

The basic love story repeats itself, for lovers—and not only those in our song—must seek each other continually, time after time, as long as their love exists; one “finding” is never the end of the story. Near the end of the Song, the cycle of seeking and finding pauses for the declarations of love’s power and value and for the brothers’ consent, but the poem does not end there. Two rather enigmatic verses (8:13–14) set us back to a point earlier in the cycle, as the boy again asks to hear his beloved’s voice, and she again tells him to flee. The poet breaks off, not with the stasis of familial acceptance, but with an image of movement, the gazelle on the mountains. The conclusion of the Song is not the end of this love story, but only a pause in its movement. Love of the sort shown in Canticles must be ever dynamic.

Canticles is a love song of a new sort. It is longer than any of the Egyptian songs but less tightly organized in its surface structure. In a study of theme and structure in the French novel, E. H. Falk concluded that in novels where story and plot receive less emphasis, the generic coherence of themes becomes more important in creating the unity of the thematic fabric (1967: 178). This is true of Canticles, where to compensate for the looseness of structure, the poem achieves unity through coherence of thematic and verbal texture. The Song takes a single romance and turns it around and around like a gem, displaying all its facets. The reader finally sees the gem as a whole, and the order in which the facets were shown does not much matter.

CHAPTER 5



What the Love Songs Were Used For: Function and Social Setting

Form Criticism and Life Setting

An enigma: a secular song of sexual love in the canon of sacred scripture. To solve this enigma scholars often assign the poem a function seemingly more appropriate to religious literature, and then use that presumed function as a guide to interpretation. I think, however, that the love songs, Egyptian and Israelite, originally had only this connection with religion: the banquets at which they were sung were commonly held during the leisure time afforded by religious holidays.¹

To ask about the love songs’ extrinsic functions²—what they were originally meant to be used for³—is to inquire into their life-setting (*Sitz im*

1. The question of whether the Song is a drama is distinct from the question of its secularity and largely separate from the question of its original setting. If it is a drama, it could have been either a religious or a secular one, and it could have been presented in any one of a variety of settings. Drama is a way of presenting a story or situation to the audience. I will therefore discuss this question in chapter 6.

2. Their intrinsic purpose is, of course, to express their meanings and to influence their readers in accordance with the literary and (possibly) didactic or rhetorical goals of their author.

3. That is, meant by the author. I follow Hirsch (1967) in regarding authorial meaning as (at least in principle) recoverable and as the primary object of interpretation. Any later uses a text might be put to, such as synagogal reading, are to be deemed part of its *significance*. Hirsch draws the distinction between meaning and significance thus: “*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a

Leben), the recurrent situation or social occasion for which songs such as these were created. This is one of the principal questions that form criticism seeks to answer, but one not always best answered by form-critical methods. Form criticism has sought to isolate units within Canticles that were once independent songs and to determine from their content the type of situation for which such texts were composed.

There has been no comprehensive form-critical study of the Egyptian love songs. Hermann (1959:124–36) discusses three types (*Gattungen*) of love songs, the Description Song (*Beschreibungslied* or *wasf*), the Alba (*Tagelied*), and the Paraclausithyron (*Türklage*). He hesitates to assign a specific life-setting to the Description Song, suggesting only that the occasion of a festival could inspire a youth to sing the praises of his beloved (p. 125). The Alba would have been called forth by the need for unmarried lovers to part in the morning (p. 130), and the Paraclausithyron by a lover's being refused admittance to his beloved's house (p. 133).

Several commentaries and studies of Canticles, on the other hand, apply form-critical observations, first dividing it into a number of short songs, then grouping these into literary types (*Gattungen*), and then undertaking to ascertain the life-settings in which these *Gattungen* originated. The most valuable form-critical studies of Canticles are Horst (1935) and Murphy (1981). In all such studies, the life-setting commonly suggested for most of the units of Canticles is the celebration of weddings. Thus Horst, who does not attempt to determine the life-setting of most of the types he defines, locates the "Description Song" in a nuptial setting. Würthwein (1969) finds the wedding to be the life-setting for at least 24 of the 29 songs and fragments into which he divides the book. For example, he supposes 1:2–4 to be a wedding song expressing the bride's desire for her husband to bring her home, and 4:1–7 he explains as praise lavished on the bride at her wedding (see ad loc.). Murphy's form-critical survey is far more cautious in determining the life-settings of the 30 songs he marks out in Canticles, observing that most are "love poems which can be uttered in the innumerable settings which are associated with the relationship of lovers" (1981:103).

Even if we suppose that Canticles and all the Egyptian song-groups were composed of originally independent songs, I doubt that we are justified in distributing either the various Egyptian love songs or the units of the Song of Songs among different life-settings, and in any case we cannot read the life-settings for which the songs were written *directly* out of the fictional settings depicted within the love songs. The fictional setting of the *wechsel* of the me-

person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable" (1967:8). Meaning (by this definition) is stable, while significance, the "meaning-to" someone, constantly changes. Similarly a text with a single primary, intended function may take on many and diverse secondary functions, including some even the author could not have imagined.

dieval *Mīnnesang*, for example, was often an exchange of affectionate messages delivered by a messenger, but we should not assume that such songs actually were delivered by messenger. The *wechsel* was rather one of many types of song composed for the amusement of the well-to-do classes and the court. Cant 5:2–6:3 is set in the streets of Jerusalem, but that does not make it a "street song." It is no less gratuitous to assume that because 1:12–14 refers to banqueting, it is a "table song" (Krinetzki, 1964), or that 8:8–10 was sung at a marriage celebration, where the girl "justifies her conduct against the programmatic supervision of her brothers" (Murphy, 1981:123). The scene shown in a song is not necessarily the life-setting for which it was composed.

Therefore, instead of proceeding from a consideration of the "form" of the individual songs or of their constituent units (though this may be justified for some literary genres), I will ask about the function of the love song genre as a whole in Egypt and in Israel, considering which of the settings available in these cultures is the context most suitable for the creation of such songs. I will approach the question of life-setting by narrowing the range of possibilities: that is, by excluding situations for which songs about love might well be written but for which the love songs at hand were not. (This negative approach is useful because it can be far more misleading to interpret a text in accordance with an irrelevant social context than to interpret it without regard to social context.) Most of the situations I will exclude have actually been proposed by various scholars as life-settings for the love songs, but in certain cases I will be trying to anticipate theories about the Egyptian songs that might be raised by analogy with theories about the Song of Songs.

Courting Songs

Canticles is not a courting song. R. Shimon ben Gamaliel (late first century C.E.), recalling the celebrations of the 15th of Ab and the Day of Atonement, told how the girls of Jerusalem would go out to dance in the vineyards and urge the young men to choose wives:

And what did [the maidens] say? "Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you would choose for yourself. Do not consider good looks; consider rather family, (as it is said): "Charm is deceitful and beauty a vanity, etc." It is also said: "Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her" (Prov 31:30–31). Likewise it says: "Go forth, daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon, in the crown that his mother put on him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart" (Cant 3:11). "On the day of his wedding"—this is the giving of the law; "and on the day of the gladness of his heart"—this is the building of the Temple, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days! Amen! (M. Taanit 4:8)

While this mishna has the girls quoting Canticles in their invitation to potential mates, we cannot conclude that the Song, any more than Prov 31:10–31—or the allegorical interpretation of Cant 3:11—originated in that setting. R. Shimon quotes the Song, along with Prov 31, in the way typical for quoting proof texts (*w'ken hu' omer*), because he considers these scriptural verses appropriate to the occasion. Similarly, the injunctions about the vanity of beauty and the importance of family connections do not seem authentic in the mouths of girls dancing in the vineyards. Rather, they belong to R. Shimon's idealized notion of what was said on such occasions.

Canticles of course includes passages that, taken in isolation, could be used by one lover in courting another (e.g., 2:10b–14; 4:8–15; 7:12–14). But the poem as a whole, including as it does the words of both lovers, with the boy's words of admiration and persuasion sometimes incorporated into the girl's narration (2:10b–14), would not have been written for courting.

The Song is certainly not a stenographic record of songs sung by the young people in the streets and vineyards. Its artistry and control of language far surpass what we could reasonably expect adolescents to produce for their flirtations.

