1. A Unique Book

"The entire universe is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs are the Holy of Holies." In these passionate words, Rabbi Akiba was upholding the right of the Song of Songs to a place in the Scriptures. The warmth of his defense testifies to the vigor of the challenge to which it was subjected, probably stronger than in the case of Esther, Koheleth and Job.

The Song of Songs is unique among the books of the Bible in spirit, content and form. It is the only book in the canon lacking a religious or national theme, the Divin name occurring only once and then only as an epithet (8:6). To be sure, Esther also makes no direct mention of God, but its national emphasis is unmistakable. Even that is lacking in the Song of Songs. The reason for the doubts as to its canonicity is not hard to discover. Fragments of secular poetry are imbedded in the Bible, but this is the only complete work which is entirely secular, indeed, sensuous, in character.

As in the case of Koheleth, more than one factor helped to win admission for this little book into the canon of Scripture. While the charm and beauty of its contents played their part, if only on the subconscious level, there were two basic factors operating consciously. First was the occurrence of Solomon's name in the text, which led to the attribution of the whole book to him as witness the title: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (1:1). The several references to "the king" were, naturally enough, identified with Solomon as well. Second was the allegorical interpretation of the book, according to which the love of God and Israel is described under the guise of

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1 For the entire passage in M. Yad. 3:5, see note 38 below.


3 See below, sec. VI.

4 See R. Gordin, Koheleth — The Man And His World (New York, 1951), chap. IV (later referred to as KMW).

5 In 1:1, 5; 3:7; 9:11; 8:11-12.

6 In 1:5, 12; 7:5.
II. THE ALEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

The allegorical view of the Song of Songs to which we owe its inclusion in the canon and therefore its preservation was already well established in the first century C. E. The Apocryphal book IV Esdras uses the figures of "lily," "dove," and "bride" to refer to Israel (5:24, 26; 7:26). While the comparison to a bride might conceivably be based on other Biblical passages, like Jer. 1:2; Isa. 62:5, the references to "lily" and "dove" point unmistakably to our book. The only passage in the Septuagint which may point to a mystical interpretation is the rendering of מֶרֶשׁ נְאָה in 4:8 as "from the beginning of faith," but this is far from certain, since נְאָה has the meaning "faith" in Neh. 10:1. The Mishnah cites the description of Solomon's wedding in 3:11 and refers it to the giving of the Torah and the building of the Temple. The same view underlies the Targum on the book, and the Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba, as well as many talmudic interpretations of various verses in the book.

Medieval Jewish commentators like Saadia and Rashi accepted its assumptions unhesitatingly. It is possible that the unconventional Abraham Ibn Ezra may be expressing his secret doubts on the subject by the method he employs in his commentary, which he divides into three parts, the first giving the meaning of the words, the second the literal meaning of the passage, and the third the allegorical interpretation. Commentators differed as to details, but the general approach was clear. The book narrates, in symbolic fashion, the relationship of God and Israel from the days of the Patriarchs and the Exodus, extols the steadfast love and protection that God has given His beloved, and describes the fluctuations of loyalty and defection which have marked Israel's attitude toward its divine Lover.

When the Christian Church accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as its Old Testament, it was easy to transfer the parable from the old Israel to the New Israel, though there were variations of attitude. The first known allegorical treatment was that of Hippolytus of Rome, written early in the third century. He prefaces Origen, Jerome, and Athanasius, who referred the book to Christ and the Church, while Ambrosius and Cornelius a Lapide identified the Shulammite with the Virgin Mary. Other figurative theories also were not lacking. Some of the older commentators, like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, saw in it an allegory of the mystical union of the believing soul with God, a particularly congenial view, since mysticism has often expressed itself in strongly erotic terms. Luther saw in it an allegory of Christ and the Soul.

The allegorical theory has been generally abandoned by modern scholars in its traditional guise. Yet a few contemporary Roman Catholic scholars and some Orthodox Jewish writers still interpret the book as an allegory of Israel's history.

1 After the preliminary draft of this study was completed, Professor R. H. Rowley sent me his new book, The Servant of the Lord and other Essays on the O. T. (London, 1952). It contains a characteristically thorough yet engaging study of "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs" (pp. 189-234), incorporating two earlier papers of the author in JTS, vol. 38 (1937), pp. 43ff., and JRAS (1938), pp. 251ff., and supplemented with valuable references to recent literature, from which I have profited greatly. On p. 232, note 3, he cites the older surveys of the history of the interpretation of the Song, from C. D. Ginsburg and Salzfeld to Vaccari and Kuhl, to which he acknowledges his indebtedness.


3 In Christian circles, Theodore of Mopsuestia, who opposed its place in the canon, was excommunicated as a heretic.

4 Cf. M. Ta'an. 4:8.
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Other forms of the allegorical theory have not been lacking. Isaac Abrabanel and his son Leo Hebraeus, basing themselves on the fact that Wisdom is described in Hekmah literature as a beautiful woman, who is contrasted with the "Woman of Folly" in Proverbs, interpreted the beloved in the Song as a typological symbol of Wisdom, a view suggested in modern times by Godek and Kuhn. However, the details in the Song of Songs are both too concrete and too numerous to support this or any other allegorical view, which has accordingly found few adherents.

III. The Cult Theory

The most modern form of the allegorical theory regards our book as the translation of a pagan litany. In 1914, O. Neuschatz de Jasay suggested that it is a version of an Egyptian Osiris ritual. While Wittekindt proposed the view that it is a liturgy of the Ishtar cult. The theory was most vigorously propagated by T. J. Meek, who, in 1922, published the theory that the Song is a liturgy of the Adonis-Tammuz cult, the rites of which were undeniably practised in Palestine and were denounced by the prophets.

The influence of Mowinckel and others has popularized the view that the poetry of the Old Testament is in large measure cult-material, most of which was taken over from Canaanite religion. Once the

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10 Cf. Neuschatz de Jasay, Le Cantique des Cantiques et le mythe d'Osis-hésep (1914); Th. J. Meek (see the following note for references); W. Wittekindt, Das Hoh-Leid und seine Beziehung zum Ishtarlit (Hannover, 1932); L. Waterman, in JBL, vol. 45 (1936), pp. 171-87; Graham and May, Culture and Conscience (1930), pp. 22 f. The same theory underlies the excellent commentary of M. Halle, Die fünf Megillot (Tubingen, 1940).


12 Cf. Is. 17:10 f.; Ezek. 8:24; Zech. 12:11. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether Jer. 22:18 refers to the ritual, and Is. 51:1-5 surely is not connected with it.


14 Cf. L. Kohler, Theologie des A. T. (Tubingen, 1936), pp. 169, 182; theory was set in motion, not merely the Psalms, but also the books of Hosea, Joel, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Ruth, have been interpreted, in whole or in part, as liturgies of the fertility-cult, and the end of the process is not yet in sight. Thus Haller declares that the Song of Songs was originally a cult-hymn for the spring festival of Hag Hamazoz, which the Canaanites observed with a litany glorifying Astarte as "the beloved" and Eael as Dac "the lover." The Song, we are assured, is part of the widespread Near Eastern ritual of the dying and reviving god. Deuteronomistic theologians are then assumed to have profanized the originally sacred text, so that today it appears as a collection of erotic lyrics of a secular character. The impact of recent archaeological discoveries, particularly of Ugaritic literature, save given this view a new vogue.

Nevertheless, the cult-theory of the book cannot be sustained, as we believe, when subjected to analysis. It begins with a hypothetical approach to the Hebrew Bible which is highly dubious. That the Old Testament contains only Kultdichtung is a modern version of the attitude which regards the Bible exclusively from the theological standpoint, instead of recognizing it in A. B. Ehrlich's succinct phrase, as the Hebrews' "national literature upon a religious foundation." Undoubtedly the religious consciousness permeated all aspects of the national life in ancient Israel, but the existence of secular motifs cannot be ignored, particularly in the area of Wisdom, to which the art of the Song belonged, and with which it was identified.

There are other telling objections to the view that the Song o' Songs is a liturgy o' the dying and reviving god. That Hag Hamazot was such a 'estival in Israel is a gratuitous assumption, with
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no evidence in Biblical or in post-Biblical sources. The proponents of the theory are driven to adduce as proof the synagogue practice of reading the Song of Songs during Passover. The oldest reference to the custom, however, is in the post-Talmudic tractate Sopherim, which probably emanates from the sixth century C. E., 19 at least a millennium after the composition of the book. Its liturgical use at Passover can be explained without recourse to far-fetched theories. It is eminently appropriate to the festival, both in its literal sense and in the allegorical interpretation which has been official for centuries. Its glorification of spring (cf. 2:11 ff.; 7:11 ff.) was congenial to the ‘festival of Abib’ and the Midrash refers many passages in the text to the Exodus, with its moving spirits, Moses and Aaron. Efforts have indeed been made to find vestiges of the Ishtar-cult in the text, but none of them are at all convincing. 20 The Song of Songs makes no references to

20 Cf. Sopherin 14:16 (ed. Higger, p. 270), which apparently refers to its reading on the last two days of the festival, as observed in the Diaspora: ישחם הרוחות והרוויות, גשים ומעשים מבקשים של הנה קשר עם קהל השירה על הנבואה פלган. על העניין של הנבואה מסדר על רוחות, see Higger, op. cit., Introduction. The reason is indicated in Mekor ha-Yesirah, p. 304: דוגמה למחשה נבואה מסדר על רוחות, אעפ”כ שראשה הנבואה מוקדש לעניין פלגי, נתייחסים למחשה הנבואה מסדר על רוחות בפרקי ב”ס פוסק ובספר ל”ד י”ד. The medieval pseudepigraphic which have entered the Passover liturgy are largely based on the Song of Songs, as is the cycle of hymns which begin with יִדּוּד (Cant. 8:14).

