Song of Songs’, *Int* 27 (1973), pp. 413-22 (416).

many genres co-functioning within a text, contribute significantly to both discussions; namely, the exact form displayed by the Song, and the various genres employed within the Song. Bakhtin might propose, then, that when apprehended in all its genre diversity, the Song would represent a 'Form of Forms' or 'Genre of Genres'. In the following quote Bakhtin describes admirably Dostoevsky's assemblage of various genres within one literary piece. His insights also illustrate further the cacophonous effects of acknowledging every disjointed and challenging feature of a text such as the Song. Bakhtin observes:

From the viewpoint of a consistently monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world, from the viewpoint of some monologic canon for the proper construction of novels, Dostoevsky's world may seem a chaos, and the construction of his novels some sort of conglomerate of disparate materials and incompatible principles for shaping them. Only in the light of Dostoevsky's fundamental artistic task, which we will formulate here, can one begin to understand the profound organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness of Dostoevsky's poetics.¹¹

Here Bakhtin moves from his concept of polyphonic truth, to the reality of the polyphonic novel, demonstrated especially by the works of Dostoevsky. Where Dostoevsky's brilliance lies, for Bakhtin, is in his employment of many genres within one literary piece, in service to his 'fundamental artistic task'. He describes Dostoevsky's novel as innovative and liberating in the sense that it is free from the bonds of the 'epic', where characters do obeisance to the plot line because of their labeled role, and the actions that would commonly dictate. Dostoevsky's treatment of the novel form, in contradistinction, facilitates freshness and vitality within the lives of his characters, and in the diversity of their presentation.

Just as each detail in a work quickens its semantic value, so each genre brings to light a richness of expression that adds insight and depth, and in that way, clarity, to its overall telling. Bakhtin speaks of the convergence and divergence of grammar and stylistics in 'any concrete language phenomenon', since 'the speaker's very selection of a particular grammatical form is a stylistic act'.¹² In addition to the particular vocabulary, phraseology, and grammar attributed to a character, an element of

11. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 8.

12. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern W. McGee; University of Texas Slavic Series, 8; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 67.

compositional structure now aids the reader's understanding of (and response to) the individuals presented. Rather than promoting disorientation and semantic instability within a work, the enlisting of several genres contributes to the strength and cohesion of the overarching genre, in its communication of the novel's ultimate event.

When first exposed to the Song, as with the works of Dostoevsky, one might similarly concede that it presents a 'chaotic' front of 'disparate materials'—both within the realm of complex detail, as demonstrated by the sampling of questions addressed to it earlier, and that of the variegated genres mediating its communication. That the Song contains some form of dialogical genre seems well agreed upon, but to what degree its dialogues accommodate a drama, as just reviewed, is debated. The Song employs many instances of the *wasf*'s poetic form of expression; but whether these bodily descriptions prescribe that the Song's 'fundamental artistic task' is simply to stand as an elongated depiction of human physical pleasures (as *wasf* examples from other ancient cultures profess), seems unpersuasive. Evidence of forms of marital ritual (for instance, 'My Beloved belongs to me, and I belong to him' in Song 2.16) likewise raises the question of whether the Song's uppermost 'task' is to facilitate a melding of ancient Near Eastern and Israelite wedding procedure. In light of all of the Song's other materials, this also remains unconvincing. One could exercise further whether the fact that the Song exhibits didactic addresses (for example, 'Whose is this thing [fem. sing.] coming up from the wilderness?' in 3.6; 'Whose is this one [fem. sing.] coming up from the wilderness?' in 8.5), including solemn phrases of adjuration (usually attributed to a woman), reveals consequentially that its overriding purpose lies in its didactic portrait of a virtuous woman. This has been argued, though unsuccessfully. The choosing of any one of the genres present within the Song, then, in governance of all others, inevitably invites the kind of monological abstraction of meaning Bakhtin so successfully resists. Could his own identification of Dostoevsky's novel as a 'Genre of Genres' in the sense that it incorporates coherently many speech types in deference to a singular 'artistic task', aid in apprehending the Song's fundamental purpose as conveyed through its diversity of speech?

