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GENDER AND THE SHAPING OF DESIRE IN THE SONG OF SONGS AND ITS INTERPRETATION

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> The work lives to the extent it has influence. Included within the influence of a work is that which is accomplished in the consumption of the work as well as in the work itself. That which happens with the work is an expression of what the work is.
>
> —Karl Kosik[1]

Take a look at introductions to commentaries on the Song of Songs or at recent essays on the book, and you will often find a common tale concerning the Song and its readers. This tale of reading and misreading can be summarized as follows:

Long ago, in ancient Israel a poet wrote passionate poetry about human love that we now find in the Song of Songs. Somehow this poetry found its way into the Hebrew Scriptures. Then, in the early centuries of the common era, Jews and then Christians, confronted with such erotic material in the heart of the canon, reread the Song as a song of love between God and God's people. This misreading was then perpetuated through various grotesque elaborations through the centuries. Those who read the Song cor-

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[1] The English translation of a German rendering of Kosik's Chech original comes from Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti; Theory and History of Literature 2; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 15. The German rendering can be found in Karl Kosik, *Die Dialektik des Konkreten: Eine Studie zur Problematik des Menschen und der Welt* (trans. Marianne Hoffmann; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967) 138.

rectly as a song of love were brutally persecuted. Only in recent years was the Song liberated from the dark ages of its misinterpretation. Using the tools of biblical criticism, scholars uncovered the original focus of the Song on human love and unmasked the repressive interpretations of the past as the misreadings that they were.

Although this tale is not universal, it is remarkably pervasive. For example, the key element of attack on earlier readings is evident in the following comments by Marvin Pope in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs:

> The flexibility and adaptability of the allegorical method, the ingenuity and imagination with which it could be, and was, applied, the difficulty and virtual impossibility of imposing objective controls, the astounding and bewildering results of almost two millennia of application to the Canticle, have all contributed to its progressive discredit and almost complete desertion.[2]

Lest we see this understanding as isolated, I include a second quotation, this time from one of the most able German commentators on the Song, Othmar Keel:

> . . . zu welch willkürlichen unbefriedigenden und haüfig himmelschreiend grotesken Rusultaten das "tiefere" Verständnis der Allegoristen fürhte, ist in jeder Geschichte der Auslegung des Hohelied nachzulesen.[3]
>
> One can read in any history of exegesis of the Song of Songs what arbitrary, unsatisfactory, and revoltingly grotesque results were produced by an allegorical search for a "deeper meaning." (My translation)

These are but fragments of a broader perspective found in most critical work on the Song of Songs.[4]

[2] Marvin Pope, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 90.

[3] Othmar Keel, *Das Hohelied* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986) 16.

[4] Some examples of work from the 1990s include Diane Bergant, *Song of Songs: The Love Poetry of Scripture* (Spiritual Commentaries; New York: New City Press, 1998) 7–11; Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995) 27–35; David Clines, "Why is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 100–121 (though Clines argues that modern readings also fail to be sufficiently critical); André Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998) esp. 1–68; John Snaith, *Song of Songs* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 3–6; and Renita Weems, "The Song of Songs," in *NIB*, 5.370–71.

Recently more works have attempted to combine a reading of the Song as human love poetry with a more sympathetic reading of the history of interpretation of the Song. Two book-length examples are Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); and Nicholas Ayo [text] and Meinrad Craighead [artwork], *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

In sum, this tale of reading and misreading of the Song of Songs has an almost mythic power. One reason for this may be that this tale resonates with the "myth of repression" that Michel Foucault has documented in modern discourse about sex. This myth tells us that we are in a time of liberation from a long process of sexual repression in the Western world. Yet Foucault and others have pointed out that the very discourses that are used as evidence for sexual repression, say in the Victorian period, were actually shaping, naming, and even instigating the very practices and development of sexual identities that they seemed designed to suppress.[5]

Much critical scholarship on the Song of Songs over the last decades has unconsciously participated in this modern construction of sexualities through reproducing a mini-variant of the myth of repression discussed by Foucault. In place of general sexual repression, we have the specific story of the repression of the original erotic meaning of the Song. In place of more general sexual liberation, we have scholarly recovery of the original erotic meaning of the Song. Recent readings of the Song as promoting non–fertility-related erotic love echo the more general shift in industrialized societies toward nonreproductive sexuality.[6] Only recently have some begun to reflect critically on how sexuality was shaped in ancient Israel.[7] To the best of my knowledge no published works have reflected in a sustained way on how twentieth-century understandings of gender and desire have shaped modern critical readings of the Song of Songs and its interpretations.

There will not be space in this essay to execute that project, but I do intend to tell the start of a somewhat different story of the Song and its journey through history, one that begins with shapings of desire in ancient Israel.