It has been argued that שָׂדָר in 3:12 must mean a “ritual song” (cf. Meek, in Schoff, op. cit., pp. 49 f.). Actually, the root שָׂדָר means “sing, make music,” generally used in the Bible of ritual song, to be sure, but only because of the Bible’s preoccupation with religious themes. The noun is used in a secular sense in Isa. 25:5, 26:14, דְּגָשׁ אָדָם, “the tyrants’ song of triumph”; note the parallelism. See also Isa. 24:16; Job 35:10. It is noteworthy that the Talmud interprets Ps. 119:54, מִלָּה יִדָּר, “the law of the Lord is perfect” in a specifically secular sense and criticizes David for tampering with God’s law as mere song: מִלָּה יִדָּר, “Why was David punished in the incident of Uziah (II Sam. chap. 6)? Because he called the scroll of the Law mere ‘song’” (B. Sofah 35a; Yalkut Shimoni, Palm 119, sec. 480d). Actually, שָׂדָר is cognate to the noun שע, “fetish, idol,” Jer. 8:14, on which see Gordin, in JThS, vol. 1, 1940, pp. 37 ff.). The root is used to refer to a secular song in direct connection with our book: cf. I Sam. 12:10:

He who gives his voice a flourish in reading the Song of Songs in the sanctuaries and makes it a secular song has no share in the word to come.

The 10th century agricultural calendar of Gezer lists רֹאֵי רוֹאֵי, “two months of vernal-spring.” The Vav is best taken as a dual, status construct (so I. G. Fevier, in Semitica, vol. 1, 1948, pp. 33 ff.; W. F. Albright, in J. E. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, Princeton, 1950, p. 320a), rather than simply as the old nominative ending (so D. Diner, Le scrivano unico-ebreo-Palestinese, 1934, p. 5; Th. C. Vroom-J., H. Hoppen, Palastina Inscriptions, Leyden, 1951, pp. 12 f.). However, רֹאֵי comes after וְרֹאֵי and therefore, as Dalman (PEQDS, 1905, p. 119) points out, “it cannot be the first pruning which comes in March, but the second,

this spring festival or any other, or for that matter, to any ritual observance.

Proponents of the theory are in diametrical disagreement on a fundamental issue, whether the alleged pagan ritual in the Song has remained in its original and unmodified form or whether it has been drastically rewritten as part of the JHVH cult. 21 If the former is the case, it is an insuperable difficulty that the entire book makes no references to the spring festival or any other; or to weeping for the dead god 22 nor to the decay of

in June or July.” 23 Rowley (p. 229 f.) follows him interpreting Song 2:12 as a reference to this second pruning. But this is very unlikely, since, according to the poem, the winter and the rain are just over and the first bloom is taking place. For this, Juse-July is too late. So, too, the parallelism with “the voice of the turtle-dove” strengthens the view that שָׂדָר refers to “singing.” Accordingly, there is nothing basic for interpreting it either as a ritual song or as meaning “pruning,” which is against the parallelism and the context (against Ehrlich).

Another locus assiduous of the cult-theory has been רָאֵי רוֹאֵי (5:9), which is rendered, “Who is blind but My servant?” (Meek, in Schoff, op. cit., p. 55; Wittekindt, op. cit., p. 83). Meek argues that שָׂדָר means “wos” in Babylonian, or that it is a textual error for צא. But even this assumed correction does not suffice to yield the required sense which would have been expressed by some such phrase as צא כָּל רוֹאֵי תִּבְרַכֶּר; cf. Isa. 42:19, צא כָּל רוֹאֵי תִּבְרַכֶּר. Is “Who is blind but My servant?” Actually, there is as real evidence for דֵּר as a divine name used in Israel. Conversely, Meek’s objection to the usual interpretation is not valid. He argues that the rendering “What is thy beloved more than another beloved?” requires the addition of “other.” I do not know of an exact analogy in Hebrew for the construction, on either view, but supplying “other” is justified. Cf. Gen. 31:1: צא כָּל רוֹאֵי תִּבְרַכֶּר, “The serpent was wiser than all other beasts of the field”; cf. Isid. 3:14:37; 3:24, דֵּר יִשָּׁב בַּתּוֹ; Judg. 5:24; Ps. 45:1. The usual rendering, literally, “What is thy beloved above the class of lovers,” is therefore eminently satisfactory.

The difficult רָאֵי רוֹאֵי (6:4, 10) is emended to רָאֵי רוֹאֵי, “like Nergal,” the Babylonian god of the underworld, who was the partner of Ninurta, the summer sun, and whose powerful gaze is contrasted with the milder light of the dawn and the moon (Haller). 24 Even if this attractive suggestion be adopted, it offers no real support to the cult-theory. Ritual texts and mythological allusions may employ the same figures, but they are worlds apart in their outlook, as Homer and Milton, or Vergil and Dante, abundantly attest. Biblical writers use Leviathan, Telom, Mot, Reseph, and other elements of pagan religion, but for them, unlike the Babylonians and Ugaritic epics, there are mythological references, not religious verities. This is particularly true with regard to astronomical phenomena. Cf. the Babylonian names of the months in the Hebrew calendar, which include the god Tamuz himself, or the modern names of the planets, the days of the week and the months. Actually, there are some important objections to the emendation. For these and for an alternative interpretation, see the Commernary ad loc.

21 Sc de Jassy, op. cit., p. 90.
22 Sc Meek, in Song of Songs — A Symposium, p. 53.
23 “Death” and “Shool” are mentioned in 8:6 purely as similes.
24 As, e. g., in Ezek. 8:14 ff., where it is clearly condemned as a foreign rite.
nature. If the latter alternative is true, there is the additional problem of a JHWH liturgy in which the Divine name is absent, either explicitly or as an allusion.

It is human love, not that of a god, which is glorified in the Song, and that with a wealth of detail, which rules out an allegorical interpretation. The entire book deals with concrete situations, whether of love's repining, or its satisfaction, of lovers' flirtations, estrangement and reunion. Moreover, the frequent references to specific localities in the topography of Palestine effectively rule out the likelihood that this material could have been used for liturgical purposes. For the essence of a liturgy is that it is typological, being concerned with a generalized and recurrent pattern of activity.15

One is, of course, at liberty to assume that our book represents a secular reworking of a no longer extant litany of an assumed Israelite cult which has left no recor of its existence behind it. Such a complex of unsubstantiated hypotheses recalls the argument that the ancient Hebrews must have known of wireless telegraphy, because archaeologists in Palestine have found no wires in their excavations.

Neither the older nor the more recent allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs are convincing explanations of the original character of the book. In favor of the traditional Jewish and Christian allegories is the fact that they have their own independent charm, which the cult-theory does not possess.

It may even be granted, as Rowley says, that "we, for our profit, may rightly find in the images of the Song, as in all experience, analogies of things spiritual," but that "does not mean that it was written for this purpose and that the author had any such idea in mind."16 The key to the book must be sought in a literal interpretation of the text, as the surest basis for true understanding and lasting appreciation of its greatness.

IV. The Literal Interpretation

While the allegorical view of the Song of Songs early became official, it is noteworthy that the Rabbis were well aware that in many circles it was being interpreted literally. That the allegorical view had difficulty in winning universal acceptance is clear from the warmth

15 This consideration disproves the hypothesis that Psalm 2 is part of a liturgy of enthronement. The historical background is clearly that of a revolt of subordinate rulers, much too specific a situation for a recurrent litany of royal enthronement.

In the Christian Church, too, the literal view was known and fought. The position of the fourth-century Theodore of Mopsuestia was declared a heresy by the Second Council of Constantinople in 353. His objections to the book were repeated, in 1544, by Chatelion, who wanted it expunged from the canon as immoral. It is characteristic of the broader conception of canonicity in Judaism that no such demand for its elimination was made, even by the anonymous French Jewish commentator of the twelfth century or by a few other medieval Jewish writers who regarded it as a song written by Solomon for his favorite wife. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries various scholars suggested that the book was a collection of eulogies, and analogies with the Icyls of Theocritus were frequently invoked. It was Herder who, in 1778, explained it as a collection of songs extolling the joys of human love. This view, however, receded in popularity for over a century thereafter.

