

Reading the Bible in Context

What is the Song of Songs doing in the Bible?

– A Bible-Handling Exercise –

NEITHER OUT FAR NOR IN DEEP

THE PEOPLE ALONG THE SAND ALL TURN AND LOOK ONE WAY.

THEY TURN THEIR BACK ON THE LAND. THEY LOOK AT THE SEA ALL DAY.

AS LONG AS IT TAKES TO PASS A SHIP KEEPS RAISING ITS HULL;

THE WETTER GROUND LIKE GLASS REFLECTS A STANDING GULL.

THE LAND MAY VARY MORE; BUT WHEREVER THE TRUTH MAY BE -

THE WATER COMES ASHORE, AND THE PEOPLE LOOK AT THE SEA.

THEY CANNOT LOOK OUT FAR. THEY CANNOT LOOK IN DEEP.

BUT WHEN WAS THAT EVER A BAR TO ANY WATCH THEY KEEP?

ROBERT FROST 1936

Reading the Bible in context adds to our understanding of its meaning when compared to pulling a passage out and trying to decipher its message in isolation. If we start with the assumption that all scripture is inspired of God and is fit for our understanding of God's plan of salvation for us, then Song of Songs must have a place there no less certainly than any other part of scripture. We would do well to examine its context. The following text is neither a sermon framework, nor a set of Bible-study notes, and certainly not a commentary. It makes no claim to be academic, though we shall treat evidence no less carefully. One thing we must not do is *eisegesis*, the reading of meaning *into* the poem according to our presuppositions or prejudice. Instead we must do *exegesis*, reading the meaning *out of* the poem, that is, doing correct interpretation.

One problem we face is the prevalence of certain opinion-interpretations, held with amazing force. Allegorical interpretation is one whereby the whole poem, including all its details, is taken as an extended metaphor to represent the loving relationship between God and his people, and if justified that would secure its place in Holy Scripture. Treating the Song of Songs as a sex-manual is another, even when it is used well-meaningly to advocate sexual purity and monogamy, though recently it has been used by certain New Calvinists¹ to advocate oral sex and other alternative sexual practices, not just as an option but as a must-do. But are we staring 'at the sea all day' (see Frost's poem above for his use of this figurative image) instead of looking in deeper and further, and finding a more complete interpretation that secures the place of this Song in the Old Testament?

¹ For meaning of New Calvinist, see http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html *10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now* [note: this article uses the term Neo-Calvinist incorrectly instead of New Calvinist], and Collin Hansen *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Crossway, 2008).

To start, we must insist that it speaks the same message to all people; to young adults of course, with beautiful, well-proportioned bodies such as the lovers in the Song. But it must also speak to people who are ugly or deformed, by genetic anomaly or disease; to those marred by the scars of injury or burns; to diseased people, dying people; to single people, to married, to divorced; to children, adults, aged people; to people sexually active in marriage and those not so, celibate by choice or imposition, to paraplegic and sexually impotent people who cannot enjoy sex, or those no longer interested; to the asexual,; to those who have same-sex attraction, but celibate; to all who take the Word of the living God seriously. I shall argue against the sex-manual approach below, not only, but not least, because it robs so many such 'unlovely' people of this wonderfully evocative part of scripture.

Song of Songs in Hebrew,² *Shir Hashirim*, שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים, probably means, as it would today, **loveliest of songs** or **best of all songs**. It may well be an edited compilation of up to 31 short poems. Nevertheless it stands as a single poem in its final biblical version. The language appears to be similar throughout. There are some repetitions, certainly deliberate.

To begin, we must be familiar with the book, so we would do well to read the book in one sitting, and several times. It will be helpful to start with a modern translation, and if we compare, for example, the NIV and ESV we shall notice some difficulties that the translators of the original Hebrew have had. We can also add to those the more archaic, but arguably as accurate, King James version.

Here is one way of dividing the poem into individual poem-sections, by no means definitive and not required for our interpretation. Because the Song is poetry, there is no chronology; it does not tell a story as a drama with a beginning and an end. That is not the point. It tells a single story of love between a lover and his beloved, with no time-line, but it does have a number of themes and, as we shall see, a consummation towards the end.

1:1	Title
1:2-4	The beloved remembers her lover
1:5-6	The rustic charms of the beloved
1:7-8	The beloved seeks her lover
1:9-2:7	Lovers' dialogue
2:8-14	The springtide of love
2:16-3:5	The beloved speaks of her lover and dreams of love
3:6-11	An image of the coming of the bridegroom
4:1-4:15	The lover admires his beloved's beauty
4:16-5:1	Together in the garden of love
5:2-6:3	More reveries and dreams of the beloved
6:4-10	The uniqueness of the beloved in the eyes of the lover
6:11-12	Surprised by love
6:13-7:9	In praise of the beloved
7:10-13	The beloved responds
8:1-4	Love song of the bride
8:5-7	The bride's hymn to love (the climax)
8:8-13	Reflections

² Where Hebrew words are inserted into the text they are in **purple colour** in the online version of this paper and read right to left. Some pointings may not be correct because of the way I have lifted them out of Hebrew text. Please forgive. I am indebted to Hebraists far better than I am, for all my comments on the Hebrew.

A comprehensive familiarity with the text should give us the setting in which we unfold the intended meaning. It will give us an overview before exploring its place in the Bible as a whole, the detail of the book and the truths it contains. We shall do this by trying to handle the context appropriately. By context we include:

- Biblical context
- Historical context
- Literary context, bearing in mind that it is unquestionably a poem, not narrative prose
- Linguistic context, including the meaning of idiom, remembering by the way that we must be careful not to over-interpret
- Geographic context, including the meaning of place names, and human geography
- Nature context, meaning the context of the natural world as described in the poem
- Cultural context, including the meaning of name and soul to the Hebrew people, and taking into account the Hebrew mind-set
- Theological context.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Song of Songs was adopted into the Hebrew canon well before Christ but the date is not known, though it was controversial amongst Jews until 2nd century A.D. At one time Jews were not permitted to read it before age 30 or marriage. Song of Songs has taken its place in the Christian canon since the Bible as we know it now was compiled. Although there was some early debate about its suitability, possibly because of its (arguably) apparent erotic nature, its value as part of the Word of God for us has not since been questioned. The Hebrew canon, the *Tanakh*,³ was, in the early centuries A.D., identical to the Christian Old Testament except for the order of the books. Song of Songs was one of five 'scrolls' in the Hebrew canon in the category of 'writings', the others being Ruth, Esther, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes, and Song is sung at Passover, indicating its relevance to the loving, redeeming nature of Yahweh and to the principle of deliverance, redemption and peace. We shall return to this theme later. Esther is unique among the books of the Bible in that it never mentions the name of God (though some have found Yahweh in obscure acrostics). Song of Songs comes close with one peripheral mention, but significant nonetheless, as we shall see later.

