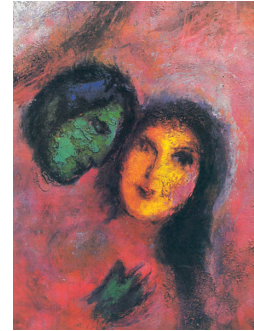


Unlocking the Poetry of Love in the Song of Songs

By Jack M. Sasson

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At barely eight chapters with a total of 117 verses, the Song of Songs is one of the shortest books of the Bible. In 1977, Marvin Pope of Yale University published his massive, 750-page commentary to the Song of Songs. That's an average of nearly six and a half pages for each verse—and most of these pages are printed in small, densely packed type. One would have thought that Pope's volume would dull, if not answer, all our questions about the Song of Songs for at least a decade or 012two. But at least four major works on the Song of Songs have crossed my desk since then, obviously a sign that authors feel the need to say more. This also demonstrates insatiable interest in this fascinating book, by scholars as well as by the general public.



The Song of Songs no doubt contains more than its share of scholarly cruxes, both linguistic and interpretive. When it was written is also a question on which scholars differ widely. The traditional title of the book, the Song of Solomon, is based on the attribution of authorship to King Solomon. As in the cases of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which tradition also attributes to Solomon, assigning the Song of Songs to Solomon allowed the pious Hebrew to give special sanctity to the collection. The tradition that the Song of Songs was written by King Solomon was doubtless based on the references to the lover as king (1:4, 12), on the mention of Solomon in several verses, and on the tradition (preserved in the 1 Kings 5:12) that Solomon was a writer of songs. Hence, the superscription to the Song of Songs: “The Song of Songs”—that is, the greatest of all songs—“which is Solomon's” (1:1).

If there is one thing that a majority of scholars agree on, however, it is that Solomon did not write the Song of Songs. This conclusion is supported by the Hebrew of verse 1 that allows the translation: “The greatest of all songs, which is *offered* to Solomon,” and in this way cancels the attribution of authorship, although it does not avoid the problem of dating.

Another difficulty with the book is the propriety of such blatantly explicit love poetry in the Hebrew scriptures. The Song of Songs sensitively describes 013the physical attributes of the lovers, the awakening of young love, the power of their attraction, their surrender to love's urge, their pain in separation, and their joy in ending it. What is all this doing in a sacred book?



Other difficulties abound. Anyone who reads the Song of Songs in Hebrew is quickly confronted with a very large vocabulary attested nowhere else in Hebrew scriptures. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the fact that erotic themes are also rare in the Bible. Nowhere else do we find the human body as richly detailed. Nowhere else do we smell spices, taste fruits and gaze on flowers, all of which are meant to evoke that most sensual of human interactions.

Despite the fact that the Song of Songs is one of the shortest books in the Bible, it contains more *hapax legomena* than any other book in either Testament. *Hapax legomena* sounds like an obscure disease, but it is the scholarly designation of words that appear in scripture only once. (*Hapax legomenon* is the singular; it means “a thing said only once” in Greek. Because this is such a mouthful, scholars talk simply about *hapaxes* for short.)^a *Hapaxes* are obviously going to present special problems of translation, so we have to seek help in order to understand them and other such difficult vocabulary of the Song of Songs. We therefore examine the ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible—for example, the Septuagint (Greek); the Vulgate (Latin), and the Peshitta (Aramaic). But when we do so, we soon discover that the ancient translators were just as bewildered as we and that they too had to invent meanings to suit the context. Since searching the vast storehouses of Arabic, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Sabaean, Ethiopic and other Semitic languages does little to improve on intelligent guesses, it is not surprising that modern scholarship has resolved only a handful of lexical cruxes in the Songs.¹ Indeed, as consummate a Semiticist as he is, Professor Pope contributes far more authoritatively when he gathers together previous scholarship than when he offers a new lexical interpretation.^b

Modern researchers have not only failed to unlock the Song’s lexical secrets, they have also largely failed to find logical developments from one sentence of the text to the next. The proper connection between two adjacent clauses—remember that before the Dark Ages the Hebrew text had no punctuation—is almost never obvious. Scholars, attuned to other scriptural passages where prose has an inexorable logic and where poetry is couched in comforting parallelism, are often mystified by the Song’s freer and more frequent leaps from one context to another, as well as by changes in subject matter and in points of view. As a matter of fact, by far the longest sequence in the entire book that can actively be followed from its beginning to its end is found in chapter 5, from verses 2 to 16. A mere 15 verses, this sequence recounts, perhaps as a dream, the reaction of a woman who fails to take full advantage of her lover’s nocturnal visit. Other sequences, however, comprise only two to three full sentences, covering a couple of verses.²

Despairing of finding much continuity within the Song, some scholars have argued that the text simply linked short songs, one after the other. Other scholars asserted that the book was nothing but a collection of opening phrases to longer songs, much like titles printed in a “Hit Parade” list. Other ingenious proposals offered keys by which the Song could be interpreted as a single continuous composition. Invariably, however, these keys are too complex for anything less than a computer to retain. So we are still puzzling over the unity and coherence of the Song of Songs.

