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THE GREATEST SONG
Some Linguistic Considerations

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> *Catch us the foxes,*
> *the little foxes,*
> *that spoil the vineyards,*
> *for our vineyards are in blossom.* (2.15)

The above text is typical of the numerous bicola which occur throughout the "Song of Solomon", the *šyr ha-šŝîrîm,* but has a further value in that it illustrates a number of focal issues relevant to the interpretation of this remarkable work[1].

Reading through the 117 verses of the English rendering leads without difficulty to the recognition that we are reading overtly erotic literature which has very little to do with foxes damaging vineyards. If then the bicolon is a genuine part of the text, some interpretive key must be found that will facilitate its inclusion in the larger text.

The coherence of the text

But we have already raised a not insignificant issue which cannot be left unresolved if we are to proceed further: is this "Song" a single work, is it a disparate collection of independent songs brought together as simply representative of a literary genre, as we might produce a collection of war poems, without any suggestion that the collection has any time line running through it, or is it a collection of songs on an erotic theme, but selected by an editor to produce some measure of textual continuity? Is the Solomon-vineyard motif of 1.1-6 and 8.11-14 to be seen as establishing *inclusio*? And is 8.8-10 susceptible of incorporation into the text stream (perhaps through the "peace", *šalôm,* "Solomon", association of the final word)[2]?

There is no agreed answer to this question of textual coherence. It is everywhere agreed that the text may be divided readily into a number of songs

1 "This verse has always been recognised as enigmatic", R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs,* Fortress Press 1990, 141.
2 See below.

which exhibit some good measure of internal coherence, and whose boundaries can be identified with some confidence. However the actual number of such songs is disputed[1]. Since the text consists very largely of soliloquy and dialogue, with two speakers, one male and one female, the change of speaker offers at least a possible song boundary. But since we do have both soliloquy and dialogue, this indicator of boundary cannot of itself provide the objective evidence we need, and we are inevitably thrown back on a certain subjectivity in any attempt to identify the constituent pericopae, and hence the disagreement on the number of such pericopae.

If we return briefly to the bicolon with which we began it can be seen that it employs the 1st person plural: "Catch *us* the foxes..." but is surrounded by a cotext in the singular, the words of the male recited by the female (10b to 14) and the words of the female (10a and 16-17).[2] It is, therefore, possible to argue that the bicolon is an intrusion and should be excised, so bringing vv 14 and 16 back together again, or, alternatively, to insist that v 15 is part of the poem, that it is spoken by a ?female chorus, and that it can be interpreted in such a way as to make its contribution to the one poem clear.

There is a second and longer apparent intrusion (referred to above) in 8.8-10, arguably involving a *male* chorus, and incorporated into the main text because of the explicitly sexual language ("she has no breasts", "my breasts were like towers"). But it may well be that the reference to the girl as bringing (unexpectedly) *peace* to her lover directs us to another allusive feature of coherence, the name of "Solomon". He is named seven times, in 1.1, 5; 3.7, 9, 11; 8.11, 12, and there is mention of the girl being as comely "as Jerusalem", (*kîrûšalaim),* in 1.5; 2.7; 3.5; 5.8, 16; 8.4 to the "daughters of Jerusalem", and in 6.13 (Hebrew 7.1) to the *hapax,* "Shulammite" (*haššulammît*). H.H. Rowley imaginatively (and correctly?) renders the word "Solomoness"[3] rather than the more common dull assimilation to "Shunammite"[4]. This provides a very neat thread of coherence more apparent in the Hebrew text than in the English translations.

There is an elusive time line, adumbrated in 2.11-13 with four time indicators: the winter (rains) are over, the flowers have bloomed, pruning has begun, and the turtledove can be heard. And yet it is certain that these apparent indicators of "spring" are not to be taken woodenly as time indicators, but as a poetic setting for the yearning love of the couple: in modern terms, "spring is in the air".

However, ch 3 does initiate a time line sequence which starts and finishes with the girl in her bed, alone at the beginning, but with her beloved at the end. But that we are not to look for coherence in a consistent time line is made clear by 3.6-11 which inserts a quite unconnected sequence involving a very old text describing the wedding of Solomon to some foreign princess[5]. It seems very clear that the compiler of the Song has made use of an existing poem, and arguably has used it

1 From Falk's 31 to Exum's 6: see A. Brenner, *The Song of Songs,* JSOT 1989, 36.

2 Against which it might be argued that enallage is typical of the poetic genre. Note particularly the problem raised by the "we" of 1.4 which is partly responsible for the so-called "Shepherd Hypothesis", interpreting the Song as involving not two but three principal actors, the girl and her lover, and King Solomon, who has stolen her from him.

