

Who or What is מְהַמְדִּים in the Song of Songs 5:16?

This is a response to an article, claiming that Song of Songs 5:16 prophesied the coming of Muhammed by name.¹

At the point at which he begins to examine the text of Song of Songs 5:16, the author of the article takes issue with a Christian apologist, James White, remarking,

“It is obvious that James White has little or no familiarity in Hebrew or in any other Semitic languages. Anyone with has proficiency (sic) in Semitic language (sic) must recognize that etymologically, there is no so called adjective in Arabic or in Hebrew. In semitic thinking the quality of a noun is described by another noun — either concrete (sic) or abstract.”

Etymology (which is the study of the derivation and ‘true’ (ἔτυμος, etymos) root meaning of words), in fact, has nothing at all to do with this issue, which is about Hebrew grammar, plain and simple. That aside, the fact is that, Hebrew, while it does frequently make use of a qualifying noun in the absolute state following a noun in the construct state, in order to convey an adjectival idea, *does* have adjectives, which, *unlike the absolute nouns in a construct+absolute noun sequence just referred-to*, inflect for gender and number to agree with the noun they qualify. (A cursory glance across the pages of any elementary Hebrew grammar will quickly establish that fact). Whatever may be the state of James White's familiarity with Hebrew (and I have nothing on which to base a judgment of that), the author of this bloggingtheology.net article is himself decidedly less ‘proficient’ in Hebrew than, it would appear, he wishes his presumed readers to think he is! The use of high-sounding language and the somewhat supercilious, declamatory tone adopted in the article, and the recourse to a show of Hebrew, are clearly calculated to impress the gullible and easily-impressed, but the author, in fact, betrays a woeful lack of a proper, working knowledge of the Hebrew language. “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing” - is the saying which comes to mind on reading the article!

But these things aside, let us come to consider the text before us.

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Part One: “Muhammed” in Song of Songs 5:16?

The verse reads in Hebrew,

(hikkô mam^êtaqqîm w^êkillô mah^âmaddîm)
(zeh dôdî w^êzeh rê^{’î} b^ênô^ty^êrûšālāim)

חָבוּ מִמְתַּקִּים וְכֹלֵי מְהַמְדִּים
זֶה דּוֹדִי וְזֶה רֵעִי בְנֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם

His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether **desirable**.

This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (*RSV*)

In his table analysing the verse, the author prejudicially translates מְהַמְדִּים, (mah^âmaddîm) as “a precious **man**”. The word is plural in form and means, literally, “lovelinesses” or “desirablenesses”, and in the context of this verse it functions unequivocally in an adjectival sense. The use of the plural *form* here is idiomatic in Hebrew (but not in English!) and in *function* it serves to express the intensive idea of “loveliness in its ultimate expression”.

The author supposes that

¹ Accessed at <http://bloggingtheology.net/2015/12/12/song-of-songs-516-prophesied-prophet->

. . . the word מְחַמְּדִים *Machamad-dîm* must denote (sic) something *not* just an ordinary noun, it must refer something of godly and holy qualities. What more interesting is out of 12 variations from the Hebrew root-verb חָמַד (*hammed*) taking this *majestic plural* form, exists only one occurrence throughout the Bible.

In fact, it no more necessarily denotes here “something of godly and holy qualities” than do the plural forms of the same in Joel 4:5 and Lamentations 1:7. It is here used as an *intensive plural*, rather than an ‘honorific’ or “majestic plural”, as the author describes it. As Franz Delitzsch put it,

*The plural tantum מְחַמְּדִים and מְחַמְּדִים designate what they mention in its richest fulness. His palate, i.e., that which he speaks and the manner in which he speaks it, is true sweetness . . . and his whole being true loveliness.*²

The difficulty of rendering the idiomatic Hebrew plurals, מְחַמְּדִים (*mamtaqqîm*) and מְחַמְּדִים (*mah^amaddîm*), in the verse into idiomatic English, and the recognition of their clearly adjectival significance, explains the variant English versions the author cites.

- The *NIV* and *NLT* render מְחַמְּדִים (*mamtaqqîm*) idiomatically with a noun used, as any native English speaker would immediately recognise, with adjectival force (“ . . . is sweetness itself” = “is utterly sweet”);
- the *KJB* and *JPS* render it equally idiomatically with a superlative adjective (“most sweet”), conveying *exactly the same essential meaning* as the *NIV* and *NLT*.
- The *NIV*, *KJB* and *JPS* render מְחַמְּדִים (*mah^amaddîm*) idiomatically as “altogether lovely”;
- The *NLT* renders it equally idiomatically as “desirable in every way”, which again *corresponds in meaning or sense* with the other versions cited. (As the author himself notes, the root חָמַד (*hmd*) may be translated by ‘precious’ or ‘desirable’. It is the *meaning*, rather than the precise word used, which is important in translating, and ‘lovely’ or ‘pleasant’ convey the same essential meaning in English).

He opposes this text and Isaiah 53:2, writing,

Most strikingly this particular form could not refer to a figure whom Christians (sic) refer to Jesus because he was mentioned in Isaiah as a man *whom* (sic) would *not* be desired לֹא נְחַמְּדֵהוּ *lo nehmadê-hû* (Isaiah 53:2).

Here we see at work a completely misguided approach to Scripture, one which is strikingly akin to that adopted by some sufferers from Asperger's Syndrome in interpreting statements in communications — and which often, sadly, leads to quite disastrous errors in their comprehension of what was meant. It is an approach which concentrates on the barest, literal sense of words, to the exclusion of **meaning** and **context**. Asperger's sufferers often make no allowance for how words are used in normal human language, where the play of irony or metaphorical speech nuances meaning; everything in their speech- or text-world is taken with wooden literalism (i.e., literalistically). Context, for them, contributes nothing to meaning. (This difference in fundamental approach to interpretation reflects the radically different concepts of Scriptural revelation in Islam and Christianity, which I have dealt with elsewhere). The same semantic root, חָמַד,

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. VI, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, by F. Delitzsch, ETr. James Martin, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, repr. Sep. 1975, *Commentary on the Song of Songs & Ecclesiastes*, p. 107.

ḥmd, is certainly present both in Song of Songs 5:16 and in Isaiah 53:2 - but in **entirely different contexts**. In the former, it is used in the context of the description of the Beloved *from the viewpoint of the one who loves him*; in the latter, it is used in the context of the description of the Servant *from the viewpoint of those who are (culpably) unreceptive to him* when he comes among them (cf. John 1:11). To see these verses as contradictories, therefore, is plainly ludicrous to anyone who is even remotely conscious of the context of each of them.

Contrary to the author's strange assertion (repeated in bullet points 2 and 3), in Christian interpretation, Song of Songs 5:16 does *not* suppose that the passage is about *an adjective*! It is about "My beloved" (5:1, 5:16b), who is described (adjectivally! - alongside all the other descriptions of him in 5:10–15) here in 5:16 as being “altogether lovely”, “lovely in every way”, “utterly lovely”.

While one can see how they would appeal to his presumed readership, the arguments the author adduces from Song of Songs 5:10-11 and 15 we judge to be entirely tendentious. Thus,

- Solomon, to whom the Song is addressed and/or concerning whom it speaks (1:1 - see discussion in Part 2), being unquestionably a Middle-Easterner, may be presumed to have been of Middle-Eastern appearance, and so fitting the description given him, “of light skin and with black and wavy hair”. Why should we need to look further?
- The reference to his being גִּילָד מֵרִבְּבָה (gūlād mērē^ebābāh), “distinguished among ten thousand”, refers to his surpassing all others (myriads) in excellence in the eyes of his beloved — not to his leadership of an army of ten thousand men. While it notes that he possessed horsemen and chariots (1 Kings. 4:26), the Old Testament never speaks of Solomon as being at the head of an army. He inherited a kingdom and empire ‘at rest’ from all its enemies (2 Sam 7:1 (David), see also 1 Kings 4:21, 24-25, 5:3-4) and, as his very name, שְׁלֹמֹה (šēlōmōh), prophetically indicated, he was a man of “peace” (שְׁלוֹם, šālôm).
- His comparison for strength to the lofty mountains and cedars of Lebanon (Song of Songs 5:15b) reflects Solomon's effective overlordship of that imposing territory, with its magnificent cedar trees (cf. 1 Kings 5:13-14), with Hiram, King of Tyre being his underling, not equal. (See 1 Kings 5:1-18, 7:13-13, 9:10-14). The exotic scenery of Lebanon, with which Solomon and his bride were well-familiar, furnishes imagery throughout the Song (4:8, 11, 15, 5:16, 7:4). Such familiarity with the scenery of Lebanon would scarcely have been possible among Israelites outwith the time of Solomon, but is eminently appropriate in his days.