Given this exotic vocabulary, as well as this lack of cohesiveness and coherence, how do

modern translators proceed? They have basically two choices—either to translate *literally* or to translate *idiomatically*. The first is more common, with the translator matching the Hebrew word for word in a modern language, while allowing for each language’s syntactic characteristics. These translations invariably focus on the meaning of each of the Hebrew poet’s words or phrases. Because the Song of Songs lacks obvious coherence, however, translators can easily become so absorbed in combing the vast resources contained in arcane dictionaries, concordances and lexicons that they may fail to perceive the poet’s overall meaning.

Idiomatic renderings, on the other hand, try to recapture in a modern language the images that the ancient poet shared with his own audience. The best of such translations are those by artists who so penetrate an ancient language that they absorb its characteristics and partake of its genius. Having immersed themselves in an ancient culture, these translators come to empathize with its goals and aspirations. When we read such renderings of the Song of Songs, we no longer have to struggle with every quaint expression; we can enjoy the rich imagination of the ancient writers and their shimmering evocations of love and its entanglements.³

I would not want to forego either of these approaches I frequently turn to Marvin Pope’s book when I want a reliable literal translation of the Song. But I delight in Marcia Falk’s sensitive English recreation of the poetry of the Song.³ Falk is herself not only a gifted poet but is also well schooled in the Hebrew language.⁴ This combination makes her translation very special.

Let me compare Pope’s and Falk’s translations of the famous passage in the Song of Songs that proclaims love to be as strong as death (*Song of Songs 8:6–7*). (See the sidebar to this article).

Both translations are very good, but they are also very different. Pope tries to match each Hebrew word as closely as possible with an English one. The word “signet,” for example, instantly throws you back to those ancient days when an elite that did not write used signet impressions stamped in clay, ink or wax to seal documents dictated to a scribe. Recent scholarship suggests that these signets or seals either hung on a concord around the neck (resting on the chest) or were tied with leather thongs on the arm. Delve further into the scholarly literature and you might link these signets to the image regarding love and death: Death need not part such signets or seals from their owners, since seals were often deposited in tombs so that the deceased could take them to the afterworld.⁵ All this and more is suggested by the translation “signet.”^d

Pope’s translation has other virtues. Although Hebrew writing does not distinguish between capital and lower-case letters, Pope nevertheless capitalizes “Love” and “Death” (except for the last occurrence of “death”). In this way Pope indicates that the poet personified these concepts.

Pope’s translation, however, also underscores the failure of comparative Semitics to establish a satisfactory meaning for the word *salhebetyaḥ* in line 6. Pope simply leaves a

blank space where the translation of this word ought to go.

Finally, by placing the last two lines in brackets, Pope signals our difficulty in understanding precisely what the poet is saying. These two lines are obviously an aphorism of some sort, but it is difficult to understand their function.

Pope's attachment to the precise meaning of the Hebrew vocabulary, however, sometimes produces a jarring effect: Passion that is "fierce as Hell" sounds too colloquial for this context, but it may be saved by the capital H on Hell. In any event, his rendering succeeds in forcing us to look at the Song with the eyes of the anthropologist, in inviting us to explore the contexts in which it was written.

But when we want to recapture the excitement and emotion released by reading the Hebrew text, we must look elsewhere. When we want to find not vestiges of the past but expressions of perfect and unabashed love, we would do better to turn to Falk's intensely emotive verses. Not that she is perfectly loyal to the original. Even in this short selection she has expanded on the text three times, as can be seen in the blank space in the Pope translation to the left of Falk's version. Thus, "Sear my emblem deep/ Into your skin" (lines a and b), which is one of the additions, may not be necessary, for Falk has deftly managed to carry the thrust of the Hebrew with the two lines immediately preceding. But note how she has quite nicely avoided the antiquarian flavor of "seal" (חֶטֶם in Hebrew) by translating it "stamp" and using it as a verb.

"Torrents and rivers" (line c) is also an expansion. It repeats "seas and floods" in line 7. But here the expansion works well. Falk uses it to evoke in English the rush of powerful waters suggested by the concatenation of consonants in the Hebrew text. True, "Endless seas and floods" gives the gist of the Hebrew, but it is unequal to the emotions unleashed by the metaphor. Finally, "play the fool" is an addition that betrays Falk's lack of confidence that her readers will get the point of the Hebrew maxim in lines 9–10.

Despite its deviations from the Hebrew, Falk's translation of this famous passage about love and death magically captures the uncanny tone of the Hebrew phrases. It evokes the intensity of the original and penetrates to the core of the Hebrew poet's insight deeper than pages and pages of learned discussion about the meaning of each word.