Even before the Christian canon was compiled Hebrew clerics were advocating an allegorical interpretation, that is, of Yahweh's relationship to his people, the Israelites. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the name of Yahweh never appears. Nevertheless, Yahweh is present in this Song.

Song of Songs refers to no other biblical text, nor is it referenced itself anywhere in the Old or New Testaments. Not all scholars have placed Song in the wisdom literature. Nevertheless one of the other four scrolls is Ecclesiastes which, along with Proverbs, also in the writings (*khetibim*), is associated with Solomon (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are categorised as wisdom literature by biblical scholars), and the title of Song does associate the Song with Solomon. Proverbs has a short passage, Proverbs 5:15-20, which advocates faithful, monogamous sexual intimacy rather than promiscuity, and which shares some linguistic style with Song:

³ 'Tanakh', T for Torah (law), N for Nebi'im (prophets), Kh for Khetibim (the writings).

Proverbs 5:1-19 *My son, pay attention to my wisdom ...³ For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil ...⁵ Her feet go down to death ...⁷ Now then my sons listen to me ...⁹ lest you lose your honour ...¹⁵ Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. ¹⁶ Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? ¹⁷ Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. ¹⁸ May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. ¹⁹ A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. (NIV)⁴*

The metaphorical treatment of water and associated words in v.16,18 by some as semen and ejaculation is perverse. Leaving aside the provocative and gratuitous nature of this interpretation, it does not make sense to change the way 'water' functions in the figure from its usage in v.15. Verses 15-18 are a single figure meaning 'Have sexual intimacy with your own wife, and no other'. Misuse of metaphor is the beginning of inappropriate allegory.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although there is little historical context, we can note that, although modern scholarship denies that Solomon did write this, or even draft it for later editing, the Song does refer to him as though he is important (1:1,5; 3:7-11; 8:11-12), even though he is never stated to be an actual character within the Song. Song of Songs 8:11-12 probably references Solomon's undoubted attraction to the opposite sex and his attendant needs, and he is hardly the subject of praise here. *Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon; he let out his vineyard to keepers. Baal means lord and hamon crowd, or something similar.*⁵ Ba'al-hamōn here reflects Solomon's need for a huge harem, and his philandering, compared to the lovers' faithful monogamous love. The wedding procession with the arrival of King Solomon in his palanquin is clearly dream fantasy.

There is a very old interpretation of Song that has the two lovers to be a shepherd boy and a shepherdess who are in love; but the shepherdess is wooed by King Solomon and taken away to court, pursued by the shepherd boy. The shepherdess stays faithful to the boy, doesn't give in to the temptations of Solomon, who eventually gives in and allows the two to return home. It's very interesting, as it explains the pastoral scene of the poem, and has Solomon in a bad light. There is, however, no historical basis for this, and it is unnecessary for our interpretation. It appears that this interpretation is being embraced again by modern New Calvinists who over-sexualise the poem.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Song of Songs is indisputably a poem. Most scholars agree that it is a collection of poems edited into a whole which arguably flows from beginning to end without interruption. Not everyone agrees where one original poem ends and another begins, or even who the speakers are, as evidenced by the supplied headings in the different translations. What is clear, though, is that it is a single poem as it stands in its final version. It cannot be broken up again.

⁴ All Bible quotes are from ESV, English Standard Version unless otherwise stated. KJV is King James Version 1769; NIV is New International Version 1984.

⁵ There is no place called Ba'al-hamōn elsewhere in the Bible. Ba'al means Lord or owner; hamōn appears in 1 Samuel 14:19 and Isaiah 13:4 where it is translated as a tumultuous crowd.

The poem has no plot nor much of a framework, except that the first verse is the title, the next few verses serve as a prologue introducing the theme of urgent longing, 1:4, *draw me after you; let us run*, and the anticipated enjoyment, *The king has brought me into his chambers*; the last few verses serve as an epilogue after the climax. Attempts to find a chiasmic structure have had no agreed success. In a chiasm the apex of the passage is in the middle. Some have found a climax at the very centre of the Song, at 4:16-5:1, where a Hebrew line-count shows 111 lines before and after these two verses. An allegorical interpretation is that the couple are making love (... *let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choicest fruits ... I have come into my garden ...*), but again this is unnecessarily sensational: the figure here may convey no more than 'let my beloved find the object of his desire in me'. In any case the lover has just spent several verses describing his beloved in totality as a garden. I, therefore, choose not to allegorise like this. If the apex of a book or passage is the most important or significant sentence, then to find sexual intercourse there makes the presumption that an over-sexualised interpretation of Song has already been incontrovertibly established. In any case it is part of a dreamy sequence which occupies the whole of the middle of the poem; we find instead a climax at 8:5-7 as we shall see later.

There is dialogue, soliloquy, dream, reverie with an imagined wedding procession and other scenes, pastoral and seasonal imagery in the Song. The whole poem has a dream-like quality suggesting perhaps that the poem is the work of someone who has known near-perfect love such as is rendered here, and is expressing it as a series of reveries, but who knows also that there is a greater, perfect love to be found by those who seek, a love founded upon Yahweh himself and related to peace and rest, as I seek to demonstrate below. If I am right, then the characters can be considered as ideal renderings of this perfect loving couple, and, by a 'trajectory extension' which I shall justify below, Song may be considered a picture of the ideal perfect loving relationship between Yahweh and his people when they find their rest consummated in him.

Poetry can take many forms. There are narrative poems which have characters and time-lines, such as Reynard the Fox, but perhaps in this case there is a collection of themes without a time-line, and perhaps even without real persons. Even if there is a time-line of, say, a couple in love, courting then marrying, the time-line might have been rearranged in the poem so that important concepts are poetically emphasised, rather than events. If the poem is allegorised as a sex-manual or as an account of a sequence of sexual acts, then its place in holy scripture would be highly debatable.

A feature of the poetry is the presence of noun pairs, often as similes. 1:12-13, *king at his table, perfume spread its fragrance, my beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh*; 1:10, *cheeks beautiful with earrings, neck with strings of jewels*; 2:1, *rose of Sharon, lily of the valleys*; 4:1-3, *your hair is like a flock of goats ... lips like a scarlet ribbon*; 4:11, *Your lips drop sweetness* (literally *honey from the honeycomb* as in KJV); 5:11-13, *head is purest gold ... cheeks like beds of spice*; 2:2, *As a lily among brambles* (there is only one woman for him who evokes his love; she replies likewise in 2:3, *as an apple tree among the trees of the forest*), and countless others. Or noun-verb phrases: 1:7, *where you graze your flock, where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?*; 2:3, *I delight to sit in his shade, his fruit is sweet to my taste*; 2:8, *leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills*; 2:17 & 4:6, *Until the day breaks, and the shadows flee* (all NIV); 2:4, *He brought me to the banqueting house,⁶ and his banner over me was love*; 1:17, *the*

⁶ Banquet hall is literally house of wine, fitting with the vineyard theme elsewhere.

