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**PART 1**

**The Song of Songs in Context(s)**





# A Daughter of Solomon in Love: Balancing Context and Metaphor When Interpreting the Song of Songs

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## Introduction

A dominant strand in the current historical-critical interpretation of the Song of Songs, the approach biblical scholars generally pursue in place of traditional allegorical interpretations of the work,<sup>1</sup> is the large number of textual features that are viewed as metaphorical. One sign of this is the appearance of monographs focused on this issue (Munro 1995; Gault 2019; and Verde 2020), while another is the number of commentaries that regularly designate aspects of the work as self-evidently metaphorical. Metaphor certainly plays a major role in the poem. This dimension emerges as early as 1:3 when the poet, having just had his female character praise the agreeable fragrance of her beloved's perfumed oils, then adds in a bravura touch: "Your reputation is perfumed-oil poured (שמן תורק שמך) which is why young women love you."<sup>2</sup> The labelling of numerous features of the poem as metaphorical has now become a powerful interpretative tradition that is thought to require little, if any, defence.

Yet this emphasis on metaphor comes at a cost. For to interpret a feature metaphorically means removing it from the stock of details that can be viewed as relating to the context an ancient audience would have recognised in the poetry as literally true and as providing a setting for the actions, the characters and their relationships that the poem creates. While every literary work generates its own imaginative world, the details of that world inevitably derive from

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- 1 The problem with allegory, as J. Cheryl Exum has pointed out (2005: 76) is that "It is not verifiable, and it is arbitrary. No agreement exists among allegorical interpreters." Furthermore, "there is no indication that the poet ever intended it to be given an esoteric interpretation." Saying this, however, is in no way to diminish the value of allegorical readings in other contexts, such as the recitation of the whole poem in synagogues on the Sabbath during Passover, probably influenced by the Targum's interpretation of the work as an allegory of God's relationship with Israel.
  - 2 Here שֵׁם is translated as "reputation," a meaning that appears elsewhere (e.g. Gen 11:4; 12:2; 2 Sam 7:9; 8:13; Neh 9:10; Isa 63:12, 14; Jer 32:20; Dan 9:15), instead of "name," because it coheres more closely with the notions of the diffusion and appealing fragrance of perfumed-oil, and is more credible as inspiring love for the man among young women, than his mere name.

the actual world known to the initial author and audience.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued below that central to the actual world familiar to the first audience of the Song of Songs were the royal courts of Israelite kings.<sup>4</sup> To speak of reading a biblical work in its ancient context entails attending to the way in which features of Israelite society and culture are stated or assumed in the text and provide important cues for interpreting specific features, such as plot and characterization. This approach has the advantage of taking seriously the alterity of the author and his or her initial audience. An excessive readiness to discover metaphors can also facilitate the arbitrary assignment of meaning to particular details. Moreover, re-examining certain alleged metaphorical features in the Song of **Song** in the light of the social and political context of ancient Israel, reinforced with comparative anthropology and information available in ancient Judean legal papyri, allows very different conclusions to be reached on the text's meaning. This does not entail shutting one's eyes to the presence of metaphors in the Song of Songs but rather striking a more appropriate balance between context and metaphor.

This issue also bears directly on a central interpretative issue in the Song of Songs from a historical point of view, namely, how would ancient Judeans listening to or reading the work have understood the female protagonist and her relation to Solomon and the shepherd? A view going back to Theodore of Mopsuestia saw the text as involving a marriage between Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter.<sup>5</sup> Many critics today aligned with the metaphorical approach regard "Solomon" and the shepherd as the same person, typically with "the king" regarded as a metaphor for the young man.<sup>6</sup> There is an old tradition of interpretation, however, that saw two male protagonists in the poem, the King and the shepherd, whom the woman truly loves. Solomon tried to persuade her to forsake her husband and join his harem. This she refused to do and thus became a model of marital fidelity. This was Christian Ginsburg's view, although he attributed the core of the idea to J. F. Jacobi in 1772 (Ginsburg 1857: 87–88).

While not adopting this particular position, it will become apparent as the argument proceeds that when context is given more scope, the case for the young man and Solomon being different persons becomes very strong.

3 For a succinct discussion of the natural and social worlds reflected in the work, see Brenner 1989: 49–56.

4 For a discussion of Persian and Hellenistic courts, see Esler 2017: 35–52.

5 For a recent proponent of this view, see Sasson 1989: 407–414, although he sees their relationship not as historical, but as a feature of the poetry of the work.

6 See, for example, Fox 1985: 105; Murphy 1990: 83, 127, 135; Garrett 2004: 146; Exum 2005: 95, 110.

Indeed, a probable solution to the nature of the relationship the poem suggests between Solomon and the female protagonist also presents itself—as father and daughter. While this is not an entirely novel suggestion in scholarship,<sup>7</sup> the argument below represents a new way to make the case. Since the critical issue for the argument involves differentiating metaphors from contextual features, that issue must be addressed first.

### Identifying Metaphors Within the Poem's Figurative Dimension

It is rather artificial to consider metaphors as a separate category of poetic trope in the Song of Songs. For they constitute but one of the two aspects of its figurative dimension, the other being similes. Both similes and metaphors are enlisted in the poem's reliance on the process of comparison as central to its craft, with similes (putting the matter simply) being comparisons with “as” or “like” and metaphors comparisons without “as” or “like.” Numerically speaking, simile has a slightly larger role in the poem than metaphor, since there are 52 similes in the poem, compared to 50 indisputable metaphors.<sup>8</sup> Of the 52 similes, 41 are introduced by כִּי (“as,” “like”).<sup>9</sup> Nine are constructed using forms of דָּמָה (“is like”), five expressly and four impliedly.<sup>10</sup> Two are introduced by כְּמוֹ, a pleonastic form of כִּי.<sup>11</sup>

A remarkable feature of the Song of Songs—if one infrequently noticed—has been pointed out by Robert Alter (2011: 241). This is a poem in which

the process of figuration is frequently “foregrounded”—which is to say, as the poet takes expressive advantage of representing something through an image that brings out a salient quality that it shares with the referent, he calls our attention to his exploitation of similitude, to the artifice of metaphorical representation.