In beginning such an endeavour it seems essential to include a corollary to Bakhtin's premise that a work's significance, properly understood, requires an acknowledgment of its every genre and detail. His accompanying claim maintains that although each individual is gifted

with a certain degree of ‘spiritual creativity’¹³ when speaking, the fundamental communicative function of language overrides the possibility of a unique and unintelligible style. Bakhtin’s clarification at this point addresses what he considers to be the improper and unfounded convictions of Saussure, a well-known Genevan linguist who ‘conceived the individual language user to be an absolute free agent with the ability to choose any words to implement a particular intention’.¹⁴ Saussure postulates restrictively that ‘language as used by heterogeneous millions of such willful subjects was unstudyable, a chaotic jungle beyond the capacity of science to domesticate’.¹⁵ Bakhtin, in clear opposition, insists that speech is not a ‘purely individual act’, since its speaker manipulates a particular ‘system of language’, which employs not only ‘forms of language’ but also ‘forms of combinations of these forms’.¹⁶ Since individual speech acts are discernable to those who share the language, there must be a limited means by which meaning can be expressed. These are the speech genres, with each form of expression directly and inextricably linked to a specific ‘sphere of communication’¹⁷ or life setting. For Bakhtin, each particular form of speech facilitated a very specific function within real life, even within real history. He terms such practical and current speaking formulations as ‘simple’ or ‘primary’ speech genres, since they pertain directly to situational needs within a language speaker’s life. ‘Secondary’ or ‘complex’ speaking genres, according to Bakhtin, represent a speech communication that is unique; namely, a combination of primary speech forms working together to accomplish a particular purpose or task. Secondary speech forms, then, are Bakhtin’s ‘Genres of Genres’.

Identifying the Song’s form as a ‘Genre of Genres’ is refreshingly illuminating. Approached in such a way, it becomes apparent that the Song absorbs and digests many communicative forms in order to facilitate its one ‘fundamental artistic task’. The appearance of several identifiable forms within it now appears less chaotic, and more traversable. Such a genre phenomenon is not different from one’s experience of various genres within Hebrew Scripture generally. For instance, when what is obviously a ‘song of a king’s anointing’ is included within a

13. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 67.

14. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. xvi.

15. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. xvi.

16. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. xvi.

17. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 60.

Psalm of Praise (Ps. 2), it no longer facilitates the physical re-enactment of this ritual or procedure associated with the ascension of an earthly king, but assists in ascribing glory to God. Its function within its earlier environment has been eclipsed, but the fact that the genre within a genre is still recognizable as an ode to majesty and sovereignty allows its event-based dynamism to be contributed to another cause or venue. If the form were no longer identifiable for what it once was, and to some degree still is, it would carry little verve, and in that sense usefulness. Likewise the didactic discourses of the Song link transitions between its scenes effectively because they are true to form and engaging, immediately catching our attention and achieving the necessary shift of attention. Further, the solemnity and conviction that inhabits the genre of adjuration speech aids admirably in rounding the ends of major discursive sections of the Song, since they require silence to process their achieved emotional impact. In the same way, the pulse-like resonances of embedded marriage ritual emerge hauntingly and unexpectedly within the Song, and their use outside of the context of an actual marriage ceremony creates an uneasy awareness that something is amiss.

Bakhtin has indeed offered an orienting premise upon which one can begin to seek an authentic understanding of the Song, even amid its many diverse genres. In reflecting upon the process of secondary genre formation, Bakhtin describes that the 'primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones', that is, 'they lose their immediate relation to actual reality'.¹⁸ The 'special character' he associates with the primary genre as it is transformed within a secondary one, likely has to do with the life-force each genre possesses within its particular life setting. When dislodged in time and space from its original life-event, the genre's singular and governing purpose is essentially transformed into a broader one, which it contributes to passively. But what is remarkable, and seems to represent the 'special character' of primary genres as noted by Bakhtin, is that when placed within the framework of a secondary genre, the simple genres still retain and contribute their original 'speech energy'.¹⁹ Though no longer fueled by their practical everyday speech function, the primary genres nonetheless

18. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 62.