V. THE DRAMATIC THEORY

In the eighteenth century, years before Herder, several scholars, like Wachel (1722) and Jacobi (1771), espoused the view that the book is a drama. This view is perhaps foreshadowed by two Greek manuscripts of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., which actually supply speakers for the various verses of the book. It is the dramatic theory which was the first to win wide acceptance among modern scholars and readers in two variant forms. According to the first, adopted by Delitzsch, there are two main characters, King Solomon and a rustic Shulammite maiden, and the book consists substantially of expressions of love by the two principal characters. According to the other view, first propounded by J. S. Jacobi and elaborated by Ewald, there are three characters, a beautiful maiden, her shepherd lover, and King Solomon, who on a visit to the countryside discovers her and becomes enamored of her beauty. The luxuries of the royal court and the blandishments of the king are powerless to shake her love. At length the young rustic lovers are reunited, and the play ends with a song on the lips of the maiden and her shepherd lover.

It is obvious that the second view has a dramatic tension lacking in the first, and it has been increasingly espoused by those who favor the dramatic theory.

Nonetheless, the theory suffers from several grave drawbacks which must be clarified, since this view is still taken for granted in most popular treatments of the book:

1. That speakers must be supplied for the various lines would be natural and constitutes no difficulty. The crux lies in the fact that the entire plot must be read into the book and the natural intent of the words be ignored again and again. One or two instances must suffice. Thus Driver, following Ewald, attributes the opening section, 1:2-7, to the maiden in these words:

"Scene I. (The Shulammite and Ladies of the Court.) — The Shulammite, longing for the treasures of her absent shepherd-lover, complains that she is detained in the royal palace against her will, and invokes eagerly where he may be found."

Now none of this reconstruction is in the actual text. The opening verses 2-4 make no reference to the lover as being absent. Moreover, the complaint in verse 7, which is addressed directly to him, is not that she is detained against her will by the king, but: that she can not find him among his fellow-shepherds. Finally, this interpretation does not do justice to the text of verses 5 and 6. The proud words of these verses, in which the maiden praises her own beauty and expresses her dark hue, are hardly the words appropriate to one who wants to flee the court and the king's advances, in order to be reunited with her shepherd lover.

The remainder of chapter 1 is assigned to Scene II as follows:

Solomon (9-11) seeks to win the Shulammite's love. The Shulammite (12, aside) parries the king's compliments with reminiscences of her absent lover.—Solomon (15) — The Shulammite (v. 16, aside) takes no notice of the king's remark in v. 15 and applies the figures suggested by it to her shepherd-lover.

Now verses 9-11 might conceivably be Solomon's words as he seeks to win her love, but there the plausibility of the reconstruction ends. Verse 12, "while the king sat at his table (or couch), my spikenard..."
sent forth its fragrance" (JV), can not naturally mean (pace Driver) that "while the king was away from me, at table with his guests, my love (for another) was active" (italics Driver's). Nor is there anything to suggest that vv. 13–14 pertain any of the king's compliments or that she has more than one lover in mind at all. Finally, assigning v. 15 to the king and v. 16 to the maiden, who is referring to her absent lover, means to divide what is obviously a single literary unit, both in form and in content. The love-dialogue is clear:

"Thou art fair, my beloved; thou art fair, thine eyes are doves."
"Thou art comely, my lover, and sweet, and our couch is fragrant."

There are many other instances where the exigencies of the dramatic theory artificially divide obvious literary units. Thus 2:2 is assigned to Solomon, while 2:3 is again attributed to the maiden as an aside.

2. Incidents which are a drama should have been acted out are narrated, as in 2:8; 5:1, 4. This is perfectly comprehensible in a lyric, but not in a play.

3. The climax of the plot is assumed to be 8:11 ff. Here the young lovers spurn the luxury of Solomon's court in favor of the delights of love, contrasting the high financial returns of Solomon's vineyard with the "vineyard" of the beloved's person and cham. But precisely here the dramatic form is totally lacking. Solomon is not addressed at all, which is what one should have expected in a dramatic confrontation of king and commoner as they contend for the maiden's hand. Instead, it is clear from the narrative phrase, "Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon," that Solomon is not present, and the adjuration in v. 12 is therefore rhetorical and not actual.

4. The distribution of the name "Solomon" in the book is worthy of note. Aside from the superscription (1:1), the name occurs six times more — in 1:5, where it is used generically, and in two other sections, i.e. in chapter 3 (vv. 7, 9, 11) and in chapter 8 (vv. 11, 12), and nowhere else. The full significance of this fact will be discussed below. Suffice it to note that if Solomon were a principal protagonist of the drama, we should expect a more consistent use of his name throughout the book than the existing pattern. As for the noun "king," kammélekh, which might conceivably be an epithet for Solomon in the drama, it is also very rare in the book, occurring in only three additional passages (1:4, 12; 7:6) besides its use together with "Solomon" in two cases (3:9, 11).

5. That the book is a drama presupposes that it is a literary unit. This is, however, ruled out categorically by linguistic considerations. The noun pardés (4:13) is of Persian origin, and the passage in which it occurs can not, therefore, be later than the Persian period (6th century B.C.E.). On the other hand, in 6:4 the lover compares his beloved to Tirzah and Jerusalem. The parallelism makes it clear that the poet must be referring to Tirzah, the old capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was replaced with Samaria by Omri in the first half of the ninth century B.C.E. A lover does not usually praise his beloved by comparing her to a city ruined centuries earlier! Hence this passage can not be later than the ninth century B.C.E. It is obvious that if at least one passage in a book can not be earlier than the sixth century, and another can not be later than the ninth, the work is manifestly not a literary unit, and the dramatic theory is conclusively ruled out.

VI. SONG AS A BRANCH OF WISDOM

In the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs finds its place in the third section, the Hagiographa, in proximity to Psalms and Lamentations on the one hand, and to Proverbs and Job on the other. This third section is not a heterogeneous collection but, on the contrary, possesses an underlying unity, being the repository of Hekmah or Wisdom. Wisdom was much more than a branch of literature. It included all the technical arts and practical skills of civilization. The architect and the craftsman, the weaver and the goldsmith, the sailor and the magician, the skillful general and the wise administrator of the state, are all described as hékámim, "wise." In Rabbinic Hebrew the epithet hékámah is applied also to the midwife.

While all the phases of Hokmah disappeared with the destruction of the material substratum of ancient Hebrew life, it was these practical and technical aspects of Hokmah that were primary, and its more theoretical meaning to designate metaphysical and ethical truths embodied in literature is a later development. This semantic process from the concrete to the abstract, which is universal in language, is validated also for the Greek sophia, which is strikingly parallel in its significance. The basic meaning of the Greek word is "cleverness and skill in handicraft and art," then "skill in matters of common life, sound judgment, practical and political wisdom," and ultimately, "learning, wisdom and philosophy." The adjective sophos bears the same meanings, being used of sculptors and even of hedgers and ditches, but "mostly of poets and musicians." The noun sophistes, "master of a craft or art," is used in the extant literature of a diviner, a cook, a statesman, and again of poets and musicians. From Plato's time onward, it is common in the meaning of a professional teacher of the arts.

The Hellenic culture-area serves as a valuable parallel, shedding light not only on the origin and scope of ancient "Wisdom," but also on the development and function of the teachers and protagonists of the discipline, but that is not our concern here.

One of the most frequent uses of the term Hokmah refers it to the arts of poetry and song, both vocal and instrumental, for the composition and the rendering of songs, which were often done by the same individual, required a high order of skill. Thus the women skilled in lamentation at funerals are called hakataith by Jeremiah (9:16).

The relationship between Wisdom and Song was so close that the terms were used interchangeably. Thus in 1 Kings 5:10-12 we read: "And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men: than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the nations round about. And he spoke three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five." Ethan and Heman, who are here described as "wise," are the eponymous heads of the musical guilds in the Temple in Jerusalem. Note, too, that the same Biblical passage attributes both "proverbs" and "songs" to Solomon.

The songs of the prophet Balaam are called mashi'l (literally, "parable, proverb"), perhaps because the poems are replete with comparisons (Num. 23:7, 16; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23). But essentially the term is a synonym for "song." Thus the unknown poets, whose military epic is cited in the fragment in Num. 21:27–30, are called mashi'el (literally, "makers of mashi'l"). The term bdl, "rdldl, mysterious saying," together with mashi'l, is applied to the song played on the krum, "the lyre" (Ps. 40:5; 78:2). The recently discovered evidence from Ugaritic sources corroborates the Biblical tradition, previously dismissed as anachronistic, which declares that these guilds of singers are very ancient. In fact, they probably go back to the Canaanite period.

Now Wisdom literature as a whole began on a secular note and only gradually took on a religious coloration. This is clear from the chronology of the best attested branch of Oriental Wisdom, that of Egypt, where religious motifs are late in appearing. Similarly in Israel, as Pfeiffer correctly says, "We know positively that the secular school (of Wisdom) flourished before the pious." The oldest popular Hebrew proverbs and the Wisdom fragments imbedded in the Historical books are all secular in character.

A similar development may be postulated for that branch of Wisdom called shr, which includes both poetry and music. The Song certainly played an important role in religious ritual, at sacrifices, processions and festivals, but it was not limited to these areas. Actu-
ally, it was coextensive with life itself, dealing with all the normal secular concerns of life, such as combat and victory, the opening of a well, vintage and harvest, feasting and carousing, the glory of nature and the tragedy of death.