But no translation will ever fully plumb the mysteries of the Song; even the original Hebrew does not allow us to do that. Moreover, it is very unlikely that we shall ever know what prompted the writing of the Song. We know of secular love poetry in Egypt and, to a much lesser extent, in Mesopotamia. On this basis we may assume that the Song originated among royal courtiers.⁶ Whether it reached its present shape in Israel or in Judah is the subject of a minor debate. But the struggle to establish a plausible date for the writing of the Song is hopelessly deadlocked

The problem of dating is especially difficult because in one form or another segments from the Song may have survived orally for centuries before their final drafting. Traditional scholars still date the Song to the tenth century B.C. because they attribute its composition either to Solomon himself or to one of his courtiers. Turn-of-the-century scholars were affected by the

amount of Aramaic influence on it, so they generally opted for a sixth-century B.C. date or even later. After the discovery of documents from Canaan, scholars became impressed by the great antiquity of the Hebrew language. Many decided to date the elaboration of the Song to the time of the monarchy. Generally, they chose the reigns of Hezekiah, Manasseh or Josiah (eighth and seventh centuries B.C.) as likely periods when the Song reached its present form. As Pope correctly observes, however, there is no sure basis by which to pinpoint accurately the moment when the Song was written.⁷

The Song contains other, more profound mysteries. Not a single one of its lines is explicitly theological. Indeed, not a single line expresses a religious sentiment. God is not even mentioned! It is hardly surprising that Jewish tradition has rarely invoked its contents to establish norms for religious behavior. In fact, this condition led to a serious debate about including the Song within the Hebrew canon. In the first century A.D., there were many rabbis who thought that the Song's erotic nature should preclude its inclusion in Holy Scriptures. But Rabbi Akiva's opinion, recorded in the *Mishna Yadayim* 3:5, carried the day:

Heaven forbid that there should be division in Israel about the holiness of the Song of Songs, for there is not one day in the whole of eternity that equals the one in which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest.

Once it was accepted into the Hebrew canon, the Song forced commentators to find in it messages that answered theological needs. In the first millennium of our era, down through the medieval period in fact, both Jewish and Christian exegetes tried to understand the same passages of Holy Scriptures on at least four different levels. Each text could be read (1) *literally*, that is, taking every word at its face value; (2) *allegorically*, that is, searching for another plane of understanding with which to parallel the text; (3) *morally*, that is, finding in it instruction on conducting personal life; and (4) *mystically*, that is, locating a spiritual code by which to commune directly with God.

In the Hellenistic period, from the third century B.C. through the first century A.D., religious texts that had been handed down for generations were often read allegorically. This approach seemed to be perfectly reasonable to rabbinical interpreters, not only because they appreciated the brilliant use of allegory in prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, Joel, Zechariah and particularly Ezekiel, but also because the apocalyptic literature that was rampant at that time depended heavily on allegory.

Allegory is an extended metaphor in which readers are *consistently* to replace persons, objects and actions found within a prose or poetic narrative by others drawn from outside that narrative. Some allegories are transparent, as is the case when Oholah and Oholibah are to represent Samaria and Jerusalem (*Ezekiel* 23); others are more subtle, allowing the enjoyment of a particular piece of literature whether read literally or symbolically. For example, when Ezekiel refers to the eagle who crops the cedar (*17:2 ff.*), his brilliant verses will please whether one respectively substitutes Nebuchadnezzar and David or not.⁸

For the rabbis of the Hellenistic age, the choices for proper appreciation of the Song were not

many. Because of its heavily erotic content, it would not do to read it literally. However, it was possible to read it as celebrating God's love for Israel. Moreover, once read in this allegorical manner, it was possible to derive moral and even mystical affirmations from it. For their part, the Church fathers merely transposed the allegory, so that for them the Song came to symbolize Christ's love for His Church.

In orthodox circles, both Jewish and Christian, permutations of this allegorical reading have persisted until our own day. As recently as the mid-1960s, Père Raymond Tournay of Jerusalem's École Biblique and one of the world's finest Semiticists, interpreted the Songs as an anthology of allegorical compositions. More recently, however, he has written a book entitled *When God Addresses Humans in the Language of Love*. In this new volume, Père Tournay, obviously affected by the secularist trend of the last decades, modified his perspective in an interesting fashion: The Song, he proposed, "could be interpreted not only as a love poem between two lovers but as a nostalgic song which invokes the coming of a new Solomon, the King [sic] who will bring peace and happiness to the daughter of Zion." To buttress this theological reading, Père Tournay catapults Solomon into eschatological domains, suggesting that he, a son of David, will inaugurate the messianic age. But Père Tournay often tries to historicize the Song by finding in it allusions to episodes in Samuel and Kings. In this, I think he is not at all convincing, but his book is nevertheless a fine study of *double-entendres* as used in the Song.⁹

Through the centuries, the use of allegory as an interpretive tool has underpinned almost every major suggestion for a new understanding of the Song. Solomon, the Shulamite and the love they express for each other readily permitted different allegorical meanings derived not so much from the text, but from the intellectual concerns of the day. Thus, in the 12th century, when mystical interpretations of scripture were rampant throughout the civilized world, Judaism invoked the Song as a vehicle by which God confirmed his choice of the bride Sabbath. Christianity saw in it expressions of the union of the soul with Christ. During the Renaissance, exegetes interpreted the Shulamite as Wisdom and her pursuer as its seekers.