I. Sexual Gender

In order to tell this story, we must reexamine presuppositions implicit in the modern tale of interpretation just reviewed. One of the central characteris-

[5] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (3 vols; New York: Pantheon, 1978–86; French original, 1976–84).

[6] On this shift, see the overview in John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Athalya Brenner has pointed out the existence of folk birth control traditions in the cultures surrounding Israel (*The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible* [Biblical Interpretation; Leiden: Brill, 1997] 72–78). Nevertheless, the lack of reliability of such methods has meant that, up until recently, most forms of unmarried love carried the high probability of the creation of children.

[7] Saul Olyan, "And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5/2 (1994) 179–206; Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5/3 (1995) 333–55; Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge*. See also the stimulating survey by David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) 15–32.

tics of the scholarly myth of the genesis and repression of the Song of Songs is the construction of maleness and femaleness that it presupposes. Most contemporary Western readers of the Song and its interpretations presuppose that the thing that makes men and women different from one another is different bodies. This is sexual difference, upon which culture builds a set of gender distinctions. Thus, according to this understanding, "sex" and "gender" are distinct.

As Thomas Laqueur points out, however, this body-focused concept of sexual difference is itself a historical phenomenon. He argues that the premodern world worked with a one-sex concept of humanity, where male and female bodies were seen as essentially the same. According to this model, what made men "men" and women "women" was not their bodies, but their place on a broader cosmic hierarchy. Depending on where they stood on that hierarchy, men and women's bodies would receive the minor bodily changes to reflect their position. And there were tales of women, for example, who might act excessively male and sprout penises, thus shifting their physical form to correspond to their new place on the hierarchy. Laqueur's best summary of this perspective comes at the outset of his discussion of the continuation of this one-sex system into the Renaissance:

> Renaissance doctors understood there to be only one sex. On the other hand, there were manifestly at least two social sexes with radically different rights and obligations, somehow corresponding to ranges or bands, higher and lower, on the corporeal scale of being. Neither sort of sex—social or biological—could be viewed as foundational or primary, although gender divisions —the categories of social sex—were certainly construed as natural. More important, though, biological sex, which we generally take to serve as the basis of gender, was just as much in the domain of culture and meaning as was gender. A penis was thus a status symbol rather than a sign of some other deeply rooted ontological essence: *real* sex. It could be construed as a certificate of sorts, like the diploma of a doctor or lawyer today, which entitled the bearer to certain rights and privileges.[8]

Thus, the fundamental aspect of sexual gender in this system is not a body but where one stands on a broader cosmic hierarchy. A key threat to this system occurs when the behavioral boundaries blur, for example, when a male, who was supposed to be high in the cosmic hierarchy, plays the part of the "lower," penetrated "woman" in anal intercourse.[9]

Judith Butler and others have built on Laqueur's work to argue for a radical reconceptualization of the sexed and gendered subject,[10] but the argument

[8] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 134–35.

[9] Ibid., 53.

[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Rout-

in what follows is not dependent on an endorsement of the idea of the construction of sexuality, the gendered body, or human subjects. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether Laqueur's depiction of the construction of sexual gender in the classical world can be applied to the world of the Bible.[11] But the work of Foucault, Laqueur, and others can lead us to take a new look at how sexuality is shaped in ancient Israel and at the ideas of sexual gender implicit in that shaping.

II. Sexual Hierarchy and the Theological Marriage Matrix

As is well known, Israel's legal prohibitions regarding sexuality focus on (a) protection of a man's status as guardian of his wife and unmarried daughter's reproductive potential and (b) protection of his dignity as a sexually autonomous actor.[12] Laws regarding adultery focus exclusively on cases where a man has sex with a woman married or engaged to another man (Deut 22:22–27; Lev 20:10; cf. Deut 5:18//Exod 20:14 and Deut 5:21//Exod 20:17). The laws regarding premarital sex focus on compensation or punishment when a man has sex with another man's unmarried daughter (Exod 22:15-16; Deut 22:28-29). And the only laws concerning homosexuality focus on cases of anal intercourse, where one man has another man play the part of a woman (Lev 18:22; 20:13), a case seen as a problem in other ancient Mediterranean cultures as well.[13]

Within this system men are sexually autonomous as long as they do not violate the rights of other men over their women. Both married and unmarried men may have sex with prostitutes, slaves, and war prisoners. Men sow the seed of procreation and are almost always viewed as the proper initiators of sexual activity. In contrast, women receive the seed, and wives bear children who inherit the land.[14] As a result, many biblical traditions aim to ensure that

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ledge, 1990). Butler cites earlier work by Laqueur, among others, at the outset of her discussion (p. 152 n. 10).

[11] See, however, some preliminary reflections prompted in part by gender theory in Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992) 118–43, esp. 140–43 and 262 n. 133.