Undoubtedly the poems of national significance, like those of war and victory, were given a religious character, as in the "Song of the Sea" (Ex. 15) or the "Song of Deborah" (Judg. 5), since the historical experience of Israel was conceived as reflecting the will of God. But it is noteworthy that many of the brief snatches of song which are preserved in prose narratives and are explicitly quoted from older collections, like the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14) and the Book of Jashar (probably the "Book of Heroes," Josh. 10:13; II Sam. 1:18; I Kings 3:53 in the Greek), are purely secular in content. The Song, like Wisdom, as a whole, later developed a religious stamp, but it remained an acquired characteristic.

For self-evident reasons, the secular note would be more likely to be preserved in the area of love and courtship, which has inspired more poetry and music than any other field of human interest. Into this area, where the sensual and the physical play so important a part, the traditional religious coloration would have the greater difficulty in penetrating. The existence of secular love-songs in ancient Egyptian and Akkadian literature, as well as among contemporary Arab peasants and city dwellers, strengthens this contention, besides offering many a key to the understanding of the Biblical song.

VII. The Song of Songs as a Collection

If the Song of Songs be approached without any preconceptions, it reveals itself as a collection of lyrics. This view of the book was taken by a Middle High German version of the 15th century, which divided it into 54 songs. A long concatenate of modern scholars have adopted the same position, though naturally differing on the division of the book.

A greater step forward in the interpretation of the Song was taken in 1893, when J. G. Wetzstein, Prussian consul in Damascus, called attention to the nuptial customs of the Syrian peasants, who have the couple sit on a "throne" during the wedding-meal as "king" and "queen," while the guests sing songs of praise (nazir), glorifying the bride and groom. In some cases, the bride also executes a "sword dance" during the festivities. The affinities with several passages in the Song are obvious, and many scholars were accordingly led to interpret the entire collection as emanating from such wedding celebrations.

That the praise of the bride on her wedding day was a regular feature of Jewish weddings in Second Temple days, and that these songs of praise were a technical art and therefore part of Hokmah, is clear from an ancient Talmudic tradition. It reads as follows: "How is one to dance before (i.e. praise) the bride? The Shammatiites declare: 'By praising her for the qualities she actually possesses.' The Hillelites say: 'By saying of every one, O bride, beautiful and gracious.'" The same function continued to be performed by the badhan or humorous rhymer at East-European weddings until our day.

On the other hand, 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. The only justifiable conclusion is that the Song of Songs,
like the Psalter, is an anthology, running a wide gamut of its emotions. It contains songs of love's yearning and its consummation, of coquetry and passion, of separation and union, of courtship and marriage.

The division of the songs will depend upon the changes in theme, viewpoint, background or form. These criteria will not always be sufficiently exact to command universal assent. Much will be dependent upon the literary taste and insight, as well as upon the knowledge, of the interpreter. But this is simply a restatement of the truth that exegesis is essentially an art, which rests upon a foundation of scientific knowledge.

VIII. SOLOMON IN THE SONG OF SONGS

Is the Song of Songs an anthology of love poems, how are the seven instances of Solomon's name in the text to be explained? For this view he is neither the author of the book, as the traditional view claims, nor its hero, as is maintained by the dramatic theory.

Several of these instances are easy to explain. In the opening verse of the book (1:1), we have a later superscription by an editor who had already accepted the theory of Solomon's authorship. In three other passages, the use of the name is authentic. These are in 1:5 ("Solomon's hangings"), where it is a descriptive term like our "Louis XIV furniture," and in 8:11 and 12, where Solomon is used to typify a possessor of great wealth, as the ancients used "Cæsars" or as moderns might use the name of a multi-millionaire like Vanderbilt or Rockefeller.

The other three examples of Solomon's name, it is generally suggested, are glosses which were induced by these authentic occurrences of the name in the text, and were reinforced by the tradition of Solomon as the "great lover" (1 Kings 11:1 ff.). It would therefore be natural to believe that he was also intended by the word melakah, "king," in the Song, though the word actually referred to the bridegroom. Hence "Solomon" was added as a gloss in three more verses (3:7, 9 and 11).

For all its apparent plausibility, however, this approach is not adequate. Not only do we find "Solomon" used without the word "king" in 3:7, but the word "king" occurs several times in the book without the gloss "Solomon" (1:4, 12; 7:6). The clue to the solution as both "queen" and "bride" in Talmudic and post-Talmudic sources; cf. Shab. 119a and Solomon Alkabets' famous hymn Lekhah Dodi.

66 Hence the use of the relative Ir, instead of 'asher, and the high valuation on the book expressed in the title. See the Commentary ad loc.
These difficulties, cumulatively viewed, all point to the conclusion that we have here no song for a rustic wedding but, quite the contrary, an ephebalium for a wedding of great luxury, one possessing even national significance. In fact, all the details cited are easily explained by one assumption—that we have here a song composed on the occasion of one of Solomon’s marriages to a foreign princess, probably an Egyptian.⁹

Such a poem has survived in Psalm 45, in which an Israelite king is marrying a Phoenician princess.³⁹ Obviously, songs were composed for and sung at different stages of the wedding ceremony. Psalm 45 is addressed to the king (vv. 3–10) and to his new queen (vv. 11–14), perhaps after the marriage rites had been concluded. Our song, on the contrary, is a chorus of welcome addressed to the bride as her procession approaches from across the wilderness which separates Palestine on the east and on the southwest from its neighbors.

All the details of the poem are explained naturally on this simple premise. The princess travels with a large retinue, which encamps at night and sends up pillars of smoke (v. 6). Her palanquin was sent to her by Solomon and is escorted by the royal bodyguard, sixty of the heroes of Israel (v. 7; cf. II Sam 23:8 ff.; I Kings 1:10). The litter is made of the finest cedarwood of Lebanon, one of the by-products of his commercial relations with Phoenicia. Its decorations of silver, gold, purple and ivory (v. 10) are in keeping with Solomon’s peacock for luxury, and may well have been prepared by the noble ladies of Jerusalem (v. 11).

All the references to Solomon in the book, aside from the title, are thus authentic, including the three references in this song, which dates from Solomon’s reign. The presence of this poem, in the collection, would serve as the nucleus for the tradition attributing the entire book to Solomon.

In connection with this early date for the song, two linguistic problems must be considered. Graetz derived the word ἀπίρην, “litter, couch” (3–9), from the Greek πρωίειον, which would imply a


On the other hand, it seems clear that the book of Chronicles thought of Tarshish as lying to the east of Palestine, since it uses the phrase “ships going to Tarshish” in its account of these same nautical enterprises of Solomon and Jehoshaphat (II Chron. 9:21; 20:26). This was long dismissed as another example of the unreliability of the Chronicler. Recent scholarship has, however, gone far in rehabilitating his credibility (cf., for example, Von Rad, Die Geschichte der Jerusdätischen Werke, Stuttgart, 1930; Martin Noth, Unterliegergeschichtliehen Studien, Halle, 1943; W. F. Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity, Baltimore, 1940, p. 268). It is, therefore, not impossible that the Chronicler’s view of Tarshish is another example where his value was unduly discounted in the past. Thus Bochart’s old attempt to validate the Chronicler’s references by assuming that there were two localities referred to as “Tarshish,” one in the Western Mediterranean, the other in the Indian Ocean, was dismissed summarily by scholars (cf. W. Max Müller, Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 4, p. 684). On the other hand, J. Hornell recently contended vigorously that Tarshish refers to “a great mart on the west coast of India,” from which gold, spices, pearls, and other gems were shipped westward (cf. his paper, “Naval Activity in the Days of Solomon and Rameses III,” in Antiquity, vol. 21, p. 72). This view is favorably considered by Salo W. Baron in Seash and Religious History of the Jews, 2nd ed., New York, 1952, vol. 1, p. 321, n. 3.

Whatever the identification of Tarshish, the Oriental provenance of ἀπίρην,
and Syria throughout the pre-Exilic period. The usage may, accordingly, be older than can at present be documented in our extant sources.

Moreover, related instances of pronominal anticipation occur in Biblical Hebrew and Phoenician. Hence we are not forced to delete the entire clause from the poem, or even to assume that it was introduced later.

Whatever approach be adopted to this detail, the unique features of this poem mark it as a royal wedding-song going back to Solomon's reign. It is at present the oldest datable unit in the book. By contributing to the growth of the tradition of Solomonic authorship, it helped to win inclusion for the entire Song of Songs in the canon of Scripture.

IX. Date of the Book

Being lyrical in character, with no historical allusions, most of the songs are undatable. There are, however, a few exceptions, which have already been noted. The song in which Tirzah, the early capital of North Israel, is referred to (6:4), must predate the year 876 B.C.E., when Omri made Samaria the capital of his kingdom, while the use of a Persian word like perdis (4:13) can hardly anecede the 6th century. Yet even this latter inference must be qualified by the consideration already adduced above, that folk songs often undergo many changes.

cf. Is. 3:5; Rahab the mythological monster mentioned in Is. 30:7; Job 9:3, etc.; Lashed accusative (2:15; 8:13; cf. Lev. 19:18, 14; II Sam. 3:30).