Wedding Songs

Because of the widely held opinion that Canticles consists of or includes wedding songs, we might consider whether the Egyptian love songs were meant to be sung at weddings. The Egyptians do not, in fact, seem to have had any special wedding ceremonies or marriage celebrations of sacral character. Mention of wedding festivities of any sort is very rare. In the Ptolemaic story of Setne Khamwas (Setne I), a woman says that on the day of her marriage, her husband, who was the king's son and her brother, "made holiday with me, and he entertained all Pharaoh's household" (Lichtheim, 1980:128). The marriage of Ramses II to the Hittite princess may have been accompanied by public festivities (KRI III, 251), but these festivities may not have been specifically wedding feasts. Nuptial celebrations in Egypt were (to the extent the scanty evidence allows us to surmise) not religious solemnities, but simply parties in honor of a happy occasion.⁴ Since we do not know just what marriage festivities were like in ancient Egypt, we cannot say whether such songs could have been sung for them. In any case, love songs do not seem to be

4. The formation of a marriage in Egypt was essentially a familial-social act devoid of religious character. Marriage consisted of the (ideally) permanent cohabitation of a man and a woman in a shared household, and sometimes (at least in later periods) was accompanied by a marriage contract. The contract was separate from the act of matrimony and could be written some time later. For a comprehensive study of Egyptian marriage, see Allam, 1981:116f.

intended to serve the specific needs of a wedding more than those of any other festivity. They never speak of the couple as presently married; on the contrary, they often tell of the obstacles still on the way to the fulfillment of love (nos. 4, 20D, 32, 36, etc.). The lovers sometimes must come from afar to get together (nos. 5, 8). While at times they express the hope that they will spend their lives together (nos. 14, 18, 20B), it is generally clear that they are not yet married. None of the songs express the hopes for the couple's future that would be appropriate in wedding festivities.

Nor is Canticles a wedding song. To be sure, it may well have been sung at weddings as part of the general entertainment, along with timbrel playing, dances, and songs of all sorts, for the general theme of love would certainly be suitable to the wedding atmosphere. But little in the Song connects it directly with weddings and marriage, and—more important for interpretation—the couple that speak in it are not a bride and groom.

The lovers in Canticles are not married or getting married as yet. The Shulammite is still under her brothers' control (1:6), or at least they would have it so. The lovers' behavior in general is not that of newlyweds. No bridegroom would have to sneak up to his beloved's house at night, peeking in the windows, and asking to be let in. Neither (one hopes) would a new bride have to leave her bed at night to chase about the city looking for her husband. Nor would the lovers behave in this fashion if they were formally betrothed and her family recognized the youth as her future husband. No betrothed woman—let alone a new bride—would have to wish that her beloved were like a brother to her so that she could kiss him openly and bring him home to mother (8:1f.). In 8:8 her betrothal is spoken of as an event in the future: "when she is spoken for." The lovers go off to the countryside to make love, not to a bed of matrimony. Nor would the Song be an appropriate "autobiography" for a bride: it is not recited from the vantage point of a bride at her wedding looking back at things she did in the past, many of which she would in any case be hesitant to relate to assembled wedding guests. Even if the Song was sung at weddings—and there is no evidence that it was—it was quite obviously not sung *about* the wedding or about the couple getting married. It would therefore be a mistake to impose a wedding interpretation on the Song.

Only two brief passages, 3:7–11 and 8:8–9, speak of marriage explicitly. Cant 3:7–11 describes Solomon's bed and refers to the crown his mother made for his wedding day. While this passage *may* have been a wedding song before its inclusion in Canticles, in context it is part of the couple's playful and fantastic description of their garden bower as if it were the royal bed (see commentary). However this passage is to be interpreted, its presence does not make Canticles into a song that is about marriage or that was written specifically for weddings. In Cant 8:8–9 the Shulammite's brothers promise

to give her ornaments when, sometime in the future, she is spoken for in marriage. Cant 3:4 and 8:2 also seem to allude to marriage, but again as a hoped-for event in the indefinite future.

Various parts of the Song (e.g., 2:1-7) may have been sung at weddings—as they are today. The Praise Songs, too, could have been sung at weddings, just as *wasfs* were sung at the Syrian weddings observed by Wetzstein.⁵ We should, however, observe that the *wasfs* among the Egyptian love songs (nos. 31, 54, and the first part of no. 3) are in no way set in the context of weddings, and the *wasf* spoken by Ludingira about his mother (see n. 23 below, and chapter 7) is certainly not related to marriage. The Arabic *wasfs* themselves are sung on various occasions, not just at weddings, nor are the numerous *wasfs* in the *Arabian Nights* set in weddings (see Rudolph, 1962: 103f., with references). There is therefore no reason to assume that the *wasfs* in Canticles must be wedding songs. Furthermore, the Sacred Marriage Songs, which *are* meant for a wedding ritual, contain no *wasfs*. In any case, in Canticles the Praise Songs are integrated into a dialogue between two lovers whom we know from the rest of the song, and these lovers are clearly not celebrating their wedding. Cant 5:10-16 is particularly well integrated into the narrative, being the Shulammitte's response to a question asked by the girls of Jerusalem.

Canticles' life-setting is not a wedding celebration. The lovers are unmarried, and the essential hopes of a new marriage—fertility, health, prosperity—are not touched upon. I cannot help agreeing with Gerleman's explanation of many scholars insistence on putting the Song's celebration of sex comfortably between the covers of the marriage bed:

Die Forderung, dass es sich bei jeder Erwähnung sinnlich erotischer Szenen um Hochzeit und Ehe handeln müsste lässt sich nur als das Hineinlesen einer kirchlichen Eheethik in das Hohelied verstehen und führt wieder aufs neue zu willkürlichen Textinterpretationen. (1965:207)⁶

5. Wetzstein first described 19th century Syrian weddings and compared the songs sung at them to Canticles in "Die syrische Dreschtafel," 1873 (see also his appendix to Delitzsch's commentary, 1885). His observations led Budde to see in Canticles "the text book of a Palestinian-Israelite wedding" (1898:xix). A. Harper argued persuasively against Budde's approach at length (1907:74-93), showing that the wedding-week theory cannot explain the present form, personae, events, or general character of the Song, and further that the Song is quite unlike the wedding songs that Wetzstein described. Recent commentators, most of whom see the Song as a collection of short songs, generally explain only some of these units as wedding songs. Rudolph, for example, says that only 1:2-4; 1:9-17; 4:8; 4:9-11; 4:12-5:1; 7:1-6; and 8:5-7 reflect the nuptial setting (1962:103). Gordis says that "it is clear that some of the lyrics in the Song of Songs are not connected with wedding ceremonies or with married love at all" (1961:17), but he does not say which these are.

6. "The insistence that every mention of sensuous erotic scenes must deal with wedding and marriage can only be understood as the reading of an ecclesiastical marriage ethic into the Song

Love Magic

Perhaps the idea that Canticles is love magic is unlikely to arise, but Davis has argued that the Cairo Love Songs constitute a sort of magic charm whose utterance was supposed to guarantee an unbroken "cycle of love" (1980:113). Yet love songs are fundamentally different from magical spells. Here is an example of love magic:

Hail to thee, O Re^c-Harakhte, Father of the Gods!
Hail to you, O ye Seven Hathors
Who are adorned with strings of red thread!
Hail to you, ye Gods lords of heaven and earth!
Come make so-and-so (fem.) born of so-and-so come after me,
Like an ox after grass,
Like a servant after her children,
Like a drover after his herd!
If you do not make her come after me,
Then I will set fire to Busiris and burn up Osiris.

(Smither, 1941:131)

If the love songs are in any way love spells, they are very subtle ones, which Egyptian magic never is elsewhere. Magic spells exhibit their magical character plainly, making demands on the gods or on unspecified supernatural forces and enforcing them with threats, entreaties, and strange potions.⁷ To add force to the demands, they are often repeated many times (preferably seven) in different ways. Although this repetition may accidentally produce a parallelism that gives the spell a lyrical quality, as in the spell quoted above, literary artistry is essentially irrelevant to the working of magic. The most fundamental difference is that in our love songs the speaker never tries to

of Songs and leads again and again to arbitrary interpretations of the text." An example in hand is Budde's defense of his wedding-song interpretation: "Es handelt sich also nicht um Liebeslieder schlechthin, etwa gar um die Zeugnisse einer unkeuschen Dichterliebe, sondern um Gelegenheitsgedichte im engsten Sinne des Wortes, und zwar solche auf die vollkommen gesetzliche Liebe eines Gatten und seiner Gattin. . . . Damit ist der Stoff allerdings, wie es die dramatische Auffassung will, vollkommen moralisch; denn die Ehe ist die Grundlage aller Gesellschaftsmoral" (1989:xix f.). ("We are thus not dealing with love songs as such, and certainly not with evidence for the unchaste love of a poet, but with *occasional* poems in the narrowest sense of the word, and, in fact, such as deal with the completely lawful love of a husband and his wife. . . . Thus the material is indeed completely moral, as the dramatic interpretation would have it; for marriage is the basis of all social morality.") I do not think it is necessary to set the Song in a wedding ceremony in order to recognize its morality, which is founded on the values of loyalty and devotion.