[12] For an overview, see Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge*, esp. 132–51.

[13] Olyan, "And with a Male," 179–206; Boyarin, "Are there any Jews in the History of Sexuality?" 333–55. Here I side with Boyarin's interpretation of the evidence as relating to gender hierarchy (pp. 340–48) over against Olyan's rejection of that approach (p. 199) and his proposal that the issue involves mixing of semen and other bodily fluids (pp. 199–204).

[14] The latter parallels widespread imagery in modern Mediterranean societies. See Carol Delaney, "Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (ed. David Gilmore; Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987) 35–48; and Raymond Jamous, "From the Death of Men to the Peace of God: Violence and Peace-making in the Rif," in *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (ed. J. G. Peristiany and J. Pitt-Rivers; Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 76; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 168–69.

women of proper lineage be the vessels of Israelite seed. Much effort is expended to ensure women's abstinence before marriage and fidelity within it. To be sure, some women such as Tamar of Genesis 38 or Ruth are depicted positively for their sexual initiative, but these cases are each closely connected with the establishment of a male dynastic line when the male protagonists are hesitant to do their part. Outside of such special cases, women are depicted as passive participants in sex, and a woman who initiates sex is depicted as a dangerous adulterer, as in, say, the vilified "strange woman" in Proverbs 7 (see also 2:16–19; 5:3–6; 6:24–35; 22:14; 23:27–28), who seduces a foolish youth to share her perfumed bed while her husband is away.[15]

Major theological streams in Israel included God in this sexual system. Adapting ancient Near Eastern treaty language, the Shema of Deut 6:4–5 enjoins the people of Israel to have the kind of exclusive, all-consuming love for God that a wife was to have for her husband—to love with all her heart, life strength, and might. Other texts in the Deuteronomistic History elaborate this analogy, calling on Israel to "love," "walk after," and "cleave to" YHWH (e.g., Deut 10:12, 20; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:5; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20; Josh 22:5; 23:8, 11 [cf. 23:12–13])[16] and idealizing those who do so (1 Kgs 3:3; 2 Kgs 18:6).[17] On the flip side, Deuteronomistic texts call on Israel *not* to "go after" (הלך אחרי) other gods (e.g., Deut 6:14; 28:14; Jer 25:6; cf. Deut 8:19; 11:28; 13:3; Jer 7:6, 9; 11:10; 13:10; 16:11; 35:15), much like a human wife was not to pursue other lovers. Moreover, YHWH is described as having a lover-like "jealousy" (cf. Num 5:14, 29, 30) about the people's "sexual acting out" (זנה)[18] through worshiping other gods (Deut 31:16; cf. Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33; and Exod 34:14–15; Num 15:39).[19] Indeed, as is well known, Israel was often imaged by prophets as an

[15] The other main biblical example of this image is adulterous Israel. Since this case is on the divine–human level, it is discussed below.

[16] Notably, the expression "walk after" with YHWH occurs only in 13:5 (אַחֲרֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלֵכוּ) of the texts cited above, while the other cited expressions that use the verb הלך usually speak of walking "in [all] his paths" (בְּ[כָל]־דְּרָכָיו; 10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 30:16; Josh 22:5; cf. 1 Kgs 3:3).

[17] As William Moran first observed, ancient Near Eastern treaties similarly use the language of love to describe political relations ("The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 [1963] 77–87, esp. 78–80; see also Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972] 82–83). Just as a wife was to "love," "walk after," and "cleave to" her husband, so also political subjects and vassals were to "love," "walk after," and "cleave to" their lord.

[18] Though some routinely translate זנה as referring to sex-for-hire (e.g., "whoring" or "harlotry") more nuanced discussions have observed that the verb often designates any sex outside a sanctioned relationship (KB^3, 1.264; S. Erlansson, זנה, *TWAT*, 2.613).

[19] These implications were first pointed out by Gershon Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures, 1960–1966* (ed. L. Finkelstein; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966) 5–8. Against Cohen, Weinfeld argues that such language in Deuteronomy does not necessarily imply "the husband-wife metaphor" since there is no explicit reference to it in the Pentateuch (*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 81–82 n. 6).

adulterous woman, failing to be exclusively faithful to her divine husband, and worshiping other gods (e.g., Hos 2:4–17; Jer 2:1–3:13; Ezekiel 16, 23; cf. Isa 54:4–8; 62:4–5). And just as a jealous human husband had the right to strip, starve, and beat his wife into returning to him, so also Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel depict God as promising to strip Israel in the eyes of her lovers and force her to come back to him (Hos 2:11–17; Jer 13:25–27; Ezek 16:35–42; 23:22–27).