Authentic Aramaic borrowings seem to be אַלְמָנַךְ (15): סְדֶּר (2:9); וֹגֶר (2:11); רָדָד (2:12, 15; 7:13); יָדָּה (2:13); מַעַכָּר (5:3); שֵׁפֶר (7:9); and יְפַת (7:3), though new texts may change the picture. See note 80.


Thus the word 'almanak occurs only in the Hebrew of Ben Sirah (50:3) with no Biblical parallel, but it is found in the Mesa Inscription (Line 9) as 'almak. The late Biblical and Mishnaic word nekhasim occurs once in, Josh. 22:8. The root kibbel, occurring only in Job 2:10 and Esth. 9:27, and generally regarded as a late Aramaism, was recently found by Ahlburg in the Tell-el Amarna Letters (BABSR, 89, Feb., 1943, pp. 29-30). On the conjunction or, once regarded as a "late Aramaism," see note 78.

In Biblical Hebrew, pronominal anticipation occurs a) with a verbal suffix (Ex. 2:6; 35:5; Jer. 7:14; Ecc. 2:21); b) with a nominal suffix, which resembles our usage more closely: (Ezek. 10:3: Prov. 11:4; Job 29:3; Ezra 3:12; possibly also Num. 23:18; 24:3, 5) and c) after the preposition Lam. (Ezra 9:4). That the usage is early in origin is attested by its occurrence in Phoenician in the Karatepe Inscription of Aziawadd (9th or 8th century B.C.E.); cf. Text C, I, lines 17–18, וְאַלְמָנַךְ לְנִמְסָה שֶׁלָּיו נִמְסָה לְןִמְסָה, lit. "for the dwelling of them, of the Danuniaim": III, line 4. סְדֶּר תְּרוּ יָדָּה תעַבְּרָה תְּרוּ לָיו, lit. "for the giving of him, of Baal Kalendis". Cf. C. H. Gordon in *JNES*, vol. 8, 1949, pp. 113 ff.; N. B. Tur-Sinai in *Lechammi*, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 9.

So Jastrow, H. L. Ginsberg (orally, to the writer), Haller.
changes with time, so that later words and expressions may well be
inserted into such older material. The grounds for attributing one
song (3:6–11) to the period of Solomon have already been set forth.
Thus the datable material in the Song spans five centuries. The
period begins with Solomon’s accession to the throne (c. 960 B.C.E.),
includes the early days of the Northern Kingdom (c. 920–876), and
reaches down to the Persian era (6th–5th century).

The variations in language, which point to a considerable dif-
ference in the dates of the different songs, are one ore factor, though
decisive, in making it impossible to agree with Rowley, who has “the
impression of a single hand” in the Song with “a corresponding unity
of theme and style.”

So, too, the varying geographical locales, from the Lebanon
mountains in the north to the Dead Sea region in the
south, from Transjordan to the central valleys, plainly point to a
different provenance for the various songs. The change from rusticy
simplicity in some lyrics to the sophistication of the city in others
points in the same direction.

It is most probable that the other songs in the book fall within
the same four centuries as the datable units, with the bulk of the
material being pre-Exilic rather than post-Exilic. The freshness of
the poetry, the naturalness of the references to the Palestinian
landscape, and the unabashed attitude toward love all seem to point to
the period before the Babylonian Exile. No national disaster has
yet cast its shadow over the temper of the people, and there is no echo
as yet of the deepening of the religious consciousness which followed
the Restoration under Cyrus and the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.
That most of the place-names are northern and eastern also points
to the pre-Exilic era, in fact to the period preceding the destruction
of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.E., since the Jewish settlements
were restricted largely to Judah in the south during the Persian and
pre-Maccabean period. The book was reedited in the Persian period,
the heyday of Zoroastrian literature, not later than the fifth century.

X. Hebrew Elements in the Song of Songs

Love lyrics are, as we have seen, difficult to date because their
basic emotion knows no limit of time. Since the sentiment is not
limited in space, love songs are not specifically national. In this
respect, the Song of Songs shares the qualities of Wisdom literature
as a whole, which is to say: most secular and least particularist element
of Hebrew literature.


Nonetheless, some specific national coloring is to be found in the
book. The reference to “the heroes of Israel” (3:7) is needed in this
epithalamium of a foreign princess to indicate the nationality of her
bodyguard. The “tower of David” upon which the shields of the
heroes are hung (3:4) testifies to the widespread living character of
the tradition of David’s band of heroes, which is now embodied in
the lists in II Sam. 23:8 ff.

The only other national notes are geographical, the cities, hills, and
valleys of the country. Principally, the book reflects the backgroun
d of Northern Israel. It is the northern mountain range which appears
in Hermon and Seir (modern Jebel esh-Sheikh) as well as in Lebanon
(now Jebel Libnan) and ‘Amana (the modern Jebel Zebadan). The
central territory of Northern Israel appears in Shunem, in Carmel
and Sharon, as well as in Tirzah, if its location is to be sought at Tel-
el-Far‘ib. Transjordan appears in Hebron (modern Hebron), in the
south, in the districts of Gilead and possibly in Bashan to the
north. On the other hand, the territory of Judah is sparsely repres-
ented. Aside from the references to the daughters of Zion (3:11) and
of Jerusalem (3:5–5:8), only En-gedi on the Dead Sea is mentioned
(1:14).

The preponderantly northern coloring of the book, as already
noted, is significant in strengthening the view that the songs are
predominantly pre-Exilic. The northern provenance of the songs
also explains the Aramaicisms in the book, which reflect the close pro-
ximity of the pre-Exilic Kingdom of Israel to Syria. Foreign products
and articles bear foreign names, whether Sanskrit or Persian.

Attention to the geographical locale is sometimes helpful in del-
linearizing the literary unit. The passage 1:9–17 is often regarded by
commentators as one song. However, the references to Pharaoh’s
horses and chariots (v. 9), which were most likely to be seen in
Southern Palestine, and the mention of the vineyards of En-gedi on

4 On the modern identification of these sites, see Wright-Filson, Historical Atlas
to the Bible (Philadelphia, 1945), pp. 107 ff. While Deut. 3:9 informs us that Serir
was the Amorite equivalent for Hermon, the Song (4:8) treats them either as distinct
mountain peaks or as a wider designation for the Anti-Lebanon range.

4 The equivalence of “Shulammite” with “Shunimeter,” long maintained, is
attested by Seleem, the modern Arabic name of Shunem. On other recent theories,
see the Commentary ad loc.

4 If יִשְׁתָּאָה יֶשְׁתָּאָה 7:5 is to be read as יִשְׁתָּאָה, in view of the other geographical
similes in the word.

4 This תִּגְוַג (4:13) is not a garden, but a park. Of the spices mentioned,
תַּלּוֹן and תַּמָּו are probably Indian, like יִשְׁתָּאָה and יִשְׁתָּאָה. יִשְׁתָּאָה may be
Persian. See the Lexicon of Brown-Driver-Briggs and Baumgartner-Kohler, s.v.

4 So e.g., Jaastrow, Haller. Pfeiffer (op. cit., p. 710) regards vv. 12–17 as a unit.
the western shore of the Dead Sea (v. 14), point to Judah in the south. On the other hand, the reference to the lovers' meeting in the forest, their "house walled with cedars" (v. 17), must necessarily reflect a North Israelite locale, since cedars never grew in southern Palestine. So, too, the Aramaized form berôšîn, "sycamores," for the more common Hebrew berôšîm (v. 17), points to the Northern Kingdom, which was more exposed to Aramaic influence. It is therefore clear that the passage consists of two independent songs (1:9–14 and vv. 15–17).

When this is recognized, other divergences which tended to be overlooked or misunderstood receive a natural and unforced explanation. The first song speaks of the beloved as luxuriously decked out in jewels (vv. 9–11), and the lover is called "king" (v. 12) and is therefore the bridegroom. He is probably speaking during the festivities of the bridal week and hence uses the plural (na'aszeh, v. 11) in the presence of his friends. Hence, too, the frank reference to sexual intimacy (vv. 12–13). The second song, on the other hand, reflects the simplicity of an outdoor tryst of lovers (note ḍēdē, v. 16), not of the bride and groom, hence the delicate reticence regarding their relationship.

Religious motifs are even rarer in the book than specific national references. In the noun šîleḥbēthayâh, "flame of God" (8:6), the Divine name is used to express the superlative, and the word is equivalent in meaning to "a mighty flame." This usage has many analogies in Biblical Hebrew.  

We believe that Hebrew religious attitudes, hitherto unrecognized, lie at the base of a unique phenomenon in the book, the adoration "by the gazelles and the hinds of the field" (2:7; 3:5), "not to disturb love until it be satiated." That the gazelle and the hind were symbolic of love is, of course, clear from Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew, where they were used as metaphors for a graceful and loving young woman. Ebeling, in his study of Babylonian magic, calls attention to the Babylonian practice of tying a gazelle to the head of the bed and a ram at the foot: as a magical rite to induce potency, with the formula, "like that ram may my husband love me."  