7. E.g., the London-Leyden Demotic papyrus, 15,1-21 (Griffith and Thompson, 1904: 105f. = Brier, 1980:288).

force love, either by natural or supernatural means. Not even wishes, such as we have in "Three Wishes," and "Seven Wishes" try to manipulate reality in the way magic does.

Religious Poetry

One vast and notable area of public and personal activity that it is *not* Canticles' or the Egyptian love poems' purpose to serve is religion, the manifold manifestations of belief about the divine and the expressions of reverence toward the gods. The love songs do not attempt to show anything about the gods or their relations with mankind.

THE EGYPTIAN LOVE SONGS

Granted that the distinction between the religious and the secular was less sharp in the ancient world than it is today (Davis, 1980:112), the Egyptian love songs are still well on the secular side of the border. There are a few references to gods and cultic activities, but these are incidental and of minor importance. The songs make no attempt to impart beliefs about the gods, to commune with them through private prayer, or to adore them and influence their will through cultic worship.

The lovers are not gods, nor do they represent gods. Although the girl in "The Stroll" has divine qualities in her lover's eyes (no. 31), she is not a goddess but a shy young girl (hardly Hathor-like) living at home with her mother. The girl in no. 20C calls her lover "my god," but this is just a hyperbolic expression of esteem. We hear his thoughts soon after and can see that he is quite mortal.

It has not yet been suggested, so far as I know, that the lovers in the Egyptian love songs are divinities, but Davis has argued briefly that although the lovers are human, they take on the *guises* of gods in a way that is to be compared to "serious transformations" of the sort so important in Egyptian religion (1980:112). Thus in addition to the fictions that White describes (1978:112),⁸ there is a "divine fiction" in which the lovers are "transformed" into gods: the "brother" is Re, the "sister" Hathor, or, in the Cairo Love Songs, the boy is Nefertem and the girl Sothis (Davis, 1980:112).

Now while it is true that many mortuary spells are meant to allow the dead to turn into gods—"any god that a man might wish"—the lovers in the

love songs are not even pretending to be gods. On the contrary, if the girl personified Hathor ("The Golden One") or were taking on her guise, it would make no sense for her to pray to that goddess (as she does in no. 36), or to declare that the goddess has destined her for the boy she loves (no. 32). Gods can take on human form in Egyptian belief, and humans can become gods, so if the lovers were in any way divine there would be no reason for the poets or scribes to hide it. Moreover, divinity can be easily indicated in Egyptian by the use of the god determinative, which is used freely in connection with anything associated with divinity. Inasmuch as girls are female and boys male, there will inevitably be similarities between them and female and male deities. But the love songs themselves do not draw any "extended analogy between divine and human affairs" (contrary to Davis, 1980:112).

None of the love songs are prayers or hymns to Hathor.⁹ We know that people prayed to Hathor in her temple for success in love. She "hears the requests of all maidens who weep" (Naville, 1913: pl. 9a). The love songs contain some *references* to prayers (nos. 21F, 35), in one place (no. 36) a line of prayer is quoted ("O Golden One, put that in her [sc. my mother's] heart!"); and in another (no. 21F) a boy expresses a wish that he wants his god to fulfill ("May he grant me my lady every day!"). But such prayers are mentioned or quoted in a manner incidental to the portrayal of the lovers and their situations. The lovers' thoughts may include prayers, but the songs themselves are not prayers.

Schröder (1951) pointed to various motifs he felt were derived from myth or cult and argued that the love songs are secularized sacral lyrics, whose formerly sacred character bears on their present meaning. Now, even if we were to accept all the connections he claims between love song motifs and mythology, we would not have to conclude that the songs were originally sacred, but only that they incorporated some reworked sacral motifs. But in fact the connections he asserts are extremely tenuous. For example, with the help of a northeast Siberian legend and a saying from the Pyramid Texts, he explains the girl's offer of her breast to her lover (no. 1) as derived from the mortuary motif of the goddess nursing the king. Or when the girl in no. 18 says, "I am your first sister" (he translates *tpy* "first" (in time); it literally means "foremost" here), we are to think of Isis, the "first sister" of the mythical primordial time. The comparison between a girl and a garden in no. 18 he associ-

9. Contrary to Bleeker, 1973b:85: "Weil Hathor die Göttin der Liebe war, wandten die verliebten Leute sich gern an sie mit der Bitte, dass sie ihr Liebesverlangen erfüllen möge. Das ist die Tendenz der schönen Liebeslieder, die der Hathor gewidmet sind." ("Because Hathor was the goddess of love, people in love readily turned to her with the prayer that she fulfill their longing for love. This is the intention of the lovely love songs, which were dedicated to Hathor.") Although Hathor was the goddess of love and had many songstresses in her service, neither the love song texts nor any external evidence suggests that the love songs were dedicated to her.

8. These are the three "travesties" or disguises that Hermann argues are important in Egyptian love poetry: the "Ritter"-Travestie, the "Diener"-Travestie, and the "Hirten"-Travestie (1959:111-24), on which see my remarks in "Excursus: The 'Travesties'."

ates with hymns to the Nile, for the Nile fertilizes the fields. The particular sacral motifs that Schröder argues for are doubtful at best. There are indeed a number of "sacral motifs" in the songs,¹⁰ but that does not show a sacral origin for the genre, any more than bird-trapping motifs show that the songs originated among bird-trappers.

Again, allusions to deities are undoubtedly present in "The Crossing" (see Derchain, 1975, and above, no. 20C, n. a, nq. 20D, n. c, and no. 20G, n. e): the lotus, the primeval flood Nun, and the goddess Menqet are all Egyptian divinities. But the lovers are not gods, nor are their experiences religiously typological. Nor do these allusions give us a clue to the life-setting of the songs in which they appear.

The Egyptians felt divinity's presence everywhere. They were, as Herodotus saw, the most religious of peoples (II.37.1). It is then all the more striking that in the love songs the gods stay well in the background. Hermann does not exaggerate in observing:

Es muss auffallen, dass die Gottheit niemals als übergeordnete Macht gekennzeichnet wird, der sich der Mensch gerade auch in seiner Liebe unterstellte. Vielmehr werden die einbezogenen Götter dem Leben in den Liedern untergeordnet gezeigt. Das persönliche Erlebnis ist das zunächst Gegebene, wovon ausgegangen wird, und dem sich die göttliche Macht anzubequemen hat. (1959:84)¹¹

THE SONG OF SONGS

The understanding of the Song that has dominated traditional Jewish (and Christian) interpretation is that it is a divinely inspired work whose function is to teach about God's relationship with Israel (or in Christian interpretation, Christ's relationship with the Church). Such interpreters generally explained the Song as allegory, using a variety of midrashic expository techniques.¹²

10. In no. 31 the girl is compared to Sothis. In no. 20C the girl calls her lover "my god, my lotus" (= Nefertem). In no. 47 the boy addresses the door of a girl's house as if it were the divine door to the afterlife. "The Orchard" (nos. 28–30) mentions giving offerings to the trees, as if they were divinities. The sycamore-goddess motif may underlie the picture of the gracious sycamore in no. 30. See the comments on these songs.

11. "It is surprising that divinity is never characterized as a superior power to whom man subjects himself even in his love. Rather the gods who are referred to are shown in the songs as subordinated to life. The personal experience is the primary given, from which everything proceeds, and to which the divine power must accommodate itself."

12. The sources for early Jewish allegorical interpretation are the Targum, three midrashic compilations (*Canticles Rabba*, *Aggadat Shir Hashirim*, *Midrash Shir Hashirim*), a number of remarks in the Talmud and early homiletical midrashim, and a fragment from an unknown midrash; see Urbach, 1971:247. Origen is a valuable source for reconstructing Tannaitic exposition of the Song; see *ibid.* Schneekloth (1977:295–331) classifies the methods the Targum uses in its paraphrastic exposition thus: allegory (i.e., interpreting words as tropes), different pointing of Hebrew words, same root with different meaning, similar sound, change of consonant, transposition of consonants, *gematria*, *notarikon*, and extension of the meaning of a word.