7 Horine (2001: 48) raises the possibility.

8 The indisputable metaphors appear in the following verses: 1:3, 13, 14, 15; 2:1 (2x), 3, 14; 4:1, 11 (3x), 12 (3x), 13 (counting just the orchard, not its details), 15 (3x, assuming this verse is separate from vv. 13–14 and not their grammatical continuation) and 16 (2x); 5:1 (10x), 2, 11, 13, 14 (2x), 15; 7:2 (2x), 4, 8 (2x); 8:6 (2x), 9 (5x, including the protases in the two conditional statements).

9 In 1:5 (2x), 7; 2:2, 3; 3:6; 4:1, 2, 3 (2x), 4, 5, 11; 5:11, 12, 13, 15; 6:4 (3x), 5, 6, 7, 10 (4x), 13; 7:3, 4 (2x), 5 (5x), 8 (2x), 9; 8:6 (4x), 10 (2x).

10 Where דָּמָה is express: 1:9; 2:9, 17; 7:7 and 8:14; where it is implied: 2:9, 17; 7:7 and 8:14.

11 In 6:10 and 7:1.

Alter then discusses the five instances of the word דָּמָה (“to be like,” “resemble”) in the Song of Songs (of thirty in the Hebrew Bible), in 1:9, 2:9, 2:17, 7:8, and 8:14 (2011: 241–245), which, as just noted, are attached to nine of the 52 similes. Although accurately suggesting that the “first occurrence of this verb is particularly ostentatious,” he misstates the reason for this as “the seeming enigma of the image: “To a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots / I would liken you, my darling” (1:9).” The real reason for its prominence is that this is the only instance of the five in which the verb is a Piel, rather than a Qal. That is, whereas in the other four cases the verb simply means “to be like,” here the young man (and surely the poet behind him) highlights his own role as someone who consciously and deliberately engages in comparison: “To a mare of Pharaoh’s chariots I compare you (דָּמִיתִיךְ), my beloved.” The Piel of דָּמָה in 1:9 is therefore utterly distinctive, as introducing the first instance of figurative language applied to a person as a totality in the poem (as opposed to the use of metaphor in relation to a characteristic of a person—his reputation—in 1:3). It thus inaugurates this major strand of poetic activity in the work. Elaine James and Sean Burt (2020) have recently published an excellent article that discusses the use of דָּמָה in the Song of Songs as a signal of aesthetic self-consciousness; their argument is cognate with mine but far more detailed.

But there is more. While the expression in 1:9 is a simile, metaphors soon follow: “My beloved is to me (לִּי) a bag of myrrh” in 1:13 and “My beloved is to me (לִּי) a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi” in 1:14. It is difficult to avoid the impression that these two examples of לִּי (although frequently omitted in translations and overlooked in commentaries) are intended to soften the impact of these initial instances of a metaphor where the target domain<sup>12</sup> is a person—a type of metaphor that frequently appears in the work—and thus convey the implication “Others may find this comparison hard to swallow, but for me it is appropriate.” The poet revels in his ability to forge unlikely combinations that might not occur to others. This impression is confirmed by the fact that, after these two instances, לִּי does not reappear in relation to a metaphor; clearly, it has served its purpose. By the use of דָּמִיתִיךְ in 1:9 and of לִּי to introduce these two whole-person metaphors in 1:13–14, the male speaker and the poet behind him are therefore announcing their interest in and commitment to bold and overtly figurative language.

That similes and metaphors constitute two aspects of the broader process of figurative comparison is evident from those passages which employ simile and metaphor interchangeably (e.g. 4:1–4; 5:10–16; 7:1–9) and also in cases where

12 For source and target domains, see Lakoff and Johnson 2003.

simile and metaphor adopt the same source domain: “His eyes are like doves” (5:12) and “Your eyes are doves” (1:15; 4:1); “(I am) a lily” (2:1) and (my beloved is) “like a lily” (2:2). Thus, the poet rather flamboyantly announces a figurative programme of poetic craft in 1:9 and 1:13–14 and implements that programme in describing the male and female protagonists as the poem proceeds. There is nothing latent here; this feature of the poet’s craft is visible in both design and in execution; he or she flaunts it and revels in it.

This overtly figurative dimension of the poem is most evident in declaratory comparisons taking the form “X is like Y,” or “X is Y,” similes and metaphors respectively, where X (in most cases the male or female character or one of their characteristics) represents the target domain and Y, *grammatically the complement of a verb functioning as a copula*, represents the source domain.<sup>13</sup> These declarations are commendatory and celebratory.<sup>14</sup> They are found in 1:3, 5, 7, 9, 13–14, 15; 2:1–3, 9, 17; 4:1–5; 4:11–15; 5:11–15; 6:4–7, 10, 13; 7:1–5, 7–9; 8:6, 9 and 14. These passages contain 45 of the similes (87% of the total) and 34 of the 50 certain metaphors (68% of the total). In some of the longer figurative passages, where similes and metaphors are used almost interchangeably, such as 4:1–5, 5:10–16 and 7:1–7, each of them in the *wasf* poetic form (where a person is described by anatomical features down from the head or up from the feet), there is almost an ekphrastic dimension which produces a rather static effect.

Yet overt comparisons also take other forms, usually involving metaphors which can be more flexible in the absence of “is like.” The remaining 16 metaphors classified as indisputable above show this character in a variety of ways. Thus, the male protagonist addresses the woman as “my dove” (2:14; 5:2). He comments that “Your lips distil nectar” and “honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:11). His declaratory metaphor “a garden locked is my sister” in 4:12 (2x) is followed by the woman saying “Blow upon my garden” and “Let my beloved come to his garden” in 4:16. Verse 5:1, beginning with the young man’s statement “I come to my garden,” contains a further nine manifestly metaphorical statements. The palm-tree he says he will climb and whose branches he will hold in 7:8 clearly means the woman referred to in the declaratory simile in the previous verse (“Your height is like a palm-tree”). This analysis shows that the remaining 16 certain metaphors unambiguously proclaim their metaphorical character in themselves or within their context in the poem. This result will play a significant role in the argument below.

13 Included here are the cases of the verb “to be” in the imperative. There are only two instances of similes not connected with the man or woman: love being as strong as death and jealousy as cruel as the grave (8:6).