19. When commenting on the links between language, life, and genre, Bakhtin remarks: 'language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well'; see Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 63.

possess a life-force. This dynamism now engages in the creative purpose and work of 'the novel as a whole', that is, in its 'literary-artistic' event.²⁰

Bakhtin opposes rightly, then, the 'vulgarization' of the relationship of primary genres to the emerging secondary and complex one. He proposes that this inevitably results when 'a one-sided orientation toward primary genres'²¹ dominates and ambiguates the 'profound organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness' of the secondary genre, which is perceivable only in light of its 'fundamental artistic task'.²² Bakhtin argues this claim admirably while addressing the methodology behind Dostoevsky's 'poetics':

All the elements of novelistic structure in Dostoevsky are profoundly original; all are determined by that new artistic talk that only he could pose and solve with the requisite scope and depth: the task of constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the fundamentally *monologic* (homophonic) European novel.²³

Although Bakhtin is describing Dostoevsky's employment of a polyphonic world, facilitated by many forms within his own creation of the novel genre, a similar, if not identical statement might be claimed in regard to the multi-faceted construction of the Song. Rather than apprehending the Song's many forms, in Bakhtin's words, 'from the viewpoint of a consistently monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world, from the viewpoint of some monologic canon for the proper construction of novels',²⁴ it seems now proper to consider at least whether each genre signifies not a governing or dominant role within the Song, but again, a lively and engaging contribution to the Song's overall structure and task. Such an approach could avoid the kind of genre 'vulgarization' that Bakhtin reproaches, namely, the insistence that the Song in its wholeness *is* one of its many forms of mediation, for example, a wedding ritual, or didactic discourse, or dialogue celebrating human love, rather than employing them as vessels for a greater cause. Only by allowing the many genres of the Song to stand side by side, each valid in its own right, yet subservient to the task at hand, might one be spared the monologic vision for whom a complex yet profound presentation 'may seem like a chaos' and its construction 'some sort of

20. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 62.

21. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 8.

22. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 62.

23. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 8 (*italics original*).

24. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 8.

conglomerate of disparate materials and incompatible principles for shaping them'.²⁵ Surely Bakhtin's statement describing the common reader's experience of Dostoevsky's 'poetics' resounds also throughout centuries of interpreting the Song.

How, then, might one acknowledge the Song's subcategories of genres, and yet avoid, in the words of Bakhtin, any 'perfunctoriness and excessive abstractness'²⁶ while discerning their place within the Song's overall semantic import? Perhaps by considering more exactly what the secondary genre of the Song might be. Bakhtin has proposed that primary speech genres represent indelibly particular and identifiable 'spheres of communication', that is, the unique occasions whereupon such forms of speaking have arisen. The events catalyzing the particular speech styles are thus grounded in the notion of an historical need. Any proposed philosophical abstraction regarding a genre's purpose, then, cannot be sustained. If Bakhtin's claim should similarly hold for secondary or complex genres, their unique purpose and *raison d'être* would likewise be grounded in an actual historical reality.

For Bakhtin, then, genre reveals a historical purpose from which it cannot be disassociated. In his essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' Bakhtin outlines what he perceives to be the novel's distinctive nature. This is its intrinsic quality of *chronotope* or 'time space',²⁷ that world which the novelist so successfully creates, and yet reflects of all the organizing categories dominating the real world in which he lives. In this way Bakhtin proposes that 'speech genres', including secondary genres, 'are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language'.²⁸ Each new speech genre belies a noteworthy change of historical context. Bakhtin insists that in order to understand more fully the inescapable link between language and life, or speech genres and history, one must 'puzzle out the complex historical dynamics of these systems' and by so doing 'develop a special history of speech genres (and not only secondary, but also primary ones) that reflects more directly, clearly, and flexibly all the changes taking place in social life'.²⁹ In comprehending more fully the Song as a 'Genre of

25. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 8.

26. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 63.

27. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (edited Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

28. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 65.

29. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 65.

Genres', then, it seems critical to consider the social and historical implications associated with its secondary or governing structure. A proposal of the Song's overarching genre and precipitant historical events appears in Section 4.

3. The Song as an Utterance of Utterances

Bakhtin's third major contribution to a reading of the Song is his understanding of the 'utterance' as representing the most basic speech unit between characters. For Bakhtin, an utterance could be as short and inconclusive as the expletive 'Ah!' What defines its beginning and ending is a change of speaker. He is careful to note also that its content is actively affected by all that has been communicated before it. Likewise, once spoken, the utterance is tied irrevocably to all that comes after it. Bakhtin's implicit dialogical understanding of the utterance comes to the fore in his own description of its significance as the orienting marker of all speech communication:

Any utterance—from a short (single-word) rejoinder in everyday dialogue to the large novel or scientific treatise—has, so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others (or, although it may be silent, others' active responsive understanding, or, finally, a responsive action based on this understanding). The speaker ends his utterance in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding.³⁰