Midrashic interpretation sees in the Song mystical allegories (describing the quest of the individual soul for God and revealing mysteries of God's appearance in the Chariot),¹³ historical allegories (telling of the relationship between God and the community of Israel), and eschatological allegories (giving reassurance of the coming of the Messiah). Since the allegorical interpretations usually (but not always)¹⁴ identify the male lover with God and the female with Israel, we can say in summary that the allegorical approach understands the Song as representing the love between God and Israel (or the individual Israelite). The premedieval expositors do not, however, try to give an overall meaning to the book. They usually treat verses, and sometimes words, in isolation, using the wording of the Song to formulate and reinforce diverse ideas or to exemplify various events and teachings.¹⁵

As modern commentators generally recognize, the Song was not written as an allegory of the love between Israel and God. Equality is the essence of the relationship between the young lovers in the Song, and this can hardly have been intended as a model for God's relation to Israel (or to an individual soul). Patriarchal marriage, where the man initiates the relationship and provides for a woman, from whom he can then demand fidelity, is a more appropriate metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel and is so used by the prophets, most notably Hosea and Ezekiel. But premarital courtship of equals such as we see in the Song, where the only bond is mutual attraction and equivalent need, and where full consummation depends on social acceptance by individuals outside the relationship, is a poor correlative of the relationship between God the master and Israel his possession. The equality of the lovers and the quality of their love, rather than the Song's earthy sensuality, are what makes their union an inappropriate analogy for the bond between God and Israel.

The prophets use marriage as a metaphor to emphasize the heinousness of Israel's apostasy and to explain how reconciliation is yet possible (e.g., Hos 2–3; Isa 5:1–7; Ezek 16, 23). In the Song, on the other hand, there is no infidelity or reconciliation. In any case, when the prophets use the marriage metaphor, they make it quite clear who the partners are and what the parable

13. *Shiur Komah*, a fragmentary text that represents a second century C.E. tradition, interprets 5:11–16 as a description of the mystical body of God (Scholem, 1960:36–42; Lieberman, 1960:118–26).

14. Cant. Rab. (ii 31), for example, takes "your [fem.] appearance" (*mar'ayik*, *mar'eyk*) in 2:14 as referring to God's appearance at Sinai. In the Targum, the male lover is identified with Israel in 2:2, and in a few verses where the female is speaking, the words are attributed to God (2:10–12; 7:14). The words spoken by the youth in 7:10 are put into the mouths of Daniel and his companions. On the whole, however, the allegorical identification of the male with God and the female with Israel is carried through consistently (Schneekloth, 1977:310–17).

15. The Targum (early Islamic period) seems to be the first attempt to read the Song as a historical sequence.

means. Thus in Hos 2 the speaker is not an unidentified lover, but God himself, who addresses his unfaithful beloved in the feminine singular and also in the masculine plural (2:20). In 3:1 God tells Hosea to love an adulterous woman "just as God loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love fruit clusters." In Isa 5:1-7 the lover (*dod*) and his beloved (who is spoken of under the figure of a vineyard) are not identified at first, but at the end of the song Isaiah says: "for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the House of Israel and the people of Judah are the planting in which he delights" (5:7a). The lover and the beloved are explicitly identified as God and Jerusalem in Ezek 16. In Ezek 23 God identifies the two women he loves as Samaria and Jerusalem (23:4), even though when the husband is clearly God, as in this chapter, there is never really any doubt about the identity of the beloved "woman" or "women."

In general, parables and allegories do not hide their identity. Their purpose is to give insight into a truth that might otherwise be difficult to accept or comprehend, so they must invite interpretation. Why then would the Song hide its allegorical function if it had one? The far greater part of midrashic exegesis found nothing under the literal "covering" that would have to be hidden. While one ancient tradition of mystical interpretation saw truly esoteric mysteries in the Song, the dominant historical and eschatological interpretations found none. It was the literal sense that almost all premodern exegetes felt had to be concealed. The midrashic interpretation of Canticles differs from that of other books not in the nature of its exposition, but in its denial of the significance of the literal meaning.

The midrashic interpreters (in this case almost all premodern interpreters) considered the literal meaning to be unworthy of inspired scripture, an unseemly covering hiding a treasure. As Shemariah ben Elijah of Crete (1275-1355) put it:

If [the words of the Song] had their literal meaning, there would be nothing in the world so thoroughly profane as they, and there would have been nothing more damaging to Israel than the day the Song of Songs was given to them, for its literal meaning stirs up desire, above all sexual desire, than which nothing is more blameworthy. (quoted in Leiman, 1976:201)

Allegorical exegesis, thinking to reveal the treasure that lay under the cover of literal meaning, in effect covered the literal meaning under layers of allegory. These layers, though beautiful and valuable in themselves, lie outside the scope of this book.

The difficulty with the allegorical approach is that it is too easy to apply. By way of *reductio ad absurdum*, we could just as easily interpret the Egyptian love songs as allegories of God's love for Israel. We could say that in Egyptian song no. 4 Israel declares that her loyalty to Yahweh will persist even if she is exiled to the four corners of the earth, while in no. 8 she waits

for the Šhekinah to appear at the Temple, where booths (for the Feast of Tabernacles?) are set up. Conversely, we could interpret Canticles as a *pagan* religious allegory, with the girl representing, say, Isis (or Ishtar), who must search for her brother Osiris (or Tammuz), who is lost in the netherworld (5:2-7). Or we might say in general that Canticles celebrates the love and sacred marriage of a goddess and a god. The latter form of religious interpretation, which will be discussed in the next section, has in fact been attempted and vigorously defended.

Love Songs and the Sacred Marriage

None of the Egyptian love songs are suited to a role in a Sacred Marriage liturgy, which, as the Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage songs show, can be expected to emphasize strongly the connection between the divine sexual union and the fertility of the land. In fact, we have no clear evidence for a Sacred Marriage ritual in Egypt. Fairman has claimed that Hathor's visit to Horus at Edfu, a festival described at length in Ptolemaic texts, was a Sacred Marriage (1954:196ff.). But, as Bleeker has shown, it is doubtful whether a true *hieros gamos* took place on that occasion (1973a:95-101).

Fertility was, of course, a major concern in Egyptian cult, and one song with a possible tangential connection to a fertility cult is no. 8, where the lovers meet in a booth or pavilion in a garden near the temple at Heliopolis. The garden is called a *dd*, which may mean "love garden." But although the lovers are meeting in a cultic setting, one *possibly* associated with fertility, the poem itself is not concerned with fertility and shows no signs of playing a role in the cult. It is simply *about* lovers who meet at a festival.

It is curious that although no one (so far as I know) has argued that love songs are a liturgy for a divine marriage ritual in Egypt, where such a ritual would be a legitimate expression of mythology, many scholars have argued that similar love songs served just that purpose in Israel, where such a ritual would be totally incompatible with the attitudes toward religious activity reflected in the other religious literature that has survived from that culture.

Neuschotz de Jassy (1914) interpreted Canticles as a litany describing the resurrection of Osiris (called Solomon) from the land of the dead (Jerusalem). Happily, this theory found no following. Erbt (1906) was the first to argue that the Song describes the love between the fertility god Tammuz and the goddess of love, Ishtar. This hypothesis first received serious attention following Meek's vigorous advocacy (1922, 1924a, 1924b). Wittekindt (1925) and Schmökel (1956) wrote commentaries interpreting the Song as a liturgy for a Sacred Marriage, Schmökel thoroughly rearranging the verses to produce an orderly three-scene liturgical drama.

According to the Tammuz-Ishtar myth, when Tammuz descended to the

netherworld and Ishtar went to seek him, all the earth withered and died. When she found him and brought him back to the land of the living, the earth too revived. These events were presented yearly in ritual dramas. The drama and celebrations of this cult included, according to one hypothesis, a Sacred Marriage in which king and priestess represented the god and goddess in sexual acts that were supposed to restore fertility to the sun-scorched earth. Using methods reminiscent of allegorical interpretation, Meek hunted for words and images in the Song that could be explained as allusions to mythical events or ritual acts. Thus *dodi* ("my beloved") is said to refer to the god Dod or Dadu, supposedly the Palestinian counterpart of Tammuz; myrrh, to which the lovers are compared, was used as incense in the festival of Adonis-Tammuz; raisin cakes, mentioned in 2:5, are connected with the Ishtar cult (cf. Jer 7:18; 44:19); gazelles and hinds are symbols of Astarte; and so on (Meek, 1922).