14 Although Black (2009) argues for grotesque bodies.

One final aspect of the 50 certain metaphors deserves mention. This is that in every case they cannot be literally true. A person cannot actually be a dove, a garden, a well, flower, a palm-tree or a wall, and one's head and arms cannot be made of gold, one's arms alabaster columns or one's eyes pools in Heshbon. This characteristic is precisely what one would expect from the programmatic statements in 1:9 and 1:13–14 discussed above. The author is set upon creating unexpected and aesthetically pleasing comparisons and this is achieved by leaving the realm of the literally possible behind. This fact weighs against elements that are not indisputably metaphorical being regarded as such, including the references to a “king” (1:4, 12; 7:5), the architectural features in 1:17, the references to mountains in 4:6 and 8, and various aspects of narrative passages, especially 5:2–6.

This conclusion has relevance to the suggestions, common in the secondary literature, that metaphors occur in the narrative sections of the poem. We begin with Robert Alter (2011: 235):

Although the collection as a whole makes elaborate and sometimes extravagant use of figurative language, when narrative governs a whole poem, as in 3:1–4 and 5:2–8, figuration is entirely displaced by the report of sequenced actions.

Even in 1985, when Alter published the first edition of *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, there was a position contrary to this (which was then and remains unmentioned by him in the revised edition of 2011) that critics have continued to maintain since then. This is that, even in apparently narrative passages, figuration continues, but in an implied manner with the implications susceptible to being discovered by the modern interpreter. Taking 5:2–8 as an example, Marvin Pope (1977: 514–519) floated the possibilities that the request for the woman to “open” in 5:2 could have “sexual connotations,” that “feet” in 5:3 was suggestive of “genitals” and “hand” in 5:4 of the phallus, and that the lover thrusting his hand into the hole in 5:4 “would be suggestive of coital intromission.” Lyle Eslinger developed Pope's ideas in 1981, arguing that the words כפות המנעול in 5:5, usually translated “the handles of the lock,” conveyed, as “double entendre” (which he discerned throughout 5:2–5), a reference to features of the woman's genitalia (1981: 275–276).

Michael Fox objected to the discovery of such double entendre on the basis that it was not consistent with the course of the narrative in the text: how could the various features be suggestive of sexual intercourse when the young man had not yet entered the house? He observed, against Eslinger, that “We should

certainly not read the text as an elaborate gynecological conceit, in which each part of the door lock represents a specific part of the female genitals.”<sup>15</sup>

This approach begun by Pope has now crystallised into two positions. Cheryl Exum has adopted a “two level” approach to 5:2–8 (2005:190–191). She acknowledges Fox’s objections but seeks to get round them by arguing that the poet moves on two levels, the literal level of the narrative (where, as Fox suggested, the couple would have had intercourse if only the woman had opened the door in time) and a “figurative”, or “erotic” level where coition is represented by allusion, double entendre, vocabulary, imagery and “artistic design.” A second, and more radical, position has been proposed by Garrett (2004: 204–205), namely, that there is no literal dimension at all in 5:2–8, since the whole passage is “a symbolic representation of the woman’s loss of virginity.” In fact, he considers “it is impossible ... to give this passage a literal reading without the text becoming nearly incomprehensible.” Even if one could make sense of “the literal gist of these lyrics, one is left with a love song that is horrifying,” especially because of the young woman being beaten up by the night watchmen. As a love song on the literal level, it would be a “monstrous parody.” Thus the passage is really “a metaphor symbolizing something altogether different from the quasi-story on the surface of the text.” Following this approach induces Garrett to interpret all the features of the text figuratively, even to the remarkable extent of suggesting that the man’s head in 5:2 is his penis and “the ‘drops of the night’ in the same verse ‘refer to semen.’”

Two objections must be raised to these approaches. Firstly, the figurative dimension proposed in both of these interpretations is illusory as inconsistent with the poetic craft of the work programmatically enunciated in 1:9 and 1:13–14 and implemented later in the poem. That craft involves the creation of comparisons (similes or metaphors) that are self-consciously overt and even ostentatious. In particular, all of the poem’s indisputable metaphors involve comparisons that are not literally possible. The poet’s expression of his or her intention to produce this kind of figuration in 1:9 and 1:13–14—an intention realised in the 50 certain metaphors—leaves no room for an entirely different mode of comparison that is covert and dependent upon sexual innuendo. Secondly, not only is the presence of crypto-comparisons alien to the creative mode of this poem, it seriously interferes with its interpretation. As Fox has suggested (1985: 145), “A reading of that sort detracts not only from the interest and tension of the narrative, but also from its erotic intensity.” As he has noted, there are sexual allusions in 5:2–6:3 “but they are delicate and indirect.”

15 Fox 1985: 145. Both Murphy (1990:168–171) and Keel (1994:186–194) ignored Pope’s suggestions.

More importantly, they arise from the literal meaning of the text; individual words do not need to be read metaphorically to produce them. The poetic focus on the persona of the female speaker and on her attitudes and actions as expressed by the poet—and not as imagined by a modern interpreter—is central to the meaning of the poem. This focus is confused by Exum's two level theory (where the alleged figurative narrative clashes with the literal one) and destroyed by Garrett's replacement of the ancient narrative with his new symbolic (actually allegorical) one motivated by a modern psychological and aesthetic sensibility. What, for example, is so surprising about the woman being beaten by the hard men of the Jerusalem night watch when they had already let her off once before (3:3–4)? And why should a narrative literally describing an event such as this be itself categorized as “horrifying” and a “monstrous parody” and rejected in consequence?<sup>16</sup>

We conclude, therefore, that Alter was justified in his view, cited above, that “when narrative governs a whole poem, as in 3:1–4 and 5:2–8, figuration is entirely displaced by the report of sequenced actions,” except for the word “entirely.” For Alter himself notes in the same place (2011: 235) that “in the description of the palanquin coming up from the desert to Jerusalem ... the only figurative language is ‘like columns of smoke’ at the beginning ... and ‘decked with love’ at the end.” While this means that figuration (although “decked with love” could be literally true) can occur in a narrative context, due credit must continue to be given to the poet's explicit preference for self-evident and eye-catching figuration, while interpretations dependent upon a comparison that has to be implied or that entail arguing for metaphors based on what is literally possible should be rejected.

### Significant Contextual Features in the Poem

Having considered the character of the figurative language in the poem, especially its metaphorical dimension, it remains to investigate its features that reflect the actual world of ancient Israel in which it was written. At critical points this exercise will mean re-interpreting details often labelled metaphorical that are, it will be argued, meant to be taken literally within the world imagined in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Athalya Brenner, in fact, suggests “it must be admitted that the punishment meted out to the girl who breaks the sexual code is not too severe” (1989: 55).