*beams of our house are cedars, our rafters are pine*⁷ (this may be figurative – their relationship is the best it can be).

An interesting poetic technique is the interjection of the refrain, first in 2:7, twice later in 3:5 and 8:4, a mechanism to halt the rising emotional tension. *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*⁸ The poet disallows progression of this thought and does not pursue into the narrow straits of solely sexual language when the maiden has been dreaming, longing to consummate their love by marriage. I shall return to this in the theological context section. Notice that *charge* (NIV, KJV) or *adjure* (ESV) has legalistic overtones – she is really asking them to take an oath, so committed is she (or the poet) to going no further than intimate closeness.

Some of the poetry is exquisitely beautiful. 1:9-14, *I liken you, my darling, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariot horses. Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,⁹ your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver. While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi* (NIV). We don't need to be embarrassed by breasts here – 'my beloved near to me is a sweet-smelling nose-gay'.

Even more expressive is 2:8-14, *Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle¹⁰ or a young [hart, my suggestion]. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.¹¹ My beloved spoke and said to me, Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter¹² is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig-tree forms its early fruit;¹³ the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me* (NIV). The imagery here is a springtide of love.

The powerful passage 3:6-11, beginning *What is that coming up from the wilderness ...*, appears to represent the coming of the bridegroom, though this is not specified.¹⁴ No marriage actually occurs, though some commentators say so (and say that the following passage 4:1-16 is the wedding night, though nothing implies that either). It is reverie, imagination. Note, the preceding verse, 3:5, is the refrain which is to halt the emotional tension. Smoke is dust. The *What* expresses wonder. *Who* in NIV is weaker.

⁷ These woods (pine may be juniper) were used for palace panelling.

⁸ Line 2 of this refrain is absent from 8:4.

⁹ Note, 'earrings' NIV may not be right; the word is a plait of something, KJV 'rows of jewels ... chains of gold ... borders of gold with studs of silver'.

¹⁰ The Hebrew word translated gazelle is apparently not known elsewhere and its meaning is unknown. Gazelle is a guess, but it fits.

¹¹ Note, no glass in the windows!

¹² Winter is the rainy season in the Middle East. This is the only use of this word in the OT.

¹³ Figs form flowers first, then a first crop of fruit before leaves. A second crop comes later.

¹⁴ In 3:9 the carriage is palanquin in RSV, 'appiryon, a Greek loan-word in Hebrew.

It has been said that the best interpretation of the Song might be no interpretation at all; that is, to let it speak simply as a poem. But I shall suggest below that we can find greater riches than just that.

LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

Some Hebrew scholars believe that the writing is late, northern Hebrew, based on the perceived influence of Aramaic and the presence of some foreign words, e.g. *pardes* פָּרְדֵּס, which means enclosed garden or reserve or park, but translated as *orchard*, in 4:13 (another instance of *orchard*, in 6:11, is a different word which also means garden, *ginnah* גִּנָּה).¹⁵ *Pardes* is of Persian origin (we get *Paradise* from it via Greek); *pardes* also appears in Nehemiah and Ecclesiastes, both thought by many to be later books. Another foreign word is *'appiryon* אַפְרִיּוֹן, for *carriage*, in 3:9, from Greek.

Other scholars suggest that the first occurrence of *Solomon's* in 1:1, that is, the *'s* (*apostrophe-s*), is different from others and introduces ambiguity (as in the English) and may not suggest *by*, rather perhaps *for*, or *appurtenant to*, Solomon. Other instances of *'s* (other than *Solomon's* in 1:1) are in a Hebrew which is apparently later according to some scholars. For example, in 3:7 Solomon's couch is *shel.li.shlomoh* שֶׁלִּישְׁלֹמֹה which means *of Solomon*. 1:1, though, simply reads "(The) Song of Songs which (is) to/for/of/pertinent to Solomon", שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה. Solomon's name appears six times in the poem but he is never there in person.

One difficulty of the language for western readers is that Hebrew syntax often allows a variety of interpretation of translation. The translators of NIV and ESV have helpfully inserted pronouns to aid our understanding, though they do not always agree! A Jewish reader of the original Hebrew would doubtless have had less difficulty than us in knowing who was 'speaking' in some instances, but there may be ambiguity even to the Hebrew reader.¹⁶

Some passages have been interpreted by some as implicitly sexual, though this is never a required interpretation. 1:4, *brought me into his chambers*, does not have to imply bedroom let alone 'to have sex'; it is a courtly figure. *My vineyard* in 1:6 most likely means her maturing as a person towards marriageable status in adolescence, rather than her sex life; thus it would read: *'until now I have worked for my brothers; but now I hope to be set free by marriage to my love'*. 2:9, *stag*, might be better *hind* or *hart*; nothing sexual is implied by *stag*. 2:15, *Catch the foxes for us ... that spoil the vineyards ... that are in blossom* is simply figurative for anything that might spoil their relationship.

The dance of Mahanaim is a problem that we can solve easily. 6:13,¹⁷ *Return, return, O Shulammitte, return, return that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulammitte, as upon a dance before two armies?* (ESV; NIV and ASV have *dance of Mahanaim*, KJV as *it were the company of two armies*, Darby *dance of two camps*; better might be *before the army encampment*). The two

¹⁵ Elsewhere in Song, e.g. at 4:12 'garden', 8 times, is *gan* גַּן, the masculine equivalent of the feminine *ginnah* גִּנָּה. Note that the 'garden' of Eden was *gan* too.

¹⁶ Some linguistic details deserve mention. 1:4, *how right they are*, (NIV; ESV *rightly*) might better be *uprightly*. In 1:6, *My mother's sons were angry with me*, *angry* might be too rough; *angry* is really *scorched* perhaps alluding to the sunburn, and might be idiomatic *persuaded me to*. The word occurs as a noun in Job 39:20 and Jeremiah 8:16 where 'snort' is used. 3:1, *All night long ...* (NIV): *night* is plural and so this should be *Night after night* or *Every night* (ESV has *by night*): she is dreaming (day-dreaming or sleep dreaming) of being close to him.