Schmidt (1926) and Rowley (1952:220-32) have, I believe, shown how tenuous the suggested connections are. At most, as Rowley says, the Song contains isolated linguistic and literary remnants from the Tammuz-Ishtar cult, these having entirely lost their religious meaning. But in fact not even remnants are clearly evidenced.

Kramer (1969) offered a modified version of Meek's theory. He sought to explain the Song as a liturgy for the Sacred Marriage between the *king* and the goddess Astarte (= Ishtar-Inanna). Kramer found parallels to the Song of Songs in the joyous Sumerian songs from the Sacred Marriage ritual rather than in the Akkadian Tammuz dirges. The Sacred Marriage was enacted—not necessarily annually—in Mesopotamia for some two thousand years.¹⁶ Six songs, representing five versions of the love story of the Sumerian shepherd-king Dumuzi (= Tammuz) and his sister Inanna (Ishtar), have been discovered, as well as five texts that describe the marriage and wedding night.¹⁷ The texts, which date from the Neo-Sumerian period (ca.2000 B.C.E.), describe in detail the lovers' desire for each other and praise their sexual attractions. Although the meaning of these compositions and the details of the ceremonies are still obscure in many ways, it appears that the king (the incarnation of Dumuzi and the representative of the land) ritually married the goddess (represented by a priestess) and had intercourse with her. This ritual was intended to ensure abundance and fertility for the land. In the following passage, as the king is led to his divine bride, the poet prays that she will bless the king and his reign with good fortune:

16. Thus Kramer, 1969:49. But Renger (RA:II, 258) says that there is no evidence for the continuation of the ritual after the first dynasty of Isin, 1794 B.C.E.

17. Jacobsen says that while the texts dealing with Dumuzi's wedding are ritual in nature, those telling of his courtship are "lightweight stuff," popular ditties whose only apparent purpose was entertainment (1976:27, 32).

May the lord whom you have called to your heart,
The king, your beloved husband, enjoy long days at your holy lap, the
sweet. . . .
Under his reign may there be plants, may there be grain,
At the river may there be overflow,
In the field may there be rich grain. . . .
May the holy queen of vegetation pile high the grain in heaps and
mounds. . . .

(Kramer, 1969:83)

Following are three excerpts from Sacred Marriage songs that are reminiscent of the Song of Songs. In the first the goddess complains about the lack of vegetation. Her lover, King Shulgi, invites her to go with him to the fields:

My sister, I would go with you to my field,
My fair sister, I would go with you to my field,
I would go with you to my large field,
I would go with you to my small field,
To my 'early' grain irrigated with its 'early' water,
To my 'late' grain irrigated with its 'late' water,
Do you [fructify?] its grain,
Do you [fructify?] its sheaves.

(Kramer, 1969:100)

In another composition, Inanna exults in her fertility:

He has brought me into it, he has brought me into it,
My brother has brought me into the garden.
Dumuzi has brought me into the garden,
I strolled [?] with him among the standing trees.
I stood with him by its lying trees,
By an apple tree I kneeled as is proper.
Before my brother coming in song,
Before the lord Dumuzi who came toward me. . . .
I poured out plants from my womb,
I placed plants before him, I poured out plants before him,
I placed grain before him, I poured out grain before him.

(Kramer, 1969:101)

In the following passage Kubatum, a votary of Inanna, tries to arouse the passion of King Shulgi:

My god, sweet is the drink of the wine-maid
 Like her drink sweet is her vulva, sweet is her drink,
 Like her lips sweet is her vulva, sweet is her drink,
 Sweet is her mixed drink, her drink.

(Kramer, 1969:94)

Similarities between Sacred Marriage songs and the Song of Songs can be seen in some of the ways they express love and desire, the nature motifs, the invitation to the garden, the praise of the beloved's sweetness, and the brother-sister address. Still, it is very unlikely that the Song is a reworked Sacred Marriage liturgy in the same tradition. First of all, if Renger is right in saying that the Sacred Marriage was a localized ritual, part of the coronation ceremonies of certain kings of the Ur III and Isin dynasties, and that it had no continuation in later times (RA II, 257f.), it is hard to see how the ceremony could have been incorporated into Syro-Palestinian practices.

Beyond this, significant differences exist between the Sacred Marriage texts and the Song of Songs, differences so profound as to undermine any theory that the Song was a liturgy of the same sort or was even derived from one. Most significantly, the Song never alludes to a myth or ritual, while the Sacred Marriage texts consistently do so. The Song makes no attempt to effect universal fertility and well-being, as does the Sacred Marriage. The Song never speaks of the invigoration of nature in terms of resurrection from death (as do the Tammuz litanies), nor does it present it as an event in doubt whose realization requires divine intervention. When the land in the Song blossoms, it does so in a natural and expected process. Canticles, like the Egyptian love songs and unlike the Sacred Marriage liturgies, is not interested in woman's fertility. Even when describing the land's blossoming, the Song emphasizes not fecundity but beauty. Sexuality in the Song is a human desire and a bond between two individuals, not the source of universal plenitude.

→ Furthermore, the gentle eroticism of the Song is far removed from the detailed and explicit sexuality of the Mesopotamian liturgies. Sexual explicitness is important in those liturgies, for the sex act is considered a means to national well-being. The sexuality in the Song, on the other hand, has no goal outside the romantic relationship between the two lovers. Such resemblances as there are between the Song and the Sacred Marriage songs can be explained in two ways. First, since both speak of sexual love, a general human experience, some similarities in formulation and motif are inevitable. How can divine sexuality, after all, be spoken of other than in terms of human sexuality? Second, it is possible that miscellaneous expressions and motifs used in Mesopotamian literature—oral or written—found their way to Canaan, where they were taken into secular love poetry.

Finally, we nowhere hear of a Sacred Marriage rite in Israel, though ritual

copulation between a king and a priestess of Astarte would hardly have escaped the prophets' notice. The Tammuz mourning rites, whose existence in Israel is evidenced explicitly in Ezek 8:14, may have been the vehicle for the transfer of some motifs, although the Song shows no traces of lamentation. But if that did happen, these influences left no clear impressions on the Song and certainly did not affect its basic character.

Mortuary Songs: Love and Death

Although festivities associated with the mortuary cult were an important part of Egyptian culture, the Egyptian love songs are not mortuary songs. Egyptians had mortuary festivals the way other people have weddings. One major festival, the Lovely Festival of the Valley, included a procession to the Theban necropolis, where participants lived it up in the company, as it were, of their dead relatives (Schott, 1952). The entertainment at such feasts may well have included love songs, for, as the tomb murals show, these festivities were not essentially different from those enjoyed on other occasions. As the visitors wanted their dead relatives to enjoy the pleasures they had known in this life, amusements of all sorts, love songs among them, would have been in order. But nothing links the love songs with a specifically mortuary setting. Mortuary texts speak at length of death and the life beyond; love poetry scarcely alludes to either. If love songs were sung at mortuary festivals, they were just part of the general entertainment.

The above denial was prompted by Pope's theory that Canticles' original setting was in orgiastic feasts of the sort that (he argues) took place in mortuary cults throughout the Near East and Mediterranean world (1977:210–29). Pope amasses evidence for the existence of funerary banquets of various sorts in various places without showing how performances of the Song functioned in them. Funerary meals undoubtedly did take place in Israel, but no evidence suggests that sexual activity was commonly part of them. The prophets, who are hardly hesitant to condemn other kinds of illicit sex, especially in a cultic setting, condemn various mourning practices, in particular self-laceration and donations to the dead, without mentioning sacral coitus.

Nothing in the Song connects it with death or the afterlife. The subject of 8:6 is love; death is mentioned only incidentally, by way of comparison, along with unquenchable fire. And the atmosphere of the Song is certainly not orgiastic. The sexual acts alluded to are not group acts. Nor does the Song hold up fertility or love as an answer to death.

Love Poetry as Entertainment

The love songs were, I believe, entertainment. When people gather in their leisure time and seek diversion, many forms of entertainment are appropriate. Songs of love have always been popular on such occasions.