### The Meaning of “The King” in 1:4

A major issue for the interpretation of the Song is thrown up by first two clauses in 1:4: מִשְׁכְּנִי אַחֲרֶיךָ נִרְצָה הַבִּיאֲנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו. The first clause is straightforward: “Draw me after you, let us run!” The second is usually translated, “The king has brought me to his chambers.” For many interpreters, these two clauses stand in parallel to one another, which means the “king” here is a device whereby the speaker (the young woman in the Song) refers to the young man she has been addressing; in other words הַמֶּלֶךְ is a metaphor. Thus, according to Michael Fox (1985: 98), “‘king’ is simply a term of affection.” He justifies this with reference to ancient Egyptian love poems in which “lovers are called kings, princes, queens because of the way love makes them feel about each other and about themselves.” Cheryl Exum, similarly, who believes that here we have the man bringing his beloved to the house or chamber (citing 1:4 and 2:4), argues (2005: 95) that “It makes no sense to assume that the king is a person other than the lover, for if he were, why would she and a king be rejoicing and delighting in the joy of her absent lover.” Her lover “is a king as far as she is concerned.” Yet, while acknowledging that the metaphorical interpretation involves the woman moving from a second to a third person singular address in this line, she argues this accords with the shift from the third person singular in v. 2a (“O that he would kiss me”) to second person address in v. 2b (“For your love is better than wine”). Other commentators share this view on the identity of the “king.”<sup>17</sup> As noted, this position treats the two clauses as standing in parallel to one another. Even Robert Alter, who has pointed out that what might appear to be one of the parallels so characteristic of Hebrew poetry can actually be an explanation (2011: 1–28), regards the second clause, or “verset” as he calls it, as a “parallelistic” expression (2011: 233). But he adopts this view without any analysis of this verse in its immediate setting.

This position, however, is unconvincing. Let us start with the issue of second person and third person addresses in the two clauses. *Contra* Exum, the movement from third to second person from v. 2a to v. 2b is quite different from the presence of the third person הַבִּיאֲנִי in v. 4, because it marks a transition rather than constituting a discordant element. Thus, v. 2b represents a three-word opening to a passage that runs to the end of v. 4 and contains twenty-eight words in which there is no further third person dimension except for הַבִּיאֲנִי. Are we to believe that in the midst of a lively address to her beloved, which includes first person plurals immediately before and after the expression in

17 See Murphy 1990: 125; Garrett 2004: 130; Spencer 2020: 676; Verde 2020: 104.

question (נרצח and נגילה), on one occasion she notably diverges from this pattern of speaking directly to him, to add as an aside addressed to no one in particular: הביאני המלך חדריו? This difficulty disappears as soon as we realize that these words represent not a parallel to the preceding clause *but its explanation*, with הביאני meaning “he has invited me,” a known meaning of the word that also occurs in a similar royal court setting in Est 5:12.<sup>18</sup> The picture that then emerges is of a young woman, excited at an invitation to the king’s chambers and in a rush to get there who has decided to bring her beloved along with her and is explaining to him the reason for their haste as they go. The plurality of people mentioned in 1:4c, 4d and 4e who will rejoice in him and love him refers to all those she and her beloved will encounter in the king’s chambers, the king himself and members of his court, especially the women of Jerusalem. This provides the answer to Exum’s question as to “why would she and a king be rejoicing and delighting in the joy of her absent lover?” The lover is present, not absent.

There are other problems with reading “the king” as a metaphor. Firstly, there is nothing overtly metaphorical about this expression and this interpretation means the use of a target domain for the comparison which is possible within the reality of the poem, something which never characterises the 50 certain metaphors in the poem. After all, Solomon is a prominent presence in the text, being explicitly mentioned four times (1:5; 3:9, 11; 8:11). Secondly, this would represent the use of a whole-person comparison in advance of their introduction in 1:9 and 1:13–14. Thirdly, the notion that the young man would have “chambers” to which he could bring the woman clashes with the consistent picture provided elsewhere of the young man’s connections with the countryside. For, even though he appears to be of noble descent (נדיב; 6:12), he owns a garden (5:1; 6:2), where he both pastures his sheep (2:16 6:13) and also lives (הישבת; 8:13). The “house of wine” to which her beloved brings here in 2:4 is not the young man’s house but rather a drinking facility of some sort.<sup>19</sup> That he might own a plurality of chambers, moreover, is also at variance with his depiction as a countryman. Even the young woman’s mother, who is also of noble descent (בת־נדיב; 7:2), only has one (3:4). While חדר appears 34 times in the Hebrew Bible, it is usually in the singular, sometimes as a sleeping

18 “Haman said, ‘Esther the queen invited [הביאה] no one with the king to the banquet which she prepared except me.’” This verb in the Hiphil also appears in Est 5:10: “and he (sc. Haman) sent and invited (ויבא).”

19 So Fox 1985:108; Murphy 1990: 132.

chamber.<sup>20</sup> To speak of the chambers of one person (as in Songs 1:4) is unparalleled, with the closest expression being “the chambers of their kings” (of the Pharaohs) in Psalm 105:30. Someone preferring a metaphorical interpretation here might object to this analysis on the basis that the poet, having chosen to use “the king” of the beloved, simply extended this imagery with respect to the royal quarters. But this is unconvincing. Nothing prevented the poet from maintaining the rural imagery associated with the young man by having the “king” invite her to meet him in property he owned in the country, like the vineyard at Baal-Hamon (8:11). Moreover, when the man and woman have amorous assignations, it is either in the chamber in her mother’s quarters (3:4) or in rural settings (cf. the green couch of 1:16) and this clashes with this alleged imagery of his royal quarters. The other, and major, argument relevant to this issue is the cumulative body of evidence in the poem for the young woman being Solomon’s daughter, which begins soon after, in 1:6 (discussed below).