¹⁷ 6:13 is 7:1 in the Hebrew, and verses are incremented by 1 in ch. 7 in Hebrew.

words used in the Hebrew are *meholah* מְחֹלָה (dance), and *maḥanayim*, a dual plural form of *maḥaneh* מַחֲנֶה, which means ‘army encampment’. Mahanaim is also a place name near the river Jabbok where David fled from Absalom, and named for the camp. It is entirely possible that this dance refers to that of ‘exotic’ dancers provided for camp ‘entertainment’ and might have been, shall we say, X-rated. The Shulammitte’s¹⁸ reply is simply, ‘Why look upon the Shulammitte as if she were a stripper dancing before the army encampment’, equivalent to ‘No I am not coming back to be looked upon like a stripper’. There is one recent suggestion that this is a biblical justification for stripping, in marriage only. But this is bizarre, and special pleading, given that there is no hint of positive affirmation of stripping here.

Given that the poem is unambiguously about love, we would do well to look at the words rendered ‘love’. There are three. First, *’ahavah* אָהָבָה (and related words likewise), is translated ‘love’ and is used in the recurring refrain, ... *do not awaken love* ..., and variously throughout the poem including 2:4, *his banner over me was love*; 1:7, ... *my soul loves* ... and elsewhere; 2:5, ... *sick with love* ... and elsewhere; but especially in the hymn to love (8:6-7), ... *love is strong as death* ... *Many waters cannot quench love* ... *If a man offered for love* The word is used of God’s love for his people, e.g. Deuteronomy 7:8, ... *because the LORD loved you* It is also the word used in Proverbs 5:19 quoted above (... *a lovely deer* ... *be intoxicated always in her love*). Secondly, there is the word *ra’yah* רַעֲיָה, translated (*my*) *love* or (*my*) *darling* frequently in the poem, e.g. at 2:2,10. Thirdly, there is *dōd*¹⁹ דּוֹד, translated *beloved* where there is sometimes a hint of sexuality implied, e.g. 4:16, *Let my beloved come to his garden*. It is used along with *’ahavah* in 5:8, *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem if you find my beloved (dōd), that you tell him I am sick with love (’ahavah)*. Interestingly, *dōd* is very closely related to *David*, and, in this poem, to the word for the mandrake plant (7:13), the love-apple, *duday*, which has supposed aphrodisiac properties.

Much of the writing is pastoral in nature. Some scholars suggest that it is not the language of the court, so that the scene is one of love between peasants, where the maiden sees her beloved as king, rather than love between the king (perhaps Solomon) and a chosen concubine. The lover is clearly a shepherd (1:7, *Tell me, you whom my soul loves [’ahavah], where you pasture your flock* ...) and the beloved works in the family vineyard (1:6, ... *made me keeper of the vineyards*). Nevertheless there are some courtly scenes and themes as well as urban scenes in reverie and dream sequences (1:4, *The king has brought me into his chambers* ...; 1:12, *While the king was on his couch* ...; 1:17, *the beams of our house* ... *our rafters* ...; 2:4, *banqueting house*; 3:3, *The watchmen found me as they went about in the city* ..., and again 5:7, where this time they beat her and take her cloak).²⁰ More important are the frequent references to the Daughters of Jerusalem, eight in all including the three in the refrains. On the earlier theory that the lover is Solomon and the beloved is a girl in his court, then these women would be her close associates and guardians, or chaperones. More likely, they are invoked because they are *not* from the country; they are hypothetical courtly women who would be antagonistic as in 1:5,6, *Do not gaze at me because I am dark*, and who would be challenged as in

¹⁸ It is possible that it is the male voice speaking here, or the poet inserting a rhetorical question, but it makes no difference to the construct.

¹⁹ The ‘o’ here is a long ‘o’, and in fact it is formed using the same consonant as the ‘v’ in David. Both these words are in fact *dwd* דוּד when the vowel points are omitted.

²⁰ The watchmen would be on the lookout for prostitutes and perhaps this image is what is in the mind of the dreamer.

5:8, *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love*, and 5:16, *This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem*. This is in the dream after the battery by the watchmen. When the beloved says 1:3, ... *therefore virgins love you ...*, she is not referring to these courtly women, but to her country folk.

GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Although the author is acquainted with all of Israel and Judah, there is a predominance of northern places mentioned, suggesting to some that its authorship, or at least its final version, is not only later than Solomon, but northern. Examples are Lebanon, Sharon (a coastal plain in the north-west, south of Lebanon), Amana, Senir, Hermon, Tirzah (means *delight*, once capital of the northern kingdom and invoked in 6:4 as equal to Jerusalem: *You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my love, lovely as Jerusalem*), Kedar, Damascus, Carmel, and Gilead (6:5). Engedi is an exception, further south on the western side of the Dead Sea between Masada and Qumran, though that place was renowned for its wildflowers (and still is – there is a nature reserve there now). Gilead is a hilly region to the East of the Jordan river. *Goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead* (4:1) is a perfect image.

The possibility that the beloved is Solomon's first wife, Abishag the Shunammite, is weak. Nothing else fits. Shunam is a place, Shulam is not, according to scholars, and she is indisputably *the Shulammite* in the Song (see later).

Turning to human geography the Song has some indoor and outdoor town scenes. The locations are unspecified. There is a contrast between the safety and security of indoors (the chambers, the table, banqueting hall, latticed windows, mother's house) and the menacing, dark streets and squares and walls where the maiden dreams of disdain, hostility, and battery.

NATURE CONTEXT

A straight reading of this poem cannot but show how it exudes nature. The poet is in love with this pastoral and cultivated land. There is natural beauty at almost every turn; *grazing pastures* (1:7-8), *vineyards* (1:6; 2:15; 7:12), *fountains* (4:12), *gardens* (4:12,15,16; 6:2; 8:13), *orchards* (4:14; 6:11), *wells* (4:15).

By way of animals we have *sheep* and *goats* (both valuable herding animals) (1:7-8; 4:1-2; 6:5), *gazelles* (2:7,9,17; 3:5; 4:5; 8:14 – the meaning of the Hebrew is unknown here; gazelles is perhaps a guess; many wild animals in the middle-east in this time are now extinct there, including the *lions* and *leopards* of Chapter 4), *does* (2:7; 3:5), *stag* (2:9,17; 8:14 – perhaps *hind* would be better), *fawns* (4:5; 7:3), *doves* (1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2,12; 6:9), *raven* (5:11).