THE EGYPTIAN LOVE SONGS

Among the Egyptian love songs, the headings to three groups state their purpose clearly: *shmh ib*, "entertainment" or "diversion" (literally, "making the heart forget").¹⁸ The scribes claim no more for the songs than that they are good entertainment. Being "entertainment songs," love songs were probably sung at banquets of the sort depicted with great frequency in tomb murals (see figs. 1–3, 6, 9). Banquet scenes are more vivacious and detailed in 18th dynasty tombs than in those of the Ramesside period, when "worldly" motifs in general recede in tomb art, but the basic features appear both before and after the 18th dynasty. These are scenes of life's "best parts," the parts the dead person had hoped to repeat through eternity. Typically the tomb owner and his wife sit before food and drink, often served by their children (figs. 2, 6). Guests, sometimes quite a few, sit before the host, often designated by name and relationship to the deceased. Frequently dancers and singers entertain the participants (figs. 1, 2, 9). Servants offer wreaths, food, drink, and ointments, urging the guests to "spend a good day" and to drink—to excess.

Although no love songs are recorded in the tomb murals, motifs seen also in the love songs do appear. Like three of the love song groups, the banquets in many murals are labeled *shmh ib*, "entertainment," "diversion." Some of the people depicted urge the other participants to amuse themselves, to divert their heart (*shmh.k ib.k*), meaning that they should do all the things shown in the scenes: sitting with friends and relatives, putting on aromatic ointments, eating, drinking, and listening to music. Other motifs appearing in both the love songs and the tomb murals are the north wind, drinking to intoxication, anointing oneself with perfumes and oils, dressing in fine linen, offering flowers and wreaths, resting in gardens—and love. The tomb owner is usually depicted sitting next to his wife, called "the beloved of his heart," an expression common in love songs as well.

Another indication of the connection between the love songs and the banquets of the tomb murals is the arrangement of P. Harris 500. Between groups B and C the copyist inserted a harper's song. This song, the "Antef Song" (App. A, no. ii), urges merrymaking of the very sort shown in the ban-

18. P. Harris 500, group B (nos. 9–16) and group C (nos. 17–19); P. Beatty I, group A (nos. 31–37). The heading of the last ascribes the song to the "Great Entertainer."

quet scenes. It is a slightly expanded version of a song found in the tomb of Paatenemheb from the time of Akhenaton, where it accompanies a picture of the tomb owner sitting with his wife and daughters and receiving ritual offerings. This song, sung by an orchestral quartet, first bewails the uncertainty of mortuary rites and then advises self-forgetfulness and the enjoyment of such pleasant things as perfumes and fine linens. Many songs in banquet murals urge similar delights, including the pleasures of song:

Put songs of singing girls before you.
Cast aside all evil,
and think of joy.¹⁹

The absence of love songs from the texts inscribed in the tomb murals does not prove that they were not sung at banquets of the sort depicted. The banquet murals themselves had two major functions in the mortuary cult, neither of which the love songs could fulfill. First, the murals, including the words quoted in them, were thought to provide the dead with food, drink, entertainment, and companionship in the afterlife, through the power of representational magic. Second, the murals were meant to teach tomb visitors the efficacy of the mortuary cult by showing the dead man continuing to enjoy life's pleasures. Some songs that appear in murals fulfill these functions by urging the owner to enjoy himself, thereby indicating that he is still capable of doing so: for example, "A pleasant day! Spend a good morning!" (Amenemhet, TT 82; Davies and Gardiner, 1915: pl. XV). Others praise his present happiness: "Fortunate are these years, which the god commanded you to spend, while you enjoy his lovingkindness and health, etc." (Kenamun, TT 93; Davies, 1930: pl. IX). Other songs have explicitly mortuary significance: for example, "You call to heaven, and your voice is answered. Atum answers you . . ." (Neferrenpet, TT 178; Lichtheim, 1945:205; see further Fox, 1982).

Love songs did not serve the purposes of the tomb murals, since they speak of unmarried, sometimes frustrated, love. None shows—as do the murals—the serene pleasures of a paterfamilias enjoying the company of his wife and family throughout eternity. At the banquets that were the model for the tomb murals, on the other hand, love songs would be quite suitable.

If this hypothesis of the Egyptian love songs' life-setting is accepted, we may inquire whether the entertainment scenes give any information about the occasions on which banqueting took place and love songs were sung. One difficulty is that the banquet scenes—which must be clearly distinguished

19. Neferhotep (TT 50); Müller, 1899: pl. I. See further Lichtheim, 1945, and Wente, 1962.

from the actual banquets they are modeled on—are a tangle of mortuary and earthly motifs. (This tangle served the murals' main purpose, which was to transfer the joys the deceased knew on earth to eternal life by binding together this life and the next.) Some murals associate a banquet with a particular occasion by labels, broader pictorial context, or the words of the participants. These occasions are the following:

1. Special events in the life of the deceased, such as when Rekhmire returned from greeting Amenhotep II upon his accession (fig. 2; TT 100; Davies, 1943: pls. LXIII–LXVII).

2. Funerals. Funerals would culminate in a meal shared, as it were, by mourners and the (newly revived) dead. This meal may have been in reality a simple funerary offering, but ideally, at least, the dead person's first meal was a banquet (e.g., Amenemhet, TT 82; Davies and Gardiner, 1915: pl. XV).²⁰ We should observe that the funerary banquet is pictured as a pleasant, quiet meal, by no means an orgy (even the drunkenness is sedate), and that the songs quoted in the scene are gentle wishes for eternal happiness.

3. Festivals. Many banquet scenes are associated with festivals such as New Year's Day (e.g., Puyemre, TT 39; Davies, 1922–23: pls. LXIII–LXIV), the Festival of Djesru (TT 247; Schott, 1952: source 118), the Lovely Festival of the Valley (TT 129 and TT 56; *ibid.*, sources 116, 117).²¹

4. "Every day." Some scenes contain a phrase signifying daily recurrence of the entertainment, as when a harper says to Puyemre, "Enjoy yourself [in these 1000] years, while your days are (spent) in happiness, [your hours] in delight, your months as one great in favor and love for the length of eternity" (TT 39; Davies, 1922–23: pl. XLII). This does not mean that parties took place every day in the tombs, but rather that the dead man's ongoing needs were to be lavishly provided for (so it was hoped) by offerings contracted for with mortuary priests, by donations from occasional visitors, and by the pictures themselves.

Since special events like a king's accession were rare and one could not have a lavish banquet every day in this life, and since one's funeral banquet was beyond this life, it stands to reason that the occasions for most banquets of the sort depicted in the murals were festival days, of which there were a great many in ancient Egypt. In joyous, even boisterous, public celebrations,

20. The scene reproduced in Davies and Gardiner, 1915: pl. XV, forms a continuation of the funerary ceremonies beginning on the south wall (pls. X–XIII) and extending onto the north wall (pl. XVII). Significantly, the offering on the north wall (pl. XIV) is paralleled by the offering on the south wall (pl. X), but on the north wall it is elaborated into a full banquet. This suggests that the full banquet scene is an idealized interpretation of a simple funerary offering. Nevertheless, a funeral would theoretically culminate in a banquet.

21. Schott, 1952, described the latter festival in detail and showed that it culminated in a procession to the tombs, where the participants joined their dead relatives in a banquet in which intoxication became a means of uniting living and dead.

crowds filled the streets and the grounds of the sanctuary to take part in procession, see religious drama, sing, dance, and get drunk.²² Details of public festivities come mainly from the Ptolemaic texts of Edfu, but the joyous character of religious celebrations was certainly not a late development. "Festivals of Egypt" was long a byword for joy and gaiety. The annals of Thutmose III compare the victory celebrations of the army to the festivals of Egypt: "The army of His Majesty was drunk and anointed with spices all the days, as happens in the festivals of Egypt" (Urk. IV, 688).

In the circumstances offered by the festival days, young lovers could meet, go off alone, and celebrate privately (nos. 8, 30). In private homes, the well-to-do would hold banquets where they would eat, drink, enjoy themselves, and be entertained by dance, instrumental music, and song, including—we may reasonably assume—love songs. In this way, love songs could have acquired a secondary, peripheral connection to the religious life of the people. This hypothesized connection did not, however, influence the way love songs were written.