Sometimes there is slippage between the divine and human sexual levels. For example, as Kirsten Nielson has suggested, Isaiah in his vineyard song of chapter 5 tricks his male audience into thinking that he is singing of a jilted husband.[20] First we need to recall how often in the Near East a wife is spoken of as a field or vineyard, into which a man plants his seed that will bring forth children.[21] In Isaiah's "love song" (שִׁירַת דּוֹדִי, 5:1a), the husband cared for his wife, his "vineyard," and planted his good seed in her, but she yielded "wild grapes," easily understood as the children of another man (5:1b–2). After stating this accusation, the male audience is called on to endorse this husband's intention to treat his wife as unfaithful, stripping his "vineyard" and punishing her (5:3–6). Yet the men soon hear that the very female they proclaimed judgment on is themselves: "for the vineyard of YHWH of armies is the house of Israel . . ." (5:7). These men thought they were enforcing the honor system on a fellow man's wife, but in fact *they* were the female vineyard, and their God was the angry husband.

I have briefly outlined a well-known set of beliefs that might be termed a "theological marriage matrix." In this matrix the believing community is depicted as the female spouse of the male god—called on to love that God with the exclusive love of a wife and punished for failure to do so. Notably, this construction of a female erotic religious subject in ancient Israel coincided with Israel's move toward henotheistic and monotheistic theology. So, where the Israelite God might have once been paired with a divine partner, say Asherah, now God is placed in relationship with a human sexual subject, and this relationship—with often highly troubling aspects—is understood to be that between a male and female.[22] Thus, in henotheistic and monotheistic Israel,

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Frymer-Kensky notes, however, that the language of "jealousy" appears to distinguish the love language of Deuteronomy from that of the treaties on which it builds, implying a relationship analogous to that between human lovers (*In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 146). Further research is required to see whether and how much the use of this language was accompanied by implicit male-female gendering of the persons involved.

[20] Kirsten Nielson, *There Is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOTSup 65; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 94–97.

[21] Delaney, "Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame," 35-48.

[22] Generally, when this linkage has been noted before, it has been yoked to a more specific theory regarding the prophetic transformation of an ancient practice of "sacred marriage." See, e.g., E. Jacob, "L'heritage canaanéen dans le livre du prophète Osée," *RHPR* 43 (1963) 250–59,

gender and love have become key concepts describing power differentials on multiple levels of the cosmic hierarchy.

This links with Laqueur's proposal regarding the positional character of sex in the ancient world—where one's position on a cosmic hierarchy determines one's sex. Thus, where I might be a "man" vis-à-vis a human woman in the hierarchy, we might both be "women" vis-à-vis God, who stands yet higher in that hierarchy. Within this world of essentially identical bodies and fluid boundaries between the sexes, it was a small step from seeing the man as superior to the woman in the hierarchy to seeing men and women as both in some sense *actually* "the woman" in a hierarchy extending upward to God. Thus, Israel as "woman" may not be "just" the metaphor that we often think it to be.[23]

Israel appears to have had a broad gender-hierarchical system where the "man" in a given relationship—whether human or divine—had exclusive rights to the "woman" of the relationship, whether a human woman or the people of God. The primary image of a problem in this system is that of a "woman" who acts contrary to the hierarchy and seeks out another lover. When she does so, she is not just an image of infidelity. She calls the whole hierarchy into question. A woman of unruly sexual initiative symbolizes the subordinate person getting out of control, not knowing her place. That is what makes the image of the sexually proactive "adulterous woman" so potent as a symbol of a rebellious Israel—because it accuses Israel of ignoring this broader cosmic hierarchy.

III. The Song of Songs as Alternative Discourse

Into this world of reproductively focused sexuality, hierarchies, male rights, and vilified sexually proactive women comes the Song of Songs. The Song begins with female sexual initiative in the famous opening lines, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking (דֹדֶיךָ)[24] is better than wine" (Cant 1:2). This woman's voice and presence dominate the rest of the Song.[25] To be sure, a man speaks his praise of her starting in 1:9–11 (also 1:15;

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esp. 252 (older examples are cited by Cohen, "Song of Songs," 19 n. 6). The notes above do not depend on this specific, and ever more questionable, theory.

[23] Cf. nuanced discussions of the "marital metaphor" in Cohen, "Song of Songs"; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 144–52; and Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

[24] Unless indicated otherwise, the translations here and in the following are my own. Though most translations render the plural of דוד here simply as "love," the word typically refers to actualized sexual relations of some sort (see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 299). Hence, I follow the Blochs in translating the term here as "lovemaking" (Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 137). Following the MT, the possessive pronoun here is second person. Some have proposed emending the text so that it does not shift from third to second person. Nevertheless, the shift from third-person monologue to direct address anticipates the interplay between these modes throughout the rest of the Song. Moreover, there is no significant manuscript evidence for an alternative reading.