3 In fact Gerhard Maier (*Das Hohelied,* Brockhaus 1991) suggests that each of the sections of the Song may be related either to Solomon or to the Shulammite.

4 "The meaning of 'the Shulammite'", *American Journal of Semitic Languages,* 56 (1939) 84-91.

5 R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs,* Fortress Press 1990, 151.

as the centrepiece of his work. As we have noted, Solomon is named in the opening verse and in the closing colon, in 1.5 and three times in this central section, giving a strong suggestion that he is introduced as legitimation for the entire collection.

The search for coherence in a time line is probably unprofitable, as is a search for a geographical setting. In addition to Jerusalem, there is mention of Kedar (1.5), En-Gedi (1.14), Sharon (2.1), Lebanon (3.9; 4.8, 15; 5.15; 7.4), Gilead (4.1; 6.5), Amana, Senir and Hermon (4.8), Tirzah (6.4), Heshbon (7.4), the Gate of Bath-rabbim (7.4), Damascus (7.4), Carmel (7.5), Ba'al-hamon (8.10), as well as to "the city" (3.2,3 etc.), but none of these is designated as the locus for an unfolding drama of sexual love. The names are not without value, however, as they generally[1] map out an area of northern Israel[2], and this suggests a northern provenance.

The conclusion to this overview, then, is that the Song is a collection of songs on a common and generally erotic theme, legitimated by the naming of Solomon, skilfully welded together both by allusion and by the repetition of key vocabulary, but offering no narrative time line maintained through the work.

This conclusion is of some value in interpreting the text since on the one hand it enables us to interpret one part of the text by reference to another, but reminds us that such comparisons must be made with caution, any individual comparison being made the more reliable when it is made across songs which have close affinity of vocabulary and theme.

Interpreting words

We may now return to the bicolon from which we set out, with this principle in mind: we may interpret the words by reference to other parts of the Song, and with some confidence to those parts of the Song with which 2.15 shows an affinity.

The text of 2.15 appears to be intrusive[3]. Taken at face value it appears to be referring to vineyards and the common experience that foxes destroy vineyards. The Hebrew word for vineyard(s), *keramîm*, occurs in 1.6; 2.15; 7.12; 8.11, 12, and the word "vine" in 2.13; 6.11; 7.12. It is the first chapter that resolves the problem of the denotation and therefore of the connotation of *keramîm* in the Song. 1.5-6 represent the second section of the first love poem voiced by the woman, linked to the title by the word *Solomon,* and to the first part of the poem by the apparently epexegetical *daughters of Jerusalem.*

In fact both assumptions may be challenged: it is not clear that *šlmh* in v 5 is to be understood as Solomon, and it is not clear that the "maidens" of v 3 are the "daughters of Jerusalem" of v 5; these observations only hint at the difficulty of establishing any agreed understanding of the opening verses of the Song. However, the two suggested links are not entirely fanciful, and they do assist in producing a plausible and integrated understanding of the poem. The poem is, in fact, a soliloquy, yet paradoxically verbalised for dramatic effect in the presence of a moderating chorus which will provide a unifying feature at intervals in the Song.

The first stanza, then, is overt erotic poetry, in which the girl expresses her ardent longing for her lover, at the same time making clear that what is attractive to her in her lover is attractive also to many others. In particular he is profoundly

1 But En-Gedi is on the western shore of the Dead Sea.

2 G.A.F. Knight and F.W. Golka, *The Song of Songs and Jonah,* International Theological Commentary, Eerdmans 1988, 5.

3 Rufinus' translation of Origen's Latin commentary on the Song proceeded no further than this verse.

attractive to the maidens, the daughters of Jerusalem. But between her and them there is a notable difference: they are of the city, prosperous, classically light-skinned, while she is, perhaps, of the north (the suggested provenance of the Song[1]), poor, and dark-skinned through her labours in the fields. But there is a more important difference between them, a difference which can scarcely be expressed delicately in plain language, but which can be expressed in heavily coded language.