By way of plants we have *henna blossom* (1:14), *myrrh* (1:13), *cedar* and *fir* (1:17, perhaps juniper), also *wood from Lebanon* (3:9), *rose of Sharon* (2:1, also found in Isaiah 35:1, actually an autumn crocus – the Israelites would have identified this easily as a beautiful wildflower in spring), *lily* (2:2,16; 5:13; 6:2-3, actually an anemone and the same as the lilies of the field in the N.T.), *apple* (2:3), *raisins* (2:5), *fig* (2:13, which forms early fruit before coming into leaf, and a later crop), *pomegranate* (6:7,11; 7:12), *mandrake* (7:13), *spice* (4:14; 6:2), *nard* (4:13), *calamus*, *cinnamon* and *saffron* (4:14), *myrrh* and *aloes* (4:14). Note the fragrance and sweetness of many of these. Myrrh, frankincense and nard are tree or shrub resins with beautiful fragrance when burned. Frankincense and myrrh were

once as valuable as gold. *Honeycomb* and *honey* add to the *sweetness*, and *milk* and *wine* (4:10; 5:1). *Sweetness* occurs 4 times, *perfume* 3 times, *fragrance* 9 times (approximately, depending on the translation). *Silver & gold, leather* (the latter might be a better translation of *upholstered in purple*) (3:10), *jewels* (1:9; 5:14), *ivory* (5:14), *marble* (5:15) add to the magnificence of more courtly scenes.

Emerging Spring is prominent; 2:11-13, *See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig-tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me* (NIV), a magnificent lyric, oozing the spring-tide of love. Likewise daybreak or dawn; 2:17, *Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle*; 4:6, *Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense*; 6:10, *Who is this who looks down like the dawn*.

Before we turn to the human form, we might note that although we have a pastoral scene, it is not all serene. Agricultural and cultivated scenes, walled gardens²¹ and orchards, vineyards and pastures have a feeling of security as well as beauty and serenity. But there is a wild side with remote, rugged hills and cleft rocks, steep mountainsides, mountain peaks, lions' dens, scorching sun and flood. There are foxes (possibly jackals) and thorns. There is a hint of danger here, though the language is "come away" to security. Lions and leopards (4:8), now extinct there, of course, signify here the remoteness, ruggedness and danger of the imaginary place from which the maiden must travel into the arms of her beloved.²²

We have body parts, all spoken of in a positive way as alluding to beauty. We have *head, hair, face, eyes, cheeks, nose, mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, neck, torso, breasts, heart, navel, arms, hand, fingers, feet, legs, thighs*, all mentioned as of great value. Note, there is no mention of genitalia, even obscurely, unless, as some have suggested, you equate 'lips' with 'labia' and the 'garden' and 'navel' as 'vagina';²³ I can see absolutely no justification for doing so. I wonder if this idea might better be termed *eisegesis* – bringing a preconceived notion to the text instead of finding what is *in* the text. This prompts the further question, "In what sort of mind did that preconceived notion find its genesis?" There is nothing below the navel, nothing above the thigh. Genitalia, we might note, whilst part of God's good creation, get scarce attention in the Bible, and where they are mentioned it can appear quite negative.²⁴ See Ezekiel 23:20, ... *whose members [genitals] were like those of donkeys*

²¹ The Hebrew words *gan* and *ginnah* generally signify a walled garden.

²² *Depart* 4:8 (ESV), *descend* (NIV), or *look* (KJV), might be better *journey*.

²³ The Hebrew word for 'navel' in 7:2, *shorer* שֹׁרֵר, is used only this once in the O.T., and is translated 'omphalos' (umbilicus = navel) in the Greek Septuagint translation of the 3rd century B.C., but a closely related word is indisputably 'umbilical cord' in Ezekiel 16:4, ... *your cord was not cut* ...; one preacher insists that 7:2 is the most mistranslated verse ever, and that the word means the vulva of a sexually aroused woman. This is perverse.

²⁴ But importantly, we insist that the human genitalia are in no way 'gross' in themselves (against disdainful claims by some that certain Christians do so think), just as we insist that sex is not 'gross', nor, taking another example, the human body's waste disposal systems. All these things are wonderful gifts of God's creation. Sex in particular is astounding in its brilliantly conceived divine creation, in its capacity to express intimacy in marriage in a context of exquisite pleasure, and in its procreative function. Within God's boundaries for godliness it is terrific. Nevertheless, these things are assumed in scripture, but are not 'talked up' in the Bible in the way that the sex-manual advocates imagine, as instanced by a sermon on Song I heard recently in which the word 'sex' was used 70 times in 30 minutes. 1 Corinthians 12:22-24 illustrates this point, that certain aspects of creation are not generally meant to be talked about much or immodestly.

and whose issue [ejaculations] was like that of horses. Why this base statement? Because, in context, it reflects the absolute abhorrence of the living God to the way the Israelites were following the pagan practices of foreign peoples (Egypt in this case but also Assyrians, Babylonians and Chaldeans), that is, prostituting themselves. See also how Ezekiel 23:26-27, *They shall strip you of your clothes and take away your beautiful jewels. Thus I shall put an end to your lewdness and your whoring,* is antithetical to the spirit of Song of Songs. This is the absolute opposite of the love in this poem which is portrayed as ideal love. The lack of any reference to genitalia in Song is in line with the lack of positive reference to genitalia anywhere in the O.T. It would be out of the spirit of Song of Songs to look for hidden references, e.g. *my fingers dripped with myrrh* (5:5 – *semen*, according to some sex-manual protagonists); such analysis cannot be compatible with the Song's place in scripture.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

The persons, if indeed they represent actual persons, are not identifiable.

Men would wear perfume in that culture (1:3, *pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes*, NIV). In 1:5, *black I am but lovely* (NIV), the implication is that she might not be as lovely as a pale woman, because pallor was then, and still is today (often called blonde when in English), the preferred appearance. She claims that she is indeed lovely, albeit suntanned. There is no need to infer that she is insecure in this state.

There is no need to be embarrassed by the allusion to a horse, 1:9, *I liken you, my darling, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariot horses* (NIV); horses were prized animals then. Solomon had apparently introduced them to Judah from Egypt in the 10th century B.C., 1 Kings 10:28. The Hittites had previously brought them from what is now Turkey into Egypt when they invaded in 13th century B.C. A mare among the chariot horses would have been the best among the best. Similarly, 4:2, *Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes* is hardly complimentary to modern Western ears, but we must assume that in Hebrew culture then it was so – she has a full set of white teeth, upstairs and down (the twins).