Even during the 18th century we find allegorical interpretations of the Song despite the fact that the Enlightenment prided itself on a humanistic perspective. During the Enlightenment interpreters merely replaced the old allegories of the synagogue and the church with examples from the secular world. These expositors frequently reshuffled verses in the Song in order to find in it some narrative continuity. From one such reconstruction was created the famous interpretation of the Song as a sentimental drama with Pastoral themes, in which Solomon grew to prefer the charming innocence of the peasant Shulamite over the, jaded pleasures easily available at his court. The virulently antiroyalist revolts which swept Europe in the 1840s transformed poor Solomon into a sinister, overbearing monarch who was forced to compete, unsuccessfully, for the Shulamite's affections. She, it was said, preferred "Dodday," a shepherd. The existence of Dodday was based on a deft emendation of vowels under the Hebrew letters in *dodiÆ*, "my beloved."¹⁰

In the latter half of the 19th century, Mesopotamian myths were deciphered. The possibility that these myths might have directly influenced the composition of the Hebrew Bible, especially the primeval stories in Genesis, shocked Europe into an identity crisis no less

shattering than that created by Darwin's theories regarding the origin of man: Who were these Mesopotamians whose gods sounded much like Israel's, whose culture was perhaps more advanced than anything known by the Hebrew prophets, whose tales paralleled those beloved by the readers Scripture?

In this atmosphere, iconoclasts interpreted the Song as one more example in which the Hebrew imagination was severely dependent on that of its Mesopotamian neighbors. The Song was not about Solomon and the Shulamite, it was suggested, but about the love shared between the goddess Ishtar and her consort, identified with Shulmanu or with Tammuz. Later, in our own century, recovery of Sumerian myths allowed scholars to substitute for these deities the passionate goddess Inanna and her fickle consort, Dumuzi. These transformations too are essentially allegorical; they simply replace the allegory advanced in orthodox circles, in which God or Christ was said to display his affection for Israel or the Church, with an allegory of a pagan god and goddess.¹¹

Although Marvin Pope wants us to read the Song itself literally, his interpretation is also essentially allegorical. His *translation* is full of instances in which ambiguous Hebrew vocabulary is given sexual meaning. Occasionally, this approach not only turns lurid some passages that are meant to be suggestive erotically but also forces the reader to give up playful ambiguities suggested by the Hebrew poet. Pope's *interpretation* on the other hand, is merely an adaptation of Theophile J. Meek's allegorical readings of 50 years ago.¹² In Meek's reconstruction, Babylonian deities escape the clutches of the netherworld (i.e., death) and, while celebrating a fertility ritual, happily and sometimes publicly consummate their love. But because Pope is also intent on finding secular love in the Song, he assigns these activities to human beings instead of to gods.

Pope proposes that in an ancient world where there was little demarcation between the Hebrews and their Canaanite neighbors, the Hebrews participated in an obscure funerary practice known as *marzeah*. The *marzeah* took place in a *bet marzeah* (probably "meeting house" for mourning). According to Pope, the *marzeah* tried to annul the boundaries between life and death, thus fulfilling the sentiments that were so powerfully expressed in the Song passage about love and death quoted above. As reconstructed by Pope, however, these rituals required practices that were not merely sexual but often abnormal, bestial, and even scatological.

I find Pope's interpretation far-fetched, as I have had occasion to note at length elsewhere.¹³ A number of criticisms of his stance may be briefly stated:

1 The word *marzeah* does not even appear in the Song, although it does occur elsewhere in Hebrew literature, at *Amos 6:7* and *Jeremiah 16:5*.

0172. The evidence Pope draws on to support his interpretation is secondary and highly tendentious. To recreate the dissipation of the Canaanites, for example, Pope relies on the testimony of the Hebrew prophets; but they were bent on disparaging their enemies. Pope also relies on evidence from the Greeks; but they regarded the Canaanites as dangerous competition and felt no qualms about slandering them.

3. Nowhere from the ancient world, and certainly not from the world of the Hebrews, do we have evidence that the state or the priesthood officially sponsored such arcane sexual activities as those described by Pope.

4. The history of Jewish funerary practices gives no comfort to Pope's thesis.

In Pope's 1980 rejoinder to my review of his translation of the Song, he refers to some graffiti and sketches found at Kuntillet Ajrud in Sinai in which sexual scenes are linked to the names of Yahweh and to his consort, Asherah.¹⁴ But such testimony—even if it has been correctly interpreted artistically as well as philologically, and that is by no means an established fact—cannot confirm Pope's thesis about the *marzeah* celebration because the Kuntillet Ajrud material adds nothing to our information regarding funerary practices in ancient Israel itself.