The bundle of non-sequiturs and illogicalities the author presents us with in his article, and the arbitrary identifications he makes with “Muhammed”, are padded by him with suggestions to the reader that “a very strong case” is being made, or that “very strong evidence” is being presented, when the opposite is, in fact, the case. It is simply a case of self-serving assertion after self-serving assertion.

The author's proposed Muslim translation of Song of Songs 5:16, “he is Muhammad in every way” makes no sense at all. If it were to be accepted as a true translation (which it is not, but just for the sake of argument), what would it mean? Can he be Muhammad by degrees? — or in part? — this way, or that way? Either he is Muhammad or he is not Muhammad! How can he be Muhammad “in

every way”? The qualification “in every way” itself demands that the word the author has rendered “Muhammad” be construed in an adjectival sense — as every competent Hebraist has recognised since long centuries ago, indeed millennia ago (to judge by the LXX), before ever the author’s present contention was dreamt up!

The LXX (Septuagint) Greek translators of the Old Testament (in c. 250 BC!) rendered the Hebrew of Song of Songs 5:16 into Greek very literally, i.e., into non-idiomatic Greek.

Φάρυγξ αὐτοῦ γλυκασμοὶ καὶ ὄλος ἐπιθυμία
His throat (is) sweetnesses and (he is) wholly desire.

They retain the literal sense of Hebrew מַמְתַּאֲקִים, (*mamtaqqîm*) “sweetnesses”, but מַה־מַּדְדִּים (*mah^amaddîm*) they render by a feminine singular noun, ἐπιθυμία, (*epithumia*), meaning “desire” or (by extension of thought) “an object of desire”. They clearly did not see it as conveying the meaning “a precious man”, or “a desirable man” —for which the masculine substantive adjective, ἐπιθυμητός, (*epithumētos*) was readily available to them, had they wished to use it! They evidently saw no reason at all to do so here.

This last point is the more telling, when it is realised that the LXX translators were not averse to using the distinctions of gender available to them in Greek in order to express their understanding of the *meaning* of particular verses. To take one celebrated example, in their translation of Genesis 3:15, words addressed by the LORD God to the serpent (Satan), in judgment on him after he had successfully tempted our first parents into sin.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

The word for “seed” in Hebrew (זֶרַע, *zera’*) has masculine grammatical gender, all nouns in Hebrew being either masculine or feminine. This means that the Hebrew text of line 3 is slightly ambiguous — the masculine pronoun, הוּא, (*hū’*) at the beginning of the line could mean “he” or “it”. In Greek, however, nouns have masculine, feminine or neuter grammatical gender, and the word for “seed” (σπέρμα, *sperma*) is a *neuter* noun. This made it possible for the LXX translators, had they so wished, to have rendered the pronoun at the beginning of the third line of the verse by a *neuter* pronoun (αὐτό, *auto*), preserving grammatical gender agreement with the neuter noun, σπέρμα (*sperma*), “seed”. But, in line with their understanding of the *meaning* of the passage (in the context of the Scriptures as a whole and in light of the unfolding revelation in the Old Testament of this first promise of the gospel), they broke grammatical gender agreement and rendered הוּא (*hū’*), by the *masculine* pronoun (αὐτός, *autos*), “he”. Since “seed” can mean an isolated singular (“a seed”) or a collective singular (“seed”), their use of the masculine singular pronoun rather than a plural pronoun, further gives clear expression to their understanding of the verse — the victory over Satan would be won, not by the whole posterity of the woman but by one single, male individual who should arise at some future time.

The LXX translators, in their translation of Song of Songs 5:16, evidently saw no reason to ‘interpret’ it in any way, shape or form along the lines proposed by the author of this bloggingtheology.net article.

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Part Two: Song of Songs 5:16, a description of Solomon

How then should Song of Songs 5:16 be understood, in a way which is sensitive to the whole context in which it occurs? The proper English translation of the verse we have already made clear, and it is perfectly adequately represented in the versions cited by the author of the article.

His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely.

This is my beloved, this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem. (*New International Version*)

His mouth is sweetness itself; he is desirable in every way.

Such, O women of Jerusalem, is my lover, my friend. (*New Living Translation*)

His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely.

This *is* my beloved, and this *is* my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (*King James Bible*)

His mouth is most sweet; Yea, he is altogether lovely.

This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (*JPS 1917*)

Of whom, then, is the author of the Song of Songs speaking here?

Consulting the immediate context, the person designated “my beloved” in 5:16 is clearly and plainly the same person as “my beloved” in 5:10, and, indeed, the same “beloved” who is mentioned frequently throughout the Song. To the impartial reader, this “beloved” is clearly Solomon, unless the mention of Solomon by name in 1:1, 3:7, 9, 11 and 8:11-12 is intended to scatter complete ‘red herrings’! In 1:4, at the beginning of the Song, the lover says “the king has brought me into his chambers”. In 1:12, “the king on his couch”, is presumably the same king just mentioned in 1:4, and is clearly one and the same as “my beloved” in 1:13. In 7:5 the Beloved says of himself, “a king is held captive in your tresses”, and he is clearly identified as “my beloved” in 7:10. The lover’s Beloved is the king, and in case we should be in any doubt which king is in view, in 3:9 and 11 he is named for us explicitly as “King Solomon”.

Wider questions inevitably press upon us, however — Who was the author? — How is the Song as a whole to be understood? — How can its place in the Canon of Sacred Scripture be accounted-for? In answering these questions, let us look more closely at the Song of Songs.

The opening words of the Song function clearly as a title, שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים (*šīr haššīrīm*), “The Song of Songs”, indicating the incomparable nature of its contents. But the following words of the opening verse, אֲשֶׁר לְיְשׁוּעָה (’*āšer liš^elōmōh*), are capable of a variety of meanings, depending on how the prefixed ל (*lāmed*) in the Hebrew text is understood. The possibilities are as follows:-

- “which **belongs to** Solomon”: denoting the **owner** of the Song.

That Solomon engaged in both writing and collecting literary works (in the form, for example, of proverbs and Wisdom sayings), we know from Proverbs 1:1, 10:1 and 25:1, but a note indicating who ‘owned’ the rights to the Song (before ever the idea of copyright was invented, of course!) or else in whose physical collection it was lodged, seems to be too trivial to deserve so prominent a place in the heading of the Song.

- “which is **by** Solomon” : denoting the **author** of the Song.

This is the possibility favoured by most commentators on the Song, but it seems to me that there are cogent, not to say, compelling, reasons for rejecting Solomon as author of the Song. The Hebrew text, unlike the English translation,

distinguishes between ‘you[r]’ masculine and ‘you[r]’ feminine), so that throughout the Song it is clear who is addressing whom, in a way which is not always apparent from the English translation. It is clear, thus, that the Song begins and ends with the lover or bride (the Shulammitte) speaking of, and to Solomon, her Beloved, rather than vice-versa (1:2-3, 8:14). She has the first words and the last words in the Song, which is not what we might expect, if he were the author of the Song.

Furthermore, while the Beloved is brought in speaking from time to time in the Song, it is his lover or bride who has the lion's share of the ‘dialogue’ - which consists of praise of the beauty and desirableness each of the other. If we measure it by *verses* in English versions (as *RSV*), the Shulammitte has half as much again to say of her Beloved, than Solomon has to say of her. If we measure it by the number of *lines of the Hebrew text* each speaks, as set out in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*,³ she has nearly double that of her Beloved, as the following table makes clear.

| verses | lines | The Shulammitte | Solomon | verses | lines |
|-----------|------------|------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 2 | 3 | 1:2-3 | 1:4a | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | 11 | 1:4b-7 | 1:8-11 | 4 | 6 |
| 3 | 3 | 1:12-14 | 1:15-2:2 | 5 | 5 |
| 26 | 54 | 2:3-3:11 | 4:1-15 | 15 | 29 |
| 1 | 2 | 4:16 | 5:1 | 1 | 3 |
| 16 | 33 | 5:2-8, [5:9], 5:10-16 [6:1], 6:2-3 | 6:4-10 | 7 | 13 |
| 3 | 4 | 6:11-12 [<i>13a</i>], 13b | 7:1-9 | 9 | 17 |
| 13 | 28 | 7:10-8:4, [8:5], 8:6-7, [8:8-9], 8:10-12 | 8:13 | 1 | 2 |
| 1 | 2 | 8:14 | | 0 | 0 |
| 69 | | Verses in English text (<i>RSV</i>) | | 43 | |
| | 140 | Lines in Hebrew Text (<i>BHS</i>) | | | 76 |

The verses listed in brackets and italics are spoken by the “daughters of Jerusalem”, the companions of the Shulammitte and have been omitted from the count.