### “The King” in 1:12 and 7:5

The “king” referred to in 1:12 is often regarded as a metaphor for the woman’s beloved mentioned in 1:13 and 1:14.<sup>21</sup> But having established the likelihood of a literal not metaphorical meaning for “the king” in 1:4 and with Solomon having been named in 1:5, a more plausible interpretation of 1:12 construes “the king” in the same sense. This is Solomon in or at his **מִסְכָּה**. While the meaning of this word is uncertain, it derives from **סָבַב**, meaning “go around,” “surround.” Many translators and commentators suggest a round bed or a round table, for which there is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible. The word only appears on four other occasions in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 6:29; 2 Kings 23:5; Psalm 140:10; and Job 37:12). In these instances it refers to architectural or spatial roundness, never to the roundness of an item of furniture (in spite of the Septuagint having ἐν ἀνακλίσει). Therefore, the meaning is probably architectural, of a round room, or a rotunda. Murphy’s translation “enclosure” reflects this position (1990: 130). Accordingly, v. 12 may well be a reference back to her visit to Solomon’s apartments in 1:4. The nard that the woman is described as giving off, is strongly

20 It is found in the plural of a number of dwellings (Isa 26:20) or the rooms of different people (Ezek 8:12), of the chambers of Sheol (Prov 7:27), metaphorically, of the inner parts of the body (Prov 18:8; 20:27, 30; 26:22), the separate rooms of a house (Prov 24:4) or the separate chambers of the Temple (1 Chron 28:11).

21 Fox (1985: 105): “As elsewhere “king” is an affectionate epithet of the youth.”; Murphy (1990: 135): “the woman is speaking of an intimate scene with her lover (the “king”); Garret 2004: 146; Exum 2005: 110.

scented, as are myrrh and henna (Exum 2005: 111–112). She is celebrating her attractiveness in relation to the olfactory sense: her scent spread through the king's enclosure. *Contra* commentators like Ginzburg and Fox (1857: 138; 1985: 105), the nard is not her lover. The poet then continues with this evocation of pleasing smells, with the woman describing her beloved in terms of myrrh and henna, here deployed with an explicitly, indeed programmatically (see above) metaphorical meaning (1:13–14), as her thoughts turn to him, presumably to be understood as present with her in Solomon's round chamber (as implied in 1:4).

The third and last instance of “king” in the poem comes in 7:5 (7:6 in the MT),<sup>22</sup> the verse concluding a *wasf* that begins at 7:1 with the gracefulness of her feet. The first clause is reasonably straightforward: “Your head upon you is like Carmel.” Then the difficulties begin. The usual lineation of the Hebrew is as follows:

ודלת ראשך כארגמן  
מלך אסור ברהטים

Exum offers the following translation (2005: 212):

And the hair of your head is like purple;  
a king is held captive in your tresses.

The word רהטים, translated here as “your tresses,” although there is no “your” in the Hebrew, only appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in Gen 30:38, 41 and Exod 2:16, of gutters or troughs through which water flows or into which water is directed for watering animals. Pope suggests (1977: 630) the word is a derivative of the Aramaic verb רהט, cognate with Hebrew רוץ, “run.” This view could explain the LXX's παραδρομαῖς, meaning “running beside or over, traversing,” and the *canalibus* of the Vulgate.

Exum then explains as follows (2005: 237):

The tresses tumble down from her head ... Purple cloth was one of the expensive materials used to decorate Solomon's palanquin (3:10). How fitting, then, that a king is held captive by these tresses! Any king would be captivated, but, of course, the man is speaking about himself in particular.

<sup>22</sup> The MT has Chapter 7 begin with what is 6:13 in other versions; the latter verse differentiation is followed here.

On this view, therefore, “water conduits” (not the “streams” as Exum and numerous others interpret רהטים) are a (rather unattractive) metaphor for her hair and “king” is a metaphor for the woman’s beloved. This approach is confidently accepted in numerous versions and commentaries.

Yet there is little basis for such confidence and Danilo Verde has rightly described this view as “dubious” (2020: 163). Murphy has noted the major problem: if “king” is a reference to the beloved, the poet is departing from the *wasf* form to inject a personal note. This would make it “the only personal reference in a *wasf*, and the line has been rejected by many commentators.”<sup>23</sup> It is not just “a personal reference” however, since it entails the speaker ending a poem about his beloved with a statement glorifying his own position—albeit while suggesting he is smitten by her—in notable disturbance of this form. An alternative approach, going back as far as the Syriac version, Aquila, Symmachus and the Vulgate, preserves the *wasf* form (Murphy 1990: 630). It involves re-lineating to interpret מלך as attributive of ארגמן: *et comae capitis tui sicut purpura regis vincta canalibus*. Even though this produces a long line, it has the advantage of preserving the integrity of the *wasf* form by continuing the description of the woman’s hair. Long ago Eugenio Zolli, noting that רהטים must involve some kind of wooden structures, offered a well-argued interpretation along these lines (1940: 282), which involves revising the meaning of רהטים: *e la tua chioma spiovente è come porpora regale attorno a stanghe* (“and your drooping hair is like royal purple around poles.” Brenner (1993: 252) also favours linking ארגמן and מלך as “royal purple.”

### “My Mother’s Sons” (1:6)

The conclusions reached on “the king” in 1:4 and 1:12 (מלך in 7:5 having proved irrelevant to the issue) necessitate that within the world of the poem the king and the young man are different people. Over the centuries interpreters who took this view have offered divergent views as to the role of Solomon in the poem and the nature of his relationship to the young woman. The first line of the poem, “The Song of Songs which is to/for Solomon” (אשר לשלמה), although of uncertain meaning, has always stimulated reflection on his role in the narrative. As noted above, two influential streams of interpretation offer competing views of Solomon’s role: either he is, broadly speaking, to be identified with

23 Murphy (1990: 186); in spite of this observation, he still regards “king” as a metaphor for the man.

the woman's beloved, or the beloved and the king are separate characters, the latter option according with the argument so far.

A hitherto unappreciated feature of 1:6 provides a highly significant entry-point to this issue. This is the expression "my mother's sons" (בני־אמי). Commentators, where they even mention the point, and many do not,<sup>24</sup> make a variety of suggestions as to why the female speaker does not refer to her male siblings as "my brothers." Pope rejected the notion that "my mother's sons" had anything to do with the prohibitions on incest in Lev 18:6–18 and proposed that it was a "poetic synonym," or possibly a "mythological motif," or a fragment of a pair of parallel clauses (1977: 322). Exum has suggested the phrase is a "poetic circumlocution," and criticised as "hardly meaningful" the idea (put forward by Delitzsch, Meek and Goulder) "that they are half-brothers, the sons of her mother but not of her father," in other words, half-brothers in the sense of step-brothers (from another marriage of her mother) living in the same house as the woman.<sup>25</sup>