Shulammite (actually *the* Shulammite), used for the maiden only once in 6:13, does not refer to a place (as it carries the definite article), and since it only occurs once, we can say that it is a descriptor rather than a name. It is a feminine word and is derived from the same root as *shalom* (*shlm*), peace. Perhaps we should render it 'O one of peace'.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Let us pause for a moment. We have seen that this great poem is indeed the most sublime of songs. It is a romantic fantasy that extols ideal human male-female love where emotions run high but are checked three times by the refrain inserted by the poet.²⁵ The characters are unknown – there is no internal or historical evidence that Solomon is there in person, though his renown is alluded to as well as his philandering. Perhaps he is there as a reference point for both magnificence in one sense, and discredit in another, but shortly I shall suggest that the concept of 'peace' also explains the reference to his name in the Song. The song is arguably late in its final version, perhaps a few

²⁵ 2:7; 3:5; 8:4, *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.* See Literary section above.

centuries before Christ. It has no plot or framework simply because it is a poem. Most importantly it portrays two lovers in exquisite poetic language whose love for each other is ideal, perfect, despite dangers and traps, tensions and struggles, conflict and stress that lurk in their way. It exudes the northern Jewish setting its pastoral nature. It alludes to longing for union and togetherness as the consummation of their love, but sexual activity is absent, as is any reference to an extravagant wedding ceremony for them. What is present, from beginning to the end of the poem, is intimacy. The nature context is used as metaphor for this intimacy or closeness, the sense of longing to be with and enjoy each other. Metaphors for this intimacy abound in Ch. 4: *You have captivated my heart* (ESV),²⁶ and the use of *sister* and *brother* in 4:9; 8:1.

There have been many attempts to 'interpret' this song, or poem. Allegory has been suggested both by the Jews since the Christian era (and even earlier according to the Mishnah), and by Christian fathers since the early centuries, perhaps starting with Hippolytus and the great allegoriser, Origen. Allegory is defined as a rhetorical device in the form of an extended metaphor where characters and objects are given hidden meanings. Allegory has been widely used in art and literature. Not all imaginative fairy-tales are allegory, such as the Wizard of Oz and Lord of the Rings. Others are, such as the Narnia books where Aslan the lion represents Jesus Christ, and Animal Farm where the pigs represent political figures in the Soviet Union. Many interpreters, who do not wish to see God speaking of human intimacy, favour the Song as an allegory conveying mystical and spiritual meanings. Jewish scholars before the Christian era pictured Yahweh as the male lover and Israel as the maiden. Many Christian commentators from the early fathers such as Origen (b. 185 A.D., 'It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium [a marriage song] ... and burning with heavenly love', where Christ is the groom and the church the bride, the 'burning' coming from the supposed erotic imagery), and Augustine (b. 354 A.D.), through St Bernard of Clairvaux (b. 1090 A.D., in eighty-six *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum*) to some modern scholars favour the allegorical interpretation.

Typically they take the bridegroom to be Christ and the Church as his bride, with abundant noun-objects in the Song representing spiritual truths. Such interpretation is subjective and therefore unfalsifiable, but varying widely between commentators. Within these interpretations we have the breasts as the two pillars of the tabernacle enclosing the fragrance of His presence, the dove as the Holy Spirit; the garden is the church, lilies are Christ's truth and goodness. *I am black but comely* (KJV) means *I am sinful but redeemed* (or to the Jews, *I am sinful, but comely on Yom Kippur*). Such allegory has reached, at times, absurd proportions, eliminating all suggestions of real love between a man and a woman, or any interaction at all. Most modern scholars reject such an approach, as do I, and we shall not take it further. It is not just the extreme detail of the allegory that we reject, but the allegory itself, where this rejects any actual content that celebrates and longs for the intimacy of real human love; but see shortly for a *typological* interpretation which commences with this latter face-value interpretation, but sees also the beginning of a trajectory towards a final fulfilment in Christ – as with every Old Testament text. Modern attempts to re-introduce a sexual interpretation are themselves doing allegory, or at least highly contrived metaphor and euphemism. There seems to be confusion between idiom and metaphor, also between parable and allegory. For example, Isaiah 5:1-7 has been

²⁶ *ravished* KJV, *stolen* NIV means literally *become enheartened*, a verb derived from *heart*.

described as allegory (with a vineyard), justifying the idea that the Bible supports allegory, but it is actually parable.²⁷

I have suggested that the Song reaches a climax towards the end. Here it is, Song of Songs 8:5-7:

Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labour with you; there she who bore you was in labour. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.

We might note that the Song has suddenly turned from reverie to a reflective style, and that the love between the lovers is almost symmetrical, but not quite. In chapter 2 she is sitting in his shade. Here she is leaning upon his breast. The bride is content to lean on the bridegroom and entreat him to seal their union in the sense of ownership. The poem's climax cannot be thought of sexually. It is, rather, the perfect union, togetherness, and companionship that the longing of the poem leads to as a natural course, as exemplified by the refrain in the preceding verse. In the following epilogue (8:8-14) a flashback (v.8,9) to the maiden's childhood, put into the words of her brothers, provides a fitting prelude to the maiden's claim (v.10) to be both mature and chaste, and then the bridegroom returns to the vineyard theme to claim his bride (v.11-13: surely it is he, not she, despite the voices of the ESV and NIV translators, who is saying in v.12, *My vineyard, my very own, is before me?*).²⁸ The final verse, in the voice of the maiden, as was the first, combines cleverly the words of longing, now fulfilled (2:9,17; 4:6). Using Solomon's vineyard as a comparison, possibly one known to be prosperous, where the keepers had to hand over 1000 pieces of silver from the produce, keeping 200 for themselves, the lover is saying, "Solomon, you can keep your vineyard and all the wealth from it – you're welcome to it. I am not envious, for I have a 'vineyard' of my own which is abundantly

²⁷ An example of extreme allegory from the church fathers is **Augustine's Commentary on the Good Samaritan** in Luke 10:29-37: 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies [Other church fathers: Jericho=the world]. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality [Other fathers: and the robe of innocence]; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love [Love God; love your neighbour], or the promise of this life and of that which is to come [Other church fathers: the old and new covenants or (Irenaeus) the Father and the Son]. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the gospel".' [Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II, 19 – slightly abridged as cited in C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961), p. 1-2].

²⁸ In the context of the comparison between Solomon and the lover, it makes sense that it is he who is speaking here, but the meaning is much the same if it is the beloved.

satisfying to me – it’s worth all the riches in the world to me.” He may well have simply had Solomon’s harem in mind.