(6:11-13 in the English versions [which are followed in all the references given here] is included in chapter 7 in *BHS*).

If Solomon, the Beloved, were the author, that he should spend twice as much space in his Song praising his own beauty and desirability than he spends in praise of his bride, would suggest he was, to say the least, unconscionably narcissistic! Could such a narcissist ever have wrested his self-satisfied gaze from himself long enough to have penned 4:1-15 or 7:1-9 in praise of another than himself? It seems to me highly unlikely.

- “which is **about** Solomon” : denoting the **subject** of the Song.

The possibility that the prefixed ב (*lāmed*) indicates the **subject** of the Song, deserves serious consideration. Prefixed ב (*lāmed*) attached to Solomon's name is found also as the heading to Psalm 72, which may, therefore, offer a parallel to the Song. The LXX translators headed this Psalm $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ $\Sigma\alpha\lambda\omega\mu\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (*eis Salōmōn*) —

³ Ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.

which carries the sense, “with regard/ reference to Solomon”. Comparison with the headings to the *Psalms of Solomon* in the Apocrypha, shows that they used εἰς (*eis*) . . . to indicate the subject matter of the Psalms, and the dative τῷ Σαλομοῶν (*tōi Salōmōn*) to denote authorship, “by Solomon”. The substance of Psalm 72 and the closing words of the Psalm, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended” (72:20), recall the “last words” of David in 2 Sam. 23:1-7, and in both passages the focus is on the covenant God made with David in 2 Sam. 7 through the prophet, Nathan, the covenant in which God promised to build an eternal ‘house’ for David, raising up his ‘seed’ after him who would reign forever. The Targum understood this Psalm to be about King Messiah, rendering the opening line, “O God, give Thy regulations of right to the King Messiah, מְשִׁיחָא לְמַלְכָּא (*l^emalkā’ m^eśīḥā’*)”. (We will return to a discussion of these matters, and how it relates to Solomon, later, in Part Three).

Taking לְשִׁלְמֹה (*liś^elōmōh*) this way, “about Solomon”, certainly makes better sense of the statistics we adduced above, but there is, to my mind, a perhaps compelling reason for setting it aside. It ignores the evident *mutuality* between the lovers in the Song, and would focus attention on just one partner in the relationship which is described in it. This would then represent a very one-sided account of the contents, given that approximately a third of the space in the Song is devoted to the praise of the Shulammitte. I would suggest, therefore, that while there is much “about Solomon” in the Song, this cannot be the intended force of אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמֹה (*‘šer liś^elōmōh*) in 1:1, or at least not the *main* intended force of it.

- ‘which is **for** Solomon’: denoting the **dedicatee** of the Song.

This is the sense which, it seems to me, by far and away makes best sense of the matter, enabling us to account for the predominance of space given to the praise of Solomon, while at the same time avoiding the charge of narcissism being laid at his door. At the same time, it does not relegate to insignificance the third of the space in the Song relating to the Shulammitte.

But then the question presses upon us, who might be the one making the dedication, and so the presumed author of the Song? The obvious answer is that the author is the Shulammitte. The lover in the Song is identified in 6:13 by the “daughters of Jerusalem” (her companions?) as הַשְּׁלֻמִית *haśšulamīth*, “the Shulammitte”. This, however, is not a proper noun or name, since proper nouns do not take the definite article in Hebrew (unlike in Greek), but refers to her in terms of her relationship or attachment to שְׁלֹמֹה *ś^elōmōh* (Solomon) — we might paraphrase it, ‘Solomon's girl’ or ‘Solomon’s intended’ (i.e. his bride)!

It is, to my mind, inconceivable, given the intimacy with which the two parties describe the relations between themselves in the Song, that some other, third party could have written it, and then given it to Solomon, and there is good reason beside for thinking that the Shulammitte was the author who dedicated it to her Beloved in the frontispiece.

Given that it is a celebration by her of their mutual love, the proportion of space given over to the praise of Solomon is just what we would expect. The third of the space in the Song which is devoted to his praise of her, if from her pen, is appropriately modest in comparison in terms of space, and expresses not narcissism on her part but her confident resting in his love for her, the wording perhaps echoing back to him the expressions of his love which he had made to her.

That she should be the author also corresponds with the use of the first person in the Song, which begins with her speaking. Thereafter, the first person referring to the Shulammitte, outnumbers the instances of the use of the first person with reference to Solomon by four to one. Her soliloquies furnish the setting for the much briefer sections in which Solomon speaks, which more naturally suggests that she is the overall author. The song was in all probability a literary wedding gift which she presented to him, either on their wedding day or else immediately thereafter. (He describes his loved one as his “bride” in 4:9, 12 and 5:1, but the wedding is mentioned in the past tense in 3:11, “. . . behold King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding. . .”).

Throughout the centuries, the frank and unashamed nature of the celebration of the physical aspects of the love relationship between the lover and the Beloved in the Song, has led some to question the appropriateness of its place among the Sacred Scriptures. This was the case among some of the rabbis at Jabneh (Jamnia) towards the end of the 1st century CE. It is worth pointing out that, as Delitzsch makes clear, what was in question among these particular rabbis was not, “whether . . . the Song of Songs should be admitted (i.e. to the Canon of Scripture), but whether (it) had been justly admitted, and whether the same sacred character should be ascribed to (it) as to the other holy writings.”⁴ The verdict of the rabbis at Jamnia on these two questions was unequivocally that (a) it had been, and (b) it should be! But the unmistakably erotic nature of the Song has led many to continue to call its appropriateness in question, with some not hesitating even to suggest that it is pornographic. I would counter that suggestion with two arguments.

The Song envisages a chaste and holy conjugal marriage relationship existing between the two parties, one in which the physical attraction between the lover and the Beloved is entirely pure and honourable. As R. K. Harrison notes, there is nothing in it that is lewd or obscene.⁵ (Cf. Heb. 13:4, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the conjugal bed undefiled”).

Moreover, there is, in fact, a discernible restraint in the Song at the very places where the descriptions of the lover's mounting desire and anticipation of its satisfaction reach a point at which to continue with them would result in the poem becoming voyeuristic, breaking the exclusivity and privacy of the marital relationship and so becoming pornographic. This restraint is seen at 2:7, 3:4 and at 8:4, in the enigmatic refrain which is introduced to interrupt the mounting, erotic description which immediately precedes it in each case — “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please.” This refrain represents, perhaps, an appeal by the Shulammitte to her companions not to allow her to get carried away in her description of her reverie beyond what it is fitting for her to speak of, and it serves, thus, to defuse the voluptuousness of the description before it becomes excessive. Supporting this interpretation of the function of these refrains, it is notable that in each instance the poem continues thereafter at a much-reduced level of intensity.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 14.

⁵ R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969, First British Edition, January 1970, p. 1058.

Simply as an example of chaste, conjugal love, a celebration of the physical aspect of the relationship existing between husband and wife, and the delight each should have in the other, as envisaged in the creation narrative (Gen. 2:18-25), the Song of Songs is worthy of its place in the Canon of Scripture, and should serve as a much-needed corrective to the gross-ness of the present age, in which nothing appears to be held sacred and prurience knows no bounds.

But from earliest times, Jewish and Christian interpreters alike have sensed that there is something more to the Song than simply a celebration of the mutual, physical attraction between the Shulammitte and Solomon and their desire, each for the other. How that “something more” is to be understood and defined, and how it relates to Solomon and the Shulammitte, we turn to consider in Part Three.