[25] Here and in the following discussion I refer to a "man" and a "woman" in the singular as if

2:2; 4:1–7; 6:4–9; 7:2–10), and he comes to "his garden" upon being invited by her (4:16–5:1a). At the same time, she trumps his praises of her (1:16–17; 2:3); she begins and ends the Song; she is the one who speaks its refrains; and she is the one who calls on her lover to do things—draw her after him (1:4), be like a gazelle (2:17), come out to the fields with her (7:12–14), set her as a seal on his arm (8:6), and flee (8:14). Where he hovers outside and his invitations to her are mediated through her words (2:10–14; 5:2–4), her passion is directly presented to the audience[26] and she energetically seeks him (1:7), "seizing" him and/or "bringing him" to the house of her mother (3:4; 8:1–2). In the middle of the Song he confesses to being driven mad by one of her glances, with but one of the strands of her necklace (4:9). By the end, the man's praise of her beauty is laced with fear before her awesome character (6:4, 10; 7:2–6).

Yet the poems of the song sometimes depict the female character as vulnerable. She is defensive about her sun-darkened skin (1:6a), put out to keep the flocks by her brothers (1:6b; cf. 8:8–9), found inside when her lover is outside (e.g., 2:9–13; 5:2–5), stripped and beaten in her second venture out to seek her lover (5:7), and prevented by fear of shame from kissing her lover in public (8:1). There is no sign throughout the Song that the lovers of the Song of Songs are married or that their love is sanctioned in any way. Their relationship is clandestine, though they wish it were otherwise (8:1–2, 13–14). And there is no

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they are continuous characters in a single work. To be sure, as A. Brenner observes, no one has successfully argued for a picture of the Song as a "unified sequence of love lyrics, with an ongoing linear plot" (*The Song of Songs* [OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989] 35–40; see more recently eadem, "To See is to Assume: Whose Love is Celebrated in the Song of Songs?" *BibInt* 1 [1993] 266–69). Nevertheless, as Michael Fox in particular has shown, the present book coheres in a non-narrative sense (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985] 195–226). Moreover, Jill Munro has found elements of "narrativity" in the Song, without presupposing that the Song is unified by a "unfolding plot movement" of the sort often sought by previous interpreters (*Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* [JSOTSup 203; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 35–42, 110–14, 145–46).

For a recent sustained attempt to find two intertwined plots in the Song of Songs, see Erich Bosshard-Nepustil, "Zu Struktur und Sachprofil des Hohenlieds," *BN* 81 (1996) 45–71. Though the article contains numerous intriguing observations, Bosshard-Nepustil's approach—like the dramatic theories he aims to replace—is weakened by the lack of explicit markers in the text of shifts in the hypothesized pairs of lovers being discussed.

[26] Building on some recent works by Clines ("Why is There a Song of Songs?") and Donald C. Polaski ("What Will Ye See in the Shulammite? Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 5 [1997] 64–81), Cheryl Exum cautions that the apparently unmediated quality of the woman's voice may be misleading ("Developing Strategies of Feminist Criticism/Developing Strategies for Commentating the Song of Songs," in *Auguries: The Jubilee Volume of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies* [ed. David Clines and Philip Davies; JSOTSup 269; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998] 228–30). For the purposes of comparison with other biblical texts, however, I am working with the seemingly unmediated voice of the woman as presented by the surface of the text.

talk of children, nor typical use of fertility imagery.[27] However powerful the female character of the Song may appear, she is also depicted as exposed to the vulnerabilities of Israelite women, and she and her lover must still conduct their relationship amidst the obstacles presented by a society hostile to their relationship.[28]

That being said, this text contrasts sharply with other depictions of desire in ancient Israel.[29] Where the dangerous foreign woman in Proverbs tempted the student toward death with kisses and a bed of spices, now the prominent female voice of the Song of Songs yearns for the kisses of her lover's mouth and they speak frequently of their spiced bed. Where a proactive, rule-breaking woman is the image of a disobedient, adulterous community in Hosea, now the Song of Songs features a woman who faces down the disapproval of her audience for her dark skin, seeks her lover at night, and revels in her love for him. To be sure, this otherwise untypical woman of the Song of Songs is not married, and so the Song does not celebrate extramarital sexuality. Yet it nevertheless presents an atypical view of premarital sexuality and nonreproductively focused female sexual initiative. Moreover, the often overpowering male of Israel's legal and prophetic texts is replaced here with a male passionately bound to the woman who loves him, captivated by but one of her glances, but one of the strands of her necklace.