We also need to note that the Name of God never appears in this poem, except once, peripherally, in the phrase, 8:6, *like a mighty flame, the very flame of Yah* (‘shal.hebeth.yah’, שְׁלֵהֶבֶתֶיָּהּ). Here, Yah is a suffix to the word for flame, and is a shortened form of the great covenant saviour-name of God, יהוה Yahweh.²⁹ The shortened form *Yah* rarely occurs on its own, 44 times in the Old Testament (Yahweh occurs more than 5,000 times), always in poetry, e.g. in Isaiah 12:2 (the song of salvation) as *Yah Yahweh*,³⁰ but it is common as a suffix, often in a name, e.g. Elijah (my God is Yahweh), or prefix, e.g. Yeshua (Joshua). In NIV and KJV the translation of *shal.hebeth.yah* disappointingly lacks God’s name – it is rendered *mighty* or *vehement flame*. ESV says *flame of the LORD*. The appearance of Yah here cannot be incidental. We are right at the very climax of the song where she is now actually leaning on his shoulder and entreating him to seal their love in the union and companionship of marriage. The name of Yahweh is frequently associated in the O.T. with fire and flame, with love and jealousy, and so here we have a hint that the perfect love of the lovers has a match in heaven. The word *jealousy*, qin’ah קִנְיָהּ, is closely linked to *jealous*, qanna קָנָא, which is only used five times in the Bible, and of Yahweh only, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example Deuteronomy 4:23,24, *Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD [Yahweh] your God is a consuming fire a jealous God.* And Exodus 34:14, *for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.* Thus, Yahweh is definitely in this Song and He is here at its climax. Jealous does not mean envious (a modern error); it means that God loves his people so much that he is possessive of them despite their apostasy.

Name is very important to the Hebrews. Your name represents who you are, what you are, your character, your behaviour and what you do. The greatest example of this, of course, is the very name of God himself, ‘I am’³¹ which means equally ‘I shall be’ or ‘I shall do’ (being and doing are integrated in the Hebrew mindset), meaning ‘I shall do what I do’, which in the context means ‘I shall deliver my people’, hence the covenant name of God, Yahweh, means Saviour God. Remember that we have

²⁹ Yahweh is the generally agreed pronunciation of the Hebrew name יהוה, or יְהוָה as it is rendered in the Masoretic text, which occurs more than 5,000 times in the OT. The pointings in this word indicate this pronunciation. It is arguably better to write it without the pointings thus: יהוה. The Masoretic Jews in the middle ages were guardians of Hebrew pronunciation but because the great name of God was not supposed to be spoken they deliberately gave a pronunciation based on the pronunciation of another name Adonai (meaning Lord or Master), by putting the pointings of Adonai on to the consonants YHWH, giving Yehowah יְהוָה rendered in KJV (sometimes) and other Bible translations as ‘Jehovah’.

³⁰ Also Isaiah 26:4, *Yah Yahweh*, rendered ‘for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength’ KJV; Isaiah 38:11 *Yah Yah* rendered ‘the LORD, even the LORD’ KJV; Exodus 15:2, *The LORD is my strength and my song* KJV & ESV; Exodus 17:16, *Yah*, rendered *the LORD*, followed by a *Yahweh*, also rendered *the LORD*; Psalms 68:4, *Yah*, rendered ‘by his name JAH’ KJV (*LORD* elsewhere); and many other psalms.

³¹ Reducing the biblical ‘I am’, or ‘I am who I am’ (Exodus 3:14, John 8:58), to a mere existential statement of ‘being’, though common even today, shows an unfortunate dependence upon western philosophy, and completely misses the influence of the Hebrew mind-set in its emphasis on ‘character’ and function. To the Hebrew it is the ‘does-ness’ of a person, not their ‘is-ness’ that is crucially important. ‘I am who I am’, in context, means ‘I am your saviour, I shall deliver you’. Jesus’ use of ‘I am’ then speaks for itself.

already noted that Song is read at Passover, the Jewish remembrance of deliverance.³² Joshua means 'Yahweh is saviour', and there are many other examples. In Song of Songs, note, *your name is like perfume* (NIV, *oil* ESV) *poured out* (1:3); note also here, that the peasant shepherd is a king to his beloved (1:4). This is the only instance of *name* in Song, though, of course, we don't know his name. So *your name is like ...* means *you, the one I love, are like ...*. In the Hebrew mindset it is the whole person, their character, their purpose and all they stand for, that is inherent in their name. *Who* and *whom* are also used, sometimes powerfully, e.g. *you whom my soul* [Hebrew *nepshesh*, see below] *loves* (1:7 ESV; NIV is weaker *whom I love*), and the same phrase multiple times in the dream sequence in 3:1-4, and 8:5, *Who is this coming up ...*, and 6:10, *Who is this that looks down like the dawn ... ?*, and 8:10, *as one who finds peace*.

The word *Peace* occurs only this once. The word is *shalom* שָׁלוֹם but disappointingly translated *contentment* in NIV, and *found favour* in KJV (the normal *favour* word, usually rendered *grace*, חֵן חַן, is not there). But dare I suggest that the whole poem exudes shalom? Solomon ('Shlomoh') himself is Shalom. Jerusalem is the city of *shalom*. *Shulammith* is feminine and cognate with the *shlm* root, related to peace (Shalom). So is the whole poem really about finding peace, and the safety and security that comes from finding peace with a protector, as the woman finds in her lover? I dare to suggest so, but we need to consider the text further before we get there.

If we read the poem again, rejecting all supposed innuendo of sexuality as we go, what we find is not sex, but intimate love all the way through. A reader who has a predisposed need to find uninhibited sex in this poem will of course manage to do so from start to finish; but it is my contention that if we lay that desire aside, and read the poem neutrally in this regard, then the 'intimacy' paradigm which I am suggesting will be perfectly satisfactory throughout. The lovers want to be close to each other, not just physically but emotionally, because they find each other perfect. Examples abound, including many quoted above.

1:12-14, *While the king was on his couch* [perhaps 'at his table' as NIV; reclining on a couch would most likely be done 'at table'], *my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi*. We really don't need to think of breasts sexually here. It is sufficient to see intimacy, or closeness, or desire, longing and attraction, as the motivating factor.

2:3b-6, *I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love. Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me*. Note here that the emotional tension has risen to a point beyond which it must not go, hence the poet interjects the refrain which comes twice more later.

2:16-17, *My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged³³ hills*. (NIV)

³² Another example of the 'meaning' inherent in a name is 'Noah', which in Hebrew is a two-letter root, נח, which appears in many other words and names and means rest, comfort or salvation – see Genesis 5:29.

³³ 'rugged' NIV (Hebrew *bether*) 'cleft' ESV perhaps means broken, or perhaps just a proper noun ('mountains of Bether' KJV).

With night-daybreak and winter-spring sequences, we might infer a parallel with our relationship with God. I shall develop this theme in due course. There is searching and yearning by night, in the dream sequence, followed by the Jerusalem refrain (the peace refrain) again; 3:1-5, *On my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.* Again the peace refrain halts the rise of the emotional intensity. It is closeness that is desired. Note *soul* again and again in this passage. Soul is *nephesh* נֶפֶשׁ, another term that invokes the complete person in the Hebrew mindset.