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Part Three: The Song of Songs in Salvation-Historical Perspective

The author of the article to which this is the third part of a response, begins his piece with a brief reference to Jewish and Christian interpretation(s) of the Song of Songs — citing the opinion of the Rabbis at Yabneh towards the end of the first century CE, and Richard Norris' summary of how Christian exegetes have interpreted the Song. He concludes,

Therefore it is clear that intellectual tradition in Judeo-christianity (sic) understood the context [content??] of Song of Songs, *not* about human love or human sexual desire but **rather as an allegory of the relationship between God and His special person or people.**

It would be more accurate to say that Jews and Christians have usually understood it as **not only** about human love or human sexual desire, **but also** as involving something more than this. In endeavouring to express what that “something more” is, however, interpreters — Jews and Christians alike — have, indeed, frequently resorted to allegorical interpretation. This method of interpretation views the biblical text as representing in coded form a reality which it supposes lies ‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ the world which the text literally describes. It endeavours, then, to find the supposed hidden meaning behind each detail of the text, and this results in quite arbitrary (and often divergent) conclusions as to what the text is *really* about — an approach not dissimilar to that which the author of the article being responded to here, calls for when he remarks,

. . . why can not the muslims allow their own understanding of the text? Why can't muslims read the Song of Songs befitting an allegory of God's love for someone really special, someone really who will glorify and exalt God in a manner like anyone has ever seen before which to Muslims **this can only refer to Prophet Muhammad (p)**, the last messenger of God . . .

Allegorical interpretation is, as much as anything, an exercise in sheer ingenuity and imagination, ascribing a transferred ‘spiritual’ significance to every part of the descriptions of the lover and her Beloved in the text. Jewish interpreters have generally seen it as representing the love between God and his people, Israel. Thus, the Targum sees it as depicting the history of Israel from the Exodus to the coming of the Messiah. Christian interpreters have seen it as picturing the love

between Christ and his church, interpreting the Song ‘backwards’, so-to-speak, from the New Testament as a representation of the love of Christ and the church.

Apart from the obvious subjectivity involved in this method of interpretation, it suffers from taking the Song in isolation from its historical setting and its place in the context of the unfolding salvation-historical revelation in the Old Testament Scriptures. It suffers also from the fact that, practically-speaking, it ascribes an equal level of significance to every line and word of the text, for every word and line may be supposed to have some hidden meaning in it waiting to be ‘unearthed’ by the ingenious (or inspired?) interpreter. This seems fundamentally unsatisfactory.

How then should the Song be interpreted? Is there an approach which avoids the arbitrariness and subjectivity of the allegorical method, and offers surer ground on which interpretation may proceed? I believe there is, and it is one which does not treat the Song of Songs as if it just fell ‘out of the blue’, in splendid isolation from its context in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Setting of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament

In order to understand the Song properly, we need first to have at least a basic understanding of the Old Testament, what it is and what it is about, and then we can begin to view the Song in its proper, canonical setting.

(1) The OT is, fundamentally, a love story

This love story begins in the opening chapters of Genesis, with **God** seeking to re-establish communion with our first parents, who, though made in his image, capable of personal fellowship with God, have now, in Genesis 3, fallen away from him in rebellious self-assertion and self-proclaimed autonomy. This love story, we should note, is emphatically *not* about **man** seeking God, but of **God** seeking man, saying, “Adam, where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). It is the story of **God's initiative, God's love, and God's actions**, with a view to restoring sinful, lost mankind to a true and saving, personal relationship with himself.

It is, however, a **long** story. From Abraham to Malachi the story unfolds over well-nigh two thousand years, in fact. (To make proper sense of it, we need to have some awareness of the ‘shape’ of the history involved, some sort of time-line on which to ‘hang’ the various persons and events of which it speaks. The lack of that basic framework hinders a lot of people in their understanding of the Old Testament. We need also to recognise the *progressive* nature of the Old Testament revelation by which God educated his people, and the particular *stage* to which certain books/ passages belong in that long, slow *process*, if we are to interpret and appraise them aright). Patiently, patiently, God began to reveal himself, his nature and his attributes, overcoming the ignorance and repeated waywardness of his people, disciplining them when they strayed from him, and gradually instructing them in the knowledge of himself, his ways and his purposes. So he prepared the way for the full disclosure of his love and grace (unmerited favour) in his sending into the world the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom and by whom God's gift of salvation was finally accomplished and made available to us.

(2) **The Old Testament is (part one of) the story of salvation history.**

It tells of how, after his judgment on the old world for its wickedness, and after the scattering of mankind because of human pride and arrogance at Babel, God savingly revealed himself firstly to one man, Abraham, calling him out of polytheism and idolatry. God established his covenant with Abraham, deigning to call himself "the God of Abraham" and calling Abraham his "friend". In due course, he made of Abraham's posterity through Isaac and Jacob a nation, the children of Israel, which he called to be **a people of God** in this world.

- He performed wonders for them, delivering them from slavery in Egypt, providing for them in the wilderness, and promising them a land in which to live as **his godly people**.
- Giving them his Law through Moses, he entered into a gracious covenant with them to be their God. This covenant looks back to his covenant with their forefather, Abraham, and foreshadows the New Covenant to come in the New Testament. He instructed them in how they should live as **a people in covenant with God**, in the midst of this fallen world and in contrast to the ungodliness of the nations around them.
- He instructed them in how he was to be worshipped and, anticipating Christ's sacrifice to come, how, being repentant, their sins might be covered and atoned-for before his face, for God revealed himself as being holy and righteous, as well as loving.
- He brought them into the land which he had promised to them, so that they might live in it in peace **as a godly people**.
- He raised up among them sages to teach them wisdom — instructing them in the prudent conduct of the practical affairs of their **daily living before God**, and also addressing the hard questions of life and death and of suffering in this world.
- He set judges to deliver them and administer justice among them and, in due course, kings to rule over them.
- When kings and people proved faithless and persisted in erring from his ways, through his servants, the prophets, he sent his words of reproof and judgment. Notwithstanding his punishments, however, in faithfulness to his covenant, he also gave through the prophets words of comfort to the believing ones among the people, assuring them of the enduring validity of his promise of a Saviour in the fulness of the times.
- In the Book of Psalms, he gave them hymns by which to celebrate his praise, and also, in face of the apparent eclipse of his covenant in the triumph of their enemies over them in the Fall of Jerusalem (587/6 BCE) and subsequent exile in Babylonia, he encouraged their faith in the inviolability of his promise of a Saviour who would yet arise from the house of David.
- In his covenant faithfulness, he brought his people back from Exile and settled them again in the land, in order that his purpose of bringing forth from among them **the Saviour in whom all families of the earth would be blessed**, might be accomplished in due course.

And all this variety of God's dealings with his people is reflected in the different kinds of books which make up the 'library', so-to-speak, of the Old Testament —

the Books of the Law (or divine Instruction), the historical books, the wisdom literature, the prophetic books, and the Psalms. In order properly to understand and appreciate the whole and the parts of the OT, we need patiently to understand how each of the various books 'fits' into the spectrum of these different kinds of revelation represented in it, and the place of the individual books in the historical unfolding of the story.

(3) **The Old Testament story ends still 'open to the future'**

It is full of expectation of God's decisive intervention, the culmination of salvation history, which it still awaits. In this way, it lays the foundations for the New Testament and the coming of Christ into the world. The Old Testament ends with the prophecy of Malachi (who prophesied c. 460 BCE). In response to the prevailing cynicism among the people of Israel in his day, who said derisively, "Where is the God of justice/judgment?" (Mal. 2:17), God replies through the prophet that he is indeed coming, and in preparation for that event he is sending his messenger before him.

"Behold, I send my messenger **to prepare the way before me**, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight; behold, he is coming," says the LORD of Hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming . . . ? (Mal. 3:1–2).⁶

Malachi ends his prophecy (and therewith the entire Old Testament) with the promise from God, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." (Mal. 5:5). Mark opens his Gospel with the heading, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" and then cites Mal. 3:1 and its fundamental in Is. 40:3, as he introduces the story of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, whom Jesus himself identifies later with the "Elijah who is to come". (Mark 9:11–13, Mt. 11:7–15. Cf. Mt. 3:1–12).