So, we might ask, given its differences from other Israelite traditions, how was the Song of Songs received alongside the gender hierarchy mentioned earlier? Were ancient Israelites scandalized by the book? Was it some form of ancient pornography?[30]

An answer to these questions may lie in work done in the last twenty years by both classicists and Middle Eastern ethnographers, who have uncovered a rich world of networks and alternative discourses among the women of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies. Thus, Teri Joseph showed how teenage Riffian Berber girls sing influential and often daring songs in the limi-

[27] Instead, as Brenner points out (*Intercourse of Knowledge*, 72–78), the herbs most used in birth control in the ancient Mediterranean world also figure prominently in the Song. On the nonmarried character of the relationship, see Fox, *Song of Songs*, 229–43.

[28] This element of overcoming social barriers to the relationship is highlighted effectively by Weems, "Song of Songs," passim.

[29] For some other contrasts of the female in the Song of Songs with other biblical texts, see in particular Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 156-70; original, 1989) and Ilana Pardes, "'I am a Wall, and My Breasts like Towers': The Song of Songs and the Question of Canonization," in her *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 118–43.

[30] The latter suggested by Clines, "Why is There a Song of Songs?" 100–106. See also Polaski, "What Will Ye See?" 71–80, who argues that the powerful woman of the Song is only constructed as such by the assumed values of an all-powerful male gaze.

nal situation of wedding celebrations.[31] Safa-Isfahani found Iranian women engaging in folk dramas that mocked their husbands and boldly confronted the problems of their lives.[32] Such alternative women's discourses are hardly a uniquely modern phenomenon. John Winkler has found traces of similar alternative female discourses about sexuality and power in ancient Greek traditions.[33]

Perhaps most interestingly, in her study of West Egyptian Awlad ʿAli Bedouin, Lila Abu-Lughod uncovered a tradition of passionate poetry, primarily sung by women or by lovers courting each other. Like the Song of Songs, this poetry stood in sharp contrast to the honor culture of the Bedouin she studied. Whereas this culture was officially hostile to romantic attachments that might compromise marriage arrangements to the proper lineages, people—especially women—could express their deepest passions through traditional poems, poems often connected to epics told about heroes of their people. Indeed, sometimes friends or lovers would express their deepest feelings through singing such traditional poems back and forth to each other, picking poems that corresponded to the sentiments they could not express more directly. They would distance themselves from their feelings through using the words of someone else, yet express themselves nevertheless.[34]

According to Abu-Lughod, this was not some sort of protest discourse or a cathartic release from an emotionally oppressive system. Instead, she argues that this practice of singing intimate poetry is symbiotically related to the honor norms of the dominant culture. For example, through singing of passionate love and/or loss, the singer demonstrates an ability to channel her feelings into an acceptable medium and the fact that her—often difficult—act of doing so is a choice. On a broader societal level, the celebration of passionate poetry of feeling amidst a dominant ideology of honor reflects tensions between the antistructural, egalitarian ideals of the Awlad ʿAli and hierarchical domination structures within the community.[35]

There are many suggestive parallels between the poetic practices studied by Abu-Lughod and the Song of Songs.[36] Like Abu-Lughod's poems, the Song

[31] Teri Joseph, "Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Riffian Berber Women," *Signs* 5 (1980) 418–34.

[32] Safa-Isfahani, "Female-centered World Views in Iranian Culture: Symbolic Representations of Sexuality in Dramatic Games," *Signs* 6 (1981) 33–53.

[33] John Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[34] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) esp. 171–232.

[35] Ibid., 234–59.

[36] John Chance previously suggested the relevance of Abu-Lughod's work for study of the Song of Songs in his "The Anthropology of Honor and Shame: Culture, Values and Practice," in *Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible* (ed. Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin; Semeia 68;

of Songs is loosely connected to a national epic by way of Solomon, and its depictions of female vulnerability are but one sign that it is symbiotically related to the broader culture with which it contrasts. The sometimes disjointed and dialogical character of the Song of Songs parallels the way Awlad ʿAli lovers and female friends would use separate poems to communicate back and forth to one another. And just as women studied by Abu-Lughod were the most prominent singers of heartfelt poetry, so also the female voice dominates the Song of Songs.[37] Most important, however, is the way Abu-Lughod's and others' work shows that multiple discourses can coexist and even reinforce each other within the same culture. Israelite culture was no monolith, just as our cultures are not. As a result, alternative poetry such as the Song of Songs or the poetry studied by Abu-Lughod may inscribe sexual subjects somewhat different from those of more public discourses, even as these alternative discourses stand in constant relation to more dominant ones.

This is not to suggest that the Song of Songs is a transcript of an actual intimate interchange between lovers. Rather it is an imaginative work that builds a poetic world based in part on discourses known to its audience, including possibly the kind of alternative, nonpublic discourses uncovered by Abu-Lughod, Winkler, and others. Originally, the Song of Songs was probably designed for entertainment, much like similar love poetry in Egypt.[38] Yet the written imitation of nonpublic discourse had profound implications. For it took a depiction of what would normally be an intensely private exchange and resituated it in the public realm. Moreover, as we have seen, this public realm in ancient Israel probably did not strongly separate human male–female love from human–divine love the way moderns do. Instead, many understood divine–human love to be male–female love *governed by much the same principles as male–female love on the human level*.[39]

Given all this, it was natural for early interpreters to understand the depiction of male–female love in the Song of Songs to be relevant to the theological marriage matrix known elsewhere in Israel. Just as Hosea, the Deuteronomists,

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Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 143–44. Note also mention of Abu-Lughod's work in Weems, "Song of Songs," 366 n. 2.

