

The Song of Songs: A Commentary

Title (1:1)

1:1 The most sublime song, which is Solomon's.

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה:

The title presents this biblical book as the greatest or most sublime song, for the construction 'Song of Songs' is the Hebrew expression of the superlative, also known to us from phrases such as 'holy of holies' (Exod. 26:33), 'God of gods and Lord of lords' (Deut. 10:17), 'heaven of heavens' (Ps. 148:4), 'king of kings' (Ezr. 7:12) and 'vanity of vanities' (Eccl. 1:2).

The reference to Solomon can imply authorship, but it can also mean 'dedicated to', 'concerning' or 'associated with' Solomon. Goldstein sums up the possibilities of that association with Solomon, noting that it may reflect that the book was read in the Solomonic court, written by Solomon, enjoyed by him, compiled in his honour, or associated with him because of his renowned wisdom and amorous adventures (1975, pp. 9-10). There are plenty of reasons for that association (see Exum, 2005, pp. 89-90): Solomon is mentioned six times in the text (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12); he was renowned for composing numerous songs (1 Kgs 4:32) and for his large harem (1 Kgs 11:3); some parts of the Song suggest a courtly ambiance; references to northern and southern parts of the country appear to reflect a unified Israel; and the numerous references to luxury items such as perfumes, unguents, ornaments, jewels, precious metals, scented garments and rare aromatic woods and spices recall Solomon's splendour.

The Woman (1:2-7)

1:2 O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,
for your lovemaking is better than wine.

יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ
כִּי-טוֹבִים דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן:

1:3 Your anointing oils are good,
your name is oil of myrrh,
that's why maidens love you.

לְרִיחַ שְׁמֵנֶיךָ טוֹבִים
שֶׁמֶן תּוֹרֵק שְׁמֶךָ

1:4 Pull me after you. Let's run!
The king has brought me into his chambers.
We'll exult and rejoice in you.
We'll esteem your lovemaking more than wine.
Rightly do they love you.

עַל-כֵּן עֲלָמוֹת אֶהְבְּדֶךָ:
מִשְׁכְּנֵי אַחֲרֶיךָ נִרְוָצָה

הַבֵּיאֵנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו
נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּךָ

נִזְכְּרָה דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן
מִיִּשְׁרָיִם אֶהְבְּדֶךָ: ס

1:5 Black am I but beautiful,
O daughters of Jerusalem,

שְׁחֹזָרָה אֲנִי וְנֹאזָה
בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם

<p>like the tents of Kedar, like Solomon's curtains.</p> <p>1:6 Don't just see that I'm swarthy, that the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me keeper of the vineyards, [but] my vineyard, my very own, I haven't kept.</p> <p>1:7 Tell me, you whom I love, where do you pasture [your flocks]? Where do you let them rest at noon? Lest I be like someone who loses her way beside your companions' flocks.</p>	<p>בְּאֹהֶלֵי קֶדָר בִּירֵעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה: אֶל־תִּרְאוּנִי שְׂאֲנִי שְׁחַרְחֲרֹת שִׁשְׁזָפְתָנִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּנֵי אִמִּי נִחְרוּ־בִי שָׁמְנִי נִטְרָה אֶת־הַכֶּרְמִים כֶּרְמִי שְׁלִי לֹא נִטְרָתִי:</p> <p>הַגִּידָה לִי שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי אֵיכָה תִרְעָה אֵיכָה תִרְבִּיץ בַּצִּהָרִים שְׁלֹמֹה אֵהִיָּה כְּעֵטִיהָ עַל עֲדָרֵי חֲבֵרֶיהָ:</p>
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In her opening address (v. 2), the woman ‘expresses emphatically, without hesitation or shame, her desire for the erotic attentions of her lover’ (Ernst, 2003, p. 23). Half-way through the sentence she shifts from the third to the second person, as is typical for addresses to someone of a higher social standing. Perhaps the ‘courtly, ceremonious tone’ is part of the lovers’ fantasy world that is also evoked when the man is described as king (1:4, 12; see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 137). The second line of v. 2 is usually rendered somewhat evasively as ‘your *love* is better than wine’, but the Hebrew term דָּדִים (*dōdîm*), which is more concrete and includes kisses, caresses and intercourse, is more appropriately translated ‘lovemaking’. As Alter (1995, p. 124) notes, if דָּדִים (*dōdîm*) ‘did not have this physically concrete meaning, it could not be repeatedly associated as it is with delectable wine, with drinking, with the honeyed sweetness of the mouth ..., and thus by analogy, with the sweetness of the act of love’.