THE SONG OF SONGS

Canticles too was probably entertainment, a song to be enjoyed on any occasion—including religious holidays—when song, dance, or other ordinary diversions were in order. The Egyptian parallels suggest that the Song too was *shmh-ib*—"diversion of the heart"—and nothing in the poem indicates otherwise.

To call the Song "entertainment" is not to trivialize it. Great music has been composed and great literature written to serve no social or religious function other than entertaining audiences. It is possible to entertain people by arousing finely nuanced and complex emotions, engaging their intellects, conveying new insights, and promulgating significant ideas. Still, we should not exaggerate the gravity of the Song's aims. It is full of fun, erotic allusions, sensual word-paintings of the lovers and their worlds, and heart-warming sentiments. It diverts the mind from everyday cares by inviting the audience to share the fresh, sensuous world of the young lovers and their erotic adventures. Such secular love songs existed in Egypt and probably in Mesopotamia as well, although none of the latter are extant.²³

22. See Drioton, 1957b, and compare the Hymn to the Nile, P. Sallier II, 14,2–9 (transl. Lichtheim, 1973:204f.) and the Hathor hymn in Drioton, 1957b:141.

23. Evidence for the existence of secular love songs from Mesopotamia include the incipits of KAR 158, many of which seem to have belonged to Akkadian love lyrics (Held, 1961:5). Two extant texts from Mesopotamia are related to secular love poetry: "The Message of Ludingira to His Mother," a Sumerian literary text (Cooper, 1971), and an Old Babylonian dialogue, "A Faithful Lover" (Held, 1961).

In the Sumerian text, a man called Ludingira sends a messenger to his mother, giving him

Ezek 33:31–32 gives us some information about how love songs were used among the Israelites. God warns Ezekiel that the people will not take his rhetoric seriously, because it is so interesting that it has become entertaining:

(31) My people will come to you as to a public gathering (*kimbo* 'am) and sit before you. They will listen to your words but not do them. For they have a taste for erotica (*gabim*).²⁴ . . . ²⁵ (32) As far as they're concerned you're just a (singer of) erotic songs,²⁶ who sings nicely and plays well. So they'll hear your words—but *do* them they will not!

five "signs" to enable him to recognize her. Four of these signs are passages consisting of metaphors similar to those in the Praise Songs in Canticles (see chapter 7). The main difference, of course, is that the description in "Ludingira" depicts the speaker's mother, not his lover. Still, the description has certain erotic overtones. It may be that the mother is really Inanna in motherly guise, but as it stands the text is secular and is not a song about sexual love (Freudian implications aside). Nevertheless, the poet may be drawing techniques from a tradition of love songs.

The Old Babylonian text (Held, 1961, 1962) is a complex dialogue about love. A young lady has lost her lover to a slanderous rival. She prays that her rival will come to shame and determines to win back the man's affections. He haughtily rebuffs her, telling her he no longer loves her and does not want her—indeed, "Your love means no more to me than trouble and vexation" (1961:9). But somehow she persuades him and he deigns to return to her: "My one and only, your features are not unlovely" (ibid.). Held, stressing the secularity of the composition, assigns it to the category of love lyrics. It seems to me closer in kind to "The Dialogue of Pessimism" or "The Babylonian Theodicy," which discuss philosophical questions in urbane and sometimes witty dialogue. The Old Babylonian dialogue in question speaks of the value and constancy of love with the same acrid humor with which "The Dialogue of Pessimism" debates the value of human activity. It would be stretching the category of love songs too far to include "Ludingira" in it; nevertheless, the text does show that human love was a subject of literary interest in Mesopotamia as well as in Egypt and Israel.

A fragmentary Old Babylonian text from Kish, studied by Dr. Joan Westenholz ("A Forgotten Love Song") appears to be part of a love song. It is unclear whether it is a monologue or dialogue and whether the setting is secular or religious. What is clear is its sexual nature. In col. i, the better preserved of the two columns, the woman coaxes her lover to have intercourse with her. Her blandishments include: . . . your caresses are sweet / growing luxuriantly is your fruit / . . . O by the crown of our head, the rings of our ears / the mountains of our shoulders, and the charms of our chest / the bracelet with date spadix charms of our wrists / the belt of our waist / reach forth with your left hand and honor our vulva / play with our breasts. . . . Observe that the woman speaks of herself in the first plural, a practice found elsewhere in amatory contexts (Westenholz refers to Gilgamesh VI, 69 and the Sumerian Sacred Marriage texts). It is likely that certain first plurals in the Song of Songs, such as in 2:15, should likewise be understood as the girl's words (see commentary). I thank Dr. Westenholz for allowing me to see and quote from a prepublication copy of her study.

24. It is unnecessary to emend *gabim* to *kazabim*, in spite of LXX *pseudos*. For *gabim* *b^epiyhem* compare *ki sayid b^epiyw*, "for he had a taste for game," Gen 25:28. In Ezek 33:31, *ki gabim b^epiyhem* explains why the people will come and sit before Ezekiel and listen to his words.

25. The rest of the verse is corrupt, but it does not bear on the issue at hand.

26. *K^ešir gabim*, elliptical for *k^ešar šir gabim*.

gabim refers to matters of lust or words that stir up lust. BDB appropriately renders "love songs," although GB always denotes sexual desire, and the implication of lust should not be obscured. Ezekiel may be using a deliberately acerbic term to describe the people's interest, yet the songs he has in mind would not have to be much more erotically explicit than Canticles to warrant this designation (see Shemariah ben Elijah's remark on the Song's literal meaning, above, p. 238). Even in exile people gathered to hear erotic songs for diversion and amusement.

Isaiah, at the start of his "Song of the Vineyard" (5:1–7), takes on the guise of a minnesinger (as Rudolph, 1962:105, aptly puts it) to get his audience's attention. *Širat dodi l^ekarmo*, as Isaiah labels his song, means "my beloved's song about his vineyard." The audience is to think that Isaiah is singing about a beloved woman—a "vineyard" (cf. Cant 1:6, 14; 8:12)—but he quickly turns the song into a reproach and throws it in their faces (vv. 3–7).²⁷

These two passages show us that entertainers sang love songs to amuse audiences during the time of the First Commonwealth. A remark of Rabbi Akiva's gives us information about the use of Canticles itself in the century after the destruction of the Second Temple: "Whoever warbles the Song of Songs at banqueting houses (*battey hammišta'ot*), treating it like an ordinary song (*ka^aḥad hazz^emarim*: lit., "as one of the songs"), has no portion in the World to Come" (Tos. San. 12:10). In the second century C.E., when the allegorical interpretation was largely taken for granted,²⁸ some people were still singing it as entertainment at banquets.

What bothers Rabbi Akiva is not (contrary to Pope) that people were using the Song in a sacral setting,²⁹ but that they were using it in a way he

27. Note that the love song Isaiah is supposed to be singing creates a speaking persona distinct from the singer. I argue in chapter 6 that the speakers in most, if not all, love songs are personae.

28. The canonicity of the Song was not seriously in dispute in the middle of the second century C.E. In the discussions about the canonicity of Qohelet and the Song of Songs in M. Yadayim 3:5, the issue is whether the status of the Song as inspired scripture *had been* in dispute at a council session at Jamnia that took place sometime between 75 and 117 C.E. (Leiman, 1976:123). Rabbi Akiva insists that no one ever disputed the Song's sanctity. The Song's interpretation as sacred scripture had begun well before Jamnia. Its presence in the Qumran library shows that the religious interpretation was accepted by some groups in the first century C.E. at the latest (the dating of the manuscript is uncertain).

29. There is no evidence whatsoever for Pope's contention (1977:221) that *beyt miš^eya^a* in Dan 5:10, *beyt miš^eteh hayyayin* in Est 7:8, *beyt hayyayin* in Cant 2:4, and *batey hammišta'ot* in Tos. San. 12:10 refer to places for "sacral feasting and drinking." *Beyt hammišta'ot*, as well as the other terms listed above, can indicate any place where banquets are held. These may include banquets where, among other things, one could praise the gods (Dan 5:4). Such practices would not make the banquet essentially sacral and would not mean that the banquet hall was a cult place. In the case of Est 7:8, we know that the occasion was definitely not a sacral celebration—Esther

considered improper. While he considered the Song most holy, others treated it as "an ordinary song." But extraordinary as its artistry is, Canticles is indeed an "ordinary song" in the sense in which Rabbi Akiva used this term.