Both the uniqueness and promise of how Bakhtin understands 'utterance' lies in his insistence that it, rather than the commonly proposed 'sentence', represents the most basic dialogical indicator within any written or oral communication. He emphasizes this helpfully in stating that 'the utterance is not a conventional unit, but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects'.³¹ Bakhtin maintains that the 'sentence' has been greatly misunderstood in this regard. He clarifies that any sentence does carry a sense of 'completedness and unity',³² and has its boundaries, but that these characteristics are determined grammatically, within a speaker's speech, rather than externally, by a change of speaking subject. Hence, the sentence is the conventional, rather than real unit of speech communication. Bakhtin relates:

30. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 71.

31. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, pp. 71-72.

32. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 74.

The sentence is a relatively complete thought, directly correlated with the other thoughts of a single speaker within his utterance as a whole. The speaker pauses at the end of a sentence in order to move on to his own next thought, continuing, supplementing, and substantiating the preceding one. The context of the sentence is the speech of one speaking subject (speaker). The sentence itself is not correlated directly or personally with the extraverbal context of reality (situation, setting, pre-history) or with the utterances of other speakers; this takes place only indirectly, through its entire surrounding context, that is, through the utterance as a whole.³³

Bakhtin's refinement of the utterance as the orienting semantic signal within written communications, then, puts much weight on the task of deducing character identification within a text, as well as character exchange. Put simply, a precise understanding of change in speaking subjects is crucial to textual semantics. To study the content of a passage's sentences is commendable; but only once it is discerned who says what, in response to whom, and in what context, is the deepest and truest meaning achieved. Roland Murphy, one of the most widely published and renowned scholars of the Song, concluded long ago (while attempting to facilitate its translation for a new Bible series) that the most prevailing challenge of the Song is its 'structure, and even the number of characters and the lines to be attributed to them'.³⁴ Where Bakhtin's astute apprehension of the speech utterance aids in comprehending more fully the text of the Song, then, is in its proposition that every fragment of speech 'counts'; each rejoinder, perhaps too short to 'make sense' in and of itself, nonetheless fulfills its role of opening the floor to the next speaker, or providing enough of a response to know that someone else is present within the dialogue, though silent.

The Song's dialogical interactions are full of incomplete thought statements. Their significance and contribution to the Song's overall meaning cannot be understood if the 'sentence' is understood to be the primary unit of semantic mediation. This could prove why Murphy and many others who interpret the Song conclude that it represents only pieces of dialogue between lovers, accommodating nothing more than a neutral portrayal of a human condition—namely, love and desire—and not a developing story that can be followed. Bakhtin's work now equips one for a new entry into the disjointedness of the Song's surface text. Though the Hebrew language contributes solid evidence as to the number and

33. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, pp. 73-74.

34. Roland E. Murphy, 'History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool: The Song of Songs', *BTB* 16 (1986), pp. 87-91 (88).

gender of the speaker or person being addressed, particularly when interactions involve the second or third person, it nonetheless remains the case that statements in the first person, since it is a common gender, can be difficult to follow. The Song contains many such first person statements. Song of Songs 4.16–5.1, a section that includes several references to the first person, might provide an instructive textual example whereby Bakhtin's premise of the speech utterance opens valuable direction to the reader. The command in 4.16—'Awake! O North! And come! O South! Pant forth my garden, might its spices flow! O that My Beloved might come to his garden, and that he might feast upon its most eminent fruits!' (author's translation)—is understood to be spoken by a woman since the epithet it contains, 'My Beloved', appears consistently within the Song where it is grammatically apparent that a woman is addressing a man. This rejoinder incorporating the force of a verbal imperative breaks upon the scene unexpectedly, even incoherently. It is most often assumed, nonetheless, to belong to the longer section of phrase preceding it, namely, 4.12–15, where a woman named 'O Betrothed' is being described using imagery of flowing, refreshing waters, and opulent, exotic spices. Her waters are overtly affiliated with Lebanon. Since the second person feminine pronominal suffix appears throughout this section, it is not difficult to imagine that a man is in the process of wooing his 'Betrothed One'. Further, Song 5.1, the utterance following 4.16, the injunction quoted above, declares passionately and resolutely, 'I come into my garden!' and 'I gather my myrrh with my spice; I eat my honey with my honeycomb; I drink my wine with my milk!' The first person occurs predominantly in 5.1, and hence creates some indeterminacy of gender in regard to the one speaking. But an address to 'O Betrothed' after the declaration 'I come into my garden' identifies the speaker as likely a man, since the epithet 'O Betrothed' is consistently spoken only to a woman throughout the Song.