*In fact, the explanation for "my mother's sons" lies in the world of the polygynous family, where one man has several wives and perhaps even concubines.* Research conducted by the Finnish anthropologist Hilma Granqvist among Arab villagers in Palestine in the 1920s cast a bright light on this subject. She found that a husband having more than one wife provided separate sleeping quarters for each of them or even accommodated them in different houses. Islamic law required this, but it also made practical sense as a way of preserving peace and harmony in the household (1935: 191–192). She discovered that the relationships between the various children of such a household varied depending upon whether they were full siblings or half siblings. "The natural thing," Granqvist observed (1935: 216), "is that the children shall take their own mother's part against her co-wife." Most importantly, a "child in a polygynous man's family speaks of its mother's co-wife as 'my father's wife' (*mart abūyi*) and of her son as 'my father's son' (*ibn abūyi*)" (1935: 216). There was "a certain gulf between the children of co-wives," notes Granqvist, before citing one of her respondents: "Thy father's son is like the people who fought against thee." But she then mentions a very different view (1935: 217): "*Thy mother's son* is as gold in thy sleeve" (italics added). For, as a rule, says another respondent: "They who are from one 'back' and two [different] wombs [i.e. children of the same father but different mothers] do not love each other." For only where children had parents in common did they really feel they were brothers and sisters: "He who from my father's 'back' came to my mother's womb, he is my

24 As Murphy (1990: 128), Keel (1994: 49), and Garrett (2004: 132–134), do not.

25 Exum 2005: 105; also see Pope (1977: 322) for details of Delitzsch's view.

brother.” Granqvist even cites an Arabic proverb that sums up the situation: “My brother, that is *my mother’s son* (*ibn immi*) and not [her] co-wife’s son, we both turned in the same womb” (italics for English words added) (1935: 217). In this context there is a critical distinction between “my mother’s son” (*ibn immi*) and “my father’s son” (*ibn abūyi*) which would have been socially necessary in any polygamous context, not just those of Palestinian Arabs in the 1920s. The Jerusalem portrayed in the Song of Songs was just such a context, since it refers to (Solomon’s) sixty queens and eighty concubines (6:8). Thus *ibn immi*, (“my mother’s son”), or *ibna immi* in the plural, is an everyday, semi-technical way of designating one’s full brothers, that is, brothers of the same mother and father, but in a polygamous setting where one also encountered one’s “father’s brothers,” that is the sons of one’s father from other wives.

That is how an ancient Israelite audience would probably have understood בני-אמי. This conclusion also makes it highly likely that such an audience would have been keenly interested in the identity of the father. We will later see that the text amply satisfied that interest. But this social setting also explains the references by the young woman to “my mother’s house” (3:4; 8:2), a feature regarded as curious by interpreters.<sup>26</sup> This is simply a reflection of the separate houses polygamous husband provided for each of their wives (and concubines). Nor is there any reason to suppose that the mother’s husband is deceased.<sup>27</sup>

### Her Brothers and the Vineyards in 1:5–6 and 8:8–12

To learn more about the woman it is helpful to consider three features of the text. First, there is the troubled relationship she had with her brothers, unusually perhaps, as they were full brothers. In v. 6 the female speaker next observes that her “mother’s sons” נהרר-בי. This is usually translated as “were angry with me.” It is generally regarded as a Niphal of הרר or possibly הרה, meaning “burn, be angry with,” with the Niphal participle of הרה appearing in this sense in Isa 41:11 and 45:24.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation would suggest that the young woman had done something that made her brothers extremely angry; it would not convey that she responded to their anger. Yet the LXX has ἐμαχέσσαντο ἐν ἐμοί and the Latin *pugnauerunt contra me*, meaning “they fought with/against me,” a very different interpretation that indicates an active role for the woman in a

<sup>26</sup> For example, Brenner 1985: 54.

<sup>27</sup> As postulated by Horine (2001: 148).

<sup>28</sup> Pope 1977: 323; Murphy 1990: 126; Exum 2005: 105.

conflict of some sort. Commentators often ignore this Septuagintal and Vulgate rendering which was inexplicable until recently but can now be explained as an Aramaic loan-word rendered into a Niphal form. The Aramaic legal papyri have revealed the existence of the noun חרר, meaning “contestation” or “dispute” (Sokoloff 2003: 50). But it also appears with this meaning in two Hebrew leases from Naḥal Ḥever (P.Yadin 45, line 27; P.Yadin 46, line 10).<sup>29</sup> The basis for the Septuagintal and Vulgate renderings is now apparent and that interpretation is to be preferred. The reason for the conflict was that the woman either refused to look after the family’s vineyards, including her own, or did so ineffectively.

Secondly, it is necessary to sharpen our focus on the fact that this is a family that possesses vineyards. For an ancient audience their possession would have immediately marked out this family as wealthy, either members of the elite or highly placed retainers of the elite, and that would have affected how they interpreted her. Just how wealthy is the family emerges toward the end of the text, in 8:11–12:

Solomon owned (היה לשלמה) a vineyard at Baal-Hamon.  
 He let (נתן) the vineyard tenants (לנטרים).  
 Each one was to bring for its fruit one thousand pieces of silver.  
 My vineyard is for my very self (שלי לפני),  
 The thousand is for you, Solomon,  
 And two hundred for the keepers of the fruit.

That the transactions in view in 8:11–12 are leases of parts of a larger vineyard for an annual rental of one thousand pieces of silver (and not, say, a sale for that amount) is shown by the expression “its fruit.” Reading the Song of Songs as a unified composition strongly suggests that these vineyards are to be identified with those mentioned in 1:6. This passage follows one in which the young woman’s brothers disparagingly comment on their flat-chested “little sister” and ask what they will do for her when she marries, and she defiantly responds (8:8–10). In other words, in both 1:5–6 and 8:8–12 the poet connects tension revolving around the young woman, her brothers and vineyards. This produces a very emphatic *inclusio* in the work. Moreover, her behaviour as described in 1:6, “My own vineyard I have not kept,” is replicated in 8:12 in her employment of other keepers for her vineyard.

The social reality of what is described in 8:11–12 must be stressed. This was the sort of thing ancient rulers, in this case Solomon, did with their property. There is, indeed, a remarkably close parallel in three legal papyri written in Hebrew

<sup>29</sup> For the texts and translations, see Yadin et al. 2002: 39–70.