Here one is reminded of the Ethiopian code form *semm inna werq,* wax and gold[2]. The outward form is the wax, the concealed meaning is the gold. The gold may be concealed because it is indelicate, or because it is politically compromising. The genre had a brief revival in the years between the execution of the principal 1960 conspirator against Haile Sellassie and the 1974 overthrow of the Emperor. In the *tej bêts* (the cafés) of Addis Ababa, the toast was *Mengist, Mengistû,* "Government, *the* government", but the gold was concealed in the fact that the executed conspirator's name was Mengistu. In the same literary genre any mention of a "lion" and more particularly of *"the* lion" was understood as a reference to the Emperor.

In the Song we have a similar more-or-less consistent code, employed however not only for reasons of delicacy, but also so as to make what is being said so much the more coquettish, tantalising and provocative. In a remarkably condensed pair of statements the girl introduces both the fact of a (to the Jerusalemite) despised peasant open-air life and the delight of the opportunity for seduction not missed. She had been sent out to care for the vineyards, and this explained the healthy glow of her skin, her radiant beauty as perceived by her beloved, and it was precisely this that led to the "spoiling of the vineyard", the loss of her virginity. The terminology of viticulture: vine, vineyard, grape, clusters-of-the vine (7.8), wine itself (1.2, 4), is, in Semitic culture, and pre-eminently in the Song, redolent with feminine sexual reference to the female form, to her virginity, to her breasts, to her kisses.

Thus the disdainful maidens, the superior daughters of Jerusalem, are teased by this girl from Galilee, as she will tease her beloved and as he will tease her.

And now we may turn again to the foxes of 2.15 (which is another tease). Undeniably there is a temptation offered to exegetes to dwell on the denotation of the *šû'alîm:* are they foxes or are they jackals? There is an even more misleading temptation to refer to apparently similar denotations elsewhere in the Bible for clues to the identity of the foxes.[3] The fact is that for the purposes of the poem they are no more foxes than the vineyards are vineyards. In erotic imagery the vineyards represent the virginity of the northern girls and the foxes, the little foxes, are the young men who despoil them[4].

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1 See R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs,* Ktav[3] 1974, 25. Back in 1913, S.R. Driver had suggested that both internal linguistic evidence and the geographical allusions would indicate a northern origin for the Song. However there is no agreement on the point.

2 See D.N. Levine, *Wax and Gold,* University of Chicago Press 1965.

3 For example, the well-known designation by Jesus of Herod as "that fox". Any attempt to draw some parallel between the two texts, separated by centuries of language development and animal characterisation, must be strenuously resisted. It is a salutary fact that in contemporary Ethiopian folklore the *worm* is characterised as *strong* (consider the exegesis of Psalm 22.6!). There is simply no way of anticipating what connotative meanings might be assumed by a denotation over centuries of time.

4 But see Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise,* Almond Press, 1983, 240, and R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs,* Fortress Press 1990, 141.

The two boundaries of the poem are not seriously in dispute: note the *inclusio* reference to the lilies in 2.1 and 2.16. The continuity of the passage is now reasonably clear:

2.1 The girl speaks metaphorically of her beauty
2.2 Her beloved extends her metaphor
2.3-7 The girl expresses her longing for the beloved
2.8-14 Her longing is realised:
8-10a The girl describes his coming
10b-14 She recites his words to her
2.15 The chorus of girls from Jerusalem
2.16-17 The girl is content in the embrace of her lover.

V 15, then, is to be understood as spoken by the chorus of Jerusalem girls who in fact appear to be envying the girl her ecstasy: *their* vineyards are in bloom[1], *their* womanhood is as ready as hers, but where are the young men who are to satisfy *their* longing? "*You* catch them (a plural imperative) for us".

Meaning and significance

The interpretation of the text suggested above reinforces the view formed by any quick and uncritical reading that the Song represents a series of erotic poems, possibly originally composed as folk poems at widely differing times. These may well have been drawn together and given some measure of coherence at some later date through their ordering and vocabulary, but very particularly through several rhetorical devices broadly based on parallelism and mono-lexic repetition (foxes-foxes, vineyards-vineyards, beloved-beloved, myrrh-myrrh, drink-drink, and so on).