Excursus: The Sacralization of the Song of Songs

How then did a song of this sort become holy scripture? We do not know. While the ascription to Solomon would facilitate acceptance, since it attributed the book to an ancient and inspired author, that attribution would not in itself lead to canonization, for other books and songs ascribed to him were not accepted. Besides, in the discussion in M. Yad. 3:5, none of the Tannaim mention Solomonic authorship to justify canonization. Certainly allegorization was necessary prior to canonization, but what impelled the rabbis to allegorize it to start with? Here was a dangerous choice for allegorization, for the Song's eroticism could never be entirely obscured, and the identification of the lover with God suggests some audacious, uncharacteristic anthropomorphisms.³⁰ In any case, one does not simply come upon a song and interpret it by midrash. Midrashic exposition is applicable only to a text that is considered authoritative and inspired. The Song must have been regarded as in some way part of the national religious literature *before* it was read allegorically.

Advocates of the cultic interpretation argue that the sacred aura the Song had in its presumed pagan use would have clung to it and led to its appropriation to Jewish religious literature. Meek says that Canticles "got into the Canon because it was an ancient book, a religious book, and one that had always been religious" (1924b:52f.; similarly Kramer, 1969:90). But a pagan religious origin would hardly make the book *more* acceptable. Meek, in fact, considered the Song's presumed cultic background as the reason some rabbis hesitated to accept it (1922:3), but there is no hint that this is what

simply invited the king and Haman to dinner. Haman was caught prostrate at Esther's couch not because he was intoxicated from sacral drinking (contrary to Pope), but because he was pleading for mercy. This banquet was not a celebration of Purim or a precursor to it, so that speculations that Purim originated in a Persian "feast of the dead" (Pope, 1977:221) are irrelevant to the identification of the "house of wine." Rabbi Akiva does not suggest that illicit cultic activities were going on in the banquets he knew about, and certainly such things would not have escaped his ire. Likewise, the term *beyt mišteh* in Rabbi Akiva's remark cannot be restricted to wedding banquets (contrary to Würthwein, 1969:32), although it may include them.

30. The dangers of allegorizing the Song are shown by early attempts to obviate such interpretations. For example, in order to neutralize the anthropomorphism suggested by an allegorical interpretation of 1:2, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai stated that the lover referred to in "Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth" is not God but an angel (Cant. Rab. i 13; see Urbach, 1971:255). The Targum similarly reads the description of the lover in 5:10ff. as praise of the Torah. The mystical midrash *Shiur Komah* shows that despite such precautions allegorical interpretation could quickly lead to extreme anthropomorphism.

bothered them. Pagan religious usages could undoubtedly be incorporated into Yahwism, but only after their original meaning had been suppressed and forgotten. So while a pagan background might not prevent canonization, it would hardly be the reason for it. In any case, there are no traces of a revision replacing pagan characteristics with Yahwistic ones, and as Rowley points out, "an intelligent reviser would have taken care that the Yahwism whose interests the book was to serve would be unequivocally displayed in it, and not left to the reader to supply" (1952:223).

Nor does the theory that Canticles was a wedding song explain its canonization. First of all, the Song exalts not marriage but the sexual love that may lead to marriage, and the Tannaim never glorified sexual pleasure as sacred in itself. Second, if an original nuptial setting was the key factor in the Song's canonization, we would expect to find this legitimizing factor reflected in the early discussions and comments on the Song, and in particular the arguments on behalf of its canonicity. Unlike the cultic theory, which says that the original use was suppressed before canonization, the wedding song theory presumes an original use that continued to be legitimate and would not have needed to be obscured by the early interpreters. But the early references to the Song in no way point to an original use at weddings.

Of the various speculations offered to explain the Song's canonization, Bentzen's (1953) seems to me closest to the mark. He suggests that the sacralization of the Song grew out of an incidental connection between it and religious festivals, particularly those in the spring festival season, whence its later association with Passover. I agree that such an incidental context would be likely to call forth learned midrashic reinterpretation to justify the Song's presence among the religious usages of the festival season. There is, however, no evidence that the Song was associated with Passover until well after its canonization. The earliest allegorical interpretations do not refer specifically to Passover.³¹

To explain how the Song came to be regarded as part of the sacred literature of Israel, it may be enough to postulate that the Song, though not intrinsically religious, was sung as part of the entertainment and merrymaking at feasts and celebrations, which would naturally take place for the most part on holidays in the religious calendar.

Festivals in ancient Israel and Judea were not days of prayer, sacrifice, and ritual alone. From various evidence, early and late, we know that they were joyous, even raucous, festivities in which the people ate, drank, and

31. Canticles is now the first of the Five Scrolls because it is read on Passover, but this arrangement is a secondary development. According to B. Babba Batra 14b-15a, in the older arrangement the three Solomonic books were grouped together (Proverbs, Qohelet, Song of Songs), and so the order in the printed editions is not evidence for an early liturgical use of the Song on Passover.

made merry both in the sanctuary area ("before the Lord") and in private homes ("in your gates"). Behaviour could even become licentious (Amos 2: 8, and cf. Eli's assumption in I Sam 1: 14). During the time of the judges, on the "festival of the Lord at Shiloh," girls would go out "year by year" to the fields to dance near the vineyards (Judg 21: 19–23). Some thousand years later, during the Second Temple period, on the 15th of Ab (probably the beginning of the grape harvest) and—most surprisingly—on the Day of Atonement, girls would dress up,³² dance in the vineyards, and flirt with the eligible young men (M. Taanit 4: 8). Thus on even the most sacred of festivals, fun, flirtation, dance, and talk of love were at home in the popular celebrations. The feasts at which R. Akiva saw people singing the Song may have taken place on festival days, although he did not consider them a sufficiently sacred context.

When (according to this hypothesis) the Song had worked its way into the people's religious life and had thus acquired a certain aura of sanctity, the religious leadership legitimized that association by means of allegorical interpretation. (In a similar process the tassles that decorated the garments of the nobility throughout the ancient Near East were interpreted by the priestly writer [Num 15: 37–41] as a device to remind Israelites of God's commandments and as a sign that all Israel had priestly and noble status [cf. Milgrom, 1981]).³³ Once the Song was accepted as sacred scripture, as it was a few generations before Akiva, its use outside an unambiguously sacred setting, such as the synagogue, seemed to violate the Song's sanctity and so was anathematized. Even if many of the banquets to which Akiva refers took place on holy days, he objected to the performance of Canticles at them, for he regarded it as the holiest of the writings:³⁴ "For all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy" (M. Yad. 3: 5).

32. According to R. Shimon's idealized memory, the girls dressed in borrowed white garments so as not to embarrass those who lacked finery. But this detail seems part of the moralizing thrust of the passage; see "Courting Songs" above.

33. There is an interesting parallel to this process in Chinese literature. The anthology called "The Classic of Song," whose editing was traditionally ascribed to Confucius, includes simple folk songs. Confucius required study of these songs as models of self-expression and correct thought. Later Chinese scholars could not understand why he attributed such importance to these simple songs and therefore interpreted them allegorically: a lover's longing for his beloved, for example, was the king's love for his people. (Liu, 1966: 216).

34. That is, of the Hagiographa and Prophets. Palestinian midrashic traditions read (less probably) "for all the songs are holy" instead of "for all the writings are holy" (Lieberman, 1937–39: II, 9).

CHAPTER 6



Who Is Speaking and How? Voice and Mode of Presentation

In this chapter I seek to sharpen our analytical focus by zeroing in on the most significant formal features of character presentation: the overall dramatic character of the poems; the forms of discourse; and the special uses of grammatical person when the personae speak of and to themselves, of and to their lovers.

Dramatic Character

AUTHOR AND PERSONAE

The speakers in the Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs are, as a rule, *personae*, created characters through whom the poets speak but who are not to be identified with them. While I have seen no explicit discussion of this issue in the scholarly literature, my impression is that commentators tend to assume that the words spoken in the Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs are direct expressions of their authors' emotions and experiences. This issue is important for interpretation, for if the speakers are personae we must ask not only what the lovers are like, but also how the poets view them and present them to us.

The literary quality of these poems in itself tends to distinguish the speakers from the authors, particularly in the case of Canticles. It is highly unlikely that lovestruck young people such as those who appear in these poems could have produced lyrics of such artistic power and sophistication. This poetry seems rather to be the work of mature and practiced artists.¹

1. P. Anastasi III, 3, 7–8 (LEM, 23/10) mentions a "school" for songstresses.