Practically every book of the New Testament interprets Jesus in the light of, as the fulfilment of, the Old Testament. Augustine of Hippo, in the fourth century CE, famously put it like this, *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet* — "The New is in the Old concealed: the Old is in the New revealed." The Old Testament looks forward to the New for its fulfilment; the New Testament looks back on the Old as being itself the fulfilment of what was held out in prospect there. For example,

- Matthew's Gospel begins by tracing the legal lineage of Jesus from **Abraham** and **David**, signalling at the outset that he comes as the fulfilment of the promises to these two key Old Testament figures. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Old Testament expectation. Matthew's account is interspersed with

⁶ These words echo the prophecy of Isaiah earlier about the voice crying in the wilderness, "**Prepare the way of the LORD**, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," (Is. 40:3). How literally that is to be understood, may be seen from Is. 40:9–10, where Zion is instructed, "Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him." The reference to the 'arm of the LORD' Isaiah is picked up again in Is. 52:10, "The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." The 'arm of the LORD' is the LORD's servant (Is. 52:13, cf. 42:1–9, 49:1–6). But when he comes, he is met with resistance and non-recognition — "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he shall grow up before him like a root out of a dry ground . . ." (Is. 53:1–2, cf. 11:1). The 'arm of the LORD' is the suffering Servant of Is. 52:13–53:12, the LORD's saving intervention in person, who entered the world and suffered for our sins, in order to redeem us and reconcile us to himself.

Old Testament quotations, introduced by formulae such as - "this was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet . . ." (1:22. 2:15, 17, 23, 8:17, 12:17, 15:7, 21:4). In this way, Matthew repeatedly invites us to see Jesus in the light of the Old Testament.

- In Luke's Gospel, the birth and infancy narratives of Jesus are full of Old Testament references, and Jesus begins and ends his ministry by declaring himself to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises and prophecies (Luke 4:16-21, 24:44-45).
- In John, Jesus says of the (Old Testament) Scriptures, "they bear witness to me" (5:39), and he declares of Moses, "he wrote of me" (5:46). Later, in 12:41, John says of Jesus, that the prophet Isaiah (who lived around 700 BC) "saw his glory and spoke of him".

How then does the Song of Songs fit into this Old Testament revelation, the story of salvation-history?

To answer that question, let us look at that story more closely from Adam up until the time of Solomon.

We have already seen (p. 4) how the first intimation of the good news of salvation to come was given immediately after our first parents fell under sin and the divine condemnation, with the promise of the "seed of the woman" who, at cost to himself, would "crush the serpent's head" (Genesis 3:15). This promise Adam and Eve were allowed only to overhear, in the words of condemnation the LORD God addressed to the serpent (Satan) - lest perhaps, had it been addressed to them directly, they should assume that sin was a slight matter, easily and readily remedied. We can trace the progress of the promise on through the book of Genesis in the promise of God to Abraham,

I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your seed shall possess the gate of **his** enemies, and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves [i.e. *count themselves blessed*]. (Gen. 22:17-18).⁷

In Genesis we see how Abraham's grandson, Jacob (who was also named Israel by God —Gen. 32:28), became the father of the heads of the tribes of the nation which God had promised to make of Abraham's posterity. Before it closes, Genesis indicates from which of these tribes the promised seed should come, the One through whom salvation — and hence blessing for all peoples — would come. In Gen. 49:8-10, the promise is given that from Judah, "Shiloh" ('the Restful One' or 'the Giver of Rest') would arise,

וְלֹ יִקְחֶהָ עַמִּים,
וְלֹ יִיֻצָּר מִיָּדוֹ, וְלֹ יִיֻצָּר מִיָּדוֹ,
w^elô yiqq^eḥat ammîm

“and to him the gathering/ willing obedience of the peoples will be(long).”

This prophecy of Jacob, uttered on his death-bed, is echoed by the Chronicler in 1 Chronicles 5:2, “. . . Judah became strong among his brothers and from him one is (to be) Leader (וְלֹ יִיֻצָּר מִיָּדוֹ, *ûl^enāgîd mimmennû*). . .”, and long centuries after Jacob, David referred this prophecy to himself, when he declared,

⁷ Paul, in Galatians 3:16, refers the promise to Christ as its fulfilment, on account of the *singular* possessive suffix, “his”: contrast the plural sense of ‘seed’ in e.g. Gen. 15:13, 16:10 and 17:7-9, where the third person *plural* form is used, referring to Abraham's descendants).

. . . the LORD God chose me from all my father's house to be king over Israel for ever; for he chose Judah as Leader (נָגִיד, *l'nāgîd*), and in the house of Judah my father's house, and among my father's sons he took pleasure in me to make me king over all Israel. (1 Chronicles 28:4).

In this, he was echoing God's words to him earlier through the prophet Nathan, recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8,

I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince (נָגִיד, *nāgîd*) over my people, Israel.

But the promise of Shiloh who was to arise from the tribe of Judah, remained then still a hope which was to be fulfilled at some time in the future, for the LORD goes on there to declare also to David,

I will give you rest (נָחָה, *wah^anihōtî*) from all your enemies. . . . When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom . . . I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever . . . your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever." (2 Sam. 7:11–16).

At one level, this finds a partial fulfilment in David's immediate son, Solomon, as David's charge to Solomon to build the temple makes clear. David there recalls God's word to him,

Behold, a son shall be born to you; he shall be a man of rest (יִשׁ מְנוּחָה, *'iš m^enūhāh*) and I will give him rest (נָחָה, *wah^anihōtî*) from all his enemies around about him, for his name shall be Solomon (שְׁלֹמֹה, *š^elōmōh*), and I will give peace (שָׁלוֹם, *šālōm*) and quiet to Israel in his days. He shall build a house for my name . . . Now, my son, the LORD be with you, so that you may succeed in building the house of the LORD your God, as he has spoken concerning you. (1 Chron. 22:9–11).

In this son of David, Solomon, David's plan to build a *physical* house for God would be realised (2 Sam. 7:13, cf. 1 Chron. 28:5–10). Because he himself had been a man of war and had spilled much blood, however, David was not to build a house for God, but Solomon, his peaceable son, should do so.

But the prophecy through Nathan here speaks of God raising up David's seed at a time after David's death — "*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you*". The prophecy would be fulfilled finally only through an individual of the seed of David who would arise in the future, and who would build a *spiritual* house for God. That 'house' is not a physical temple but the spiritual temple, the very people of God (cf. Hebrews 3:1-6; Eph. 2:13–22; 1 Peter 2:4–5), a people among whom God would dwell, and over whom great David's greater son would reign as King for ever.

"I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne for ever. I will be his father and he shall be my son . . . I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom for ever and his throne shall be established for ever." (1 Chron. 17:11-14).

David himself recognised that Nathan's prophecy in 2 Samuel 7 related not simply to his son, Solomon, but to a fulfilment lying in the then remote future, as his response to the prophecy makes clear — "You have spoken also of your servant's house (לְמַרְחֹק, *l'mērāhōq*) for a great while to come, . . ." (1 Chron. 17:17). The Targum relates it to the time of the Messiah, rendering it, "you have spoken of the house of your servant *unto the world to come*".

David recognised also that it spoke not merely of the establishment of a *dynasty* which would continue in perpetuity, but of a *single individual* whose reign would know no end, an individual with reference to whom God's declaration, "I will be his Father and he shall be my Son", would be uniquely true.

Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49 already contained within it a hint that the Shiloh to come would be one to whom divine worship would be given. In the beginning of his words regarding Judah, Jacob declares,

יְהוּדָה אֲתָהּ יִדְוָה אֶחָיִךְ
Y^ehūdāh attāh yôdūkā 'ahēkā

"Judah, as for you — your brothers shall praise you!" (Gen. 49:8).

The verb 'to praise' (יָדָה, *ydh*) employed here is used elsewhere in the Old Testament exclusively for the praise of God. This recognition, that what God had promised to David could only find its ultimate fulfilment in one who was not only David's offspring but who also shared God's nature, finds expression in the further words of David's response in 2 Samuel 7:19 —

וַיֹּאֶת הַתּוֹרָה הָאֲדָמִית אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה
w^ezô 't tōrat hā 'ādām 'adōnāy YHWH.