If we maintain E.D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance[2], it is possible to see why the Song was included in the Hebrew canon and what significance it might have for the reader today. Hirsch defines *significance* as "textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context beyond itself."[3] Thus employing Hirsch's terminology, the *meaning* of the text is in one sense secular, and not appropriate for inclusion in a sacred book. But the many possible *significances* of the poem may well cause that judgment to be modified.

The development of an infinitely variable number of significances is made possible in part by the inevitable process of developing lexical polysemy. An event occurs and time passes before the event is recorded. Already there is an unavoidable chronological interval (which might be measured in hours, when it may safely be disregarded, and centuries, when the nature of the linguistic changes which have taken place in the interval must be treated seriously). To use an entirely trivial example, Ann Arnott published (Hodder and Stoughton) a delicate and largely autobiographical work in 1957 with the title *The Brethren,* in which she repeatedly expressed her wish to "be gay". Forty years later her wish may be interpreted in a way impossible when it was first written.

1 "*Our* vineyards" can scarcely refer to "the vineyards" of the girl and her lover, but certainly could refer to those of the girls of Jerusalem: see Dennis Kinlaw, *Song of Songs,* in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* vol 5, Zondervan 1991, 1224.

2 See P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation,* SPCK, 1989, ch 2, "Semantics and Hermeneutics".

3 *The Aims of Interpretation,* University of Chicago Press 1976, 53.

In the case of the Song the gradual assimilation of its erotic terminology, and the parallel application of the love poem to the relationship between God and the people of Israel opened up the way to ever more radical and more comprehensive allegorisation to the point where it became almost impossible any longer to read the work as erotic poetry[1], and the reader actually saw the allegory without being in the least embarrassed by the underlying eroticism. This development took place amongst Jewish commentators in the early decades of the Christian era[2], opening up the way for a parallel Christian interpretation of the Song as a celebration of the love of Christ for the Church[3], an assimilation facilitated by New Testament imagery of the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19.7-9) and similar metaphors. These metaphors then determine not the singular *meaning* of the Song, which remains an erotic love song, but its multiple *significances.*

Indeed, the significances are determined by the relationship of the interpreter to the text, and thus to the context within which the interpreter must necessarily operate. Those who wrestled with the problem of church and synagogue, or with the psychological understanding of humanity, or with the authority of the institutionalised church would arrive at their individual identifications of the principals involved in the Song.

This is clearly true of the contemporary feminist movement[4], which has found significant comment to make on the Song as read by a feminist (although that is not to concede that such comment could be made only by a female commentator). The primary observation of the feminist here would arguably be of the girl's defiance of male (especially male kinsman) authority and the concomitant essential independent action of the woman in the song. Again, while there is reference (almost scornful reference) in the Song to brothers, there is no reference to a father. And while it is true that there are two songs extolling the beauty of the female figure, the classical *wasf*[5] there is also a parallel song extolling the beauty of the male figure, and this is unusual:

> Regardless of how we interpret the sequence of vv 9-16, the passage in vv 10-16 is most remarkable. This is one of the few poems that has come down to us from the ancient world in which the female gives an inventory of the male's features. Obviously it is her response to his description of her in 4.1-7.[6]

It is this observation that suggests and supports the idea that in fact the Song is the work of a female editor: it is certainly notable that almost 80% of the text in the central section of the Song originates with the woman, and that in all those passages which can be attributed with some confidence to either the principal male or female some 57% of the text comes from the woman and 43% from the man.[7]

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1 See especially A. Brenner, *The Song of Songs*, JSOT 1989, 68-70.

2 See Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Fortress Press 1990, "Early Jewish Interpretations of the Song and the Emergence of Christian Allegorical Exposition", 12.

3 Or church and synagogue, or Christ and Mary = Church, or God and the human soul. See A. Brenner, *ibid.*

4 See especially A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Sheffield: JSOT 1993.

5 Marcia Falk, "The *wasf*" in A. Brenner, *A Feminist Companion*, 225-233.

6 Dennis Kinlaw, "Song of Songs" in F.E. Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol 5, Zondervan 1991, 1233.

7 Whose adulation of the female figure provides the major element.

If it is not possible to give a singular answer to the question "What is the significance (*meaning for today*) of the Song?" it is possible to offer a suggestion as to what its significance might be for many Christians today.