As Pope's reconstruction confirms, the allegorical interpretation survives until today because of its versatility and remarkable adaptability. It continues to attract powerfully inventive minds from all faiths.

In more recent years, a few exegetes have insisted on appreciating the Song as a product of secular forces within Israel. Some of these scholars rely primarily on the delicious love songs from pharaonic Egypt to confirm the sensitivity of poets, in Israel as well as in Egypt, to the aesthetics of erotic literature.¹⁵ It is apparent, however, that such an approach cannot tell us much about the *reasons* that impelled Israel to preserve the Song within its holy canon.

A recent book by Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song, of Songs*,^e makes a new and in many ways original contribution. It is able to do so, interestingly enough, because it harks back to the early exegetical method, in which the Song could be read on many levels—literal, allegorical, moral and mystical—without unduly prejudicing one approach at another's expense.¹⁶

In three ambitious and integral chapters, Landy observes the Song as: 1. *Archetype* (containing primordial images found universally in literature), 2. *Metaphor* (full of ideas and images that are figurative of others); and 3. *Allegory* (a metaphor consistently extended over a whole text). In his last chapter, Landy's discussion acquires *mystical* tones, allowing him to join man and God in the work of creation.

Landy's approach, however, recognizes no separation among different documents within scriptures nor, for that matter, among texts that differ in genre (literary category). More important, Landy endows the ancient Hebrew with a ubiquitous and omniscient vision of Israel's life, as well as of its literature. For Landy, therefore, when the Song's poet wrote his beautiful verses, he knew, at least subconsciously, everything about the psychology of love that we know today. In this way, Landy loosens the Song from the grip of the biblical scholar and hands it back to the sensitive interpreter of whatever background.

Admittedly, it is often difficult to pin down what Landy is about, and his book is experienced on the same level as a Chinese banquet: both are feasts for the senses, but hard to remember after leaving them. This is because Landy uses a highly refined and sentimental

idiom; he is overly fond of the clever phrase, and his book is full of personal introjections. But Landy gives unity to the whole of the Song by inspecting it kaleidoscopically. Not only does he return to particular passages again and again to comment upon them from many different angles, but he also opens and closes his book with quotations from Rabbi Akiva.

The first of these has been given above and is to the effect that the Song is God's holiest gift to humanity. The second quote comes from the Jewish mystical, and mystifying, texts known as *hekhalot*. Landy plucked it from a mass of similarly intriguing pronouncements in order to stress the baffling effect that the Song has upon its readers.¹⁷ We ought not—Landy is warning—depend only upon the intellect in order to understand what is captured by the heart and what is appealing to the senses.

Landy's book explores the psychology of the erotic with two bursts of inspired analyses of the poet's craft. Landy treats the human body as modern artist would treat a landscape. He disassembles anatomic parts (breasts, thighs, legs), inspects the manner in which they are recalled in the Song, and reassembles them into a whole. His insights are inspired by Jungian and Freudian perspectives; as such, many are bound to be idiosyncratic, sometimes revealing much too much of their author's state of mind. There are simply too many visions that cannot work for many readers; among them are aggressive breasts, castration fantasies, recollections of infancy, lips as metaphors for vaginas, and phalluses triumphant.

Landy is very good at selecting episodes by which to show that difficulties in the Song, far from weakening its meaning, are actually part of that meaning. It was not possible, argues Landy, for the Hebrew poet to use a simple, uncomplicated language and diction to plumb the complexity and mystery of love. He therefore had to turn to a technique that forced the attention to leap from one image to another, from one scene to the next.

Because he is willing to find conjunctions, continuity and harmony in the Song where other researchers have only seen fragments, Landy succeeds in penetrating the Hebrew verses more rewardingly than do most of his predecessors. Although not an expert grammarian, Landy nevertheless achieves this happy end without abusing the rich storehouse of literary tools. Landy can show where ambiguity lies, where sentiments are paradoxical, where images are placed in polarity, where similes are balanced, where ideas are foreshadowed, where movement is carefully constructed, and where words are made to play.

As an interpreter, Landy joins previous researchers in promoting an essentially mystical position. For him, the Song is an inversion of the Garden of Eden narrative. This thesis is not new, for the medieval rabbis sometimes cited one text when elaborating on the other. But it has recently acquired new life in Phyllis Trible's imaginative writings. Trible has shown that when read as allegories, the Song and the Garden of Eden narrative contain insights for the explanation of the other.¹⁸ Landy agrees that the Song's poet sought to provide adequate response to the loss of Paradise. But he also implies that the crafters of the Hebrew primeval histories were themselves well aware of the Song of Songs.

In making his proposals, Landy relies heavily on rather specific readings of the Genesis narrative, despite the fact that philology and interpretation can offer a multitude of readings.