These words have occasioned difficulty for translators. The King James Bible rendering, "And *is* this the manner of man, O Lord GOD?", while making tolerable contextual sense, labours under the difficulty that תּוֹרָה ('law', 'instruction', 'teaching', 'doctrine') does not carry the sense of 'manner'. More recent, mainline English versions sit light to the actual Hebrew text, drawing on the opening word in Chronicles *ad loc.*, "and you have shown me", and then rather imaginatively concocting something to follow it, such as "future generations", deemed to offer a parallel of sorts to what has preceded, but which finds little or no support in the actual Hebrew text.

The Chronicler renders these words slightly differently —

וַיִּרְאֵנִי כְּתוֹר הָאֲדָמִית הַבּוֹעֵלָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
ûr^e 'îtanî k^e tôr hā 'ādām hamma^a lāh 'adōnāy ^elōhîm,

"and you have shown me the appearance of the form of the man exalted on high,
the LORD God" (1 Chron. 17:17).

The Chronicler found reference here to the higher status of the One promised to David by God. With this inspired interpretative rendering in mind, and returning to what is before us in 2 Samuel 7:19, the Hebrew text there may be seen to support quite readily the sense, "and this is the doctrine of the man (who is) the Sovereign LORD". This recognition of the divine status of the Messianic "Son" who is promised to David at some time after his decease, supplies the necessary theological foundation for the Messianic Psalms, such as Psalm 2, Psalm 45, Psalm 72, Psalm 80 and Psalm 110, and is essential to a proper understanding of the significance of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament canon. A brief consideration of these Psalms, therefore, will be help to establish this, before we come directly to consider the Song of Songs.

(1) Psalm 2.

In Psalm 2, we find allusion to this insight expressed by David in 2 Samuel 7:19. The LORD's Anointed (מְשִׁיחֹ, *m^ešîḥô*, "his Messiah") in Psalm 2:2 is the King whom he (the LORD) has set on Zion, his holy hill (2:6). The Messiah is then introduced as speaking in 2:7, applying to himself the LORD's words, "You

are my Son, today I have begotten you”. In this there is a clear allusion to 2 Samuel 7:14, “I will be his Father and he shall be my Son”.⁸ The Psalm admonishes the kings and rulers of the earth, “Serve the LORD with fear; with trembling embrace the Son, lest he be angry and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled” (cf. John 5:19–29), before the concluding comment, “Happy/ blessed are all who take refuge in him.” The “Son” is the promised Saviour of those who trust in him; he is also the Judge, to whom all who oppose him will one day give answer in the Day of Judgment which is coming. The divine nature of the “Son” is clearly to the fore in this Psalm, although his connection with David is also apparent in the association of his reign with Zion, the city of David, and in the placing of this Psalm at the beginning of the Davidic Psalter (along with Psalm 1, which may be Messianic, too, the prose introduction being followed by the poetic Psalm 2, forming a joint introduction to the Psalter).⁹

(2) Psalm 80

Psalm 80 is an extended prayer for God to intervene for the salvation of his people — “Stir up your might and come to save us . . . let your face shine, that we may be saved” (80:2–3, cf. 7, 19). Confronted in his day with a desperate situation, the Psalmist cries out to God, the God of Hosts, to intervene on behalf of his people, Israel; he calls upon him to do so in the person of “the Man” —

תְּחִי יְדֶךָ עֲזָרְיָאֵשׁ יְמִינֶךָ עַל־בְּנוֹ אֱמֶנְתָּ דָּלָה
t̄hî yād^e kā ‘al ’iš y^emînekā ‘al ben ādām ’immaṣtā lāk

“Let your hand be upon the Man of your right hand,
upon the Son of Man whom you have made strong for yourself.” (Ps. 80:17).

⁸ For the avoidance of misunderstanding, it should be noted that Christ is here called ‘Son of God’ *analogically*, not in a literal, physical sense (as if God had sexual relations — an idea which is as repugnant to Christians as it is to Muslims!). This *analogical* sense is to be seen also in Exodus 4:22–23, where God instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son. . . Let my son go that he may serve me.” In 2 Samuel 7:14, God expresses the unique intimacy of relationship between himself and the Messianic son of David, saying, “I will be his father, and he will be my son”. John’s Gospel speaks of the Word, who is Christ, as the *μονογενής παρὰ πατρός*, (*monogenēs para patros*), “the Only-begotten from the Father”, and as *μονογενής θεός*, (*monogenēs theos*), *God, the Only-begotten* (John 1:14, 18; cf. 1:1). The language of ‘Father-Son’ is employed *analogically* to describe the relationship between the persons of the Godhead existing eternally and prior to the Word ever becoming flesh and dwelling among us as the son of David (John 1:14). Christian theologians since Origen, in endeavouring to do justice to the distinction of persons within the *one* God, have spoken of the “*eternal* generation of the Son”, a concept utterly devoid of any sexual connotations.

⁹ The first line of Psalm 1 begins with אֲשֶׁר־, *’ašrê*, “Happy/Blessed”; the final line of Psalm 2 begins with the same, which may suggest an *inclusio* is intended, bracketing the two Psalms together. With the exception of Psalms 1 and 2, all the remaining Psalms of Book 1 of the Psalter (Pss. 1–41) are ascribed to David. Only Psalms 1 and 2 lack a superscription. The reason for this may well be that the other Psalms in Book 1 relate primarily to the experiences of David and ‘all the hardships he endured’ (Psalm 132:1), whereas these opening two Psalms relate more directly and specifically to King Messiah. [David, like Solomon his son, however, has a typological significance in relation to the Messiah, his experiences foreshadowing those of the One to come]. Psalm 2 relates more obviously to the Messiah; Psalm 1, however, describes the “man” who, though beset by the wicked, unfailingly ‘delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night’. Only one man perfectly fulfilled this faultless devotion to the law of God, the descendant of Jesse (the father of David) of whom Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 11:1–3,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a lowly branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

The allusion here is to the “Man” of whom David spoke in 2 Samel 7:19, who is the promised Messiah. The Targum renders “Man” in Ps. 80:17 by “King Messiah”. Nearly five centuries after the time of David, whilst languishing in exile in Babylon, in a vision given him by God, the prophet Daniel saw this ‘one like a Son of Man’ —

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingship one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

The Babylonian exile in which Daniel was caught up was not to last for ever. The great Shiloh, the Messiah, would come and God's purposes for his ancient people and for all peoples would yet come to fruition through him! The Son of Man would triumph over all his enemies, and the peoples (the saints of the Most High) would serve him (cf. Genesis 49:10) for ever and ever. (Cf. Daniel 7:18).

These passages undoubtedly furnish the background to Jesus' regular use of the title, “Son of Man” as a self-designation (in all the Gospels), and nowhere is this more clear than in Mark 14:62, where, confronted by the highest religious authority in Israel, who demanded of him, “Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?” Jesus replied, in words clearly echoing Daniel 7:13, “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven”. Jesus, the Son of Man, who was crucified in weakness for our salvation (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33), and who rose again on the third day and later ascended to heaven, will one day return “in the glory of his Father, with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

But in the days of Solomon, all this lay as yet in the remote future, and we risk getting ahead of ourselves in our effort to understand the place of the Song of Songs in the unfolding story of salvation-history! Solomon, as David's son, stands in the Old Testament as a prefiguration of this great Davidic Messiah, the Son of Man and Son of God, who was to come in the fulness of time in the promise of God. David was told by God to name his son, ‘Solomon’, שְׁלֹמֹה (*š'elōmōh*), ‘the peaceable one’, or ‘the peace-giver’ (2 Chronicles 22:9–10), in allusion to the ancient prophecy of Jacob concerning שִׁילֹה (*š'ilōh*) ‘Shiloh’, ‘the restful one’, or ‘the giver of rest’, who was to arise from his tribe, the tribe of Judah — the one to whom the obedience of the peoples (not just one people) would be willingly given. In Jesus, these two aspects of the promised eschatological figure — ‘rest’ and ‘peace’ — find their fulfilment, as seen in his words expressing his gift to us,

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, **and I will give you rest**. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, **and you will find rest for your souls**. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30).

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. (John 11:27).

In the unfolding of God's purposes, Solomon serves in Old Testament times, then, as a picture — a picture only, but a very significant picture, at that — of the promised Deliverer, the great Shiloh who was to come.