[37] Indeed, many have plausibly proposed that the Song of Songs may be one of the few biblical texts by a female author. Carol Meyers has argued persuasively that women were prominent musicians in ancient Israel ("The Drum-Dance-Song Ensemble: Women's Performance in Biblical Israel," in *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions* [ed. Kimberly Marshall; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993] 49–67), and many have argued more specifically that the Song may have been written by a woman (see most recently Lacocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 39–53, with citations of some earlier proposals). But see the cautions of Exum, "Developing Strategies," 229–30.

[38] Fox, *Song of Songs*, 227–50.

[39] For discussion of some possible differences, see Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 148–49.

Isaiah, or Ezekiel could apply human gender categories to a picture of human infidelity to the divine, it was but a small step to take the radically different picture of love in the Song of Songs and use it to depict that same divine–human love relationship *differently*. What seems to be a big jump to modern readers, may have been a much smaller one to ancient ones.

The earliest audiences of the Song appear to have done just that, radically reimaging the divine–human, male–female relationship in terms of the Song of Songs. Thus in place of the shaming and stripping of Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, we see images such as:

> The *Mekhilta* and *Sifre*'s understanding of the woman's praise of the man's body in Cant 5:10–16 to be Israel's praise of God's body at the Red Sea.[40]
>
> Origen's rereading of the Song of Songs as a means of awakening within the soul the passionate, erotic love for God for which the soul was originally created.[41]
>
> Bernard of Clairvaux's redescription of the opening of the Song—as the soul passionately demanding nothing less than union with God, as she refuses to settle for the divine kiss of the feet or hands and says, "I ask, I crave, I implore; let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."[42]
>
> Mechthild of Magdeburg's vision where her divine beloved "took her in His divine arms, placed His fatherly hand on her breast, and looked into her face. Note how she was kissed there. With this kiss she was raised to the highest heights above the choirs of angels."[43]

In each case, the Song's description of a mutually passionate relationship is harnessed to redescribe the divine–human relationship in less violent and hierarchical terms.

To be sure, the human soul or community is still almost always the

[40] This saying is attributed to Rabbi Akiba in the *Mekhilta* (on Exod 15:2) and is often used as a key text for dating the beginning of an "allegorical" approach to the Song. Nevertheless, the saying is anonymous in *Sifre* (on Deut 33:2), and its attribution to Akiba in the *Mekhilta* may well be an attempt to link a famous interpretation to a sage already attested in early writings to have advocated the Song in general and nonliteral reading of it in particular. For the present purposes, it is enough to note the existence of this saying in two of the early midrashic collections.

[41] P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 162–76; Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1. of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 108–30, esp. 117–24.

[42] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I* (trans. Kilian Walsh; Cistercian Fathers Series 4; Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971) 54 (Sermon 9.1).

[43] Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of Divinity* (trans. Christiane Mesch Galvani; ed. with an intro. by S. Clark; Garland Library of Medieval Literature; New York/London: Garland, 1991) 60.

"woman" in these interpretations.[44] Yet the "woman" constructed in the Song of Songs is a far more powerful and unruly character than elsewhere in the Bible. She makes demands on God, even as she passionately desires him. And God is taken by his love for her, subject to her demands, "driven mad by but one of her glances, with but one of the strands of her necklace." Indeed, in parts of the Song, the challenge to the divine–human hierarchy would not be as great if we were to take God as the woman and humanity as the man.[45]

IV. Concluding Reflections

All this is not intended to suggest that these interpreters were recovering the originally intended meaning of the Song. Though the Song may draw on forms and/or specific cultic traditions that depicted divine love,[46] the Song itself shows no clear signs of having been written to depict God's relation with God's people or the soul. Even the latest levels of the Song, such as its superscription, do not indicate a theological orientation,[47] and it was neither placed

[44] There are important exceptions. Traditional Christian allegorical interpretation of the Song had given divine overtones to the woman of the Song as representative of the preexistent church; the Marian liturgy and a growing tradition of Marian commentaries took the Song as being a dialogue between a divinized Mary and Christ upon her assumption into heaven; and Hildegard of Bingen made the brief suggestion that the Song of Songs was the song of love by Solomon when he received divine Sapientia, to whom "he spoke . . . as to a woman in the familiar language of love" (*Book of Divine Works* 5.39; translation from Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* [Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1987] 65). Particularly in the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries we see more developed interpretations of the Song as speaking of feminine divinity in such texts as the poems in stanzas by Hadewijch of Brabant (e.g., 3:44; 12:67; 25:9; etc.) or use of the Song to depict various feminine components of divinity (e.g., the Shekinah) in the *Zohar*.