Having observed all the above detail of Song 4.12–5.1, however, the question of the precise speaker in 4.16 remains: Is it a man or woman? Why this sudden impassioned appeal to the cosmos? Why is it so necessary to send forth the scent of someone's garden when it is evident from preceding verses that two lovers, a man and woman, are obviously enjoying each other at close range? Bakhtin's emphasis on letting change of speakers identify meaning units is critical at this point. There is obviously something happening in 4.16 that relates to the couple's physical delighting of 4.12–15 and 5.1, and yet it cannot simply be

viewed as an intermediary ode of sensual praise. But what could provoke such solemnity and urgency in the midst of a couple's act of love? Bakhtin's method would provide one answer: there is a change of speaker. The presence of 'My Beloved' in 4.16, as just stated, indicates from all other instances of its usage within the Song that the speaker of this verse is a woman. The urgent supplication addressed to the 'North' and 'South', then, is to waft abroad 'her', namely, a woman's scent. The speaker, then, is another woman, one who is not currently within the embrace of the man, nor associated with water or exotic spices. In this way the utterance beginning with an adjuration is viewed in its own right as a complete 'speech' and possible marker of movement between speakers. Song 4.16, then, represents a 'word' spoken by someone else in the form of an interruption. Moreover, since the appearance of 'My Beloved' identifies the speaker to be a woman, the utterance's urgent and commanding tone can now be acknowledged and understood. Finally, any contribution that this 'interruption' could be making within the development of the Song's 'fundamental artistic task' will not be overlooked.

The importance of every utterance within the Song, then, including each one's role in helping delineate speakers, could represent why, for Bakhtin, the Song might represent an 'Utterance of Utterances'. But Bakhtin would likely posit, in addition, that each utterance is truly an 'Utterance of Utterances' in the sense that each one responds to what has been spoken before, and each, in its turn, will be responded to. What is being alluded to here is Bakhtin's claim that each author's work metaphorically represents his or her speech utterance within a particular semantic sphere. Such a speech act represents his or her 'link in the chain of speech communion'. Bakhtin elaborates:

Like the rejoinder in dialogue, it is related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it. At the same time, like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is separated from them by the absolute boundaries created by a change of speaking subjects.³⁵

As stated previously, the world of the writer is larger than the encapsulated one he or she constructs within the secondary genre of a novel or drama. This is inescapably reflected within what is said. But the complex genre's active and environmentally responsive quality in reality refers not only to the work's conversation with the artist's own contemporary existence, but also to different artist's writings with one another, that is,

35. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, p. 76.

writings that have come before, and writings that follow. Hebrew Scripture provides incredibly fertile soil within which its artistic works ceaselessly engage one another. The exact speech utterances within Scripture that the Song invokes, addresses, and influences will now be explored.

4. The Song as an Event of Events, Genre of Genres, and Utterance of Utterances in Accordance with a Lexical Approach

What, then, might be gained by reading the Song as an 'Event of Events', a 'Genre of Genres', and an 'Utterance of Utterances'? My own incorporation of Bakhtin's linguistic premises is inextricably bound to a lexical reading of the Song's Hebrew text. Here recurrences of Hebrew vocabulary items help discern its characters and discourses, since particular words, and especially epithets, tend to cluster around distinctive persons. This methodology has produced an unexpected identification of three main characters within the Song: one man and two women. The man is termed 'O Beloved'. One woman is addressed by the epithet 'O Betrothed', and the other 'O Fair One'.

The careful observation of Hebrew vocabulary surrounding the Song's epithets represents the kind of detailed investigation that facilitates a textual 'Event of Events'. Each Hebrew word item provides direction and contours within a scriptural piece whose intricate subtleties are often viewed as fraying its fabric, rather than binding its comprehension. The overarching 'Event of Events', or ramification of vocabulary-based detail within the Song, might be its lexical culmination of the aforementioned three interacting persons. A brief sampling of the smaller 'events' associated with these persons and their distinctive vocabulary, by way of example, reveals that King Solomon, most often addressed as 'My Beloved', undertakes a long journey with his 'Warriors of Israel' whereby he returns with opulent items including an elaborate bed, spices, and fragrances. 'O Betrothed' is a noblewoman from a far-away land, namely, Lebanon. She is affiliated with exotic and expensive delights, and pursues 'O Beloved', King Solomon, whose 'name' is better than the finest oil. This woman of Lebanon calls herself the 'The Bundle of Myrrh', and eventually succeeds in consummating her engagement to the Israelite king, whereby, at his request, she leaves her homeland with its 'ramparts of leopards' and resides with her 'Maidens' in Jerusalem. 'O Fair One', meanwhile, is a Jerusalemite woman who also has a continuing, although momentarily lapsed, relationship with King Solomon.