(3) Psalm 72

We have already referred to Psalm 72 (see p. 7). In Psalm 72:1, the “king” is David, and “the king’s son”, who is in view in the rest of the Psalm, is Solomon. It is, however, in the light of Solomon’s prefiguring the Messiah who was to come, that this Psalm is to be understood. The Hebrew verb forms in the Psalm may be read as jussives — expressing David’s prayers (cf. 72:20), “may he live, (etc.)” (prayers which will surely be answered by God!); or they may be read (perhaps preferably) as Hebrew imperfects — expressing his prophesying, “he shall live, (etc.)”. But we cannot read far into the Psalm before realising that, as Jesus says in another context, “a greater than Solomon is here” (see Luke 11:29–32). Psalm 72:8 and 11 indicate of the One spoken of here that “he shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” and “all kings shall fall down before him, all nations serve him” (cf. Genesis 49:10). Psalm 72:17 speaks of his name ‘enduring for ever’, recalling David’s recognition that one of his seed should arise who would reign for ever. It speaks also of ‘all men blessing themselves (i.e. counting themselves blessed) in him, and blessing him,’ recalling what was prophesied of Abraham’s seed (singular) in Genesis 22:18 (where the *hithpa’el* form of the verb is also used in the Hebrew text).

Nearly three centuries later, Isaiah wrote of the Peaceable One to come, foreshadowed by Solomon,

... to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called,
“Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, **Prince of Peace.**”
Of the increase of his government and of **peace** there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it,
and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for
evermore.

The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6–7).

And Micah, his contemporary, also speaks of the certain hope of the coming of the same. In three successive vignettes, in Micah 4:9, 4:11 and 5:1, the prophet describes the troubles which are to be coming upon Zion for its faithlessness, and in 4:10b, 4:12–13 and 5:2–4 he describes the deliverance which will come for the people of God from these troubles. The third vignette describes the utter humiliation of Zion’s king, “with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Zion” (5:1). The deliverance prophesied will arise from the great One to be born to the house of David.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me One who is to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth
have been from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2).¹⁰

And describing the hope which will sustain the believing people of God in the midst of the troubles coming upon the faithless nation, he declares,

And this (one) shall be **peace**, when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our courts. (Micah 5:5).

¹⁰ The combined form of the place name, Bethlehem Ephrath(ah) recalls Genesis 35:16–21. Ephrath (Bethlehem), the rural home of David (1 Samuel 16:1–12), was distinguished of old by a birth — the birth of Benjamin — but Micah declares that it is to be distinguished in the future by another, far more important, birth. (See Matthew 2:1–12, Luke 2:1–16).

(4) Psalm 110

The One prefigured by Solomon comes into view again in Psalm 110, in which David (note the superscription, which is an integral part of the Psalm) writes, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Jesus himself raised this passage in controversy with the Pharisees.

Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “the son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word . . . (Matt. 22:41–46).

The answer to the question “Whose son is he?” is found, of course, in the paradox that Jesus is the son of David by earthly, physical descent (a matter which his opposers could readily accept), but also the eternal Son of God incarnate (a matter which his opposers could not accept and vehemently resisted — John 1:9–11, 5:2–18, 10:24–39), and as such he is David's Lord. (See Romans 1:3–4, cf. 9:3–5).

(5) Psalm 45

This brief resumé of these Messianic Psalms and the theology behind them, enables us to make better sense of the other Psalm which I mentioned earlier, the Psalm which has a particularly close connection to the Song of Songs, viz. Psalm 45, which is often called the ‘Royal Wedding Psalm’.

Book 2 of the Psalter (Psalms 42–72) begins with a Psalm in which it is twice declared of the Psalmist's oppressors, “. . . they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”. In the following two Psalms (Psalms 42–43), the refrain three times occurs,

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Psalm 44 then follows, with the Psalmist lamenting,

All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face,
at the words of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

It ends with the Psalmist calling upon God,

Rouse yourself! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever! . . .
. . . Deliver us for the sake of your steadfast love!

The next Psalm in the canonical Psalter, Psalm 45, presents the One who is the Lord's answer to these importunate cries!

Before looking at the body of it more closely, the superscription to the Psalm (verse 1 in the Hebrew text) is deserving of our attention. It begins with the words, לַמְנַצֵּחַ, *lamm^enaṣēah*, which is usually translated “to the chief musician/choirmaster”, from the verb ‘to excel’, ‘to lead’, ‘to oversee’ (and in post-exilic Hebrew, ‘to conquer’), the assumption being that it is part of the musical directions for the Psalm. It may, however, be a reference to the Messiah as the ‘Leader’, and so the opening words of the superscription may be translated, “with reference to the Leader” or “for (i.e., dedicated to) the Leader”. The Targum and subsequent Jewish interpreters did not hesitate to see the Psalm as describing the marriage of King Messiah (with the people of Israel as the bride). The LXX took it as deriving from נֶשֶׁחַ, *nēṣah*, ‘eternity’ and translated it εἰς τὸ τέλος, *eis*

to *telos*, “with reference to the end (sc. of the age)”, the beginning of the age/world to come, i.e. the time of the Messiah.

The superscription of the Psalm concludes by describing the Psalm as a שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidōt*, which is usually translated, “a love song” (lit. “a song of loves”).¹¹ But the Hebrew consonantal text could equally support the reading, שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidût*, “a Song of **the Beloved One**” (female).¹²

The Psalm superscription may then indicate by these words the author (or should we say, authoress) of the Psalm — the woman who is the beloved of the king, and who speaks of herself in the first person in verse 1, before addressing him directly in writing in verses 2–9.¹³ That she describes herself, or else is described by the compilers of the canonical Psalter, as the יְדִידוֹת, *y^edidût*, “the beloved” (f.), would be eminently appropriate, if, as most commentators consider to be the case, Solomon is (in some sense, at least) identified with the king in the Psalm, for he bore the name from God, יְדִידְיָהּ, *y^edidyāh*, Jedidiah, “the beloved of the LORD” (2 Samuel 12: 24–25. Cf. Mark 1:11, 9:7; Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Luke 3:22).

If the author of this song is, indeed, the Shulammitte (to give her her other moniker also derived from the name of her beloved, as in the Song of Songs 6:13 — see p. 7), it will come as no surprise when we discover that Psalm 45 contains **exactly the same cast of characters** as is represented in the Song of Songs, viz. the bride beloved of the king, the king himself, who is her Beloved, the mother of the king (cf. Song of Songs 3:11), and the virgin companions of the bride (cf. the ‘daughters of Jerusalem’, her companions in the Song of Songs 2:5, 3:7, 11, 5:8, 16, 8:4). The occasion envisaged in the Psalm is the Wedding of the King, reference to which we noted in the past tense in the Song of Songs 3:11.

¹¹ This supposes that the Massoretic Text שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidōt*, is written *scriptio defectiva* for שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidōt*. The LXX translators saw a reference here, not to a ‘song of love’, but to a person, rendering the expression, ὁδὴ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ, *ōdē huper tou agapētou*, “a song regarding **the beloved**” — but they mistook the gender of the individual concerned, having taken the construct-absolute sequence to denote the one **about whom** the Song (principally) speaks, i.e. the king.

¹² With שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidût*, written *scriptio defectiva* as שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת, *šîr y^edidut*. The word which it is proposed should be read thus here, occurs also in Jeremiah 12:7, where the LORD declares his abandonment of his heritage (his people Israel) in the days before Fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE and the ensuing Babylonian Exile, saying,

נָתַתִּי אֶת־יְדִידוֹת נַפְשִׁי בְּכַף אִיבֵיהֶן:

nātattî ‘et y^edidût naphšî b^ecaph ‘ōy^ebēhā

“I have given **the beloved** (f.) of my soul into the hand of her enemies.”

¹³ The expression in the middle of the superscription, לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח, *libenē qōrah*, “for the sons of Korah” (who were among the Temple singers), will then indicate not their authorship of this Psalm (nor of the other Psalms in which the expression features in their superscriptions (Pss. 42–49, 85, 87 and 88), but their involvement in the performance of it. This would appear to be confirmed by the superscription to Psalm 88, which includes this expression and *also* the expression, “a maskîl (‘skilful Psalm?’) of Heman the Ezrahite”, the latter expression being the superscription to the following Psalm also. In 1 Chronicles 6:33, “Heman the singer” is mentioned as being among those whom David put in charge of the service of song in the tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. The substance of Psalm 89 and the use of the first person singular in v. 50 strongly suggest that the author of that Psalm is the Davidic king himself, rather than simply a temple singer. This indicates that these two superscriptions contain details of the performers by whom these Psalms were intended to be sung, rather than an indication of the authorship of the Psalms in question.