We may begin from the *meaning* of the Song: a glorious, free, uninhibited, honest celebration of the wonder of sexuality. For that is clearly what the original poems were, and that is what the editor took them to be. The editor also recognised that the composition was "advanced" and open to objection, and submitted to contemporary views of sexuality so far as to introduce a certain coding into the text.

For too long, first Jewish commentators and then Christian commentators found it impossible to conceive of an inspired text that dealt with erotic love, and developed the allegory as an alternative interpretive tool. As a consequence it became almost impossible to read the text as anything but an allegory. Diachronically the lexical polysemy had increased to the point at which allegory was irresistible. But time has continued to pass, and we are now at a point where we can both see the original meaning of the text and can be convinced of the error of the allegorical approach. And so we may advance one further step into the present.[1]

Having now in some measure decoded the text, the significance seems to be that the authenticating Spirit has allowed this unique text into the canon of Scripture to assure the Christian lover that the ecstasy found in the mental and physical uniting of two bodies, male and female, carries the sanction of God[2].

Translation issues

The text actually poses the problem always posed by poetry: how to convey in a second language what is conveyed in the source language through connotations and assonances which are simply unavailable in the receptor language[3]. In other words how are we to represent foxes and vineyards in, say, the English language in such a way that the reader will perceive the intended sexual imagery and not be led away into enquiring about the denotation of foxes or jackals, or asking how, in fact, foxes can possibly spoil vineyards.

There can be only two answers to what is almost a rhetorical question. The first is to dissolve the metaphors and abandon the assonances, to set aside the parallelisms, accepting the attendant loss of poetic force, and using such insights as can, with reasonable confidence, be gained as to the "gold" underlying the "wax" of the text. In this way some measure of continuity can be retained between the original text and its translation. The alternative is to seek in the receptor language parallel figures of speech, similar metaphors, and even corresponding assonances and parallelisms, to match the superb text of a unique and remarkable Hebrew poem.

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1 Though time will continue to pass and bring new significances which at present could not be perceived.

2 Although for those who would attempt to find similar sanction for the uniting of two bodies male and male or female and female, the Song offers no support.

3 Cf 4.2, *"šeccullam*...has its twin and *šecculah* is alone." I owe this particular example to Professor Albrektson's unpublished paper, "Singing or Pruning?", an edited version of which appears in this issue, pp 109-114.

Appendix

The problem of 8.8-10: a suggestion

We have a little sister,
and she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for?

If she is a wall
we will build upon her a battlement of silver;
but if she is a door
we will enclose her with boards of cedar.

I was a wall
and my breasts were like towers;
Then I was in his eyes
as one who brings peace.

The poem has three stanzas, the first stanza posing a problem, the second stanza proposing an answer, and the third stanza rejecting both the problem and the proposed answer. The first and second stanzas are best understood as spoken by the girl's condescending brothers[1], the third stanza as the triumphant and dismissive exultation of the girl herself. It clearly fits the strategy of the editor of the Song, which is brazenly to glorify the sexual experience, and in doing so to expose the hypocrisy and pretensions of men.

Her brothers speak pityingly and condescendingly of this "little sister" and their duty towards her when eventually she is mature enough to be "asked for". The two metaphors of wall and door are certainly perplexing, and no less perplexing is the suggestion of building battlements on the wall or of enclosing the door with cedar. But the girl's derisive response takes up the metaphor of the wall and develops it: her breasts (which they imagine not yet to have developed) are in fact like towers to ornament the wall they think to build. If the speech of the brothers is intended to describe the steps they will take to defend her virginity[2], there is nothing of that in her response: on the contrary she flaunts her sexual maturity and glories in the fact that her lover has already found on that wall and those towers the *šalôm* that he sought.

It is worth noting that the metaphor she uses: "my breasts were like towers", develops the metaphor already employed in the poem by her brothers: "If she is a wall". But no attempt has been made by the editor to assimilate the metaphor to that used earlier in the Song: "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (4.5 and 6.3)[3]. This is a further argument in support of the suggestion that the Song is a collection of independent poems, carefully arranged so as to present some measure of coherence, but without any attempt to force the constituent parts into a more formal narrative whole.

1 George Knight (*The Song of Songs and Jonah*, 43) supposes that the "we" is the girl and her "husband", but the very terminology of this suggestion is far removed from the earthiness of the poem.

2 Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 198-9

3 In both places it is the girl's *neck* that is depicted as a tower.