**Cf.** Enzyklopädie Miqra'î (Jerusalem, 1950), vol. 1, p. 55b.

**Cf.** יִרְעֹם, "deep gloom" (Jer. 3:13); יִרְעֹר, "great enlargement" (Ps. 118:5); יַרְעֹר יִרְעֹר רוֹדֵב, "an exceedingly mighty hunter" (Gen. 10:9); יַרְעֹר יִרְעֹר, "mighty cedars" (Ps. 80:11).

**Cf.** יַרְעֹר יִרְעֹר יָרְפֵּא יִרְעֹר יִרְעֹר יִרְעֹר יִרְעֹר יִרְעֹר (Prov. 5:19). These and similar terms are frequent in the love poetry of Jehudah Halevi, Immanuel of Rome, and other mediaeval Hebrew poets.

**Cf.** J. Ebeling, "Liebeszauber im alten Orient," in Mithilfungen der orientalischen Gesellschaft, 1 (1905), pp. 27, 33.

This is, however, far removed from an oath "by the gazelle," particularly for the strongly monotheistic Hebrews. A closer parallel is afforded by the Greek custom, practiced by no less a figure than Socrates, of swearing by an animal, as e.g. "by the dog," "by the goose," or by any nearby plant or object, such as "by the caperberry," "by the almond" and "by the cabbage." The Greek philosophers defended this usage by asserting that the Greeks never intended to swear by the animals as gods, but used the animals as substitutes for gods. This was no mere apologetics, but a reflection of the widespread fear of the consequence of an unfilled oath. Hence arose the desire for an "escape formula."

Another factor, however, often enters into the choice of a substitute, which has been overlooked — a similarly sounding term, even if irrelevante or virtually meaningless, is often chosen. Thus the Rabbinic vow-term kôrbân would frequently be replaced by kôřôm. In contemporary colloquial English, this phenomenon can be clearly observed. "Gosh darn" does duty for "God damn," "Gee," for "Jesus," "Jiminy Crickets" for "Jesus Christ," "Holy Cow" for "Holy Christ," etc. Older substitutions of the same kind that entered English literature are "zounds" for "By God's wounds," "Marry" meaning "indeed," for "By Mary," "Dear me," probably for "Do Mio," "By Cripes" for "By Christ." The German replaces "Gott" by "Pota" in "Potsdaw," "Potszetter" and "Potsliebe." The Frenchman changes "Dieu" into bleu in "Corbleu," "Marbleu," "Sambleu," and avoids the name of God altogether by swearing by "nom de nom."

Of the common speech of the Hebrew populace, little, if any, has reached us, and so the only extant example of this phenomenon is to be found in our book. The most solemn Hebrew adoration would be be'ôhei stîhâšîn or be'el laddas, "by the Lord of Hosts" or "by the Almighty." The

**Cf.** the discussion in S. Lieberman, 

**Cf.** op. cit., p. 125, note 36.

**Cf.** Burgess Johnson, The Last Art of Profanity New York 1948, esp. pp. 26, 101, 116, 117. I am indebted to Professor Mario A. Pei for this reference. I was unable to consult A Dictionary of Profanity and Its Substitutions by M. R. Walter, on deposit in manuscript form in the Princeton University Library, to which Johnson refers.

The most popular oaths naturally invoked the God of Israel: a) יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה As JHVH liveth" (1 Sam. 14:39, 45; 19:6, and often; I Kings 1:29; 2:24, and often; Jer. 4:12; 3:2, and often; Ruth 3:13); יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה (Josh. 2:12; 9:19; I Kings 1:17; 2:8, etc.). b) יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי יְהִי YHVH liveth" (1 Sam. 2:27); יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה יִהְיֶה YHVH liveth" (Gen. 2:23). c) (rarely)
In this reticence with regard to the use of the Divine name, particularly in the context of sensual love, as well as in its pervasive delicacy of expression, which will be discussed below, the Song reveals itself as authentically within the Jewish tradition.

At times, the differences between the Hebrew poet and his Oriental confères prove highly revealing of the Hebrew ethos. Moreover, what the Song does not say is often as significant for its Israelite outlook as any overt Hebrew element.

Thus, hunting was a favorite sport in Egypt and Mesopotamia, as literary sources and archaeological discoveries abundantly indicate. In a love-song emanating from “the Golden Age” of Egyptian lyric poetry in the 18th dynasty, the maider expresses the yearning for her lover:

“How good it would be, If thou wert with me. When I set the trap.”

She is referring to a small trap set for bird-catching. It is noteworthy that in all the references to nature in the Song, hunting is not mentioned. Nimrod and Esaau were hunters, but the taking of animal life for sport was not popular in ancient Israel, an attitude crystallized further in Rabbinic Judaism.

Even more characteristic of the Hebrew spirit is the absence of the personification of nature in the Song. In the Egyptian poem “The Tree in the Garden” the poet goes on to say, “The tree speaketh.” For the Hebrew poet, nature serves as the glorious background for human love, but reveres as more, exactly as nature is the manifestation of the creative power of God for the Psalmist and for Job.

The age-old relationship of wine, women, and song finds its reflection, of course, in the Song, for wine-drinking was widespread in Israel. Nonetheless, references in our book to the first member of

102 K. Galling, Biblisches Realelexikon (Tubingen, 1937), pp. 286 ff. On the other hand, killing animals in self-defense was naturally practised (cf., for example, Judg. 14:6; 1 Sam. 17:34 ff.), and some game animals were used for food (Deut. 12:15, 12; 1 Kings 5:3).
103 The Jewish laws of sheḥiāh, which prescribed slaughter with a knife, effectively ruled out the use of birds or animals killed in the hunt.
104 Cf. Erman, op. cit., p. 249.
105 Cf., inter alia, Psalms 19 and 105; Job, chaps. 38-41.
the triad are very few. Nothing is to be found resembling these lines of an Egyptian love song:

"Her lover sitteth at her right hand,  
The feast is disordered with drunkenness."

The absence of this theme in the Song may, of course, be the result of the choice of poems in the collection. It is at least equally likely that it reflects a negative attitude toward drunkenness, which became traditional in Judaism.

Another common aspect of love-poetry, virtually missing here, is the motif of faithlessness and jealousy. On the other hand, the Egyptian maiden complains:

"What meaneth it that thou wrongest another heart and me?"

To be sure, coquetry and the maiden’s resistance to the lover’s advances occur as themes, but no “love triangle” is to be me: with in our book. This absence, however, must be accidental, or the result of the editor’s choice — the human emotion involved is ubiquitous and must have existed in ancient Israel.

XI. EXTRA-HEBREW PARALLELS TO THE BOOK

The universality of love as an emotion and an experience, which is responsible for the absence of any considerable degree of specific Hebrew coloration in the book, should make us wary about postulating direct borrowings from other peoples in these songs. Mere resemblances of theme are not sufficient. What is methodologically required is a special sequence of theme or some other unusual feature, not explicable in terms of Hebrew background. A few centuries later, the Palestinian city of Gederah was the home of the gifted Greek poets Meleager and Philodemus the Epicurean, who flourished in the 1st century B. C. E. It is a purely gratuitous assumption that the lyric gift was limited to the Greek inhabitants of the country and that the Hebrews were congenitally incapable of love-poetry.

With the all but universal rejection of a Greek date for the book today, scholars have turned instead to the Egyptian culture-milieu in seeking evidence of borrowing in the Song of Songs. Thus, it has been argued, for example, that the use of ‘ahāth, “sister,” for “beloved” is an Egyptian usage. Being unhebraic, the word was glossed by kālī, “bride,” everywhere except in the last passage (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2). Actually, the assumption of glossing is not supported by the meter. Of the five passages where the term occurs, it is not accompanied by kālī in one (5:2), and it can not be a gloss in two others (4:9, 12), because its deletion would destroy the rhythm of the text. In the other two passages (4:10; 5:1), metric considerations can not be invoked at all, since either the retention or the deletion of ‘ahāth would produce an acceptable rhythmical pattern.

The entire assumption that: the usage is unhebraic, however, is unjustified. The Hebrew nouns rē’ā and rā’yōh (rē’ōh), which are common in the meanings “friend” and “neighbor,” also signify “beloved.” Similarly, the synonyms ‘ās and ‘ahāth, “brother, sister,” develop the parallel meanings of “friend, neighbor” and “beloved.” ‘Aḥāth therefore means “beloved” in the Song, when the lover, in an outburst of emotion, heaps up terms of endearment, coupling “sister"
either with "bride" or with "friend." So too, the Hebrew and Arabic word for "daughter," bat, bint, means "girl" and is not restricted to the specific family relationship.

Nor is there any objective ground for assuming that the feeling for nature was an exclusively Egyptian trait. The God speeches in Job manifest a loving insight into nature unparalleled elsewhere, and the prophets and psalmists disclose a love and observation of the external world which needed no foreign influence or literary borrowing.

Of direct borrowings in the authentic sense, there is no evidence. Nonetheless, since love is the same anywhere, the reactions and forms of expression of love-lyrics everywhere will resemble each other. Accordingly, Oriental love poetry, ancient and modern, often sheds light upon the background of the Hebrew poem. Because of the close relationship of love to magic and religion which modern psychology and anthropology have revealed, ancient incantation texts also add considerably to our understanding of the Song.