She is lowly yet beautiful and associates with her companions, 'The Daughters of Jerusalem', to whom she shares her longing for the return of 'O Beloved'. These commonplace women are continually amazed by 'O Fair One's' inability to find 'O Beloved', who they assume is a shepherd, though from her descriptions and responses it is clear that this is not so. 'O Fair One' laments especially that 'O Beloved' is continually 'hieing' over the 'Mountains of Cutting' to beds of spices and feeding among lilies. Her complaint is based on the fact that he is not fulfilling his initial vow of love to her, made privately outdoors under the green canopy of a garden bower, where, she claims adamantly, 'his banner over me was love'. 'O Fair One' builds her case throughout the Song, while the king publicly and visibly advances his betrothal to the woman of Lebanon, addressed 'O Betrothed'. 'O Fair One' nonetheless continues her appeals to him, and whoever is listening, employing wisdom sayings and adjurations, including her statement 'For strong as death—is love' (8.6) and admonition that anyone who chooses wealth over love will be commonly scorned (8.7). In the end, as though in response to 'O Fair One's' weakening yet relentless summons, 'O Beloved' calls to hear her voice. She retorts that he 'withdraw...from mountains of spices' (8.14). This listing, though incomplete, provides some insight as to how the apprehension of detail within the Song, oriented around vocabulary-based clusters of persons, provides an 'Event of Events', that is, actors, plot, and action.

Next, in adjudicating the Song's structure as a secondary form or 'Genre of Genres', it seems possible to conclude that its overarching purpose reveals a Drama of Testimony. The historical link for a development of this genre could be Israel's exile in Babylon, a time when it appeared that *Adonai*, its 'Beloved', had begun to court and be in alliance with other nations. The Song could then represent a dramatic festal component enacted religiously. It would in this way facilitate a formal and communal testimony that accommodated the 'artistic task' of wooing God back to God's people, Israel.

Finally, in regard to approaching the Song as an 'Utterance of Utterances', it seems essential to record this piece's dialogue, as a whole, with other parts of Scripture. Psalm 45, often thought to be affiliated with the Song because of its title, 'A Song of Love', resounds remarkably the grouping of lexical recurrences affiliated with 'O Betrothed', the woman from Lebanon identified within the Song. Since this Psalm tells first of a foreign woman's fascination with a king of Israel, and next, of this

king's enticing invitation that she leave her homeland to reside with him, it demonstrates incredibly close ties with discourses between 'O Beloved', that is, King Solomon, and the foreign woman within the Song. In regard to the Song's dialogue with portions of Scripture that likely preceded it, it seems certain that there is an acknowledgment of materials from the Historical Books, namely, 1 Kings. The choice of Solomon to portray 'O Beloved', the king who in the Song is betrothed to two women, one local, the other foreign, seems undeniably attuned to the historical Solomon's practices of marrying foreign wives and forming alliances with mercantile nations, particularly King Hiram of Tyre. The recounting of Solomon's policies within 1 Kings, then, which includes his growing attachment to opulence and willingness to sacrifice the 'citizenship' of his own kinsmen through his introduction of forced labour, grants surprising relevance to the experience of post-exilic Israelites. They too witness their ultimate leader's, namely, God's, obvious fascination and attachment to other nations, and also bear the brunt of losing their own precious 'peoplehood' status, as they labour in their own land for others.

If one were to surmise those materials within Hebrew Scripture that respond actively to the 'utterance' of the Song, one's guesses would surely include Isaiah and portions of Zechariah. Isaiah not only resonates abundantly with the Song's distinctive vocabulary as a whole, but portrays unabashedly God's remembered covenant with God's people, God's triumphal return, and God's abandonment of the 'foreign woman'. Zechariah, similarly, sings victoriously of the king's return to Israel, resulting in an end to its chastisement, and much joy.