[45] Brenner similarly notes the tension between the depictions of the man and woman in the Song and conceptions of God and humanity in prophetic "marriage" texts like Hosea ("To See is to Assume," 273–75). As she rightly points out, many interpreters have resolved this tension by reading the woman of the Song as more passive than she appears in the Song and the man as more powerful. Still, in reading the Song allegorically, such interpreters had to wrestle with depictions of the man and woman that did not conform with their concepts of God and humanity.

[46] For a recent intriguing proposal, see Martti Nissinen, "Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu: An Assyrian Song of Songs?" in *"Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf": Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient* (Festschrift Oswald Loretz; ed. Manfried Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998) 585–634.

[47] For suggestive speculation on some Solomonic and other elements of the Song that might have been added to the text to buttress its (already) canonical authority in early Judaism, see Magne Sæbø, "On the Canonicity of the Song of Songs," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. Michael Fox et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 267–77.

The term "theological" is used here and in the following to designate readings that see God as a character in the Song. Though the term "allegorical" is often used generally to designate such readings, it is not necessarily appropriate to early rabbinic Jewish interpretations (see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* [Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloom-

near nor explicitly coordinated with those texts (e.g., Hosea, Ezekiel) which most clearly depict the divine–human relationship as that between male and female lovers. Otherwise similar ancient Near Eastern cultic dialogues between gods and goddesses include telltale addresses to the deities by name.[48] Erotic religious literature such as the Hindu *Gita Govinda* or Rumi's mystical poetry include asides and other indicators of their divine referents.[49] The Song lacks such indicators. Moreover, though various theological interpreters have attempted to prove otherwise, the nontheological props and scenery of the Song suggest that it originally focused on human lovers.

That said, it should also be noted that the push in much modern biblical scholarship to distinguish sharply ancient theological and modern critical interpretations says more about modern interpreters than about the dynamics of the Song and its ancient interpretations. For the ancient Israelites, the jump from human male–female gender to divine–human gender was smaller than it is for us. At the same time, partly because of elements of our culture like the myth of repression, generations of biblical scholars time and again have depicted their nontheological approaches to the Song as a radical improvement over the repressed, ridiculous interpretations of their predecessors. In this respect, much critical biblical scholarship has been insufficiently critical of its own aims and categories.

In the face of this, it would be easy for specialists to renounce comment on the history of interpretation altogether. Yet to do so would be to cut biblical scholarship from a crucial dimension of the reality of the texts under study. As Kosik puts it in the quotation at the outset of this article, a "work lives to the extent it has influence" and "that which happens with the work is an expression of what the work is." In the end it was the Song of Songs read theologically and not Hosea that was preached on more often than any other OT book in the thirteenth century. It was the Song of Songs and not Jeremiah or Ezekiel that was

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ington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990] 105–15) or to tropological and other forms of interpretation of the Song that do see God or a divine element in the Song, but do not see God's people—whether the church or people of Israel—as the other main character.

[48] For example, in the dialogue of Nabû and Tašmetu linked by Nissinen to the Song of Songs ("Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu"), the gods are mentioned by name in lines 2–6, 11–12, 15, 17 and (r.) 9, 13, 15–16, 25.

[49] Notably, there is evidence that the twelfth-century Bengali poet Jayadeva in the *Gita Govinda* drew on Sanskrit courtly love poetry regarding humans to talk about devotion to Krishna, thus moving from human love poetry to divine eros. Two hundred years later, the poet Vidyāpti used the spiritual love imagery of the *Gita Govinda*—as well as legends about Krishna and Rādhā in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*—as the departure point for poems about Krishna and Rādhā as images of ideal human eros (W. G. Archer, "Introduction," in idem, *Love Songs of Vidyāpati* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1963] 23–36). Such shifts back and forth across the divine–human divide, along with examples of use of cultic love imagery in the Song of Songs (see Nissinen, "Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu") indicates how fluid ancient boundaries were between theological and nontheological use of erotic imagery.

one of the most frequently copied manuscripts of the Middle Ages.[50] It was the Song of Songs and not Proverbs, that Rabbi Akiba is reported to have described as the "holy of holies" among the writings (*m. Yad.* 3:5). In the midst of a renaissance of study of the Song of Songs in recent years, we would do well to listen attentively to such ancient readers and let our own notions of love and subjectivity be interrogated even as we interrogate theirs.

[50] Figures are from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993) 22–23 and 248–49 n. 4.