Turn to *Genesis 3:14–20*, for example, where God pronounces judgment on the serpent, Adam and the Woman, the three who conspired to partake of the tree of Total Knowledge—that is, good *and* bad. Undoubtedly, one can understand these lines, as Landy does, to be “curses,” punishment for human disobedience, and therefore find it worthwhile to turn to the Song in order to soften the sting. But it is just as possible to read in these lines a parable for the *transformation of immortality*. Eve alone of the three is *not* the subject of the Hebrew verb ‘*aprar*, “to curse,” directly or otherwise. Eve is allowed to bear children. Painful as the experience may be, birthing now *extends eternal life to the whole human species*, a privilege originally available only to Adam and his mate, now called Eve.

Landy offers the dove of the Song (6:9), associated with grace and love, as the perfect counterpart of the demonic snake invoked in Genesis. But in the “curses” of *Genesis 3*, the snake helped construct an excellent paradigm for the cycle of earthly life. Living in the ground and feeding on its dust (“you shall move on your belly and eat dust, ‘*apfar*”), the snake creates a brood that is destined to struggle eternally with the woman’s own children (“I shall set enmity between you and the woman, between your descendants and hers”). Woman cannot be fruitful without Man, but when the last, after much toil on earth, dies, his remains will feed and thus nourish new generations of serpents (“you are dust, ‘*apfar*, and you will turn into dust”). In this way, nature repletes itself by binding the fate of all those who were forced out of the garden in Eden.

Landy’s book cannot compete with Pope’s unmatched scholarly treatment of the Song, for Landy’s is essentially an artistic endeavor, closer to Falk’s in demanding the freedom of movement that this perspective requires. I have gone to some length in treating it, however, because to my mind it proves that new and *interesting* things can still be said about the Song. But if the pages I offer in this inaugural issue of **Bible Review** offer one thesis it is that the lures of the Song can never be exhausted. For perhaps more than any other single book within the Hebrew Scriptures, the Song urges us to delve into our own expectations and then to invest them into an ancient people who, many believe, came closer to the divine than any other. We inspect the Song’s many beauties and hope to decode hidden messages by which to direct our own lives.

With such expectations in mind, the commentaries and the interpretations of the Song cannot ever come to an end. Even as I write, Fortress Press and its prestigious *Hermeneia* series is readying Father Roland Murphy’s own assessment of the Song. I hear also that Michael Fox is about to publish a book on the Song. These volumes are sure to spawn further discussions, perhaps even from me. There is much more to be said.

Footnotes:

- a. See “Words That Occur in the Bible Only Once.”
- b. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* The Anchor Bible (Doubleday & Company, Inc.: New York, 1979), p.25. See also Jack M. Sasson, “On Pope’s *Song Song* [AB 7C],” *Maarav* 1 (1980), pp. 177–196, and Marvin H. Pope, “Response to Sasson on the Sublime Song,” *Maarav* 2 (1980), pp. 207–214.

- c. Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: Love Poems from the Bible* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: New York, 1977).
- d. See "As the Seal Upon Thy Heart."
- e. Franchs Landy *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (The Almond Press: Sheffield, England, 1983).

Endnotes:

1. Recent attempts at resolving difficulties in vocabulary and syntax include Michael Fox, "Scholia to Canticles," *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983), pp. 199–206, and Manfred Görg, "Die 'Sänfte Salomos' nach HL 3, 9f.," *Biblische Notizen* 18 (1982), pp. 15–25.
2. The last attempt at finding a definable structure in the Song is in Edwin C. Webster, "Pattern in the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22 (1982), pp. 73–93. Webster thinks that separate poems were arranged in a balanced form within chiasmi. Roland E Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* [The Forms of the Old Testament literature, 13] (Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981), develops a structure for the Song of Songs (pp. 97–124). In 1979 ("The Unity of the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 [1979], pp. 436–443, and "Interpreting the Song of Songs," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 9 [1979], pp. 99–105), he took a different approach by concentrating on the unifying devices that are used within the Song: refrains, themes, and vocabulary/phrases. In my review of Pope (*Maarav*, 1979, pp. 192–194), I alluded to the use of "linkage" to obtain such a unity, but such devices necessarily alert us to the activities of editors rather than to those of the poets.
3. An excellent overview of the methods and the consequence of both of these approaches can be found in Edward Greenstein, "Theories of Modern Bible Translation," *Prooftext* 3 (1983), pp. 9–39.
4. Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (The Almond Press: Sheffield, 1982). For Ms. Falk's translation without her literary comments but with illustrations by Barry Moser, see her 1977 book. Interestingly enough, when the poet Robert Graves, who is not a Hebrew scholar, turned his attention to the Song of Songs, he chose to render it into lyrical prose, *The Song of Songs*, illustrated by Hans Erni (William Collins Sons & Co.: London, 1973).
5. William W. Hallo, "'As the Seal Upon Thine Arm': Glyptic Metaphors in the Biblical World," *Ancient Seals and the Bible*, edited by Leonard Gorelick and Elizabeth Williams-Fone (Undena Publications: Malibu, California, 1983), pp. 10–13.
6. Beyond the bibliography in Pope's Anchor Bible translation of the Song of Songs, see, for Egypt: John B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* Society for Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 38 (Scholars Press: Chico, California, 1978); Michael V. Fox, "The Cairo Love Songs," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1980), pp. 101–109, and "'Love' in Love Songs," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 67 (1981), pp. 181–182; and Virginia Davis, "Remarks on Michael V. Fox's 'The Cairo Love Songs,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1980). pp. 111–114. For Mesopotamia, see Jerome Black, "Babylonian Ballads: A New Genre," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983). pp. 25–34.