(P.Yadin 44, 45 and 46)<sup>30</sup> that survive from the same cave in Naḥal Ḥever where the Babatha archive was found. These relate to a lease to four Judeans over agricultural land in En-Gedi made by Bar Kokha (acting as owner) in the third year of his revolt, with the rental payable in money. By taking this step Bar Kokhba obtained valuable income, ensured that the property in question was properly tended and rewarded significant followers, who would have expected to achieve a surplus from the land after they had paid him the rent. An ancient audience would have assumed a similar rationale lay behind Solomon's action in Song of Songs 8:11–12. In addition, however, the large rental charged by Solomon per portion must be noted. In Isa 7:23, although there is no direct connection to this text, a thousand shekels of silver are the price of one thousand vines. In modern Israel vineyards contain about 2,220 vines per hectare.<sup>31</sup> Few, if any, peasant families would have had one thousand pieces of silver, so this high rental indicates that the tenants mentioned in 8:11 would have been understood to be members of Solomon's court, that is, part of the Jerusalem elite, most probably his relatives but perhaps also senior army officers.

Apart from this leasing arrangement, other aspects of the actual operations of an ancient monarchy and its court that appear in poem and form part of its imagined actual setting include the existence of a sizeable army—as shown by Solomon's arrival in a palanquin escorted by sixty of warriors of Israel in 3:7–8 and the presence in Jerusalem of a tower (said to be of David) on which hang 1,000 warriors' shields in 4:4—and a group of night-watchmen in the city (3:3; 5:7).

The third relevant matter related to the vineyard is the circumstance that nearly all commentators consider that the references to the woman's vineyard in 1:6 and 8:12 are figurative; that is, the vineyard is viewed as a reference to herself or perhaps her virginity. This is deemed so self-evident that little in the way of proof seems required. Thus, Michael Fox observes (1985: 102) in relation to 1:6:

Here “vineyards” means actual vineyards, while “my vineyard” (with the emphasized possessive) must be interpreted figuratively, for we are hardly to suppose that the girl owned her own vineyard or that she would complain in this context about a financial loss that her brothers caused her.

Yet this is inexplicable, given that she did indeed own (well, lease) a vineyard (8:12) and that there is nothing in the text to suggest she makes the complaint

30 See footnote 61.

31 <https://winesisrael.com/en/150/israeli-viticulture/> (accessed 11 September 2025).

Fox attributes to her. Pope begins his treatment (1990: 323–324) by saying “The sexual symbolism of terms like ‘vineyard,’ ‘orchard,’ ‘field’ is well established.” He then adds, “The plowing and cultivation of a field is a natural figure for sexual intercourse and doubtless has some association with the custom of ritual copulation on freshly plowed fields in order to ensure or encourage fertility.” But the figurative meaning for “vineyard” known elsewhere cannot, without more, simply be imputed to the word here. On the other hand, a number of considerations weigh against the word having a metaphorical meaning.

The first argument is that interpreting “vineyard” metaphorically is in conflict with the poet’s pattern of leaving no doubt when he or she is employing a metaphor, of his or her being overt in their use (even though in this case the word, like the certain metaphors, is one which could not be literally applied to her). Secondly, it requires the intrusion of a metaphor in a narrative passage. Thirdly, a metaphorical meaning would necessitate a sudden and unmarked transition from what can only be the literal significance of the previous two clauses: “My mother’s sons fought with me; they appointed me guardian of the vineyards.” Marvin Pope, at least recognising the need for “vineyard” to carry the same meaning in both clauses, offers the desperate suggestion that “If the brothers made her a guardian of chastity, she did not protect her own” (1977: 326). But the notion that a young woman could be the guardian of chastity (in Jerusalem, presumably) makes no sense, either literally or figuratively, while this also leaves the conflict unaccounted for. In 1857 Christian Ginsburg made a rather similar observation on this very point:

But it is a hazardous mode of interpretation to take an expression in the same verse in an *ordinary* and in an *extraordinary* sense, which ought never to be done unless required by absolute necessity, which is not the case here (1857: 134; italics original).

We might rephrase this to say that it would be extremely odd to interpret the same word in the same verse first literally and then metaphorically. Thirdly, the statement that she did not look after her own vineyard contributes to the development of her character: she has a will of her own and prefers her priorities to those of others and will breach social convention if she chooses. Thus, she fights with her brothers (1:6), roams the streets of Jerusalem at night (3:3; 5:7) and mocks her brothers’ assessment of her looks (8:10). Fourthly, the reference to her paying Solomon 1000 silver pieces for the lease of her vineyard and a further 200 to guardians of its fruit is embedded in political, economic and social realities in a detailed way that is only consistent with its literal truth. What metaphorical meaning can sensibly be attached to such features? Fifthly,

the fact that she hired someone else to guard her vineyard's fruit is consistent with what she says earlier: she herself did not want the job of guarding the vineyard. Her priorities lay elsewhere—in the pursuit of love. She is presented as being a person of independent mind at both the start and the end of the poem.

Accordingly, we conclude that the vineyard the woman possesses is meant to be understood literally. The way she deals with it tells us much about her character and high position within the actual setting imagined in this poem—Jerusalem and the royal court in the time of Solomon.

Thus, we now know that the woman is a member of a polygamous family and that she and her brothers are so wealthy, as shown by their leasing royal vineyards at a huge annual rent, as to be members of the Jerusalem elite. Who then is their father? A good case can be made for his being Solomon.

### Solomon's Wives and Concubines (6:8–10)

The critical text is 6:8–10.

- 6:8 There are sixty queens  
and eighty concubines  
and young women (עלמות) without number.
- 6:9 One is (אחת היא) my dove, my perfect one.  
One is she (אחת היא) to her mother.  
Pure is she to her who bore her.  
The daughters (בנות) saw her  
and called her happy,  
the queens and the concubines praised her.
- 6:10 "Who is this who looks out like the dawn,  
beautiful as the moon,  
pure as the sun,  
awesome as banners for war?"

In line with the tendency among interpreters to find metaphors everywhere in the poem, most commentators staunchly refuse to recognise here a reference to the court. Murphy states (1990: 178) that "The woman is contrasted with the royal harem, which can be explained from the king fiction which appears elsewhere in the Song (cf. 1:4, 12.)." In relation to Song 6:8, Fox asserts (1985: 152) that "The verse does not refer to any particular group of women, such as Solomon's wives and concubines." Exum proffers the view that just as she imagined him as a king in 1:4, now he imagines her in a courtly setting (2005: 221).