Tur-Sinaï has called attention to the background underlying 8:9:

If she be a wall,
We will build upon her a tower of silver;
And if she be a door,
We will enclose her with boards of cedar.

On the equivalence of בָּרְנָה and מַגְּרָה, cf. Ps. 35:14, "כְּרֵשׁ מַגְּרָה תִּמָּדְגְּרֶנָה: Job 30:28, "םַמָּיָה תִּמָּדְגְּרֶנָה":

Tur-Sinaï calls attention to this fact, op. cit., p. 367. This usage is not restricted to Biblical Hebrew (Gen. 30:13; Isa. 32:9; Prov. 31:29), but is common in modern Israeli Hebrew as well.


Op. cit., p. 367. We are, however, unable to accept his interpretation (p. 368) that שֶׁרְדָעַב bbd (8:8) means "when incantations are pronounced upon her."

Charm warding off all types of perils were couched in this form. Thus, for example, the Assyrian charm against a crying baby was as follows:

If it is a dog, let them cut off morsels for him!
If it is a bird, let them throw clogs of earth upon him!
If it is a naughty human child, let them adjure him with the oath of Anu and Antu!

Even more apposite, because it demonstrates that hešñah, "wall," and debelh, "door," "bar," in 8:5 are synonymous and not antithetic, is the following charm against an enemy:

If he is a door, I will open thy mouth,
If he is a bar, I will open thy tongue.

Obviously there is no incantation implied any longer in the Song, but the formula has survived as a love motif.

While several wəṣaf in praise of the beloved occur in the book, only one wəṣaf praising the lover is to be met with (5:10–16). In part the description is highly extravagant and goes beyond the limits of metaphor. Thus, for example, 5:11, 14, 15:

His head is fine gold...
The horns are rods of gold, set with topaz... His thongs are pillars of marble
Set upon sockets of gold...

Perhaps these phrases are more than mere poetic hyperbole. This is suggested by a Babylonian adjuration for the recovery of a sick person from illness:

Like lapis lazuli I want to cleanse his body,
Like marble his features should shine,
Like pure silver, like red gold,
I want to make clean what is dull.

The Biblical ṣawf may therefore be extolling the health and potency of the lover.

A long-standing difficulty in the Song is presented by 5:1. The first four stichs of the verse speak of the lover enjoying the myrrh,

Ebeling’s rendering "seine Zunge" is a lapsus calami. The Akkadian is luṣmuku.
Ibid., p. 37.
honey, wine and milk that symbolize the delights of love. The fifth stick of the verse is couched in the plural:

'ishšā' išam šīhū r'iškhrū dōdim

"Eat, friends, drink abundantly, O loved ones." It's, of course, inconceivable that either the love-struck youth or the maiden would invite others to enjoy the same pleasures as the loved one, and the stick has therefore been emended either to the masculine singular or to the feminine, either procedure requiring no less than five changes. Some have regarded the stick as a misplaced fragment of an independent song. A solution to the problem through an illuminating parallel is offered by an Arab song, widely known all over Palestine and Syria, which would indicate that the poet may address the individual lover in the plural, as well as in the singular:

Examine me,
O physician,
As to what I suffered
On behalf of the beloved one.

By God, O Lord!
This is a wondrous thing;
Yet my heart melted
For the beloved ones.

The Hebrew text of 5:1 is therefore in order and the stick is in place.

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Ehrlich reads: וַאֲסֻסְתָּנָה בְּשָׂמֵךְ מֶלֶךְ.
Haller reads: וַאֲסֻסְתָּנָה בְּשָׂמֵךְ מֶלֶךְ.
So Budde, who deletes the stick entirely, also Jastrow.

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A. SONGS OF YEARNING

The Call to Love (1:2-4)
The Rustic Maiden (1:5-6)
Tell Me Where My Love (1:7-8)
Love's Proud Proclamation (2:4-7)
Would Thou Wert My Brother (8:1-4)
Let Me Hear Thy Voice (8:13-14)

B. SONGS OF FULFILLMENT

Love's Barriers — a Duet (4:12 to 5:1)
How Delightful is Love (7:7-10)
The Beloved's Promise (7:11-14)
Love Under the Apple-Tree — a Duet (3:5)
Surrender (2:16-17)

C. SONGS IN PRAISE OF THE BELOVED

Bedecked in Charm — a Duet (1:9-14)
My Beloved Is Perfect (4:1-7)
Love's Enchantment (4:9-11)
The Plover of Beauty (6:4-7)
The One and Only (6:8-9)

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GORDIS

XII. MOTIFS AND PATTERNS IN THE COLLECTION

Because of the degree of subjective judgment which must enter into the definition of the songs, unanimity is not to be expected. Our own study of the book indicates that it contains twenty-eight songs and fragments, which fall into several patterns, though they often overlap. To mark each basic theme, we have added descriptive titles:

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114 V 14 is best taken as a quotation of the words which the lover wishes to hear (הָיוּ דֹרֵךְ), an invitation to enjoy the delights of love (so Haller; slightly differently Bettan).
115 The entire passage 7:7-10 and 11-14 may constitute a single song in duet form, the first portion being spoken by the lover, the second by his beloved. However, there is no direct plea to the beloved in 7-10, which is essentially a poem of praise, and vv. 11-14 do not constitute a direct answer. We therefore prefer to regard these passages as two independent poems.
THE SONG OF SONGS

D. DUETS OF MUTUAL PRAISE

Our Walls Are Cedars (1:15–17)
Who Is Like My Love (2:1–3)
The Lover’s Welcome (2:14–15)

E. LOVE IN THE WORLD OF NATURE

The Time of Singing Is Come (2:8–13)
Call From the Mountains (4:8)
Love’s Dawning (6:10–12)u

F. DREAM SONGS

The Dream of the Lost Lover (3:1–5)
Love’s Trial and Triumph (5:2 to 6:3). See below.

G. THE GREATNESS OF LOVE

The Seal of Love (8:6–7)
The Finest Vineyard (8:11–12)

H. SONGS OF COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

A Wedding Song for Solomon (3:6–11)
The Maiden’s Dance (7:1–6)u
The Ramparts of Love (8:8–10)

I. LOVE’S SORROWS AND JOYS

Love’s Trial and Triumph (5:2 to 6:3)

This, the most elaborate and perhaps the most beautiful song in the collection, is a blending of several patterns: (a) the dream motif (5:2), which incorporates the themes of coquetry (3:3) and longing (5:4 f.); (b) the waqif in praise of the lover (5:10 f.); and (c) praise of the delights of love (5:2 f.).

It is possible that these verses may be independent fragments. V. 12 is completely untranslatable in its present form. See the Commentary for some of the emendations proposed.

That this is a dance a clear from the fact that the description of the bride begins with her feet. That the occasion is a wedding highly probable, both from the frank description of her physical charms, far the most outspoken in the book, and from the reference to the “king,” i.e. the bridegroom, in v. 6.

In several instances, the units seem very short and we have merely fragments, or perhaps only titles of songs, which are no longer extant in their full form. On the other hand, it must always be remembered that in these charming lyrics we lack the music to which they were invariably sung. The number of words and lines required for a song would therefore generally be fewer than in the case of poetry designed to be read. One has only to compare the few words in the popular Israel song or traditional Hasidic melody with the longer texts of modern poetry in Hebrew or any other language to see the difference. The longest lyric in the book (5:2 to 6:3), which consists of eighteen verses, is, as has been noted, a highly complex blending of several literary motifs.

In a collection such as this, it is to be expected that phrases and verses will reappear more than once. Glosses are, of course, not to be ruled out a priori, but deciding which words are secondary is a particularly precarious undertaking in a collection of popular folk-songs, where additions are natural. Thus the two dream-songs (3:1–5 and 5:2 ff.), repeat the theme of the city watchmen, but the second passage introduces a variation, which is in thorough keeping with the more elaborate development of the song as a whole.

XIII. SYMBOISM AND ESTHETICS IN THE SONG

It is of the essence of poetry that it employ symbolism to express nuances beyond the power of exact definition. This is particularly true of love poetry, where the reticences imposed by social convention add both urgency and piquancy to the use of symbols. Hence the beloved will be compared to a flower (2:1 f.), and the lover to a tree (2:3). The delights of love will be described as fruit (2:3), wine (1:4;

10 Cf., for example, 8:5 or 8:13 f. Albright has made the suggestion that Psalm 68 may contain the titles of a collection instead of being the text of a single poem.

11 Such are the three adjurations of the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7; 3:5; 8:6), the first two of which include the reference to the hinds and gazelles of the field. So, too, the song text a repeated in 2:5 and 5:5 the phrase seems less relevant in the second passage. The two dream songs (3:1–5 and 5:2 f.) repeat the theme of the city watchmen (3:3; 5:7) with a variation in the latter.