In the Psalm, the focal point in time is the occasion of the bride's introduction into the presence of the King, who awaits her with his mother at his right hand, who (as in the Song of Songs) is also an actor in the wedding.

The body of the Psalm consists of the following sections:¹⁴

| | |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 45:1 | The Prologue |
| 45:2–9 | An Address to the King, describing his excellence |
| 45:10–12 | Counsel addressed to the bride |
| 45:13–15 | A description of the bride as she is led to the King's palace |
| 45:16–17 | Her address to the King |

The author's introductory note in the first person establishes a connection with the bride, who appears to be the speaker in vv. 16–17, where the first person is also used. The description of the King in vv. 2–9 dwells upon his superlative kingly excellence, and has a more formal tone than the lover's more intimate descriptions of her Beloved in the Song of Songs. That the description exceeds anything which could properly be attributed to Solomon, however, is clear in v. 6, when the Psalmist declares of the King,

כִּסֵּאֲךָ אֱלֹהִים עוֹלָם וָעֶד
kis^a kā^e lōhîm 'ólām wā'ēd
 Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever.

Endeavours to relate these words to the ordinary incumbents of David's throne, to Solomon and his successors, fail on two counts — that of Hebrew grammar, and that of Israelite theology of kingship. The RV footnoted alternative reading, “Thy throne is the throne of God” (cf. RSV “Your divine throne” and footnoted reading, “Your throne is a throne of God”) is inadmissible, as this would require the repetition of the word כִּסֵּא, *kisē*, throne, thus:

כִּסֵּאֲךָ כִּסֵּא אֱלֹהִים
kis^a kā kisē lōhîm.

The alternative readings proposed are attempts to avoid the clear meaning of the text, so that it can be applied and interpreted in relation to the ordinary, earthly king(s) succeeding David, who, the translators recognise, could never in the Israelite theology of kingship have been regarded as being God. The king in Israel ruled under God and for God, but not as God. The prophets, as de Vaux has noted, reprovved kings for many things, but never for making themselves God. The fact is, however, that the Psalm is not speaking of the ordinary successors of David, but of King Messiah, who, while being the promised seed of David, descended from David, is David's Lord and David's God!

In v. 9, the descriptive address to the King ends with reference to the King's mother,

נִצְבָּה שְׁגֵל לְיְמִינְךָ בְּכֶתֶם אוֹפִיר:
niṣebāh šēgel lîmînekā bekephet 'ôphîr.
 “at your right hand stands the *šēgel* in gold of Ophir.”

Who is the *šēgel*? — It is a term which occurs only here in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. The most obvious answer is, that she is the Queen (Mother) (LXX ἡ βασιλίσσα, *hē basilissa*). While there were many queens, there was only ever

¹⁴ The gender distinction in the second person forms in Hebrew make clear that the bride is the speaker in vv. 16–17. The first person in v. 17 echoes the first person in v. 1.

one Queen Mother, the mother of the king, and she had an honoured place at the King's right hand (1 Kings 2:19; cf. Nehemiah 2:6).¹⁵ This corresponds with what we read of her in Song of Songs 3:11. In Psalm 45:10–12, it is the Queen Mother who, most naturally, addresses the words of counsel to the bride, and in vv. 14–15 the bride's “virgin companions” are the bridesmaids, corresponding to her companions, the “daughters of Jerusalem”, in the Song of Songs.

* * * * *

With this understanding of the setting of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament and of its place in the context of the unfolding of salvation history in mind, let us return to the Song itself.

The Song of Songs concentrates on depicting the Shulammitte's relationship with King Solomon, her Beloved, and it is he who is in view in 5:16. The Song has the earthly relationship between them primarily in view (in all its exclusivity, purity and honour), and it stands firmly within Scripture as witness to what the marital relationship should be like. Its place in the canon of Sacred Scripture is due also, however, to **Solomon's typological association with the Messiah** to come. In this secondary sense, it pictures the intimacy of relationship which exists between Solomon's anti-type, King Messiah, and his “bride”. This is the ‘something more’ which the Rabbis and Christian interpreters sensed was present in the Song. This picture, however, it must be emphasised, is not allegorical, as many well-meaning interpreters have supposed, but typological, and dependent on the salvation-historical context which is furnished by the other Scriptures which we have discussed.

In saying that the picture it presents us with is typological, not allegorical, we mean that there are certain broad correspondences, but not an equivalence of every detail, discernible between the relationship of Solomon and his bride, on the one hand, and that of the Messiah and his people, on the other. These correspondences, furthermore, are not merely fortuitous, as would be the case in a simple analogy, but intentional. In the purpose of God, Solomon stands as a type of great David's greater Son who is to come. In his names, in the peaceful nature of his reign, in his ‘building a house for God’, and in his great wisdom, he pictures (but only imperfectly!)¹⁶ the great Shiloh who was promised to arise in due course from the house of David.

How appropriately the marriage between Solomon and the Shulammitte may be seen as picturing the relationship between God and his people, is seen in the fact that elsewhere within the Old Testament the relationship between God and his people is spoken of in terms which draw analogy from the marriage relationship. In Hosea, the faithlessness of the people is described in terms of ‘spiritual

¹⁵ The term occurs also in Aramaic in Daniel 5:2–3, but in the plural, where the connotation is clearly different, and the term there refers to the ‘wives’ of the Babylonian King, Belshazzar, not to his mother. In 2 Kings 24:12, 15, the mother of the king is closely associated with him and shares his fate. In Jeremiah 13:18, a different word (גְּבִירָה, *g^ebûrāh*) is used for the “queen mother”, one which indicates her particularly ‘powerful’ position. (Cf. גִּבּוֹר, *geber*, ‘(mighty) man’). Second person plural suffixes are used in the address in Jer. 13:18 and the word “heads” is plural, indicating that it is not just the king who is addressed, but also the Queen Mother alongside him. The Queen Mother was ever a powerful figure alongside the king. (Cf. 1 Kings 2:13–20).

¹⁶ How far Solomon fell short of perfectly picturing Christ's relationship with his people, may be seen from 1 Kings 3:1, 11:1–13.

adultery’, the breaking of the ‘marriage relationship’ with God. In Jeremiah 2:2, the relative purity of Israel in former days is recalled in the following words from God,

I remember the devotion of your youth, **your love as a bride**, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD . . .

And in Jeremiah 31:31-2, when God promises a new covenant with his people, he declares,

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, **though I was a husband unto them**, says the LORD . . .

The covenant relationship between God and his people is akin to that between a husband and wife, and calls for a like exclusive love, devotion and faithfulness. The same verb, ‘to know’, is used in both contexts to describe the expression of the covenant relationship, of sexual knowledge (in the case of husband and wife) and of spiritual knowledge (in the case of the relationship between God and his people). (See Genesis 4:1, Hosea 2:20, Jeremiah 31:34, cf. Philippians 3:7–10). Accordingly, in the New Testament, the church, as the people of God, is spoken of as the “bride” of Christ — both by Paul in Ephesians 5:21–33, and by John in Revelation 21:9–27. (Cf. Matthew 22:1-14).

The new covenant which was prophesied through Jeremiah is what gives the “New Testament” its name, of course. In Christ, the new covenant has come into being (see Luke 19:20, 1 Cor. 11:25, and Hebrews 8:6–13, 10:12–22). A new covenantal relationship with God has been made possible by him — his atoning death (the sinless One for the sinful) covering our sins and effecting pardon and forgiveness (cf. Jer. 31:34b, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more”) and his risen life introducing us into new life in the favour and fellowship of God (cf. Jer. 31:34a, “. . . they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD”). John writes of this intimate relationship with God through Christ thus,

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the Day of Judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not made perfect in love. We love, because he first loved us.”

If the Shulammite had reason to love Solomon for his excellence, flawed as he was, how much more reason have we to love Jesus Christ, who was “holy, blameless, unstained, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26), for his excellence. This is the One in whom is realised the ancient promise to Abraham, that in his seed singular (that is, in Jesus Christ) all families of the earth should be blessed. And if the Shulammite had reason to say of her King Solomon, “His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable; This is my beloved and this is my friend”, how much more reason have we to say it of King Jesus, upon whom all our hopes of heaven depend, and in whom “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

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