4:8-9a, *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amanah, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions' dens and the mountain haunts of leopards. You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride.* Here it is he who is doing the imagining. She is coming to him from afar, even from a dangerous, rugged place to a place of peace with him. If marriage is inferred here, then marriage must be seen as the consummation of the love. There is no need here to leap to the idea of sexual intercourse being the consummation of marriage. Yes, sex belongs to marriage between man and woman, it is a natural consequence. But it is not here explicitly in this poem. We find plenty of instruction about God's boundaries for sexual conduct elsewhere in the Bible. Sure, there is no biblical concept of human marriage that does not include sex. But what makes a marriage is the giving of vows in public to each other, followed by the keeping of those vows in lifelong faithfulness – this is most certainly implied in this poem. Much of the lovers' language is of this type. Sure, they are going to marry. Perhaps they are married. It does not matter because this couple, whether or not they are real or imagined people are, or typify, an idealised couple with a perfect love for each other. They desire each other. They are everything to each other.

5:10-16, *My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. His arms are rods of gold set with topaz. His body is like polished ivory decorated with lapis lazuli. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem. (NIV)*

6:4, *You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem, ... and a long lyric follows depicting her beauty as seen by him. ... awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me – Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?" (NIV)*

1:15;16, *How beautiful you are, my darling!* (NIV), and her reply *you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful* (ESV) encapsulate the entire dialogue.

Now we need to return to the big question, “What is the Song of Songs doing in the Bible?”

It cannot be allegory in the manner normally alleged, because allegory is deliberately contrived to conform to a preconceived ‘higher meaning’, often fantastical. In simple allegory, the ‘story’ used to convey the allegorical message is not important in and of itself – only the ‘higher meaning’ is important. But here, in the Song, the ‘story’ itself is of immense importance – it celebrates the wonder, the peace, the security, of perfect human love. Therefore, the components of the lovers’ mutual attraction, even their body parts or other physical details of the natural world, cannot be reduced to illustrations of spiritual truths. We shall not find Christ there in such allegory. The male lover is not Christ; he is at face value a human, not divine, lover. But we are going to find Christ in this poem.

First, we would do well to ask how this poem here in Scripture must conform to the Reformation motto, “Christ in all the Scriptures”. When the reformers coined this maxim, they didn’t mean that Christ is actually there in the Song of Songs, or any and every other part of the Old Testament, in some historical sense. Rather, they meant that every part of scripture has its place in an overall trajectory that has its fulfilment in Christ and the gospel. Nothing in scripture is merely incidental. So, no, the male lover in Song of Songs is not Christ. He is a man, perhaps a specific individual, more likely an idealised man, perhaps fictional or perhaps representing an actual specific person in imagined perfection, who has fallen in love with his girl (and *vice versa*). The song celebrates this loving relationship that culminates, or will culminate, in marital union.

As we have noted above the Song is certainly a poem about love, but we should see it rather as a poem about a specific aspect of that love, namely intimacy – the love that wants to be close in a relationship of perfect peace and security. But in consequence of the reformers’ motto, we must also see the very real event of two people wanting intimacy with one another in a mutual, permanent, bound relationship as an anticipation of the rightful intimacy with Christ that will characterise Christ’s people, and the eventual ‘marriage’ of the bride and groom. In reading the Song, yes we must start with the quasi-historical event and see what it tells us of intimacy. But we should then additionally apply it through Christ in the light of the gospel. That is, we do not see the Song as *either* a love/intimacy poem, *or* only an ‘allegory’; rather, we see it as *both* a love/intimacy poem conveying the wonder of male-female attraction and desire, *and* as typological (not allegorical), typology being the category that denotes a human reality (ideal human love) that conveys an analogy (not allegory) with Christ and his people.³⁴

³⁴ A typological (or *typical*) interpretation has been advocated since the early 20th century, e.g. J.H. Raven *Old Testament Introduction* (1910) and M.F. Unger *Introductory guide to the Old Testament* (1956), but appears to be recently out of favour. Typology is not considered by A.S. Herbert in *Peake’s Commentary* (1962), is briefly considered (but the word typology not used) by J.A. Balchin in *IVP New Bible Commentary* (1994), and is rejected by D.A. Hubbard in *IVP New Bible Dictionary* (1962). There are numerous examples of how scripture itself confirms a typological interpretation of O.T. texts, e.g. Christ’s use of Jonah in Matthew 12:40; the lifting of the serpent in the wilderness in John 3:14; and the use of ... *the virgin will conceive* ... in Matthew 1:23, etc. Examples where there is no scriptural confirmation of typology include Ruth and Boaz.

We can usefully bring another Bible-handling principle into play at this point, namely “Scripture interprets Scripture”. I would be wary of Christological typology in the Song if it weren’t that the Bible elsewhere is not coy about the analogy of marriage of man and woman with the marriage of Christ with his church. We see this epitomised in Ephesians 5:22-33, ²³ *For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour ...* ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...* ³² *I am talking about Christ and the church* (NIV). Ephesians is not the only place in the Bible where marriage terminology is used of God’s relationship with his people – e.g. Jeremiah 2:2, ... *how as a bride you loved me ...*, and Ezekiel 16:8, ... *I spread the corner of my garment over you ... and entered into a covenant with you ...* (cf. Ruth 3:9, a figure conveying protection and security). It can be no accident that the O.T.’s use of the marriage metaphor finds its fulfilment in Christ and his bride, the church. The yearning love of God for his people, and the intimacy that God desires to have with them, is written everywhere into scripture. It is perfectly consistent with good Bible interpretation, I suggest, to find it implied, typologically, in the Song of Songs. The Song’s celebration of ideal human love ‘anticipates’ the love of Christ for his bride, the church. It is real, now, for every forgiven sinner; but the final consummation of our loving relationship with our saviour in ‘marriage’ is yet to come.

So in this Song of Songs we can see our own proper longing for intimacy with our Saviour, and his own longing for us his people, and we can see how far we fall short of that ideal, and long all the more for it. To pursue this ideal, and thus nurture our relationship with Christ and grow in our love for him, in response to his perfect love for us, is truly to find peace, safety and security in him, as is found on a human level in the climax of Song, 8:6, *Set me as a seal on your heart, ... for love is strong as death, ... the very flame of the LORD* (ESV). Yet we can also see that when time ends, we, as part of the Church of God, will be united with Him in eternal rest and peace, as the ultimate marriage of Christ with His Church. Love has its ultimate source in Yahweh. In the very centre of the Song in 4:16 and 5:1 the couple are in the garden of love. Garden here is the same Hebrew word as the garden of Eden. Song portrays an ideal, intimate relationship as foreseen in Eden in Gen 2:18, ... *it is not good that the man should be alone ...*, but though our present relationship with our saviour God is flawed by our own sinfulness, yet we can see in Song of Songs our longing for that perfection, and His promise of eternal rest and a return to Eden, God’s ‘Garden of Love’.

Barry Wilkins, December 2015