12 Cf. Pfeiffer, op. cit., p. 710, for a list of alleged glosses. Some are essential to the text and need only to be interpreted co-textly (as e.g. 5:6). Most rest upon considerations of meter which of themselves do not suffice to justify exclusions in the text. Not only is there great uncertainty concerning all theories of Biblical meter proposed (cf. W. H. Cobb, A Criticism of Systems of Hebrew Meter, Oxford, 1905), but our lack of the accompanying music makes it impossible to tell what words were repeated or lengthened in the chanting of the song.
it expresses far more than it says; its nuances are at least as significant as its explications. Its overt meaning has nothing in it to arouse the vigilance of the censor, and meanwhile its deeper content is able to cross the threshold of consciousness.

Modern psychological research has also shed considerable light on the intimate relationship between love and pain. This connection is expressed in the great "Dream-Song" (5:2 to 6:3). When the love-sick maiden wanders through the city, in search of her lover, the watchmen beat her (5:7).

Stephan cites an old haddawiyye from Jaffa, which affords a striking parallel.18

"The quarrel rose between me and him:
They dragged me to the sarai;
They beat me a thousand strokes;
They beat me on my ankles."

An Egyptian love song of the New Kingdom:19 expresses the same theme of the lover's devotion in the face of physical attack:

"I will not let go of thy love
Even if I am beaten,
As far as the land of Palestine with sickles and clubs
And on to the land of Ethiopia with palm ribs
As far as the hills with sticks
And unto the fields with cudgels."

The variations in date and geographical provenance do not exhaust the variety to be found within this small book. The songs reflect the simplicity of rustic scenes, the sophistication of the great city, the poverty of the shepherd's hut, and the luxury of the royal palace. Hence it is possible for one scholar to find in the book "the simplest kind of ballads scarcely touched by the polishing efforts of the self-conscious poet,"20 while another declares that the Song is to be classed "as beller-letters rather than as folk-songs," and finds them "only less artificial than the idylls of Theocritus."21 Actually, the book contains both the simple and unrestrained outpourings of untutored love and the elaborated literary expressions of the same basic impulse.

21 Cl. Pfeiffer, op. cit., p. 711.
Frequently the point is made that the boldness of expression in the book with regard to sexual intimacy and bodily description is not in keeping with modern taste. It is true that the description of the maiden's charms in 7:3 is more explicit and franker than has been customary in Occidental poetry, but this passage is unique in the Song. Elsewhere, the description of physical beauty is frank without coarseness. To evaluate it fairly, the Song should be judged against its Oriental background. Actually, its delicacy is at least as striking as its lack of inhibitions. The symbolisms used in describing the manifestations of love throughout the book add piquancy without offending. It should also be noted that some of the most outspoken passages are to be found in songs relating to married love. Yet even here we have none of the crassly physical references to be found in the Akkadian love-charms, in Sumerian love-poems, or in contemporary Arabic love-songs.

Esthetic standards are notoriously prone to change. In describing the beauty of a woman today, we would not think of her as resembling a city or a mare (1:9), yet we do compare a city to a woman, and we refer to a beautiful horse by the feminine pronoun. A horse was, of course, not a beast of burden, but the cherished comrade of kings and nobles. Sociological and economic factors undoubtedly influence tastes in feminine vulgarity. The ancients liked their women large, as the Venus de Milo demonstrates and as is clear from the Song, even after allowance is made for poetical hyperbole (see 4:4; 7:5). Undoubtedly this taste for an ample woman reflected the emphasis upon child-bearing as woman's chief task. On the other hand, the modern preference for thin, "stream-lined" figures testifies to the present position of women as associates, and even as competitors, with men in all fields of activity in a society of small families, where child-bearing plays a considerably less important role. Yet in this area the French proverb has particular cogency: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." The love of a man for a maidservant is a perennially fresh theme in literature, because it is a constant of human nature.

XIV SOME STYLISTIC TRAITS IN THE SONG

Our understanding of the Song of Songs is helped considerably when certain characteristics of style are kept in mind. One of these is the use of quotations, without any external formula or phrase to indicate that the words are being quoted. Elsewhere we have shown how widespread this usage is in Biblical, Rabbinical and Oriental literature generally. Several passages in the Song are best explained as instances of this use of quotations.

In 1:7-8, Tur-Sinai plausibly explains v. 8 as the words of the shepherds who want to draw her affections away from her lover:

Tell me, O thou whom I love,
Why should I be a wanderer
Among the flocks of thy friends,
Who should mock me and say, if I asked about thee:
"If thou dost not know, C faiest among women,
Go forth in the tracks of the flocks
And feed thy kids near the shepherds' tents."

The closing verses of the Song, 8:13 f., are explained by Haller as containing the words that the lover wishes to hear from his beloved:

O thou who sittest in the garder.
With friends listening,
Let me hear thy voice
Saying to me,
"Hasten, my beloved, and be as a gazelle,
Or as a young hart
Upon the mountains of spices."

In 14, the third stich, "We will rejoice and be merry with thee," may well be the quotation of the words of the bridegroom to his...
beloved, who responds in the following stichs, "We shall inhale thy love more than wine."

This use of quotations without a *verbam dicendi* is illustrated in a popular modern Palestinian Arab song, current in several versions:147

"If you should visit me one night, O perfection of my happiness,
I would rejoice and mortify the envious (saying):
"My friend regales me."

The use of similes and metaphors in the Song also requires a word of explanation. When the poet uses a figure of speech, he often continues to elaborate upon it for its own sake, without reference to the subject for the sake of which it was invoked. The figure, so to speak, develops its own momentum and has its own independent existence. Thus, in 4:2,

"Thy teeth are like a flock ready for shearing
Who have come up from washing,"

the second stich describes the sheep, without being related back to the teeth. Similarly, in 4:4,

"Like the tower of David is thy neck,
Built as a landmark,"

the second stich likewise refers not to the neck, but to the tower of David.

The difficulties and obscurities of the Song are due, in large measure, to the fact that it is an expression of a segment of Israelite life, which is largely unknown to us otherwise. Reference has already been made to variations in esthetic standards. These factors should caution us against facile emendations and transpositions in the text. Only in a small number of passages does emendation of the Masoretic text seem justified on the basis of our present state of knowledge.148

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**GORDIS**

**XV. THE SONG OF SONGS IN HOLY WRIT**

Undoubtedly, the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, aided by the ascription of the book to King Solomon who is mentioned in the text, led to its inclusion in the Biblical canon. That Pharisaic Judaism admitted the book into the canon because it was "an ancient book, a religious book, and one that: had always been recognized as a part of the pagan fertility cult is, unlikely to the point of impossibility. Had there been any recollection of such a use of the material, those who objected to the canonicity of the book would not have hesitated to mention it, and its chances for inclusion would have been nil.

The view against which Rabbinic Judaism levelled its strictures and which led to lengthy discussions as to its canonicity was the widely held literal interpretation, with which the Rabbis were very familiar, as has been noted. That all objections were overruled and the Song admitted into the canon indicates that on the subconscious level, at least, another factor operated, as was the case with Ecclesiastes:149 a genuine affection for the book. It was this attitude which refused to permit its exclusion from Scripture, an act that would have spelled its ultimate destruction. As Jastrow well says: "It entered the canon not by vote, but because of its inevitable human appeal. Love is sacred even in passionate manifestations, when not perverted by a sophisticated self-analysis."

The physical basis of love is extolled in the Song without shame or pruriency. Yet it serves as the foundation for the spiritual relationship, which is adumbrated in many an incidental phrase and reaches its climax in the great praise to love in 8:7:

Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it.
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
He would be laughed to scorn.

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147 Stephan, op cit., p. 60:

1a surawas jird 5wtk wad:
ofrah v'hash il-azul: "kubli mhninsei."

148 The following changes from the Masoretic text underlie our version:

1:1 For נמר read מתשא
3:4 For תמרים read תמרים (doubtful)
4:15 For בם read ב
5:13 For מגדים read מגדים
6:12 For מקר read מכר
6:14 For יד read עד
8:2 For סניא readuder (see the Commentary)

149 Cf. Meek, in Schoff, op cit., pp. 52 f.
150 Cf. Gordis, KJW, pp. 131 f.
152 Tur-Sinai, op. cit., pp. 385 f., refers the "love" which is the subject in 8:7 not to the relationship of a maiden and her lover, but to the effort of an interloper to steal the affection of a married woman from her husband. The passage is interpreted to mean that it is impossible to make monetary restitution for this heinous sin. This is highly ingenious, but we find it unconvincing. There is a clear-cut reference to the wrangled husband in Prov. 6:27 f., which Tur-Sinai adduces as a parallel, but it is entirely lacking here.
It is in this sense that the modern reader, who is not likely to read it as an allegory, will echo Akiba’s passionate description of the book as “the Holy of Holies,” for it is, in Herder’s words, “holy as a song of pure natural love, the holiness of human life.”

Over and beyond its eternal youthfulness and inherent charm, the Song of Songs, precisely because it is within the canon of Scripture, serves to broaden the horizons of religion. It gives expression, in poetic and hence in deathless terms, to the authentic world-view of Judaism, which denies any dichotomy between body and soul, between matter and spirit, because it recognizes them both as the twin aspects of the great and unending miracle called life.