7. We are not likely ever to place a secure date on the origins of the Song of Songs. Since erotic literature is available to many societies and at all periods of their culture, the content of the Song is especially impervious to acceptable methods of dating; note how often unconvincing cases have been made to date the Song by comparing it to similar delights from the biblical, classical (Giovanni Garbini, "Poesia alessandrina e 'Cantico dei Cantici,'" *Alessandria e il Mondo Ellenistico-Romano: Studi Onore di Achille Adriani* Università di Palermo Istituto di Archeologia: Studi e Materiali 4 [L'Erna" di Bretschneider: Rome. 1983], pp. 25–29), and—in one startling example that seems to have pleased Pope—the Asian subcontinent civilizations. Scholars have, therefore, turned to linguistic criteria to find a more plausible context for the origin of the Song. This method is very unreliable, however, and I direct the reader to my treatment of linguistic criteria used to date the Book of Ruth (*Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* [The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1979], pp 243–246), a treatment that is equally applicable here. One other dating criterion, one that depends on evaluating the Song's rich vocabulary for aromatics and perfume, is more promising; see Athalia Brenner, "Aromatics and Perfumes in the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983), pp. 75–81. But it meets with the difficulty of properly evaluating the movements of trade and of cultural words. S. Saviv, "The Antiquity of the Song of Songs," *Beth Mikra* 26 (1981), pp. 344–352, affirms an early monarchic date (i.e. Solomonic and traditional) for the Song by offering the fragile claim that Isaiah paraphrased its contents in his parable of the vineyard (at 5:1–7).
8. See the article "Allegory" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.
9. For a very sensitive, even lyrical, plea in behalf of a theological reading of the Song by a well-known Jewish intellectual, see André Chouraqui, "The Canticles of Solomon: An Introduction," *Service International de Documentation Judeo-Chrétienne* 16 (1983), pp. 4–7
10. A recent discussion of the dramatic interpretation is found in G. Lloyd Carr, "Is the Song of Songs a 'Sacred Marriage' Drama?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979), pp. 103–114.
11. See the works of White (1978), Murphy (1979 BTB) and Davis (1980). Mesopotamia has not produced love poetry that is similarly secular, since almost all examples either are drawn from religious circles or insert Ishtar/Inanna as paradigmatic of the beloved. Recent texts that could be placed in the same category are available in Jerome A. Black (1983); Jacob Klein, *Three Sulgi Hymns: Sumerian Hymns Glorifying King Sulgi of Ur* (Bar Ilan University press: Ramat Gan, 1981); and Joan G. Westenholz, forthcoming in the *Reiner Festschrift* (1984). A few more examples, already identified as such, await publication. A most delightful study of the Mesopotamian evidence is available in the recent French edition of a book by Samuel Noah Kramer. *Le Mariage Sacré, à Sumer et à Babylone, translated by Jean Battéro* (Berg International: Paris, 1983). Cesare Perugini, "Cantico dei Cantici e lirica d'amore sumerica," *Rivista Biblica* 31 (1983), pp. 21–41, assesses the import of Sumerian "sacred marriage" texts upon the Song of Songs. Frederic Raurell, "Erotic Pleasure in the 'Song of Songs,'" *Laurentianum* 24 (1983), pp. 5–45, writes interestingly on the erotic in the Songs.
12. Meek's readings were presented in a series of articles and studies beginning in 1922

and ending in 1956: “Canticles and the Tammuz Cult,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 39 (1922–1923), pp. 1–14; “Babylonian Parallels to the Song of Songs,” *Journal of Biblical literature* 43 (1924), pp. 245–252; “The Song of Songs and the Fertility Cult,” *A Symposium on the Song of Songs*, ed. W. H. Schoff Philadelphia, 1924), pp. 48–79; “Introduction and Interpretation of the Song of Songs, *Interpreters Bible V* (New York, 1956), pp. 98–148.