Yet this is a poem which, as we have seen, has several references to actual elements in Solomon's court: the king himself, his practice of leasing vineyards to the elite, his numerous army, a tower festooned with shields, and the Jerusalem night watch. In Israelite tradition he was known to have a harem of wives and concubines, specifically the 700 wives and 300 concubines mentioned in 1 Kings 11:3. Why should they not be the reference here, especially when the numbers, of eighty and sixty, have been reduced to a more realistic level?

The chiastic arrangement and details of the text require noting:

- A. (Sixty) queens and (eighty) concubines
- B. Young women (עלמות) (without number)
- C. The perfect and pure woman.
- B. The daughters (בנות) bless her.
- A. The queens and concubines praise her.

It is apparent from this that the עלמות, meaning women, usually young women, who have reached sexual maturity (Exum 2005: 95), are to be identified with the בנות, daughters. An ancient audience would surely imagine 140 women producing a large number of sons and daughters. Here the focus is on the daughters produced by the queens and concubines and they are described as being "without number" (אין מספר). The social reality of these young women as *daughters* of the queens and concubines is regularly obscured by translating בנות as "young women," "maidens" or "girls." This can be seen in versions such as the RSV, NRSV, JB and GNB and in the commentaries by Pope, Fox, Murphy, Exum and Garrett, to name only a sample.

What makes this grievous mistranslation—and the failure to take the social context evident in the poem seriously that it reflects—all the more notable is that elsewhere the text specifically refers to the expected two groups, of sons and of daughters. This occurs in 2:2–3:

*The Man*

- 2. Like a lily among the brambles,  
so is my companion among the daughters (הבנות).

*The Woman*

- 3. Like an apple tree among the trees of a wood,  
so is my love among the sons (הבנים).

Here it is usual to translate *הבנות*, literally, “the daughters,” as “women,” or “girls,” and *הבנים*, literally, “the sons,” as “men.” In support of such translations three cases are cited from the Hebrew Bible where “daughters” (all without the article) do seem to mean “women” (Gen 30:13; Isa 32:9; Prov 31:29). According to Poper (1977: 372), instances of “sons” equalling “men” are even rarer (Prov 7:7). I have just argued that in the imagined setting of poem, the Jerusalem of Solomon and his court, there were a significant number of young men and young women who were his children. They would have been understood as forming recognisable groups in the city because of two factors, first, the sheer fact of enjoying fatherhood from the king and, secondly, the elite status and wealth that flowed to his children. Now we learn that the poem itself recognises precisely these two groups and attaches to them just the names we would expect, “the sons” and “the daughters,” each with the article, without any specification such as “of Solomon” or “of the king” since it would be otiose.

We also learn from 6:8–9 that the female subject of the poem, elsewhere called the Shulammite, is one of those daughters. Whereas v. 8 ends with the words, “without number” (*אין מספר*), v. 9 begins, “One is (*אחת היא*) my dove,” so that “one” (*אחת*) comes immediately after “number” (*מספר*). This collocation compels the conclusion that the “one” forms part of the number. The numerous commentators who resist this conclusion and want to distinguish this woman from the others, to say she is contrasted with the royal harem,<sup>32</sup> are forced to translate *אחת* as something like “unique”<sup>33</sup> or “utterly distinctive.” But this meaning of the word is not listed in standard dictionaries.<sup>34</sup> On my approach, the next phrase, which uses the same Hebrew expression and which literally states “one is she to her mother” (*אחת היא לאמה*), indicates she was her mother’s only daughter (as in the AV and NEB), in spite of the many commentators who wish to introduce the meaning “unique” here as well. But even if we were to translate “unique,” it would mean unique among the large number of young women, not in contrast to them. The translation “a special one” would probably fit both instances here: she is special among the larger group and special to her mother.

Other evidence supports this identification. That this is a very wealthy family, with leases over royal vineyards, is closely consonant with Solomonic fatherhood. So too is the young woman’s residence, presumably owned by her mother, which has windows and lattices (2:9). The only other two places in the Hebrew Bible with this combination are Judges 5:28 and Prov 7:6. In the former

32 For example, Murphy (1990: 178).

33 Murphy (1990: 174); Exum (2005: 211); Garrett (2004: 226).

34 Including Koelher and Baumgartner (1953) and Brown et al. (2001: 25–26).

the house belongs to Sisera, the army commander of Jabin king of Canaan. He is clearly of the elite. The other is the putative author of Proverbs, a member or retainer of the elite. The young woman is to be regarded as living in her mother's apartment in the royal palace. Thirdly, in 7:2 she is called בַּת־נָדִיב, an expression of considerable difficulty, but literally "daughter of nobility," so "a noble daughter" (Pope 1977: 615). Many commentators see this as figurative,<sup>35</sup> but why should it be, given the poet's failure to indicate that and the other signs he provides of her elite status. Fourthly, there is her description as "the Shulammitte" (הַשּׁוֹלֵמִית; 7:1 [2x]), coming just before her designation as noble. One of the three main interpretations of the word connects it with Solomon, in that it is a feminine form of his name (suggested by E. J. Goodspeed in 1934, but the idea is much older). Here it is not a name but a title,<sup>36</sup> yet not in the old view as "Solomon's wife" (Rowley 1939), but "Solomon's daughter." Fifthly, her father is never mentioned in precise terms. That makes sense if it was Solomon, since he would have been a distant figure with so many children and calling him "the king" would have been all that was needed. But if Solomon was not her father, the fact he is not mentioned is much harder to explain.

Thus, the court is not a field of imagery or metaphor in the poem. Instead, it is the social and political context taken up within the imaginative structure to provide the primary setting in relation to which the love story is played out, in a manner comparable to the way that an imagined Elizabethan London in the 1590s provides the setting for the love affair in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*.

## Conclusion

Let us return to 1:4. To my mind, just as 1 Enoch begins with a statement of the final victory of God over evil (1:4–9), so too the Song of Songs begins with a vignette that represents the culmination of the love between the young woman and her shepherd. The king invites his daughter (and she brings along her beloved) into his apartments where Solomon and an imagined audience celebrate the young man and thus sanction his union with the woman. The shared joy at the start of the text indicates official approval for their love, just as

<sup>35</sup> Murphy 1990: 181; Exum 2005: 233.

<sup>36</sup> On Shulammitte, see also Pope (1977: 596–597) and Rowley (1939). The other two possibilities are as a version of Shunammite, that is, from the town of Shunem, and as the epithet of a goddess, which comes from the context of cultic interpretation.

Solomon felt gladness of heart on the day of his own wedding, no doubt many years before (3:11).

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