13. Sasson, “On Pope’s *Song of Songs*,” *Maarav* 1 (1979), pp. 177–196.
14. Ze’ev Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaeen Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Israel Museum Catalog 175: Jerusalem, 1978), and “Did Yahweh Have a Consort?” *BAR* 05:02; for later views, see Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, “Fifteen Years in Sinai,” *BAR* 10:04, and André Lemaire, “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah?” *BAR* 10:06.
15. Pope, “Response to Sasson,” *Maarav* 2 (1980), pp. 207–214.
16. See my comments in “Ruth: A New Translation,” pp. 184–185.
17. Rabbi Akiva, who went into paradise and alone emerged unscathed, is quoted as saying (Landy’s reading): “When you come to the place of stones of pure marble, do not say ‘Water, water,’ for it is said ‘Liars shall not endure in my sight’” (Landy, *Paradoxes*, pp. 269–270). It is not surprising to find Landy unable to do justice to this very difficult passage. In fact, he may not even realize that his quote itself contains a quote (“liars shall not endure in my sight” from *Psalms 101:7*). A fuller appreciation of this passage is to be found in chapter 2, “The Mystical Collection,” of David J. Halperin’s *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, 1980).
18. Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), pp. 30–48, and *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fonress Press: Philadelphia, 1978); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (European Publishing Co.: New York, 1895) [Reprint. Arno Press: New York, 1972].

SIDEBAR

Song of Songs 8:6-7

016 017

- 016

Hebrew

ûbl l[µtwjk ynmy

û[wrz l[µtwjk

hbha tymk hz[yk

hanq lwak hq

a ypr hypr

hytbhl

wlkwy al µybr µym

hbhah ta twbkl

hwpyf al twrhnw

ya ÷ty µa

hbhab wtyb ÷wh lk ta

wl wzwbz zwb

- **Transliteration**

sŒiÆmeµniÆ kah\oÆetaµm Ôal-libbekam kah\oÆetaµm Ôal-zeroÆÔekam

kiÆ-Ôazzaµh kammaµwet Ôahabaµh qaµsaûh kisûÔol qinÔaµh resûaµpeyhaµ risµpey
Ôeµsû sûalhebetyaµh

mayim rabbiÆm loµÔ yuûkeluû lekabboÆet Ôet-haµÔ ahabaµh uÆenhaµroÆet loµÔ
yisût\epuÆhaµ

Ôim-yitteµn ÔiÆesû Ôet-kol-hoÆen beytoÆ baµÔ ahabaµh boÆez yaµbuÆezuÆ loÆ

- 017

Pope Translation

1 Set me as a signet on your heart,

2 As a signet on your arm.

3 For love is strong as Death

4 Passion fierce as Hell.

5 Its darts are darts of fire,

6 Its flames —

7 Mighty waters cannot quench love,

8 No torrents can sweep it away.

9–10 [If a man gave all the wealth of his house for love, would he be despised?]

• **Falk Translation**

1 Stamp me in your heart,

2 Upon your limbs,

[a.] Sear my emblem deep

[b.] Into your skin.

3 For love is strong as death

4 Harsh as the grave.

5 Its tongues are flames, a fierce

6 And holy blaze.

7 Endless seas and floods,

[c.] Torrents and rivers

8 Never put out love's

[d.] Infinite fires.

9 Those who think that wealth

10 Can buy them love

[e.] Only play the fool

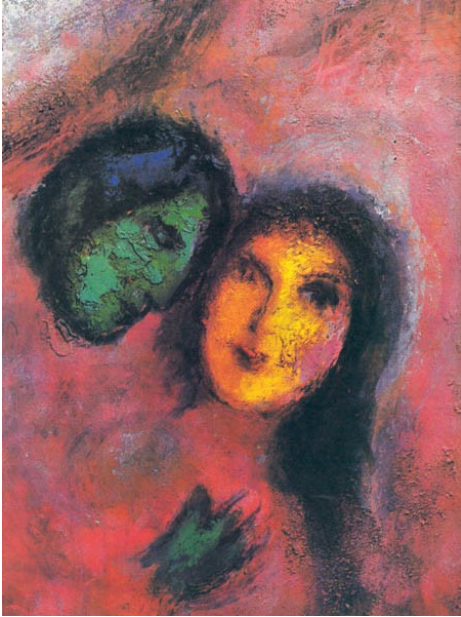
[f.] And meet with scorn

Unlocking the Poetry of Love in the Song of Songs

Magazine: Bible Review, Spring 1985

Volume: 1

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Courtesy Jacobook

Detail from Marc Chagall's interpretation of the Song of Songs (compare with photo of full painting).



Courtesy Jacobook

Brilliant colors and dreamlike images distinguish Marc Chagall's interpretation of the Song of Songs. Merging landscapes of Jerusalem and of the Russian village of his birth, Chagall creates a backdrop for the interplay of biblical and personal images. The lyre-playing figure of David, brushed by a bird in flight, dominates the composition, while pairs of lovers echo the poetry of Song of Songs.

In the center of the painting, the extraordinary colors of the disembodied faces (compare with detail) draws the viewer's attention to the center of the painting. The jarring effect of the man's

green face is softened by the gentleness of his hand and the tenderness of his profile as he turns toward the full face of his beloved.

Today, this painting is in the collection of the Marc Chagall National Museum of the Biblical Message in Nice, France. It is displayed with 16 other paintings illustrating the major themes of the Song of Songs, Genesis and Exodus.

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