She then praises her lover’s enticing smell. The first line of v. 3 literally reads ‘as for scent, your oils are good’. This reflects the ancient practice of anointing oneself with fragrant oils. The word order of this line is rather unusual but may have been chosen because it results in a chiasmic arrangement when read together with the preceding line (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, pp. 137-138):

- (a) better
- (b) your lovemaking
- (c) than wine
- (c) as for scent
- (b) your oils
- (a) good

The next line says something about the man's name, which evokes the whole person. This is described with reference to some kind of oil, but the term תִּזְרֹק (*tûraq*) is enigmatic. The Peshitta, the Syriac translation, reads 'oil of myrrh'. What appears to be in view here is the man's 'sensual attractiveness' (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 138). Indeed, his charms are widely appreciated: all the young women want him (v. 3c). 'Love', אֶהָב (*'āhab*), here refers to erotic longing.

The woman longs to get away with her lover and cherishes their time together. The 'king' in v. 4 refers to the woman's lover rather than to King Solomon, as has sometimes been suggested. Especially in Victorian times, it has been popular to read the Song as a drama featuring three main actors, King Solomon, the woman and her humble shepherd-lover (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 33, for further details). Because most of the couples' erotic encounters take place outside, the 'chambers' might refer to sheltered spots in the woods or vineyards where the lovers can meet without danger of being disturbed (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 138).

The last two lines of v. 4 have puzzled interpreters, as it would seem more natural for the woman to say simply 'let us exult and rejoice'. The addition 'in you' seems odd. The same applies to her talk of 'your lovemaking' rather than 'our lovemaking'. As the Hebrew words for 'your lovemaking better than wine' occur in exactly the same way in v. 2, Bloch and Bloch have suggested that they are here repeated as some kind of refrain (1995, p. 139). One solution might be that the woman's choice of words is motivated by her focus, which is firmly on her lover and thus leads her to say that they both enjoy *his* lovemaking. Another possible explanation is that she is projecting her love for the man onto the other young women mentioned in v. 3, who are also in view in the following line: 'rightly do they love you'. The penultimate line of v. 4 literally reads 'let us *remember* your lovemaking', but 'remember' is perhaps best understood in the sense of 'regard', as suggested in the translation.

The woman's description of herself as 'black' or 'dark' (v. 5) is usually understood to refer to her sunburned skin. Because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew conjunctive וְ (*wě*), the first line of v. 5 can be rendered as 'black and beautiful' or 'black but beautiful'. Some interpreters have suggested that her dark skin may have contributed to the woman's attractiveness, which she is thus boasting about. However, this is unlikely for two reasons. First, it is generally thought that sunburned skin, which was the mark of someone working outdoors, was associated with a lower social status. More importantly, the woman's plea, in the following verse, that others not be preoccupied with her dark tan suggests that she does not regard her blackness as something to be proud of.

Here, for the first time in the Song, we find a reference to the 'daughters of Jerusalem', which, except for those passages where the woman engages them in dialogue, may be a rhetorical audience (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 140). The reference to the tents

of Kedar may be due to the fact that the tents of Middle Eastern nomadic Bedouins are usually made from the wool of black goats (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 140). But the name of the tribe itself is significant, too, because it plays on the root קדר (*qdr*), ‘to grow dark, black’. ‘Solomon’s curtains’ do not appear anywhere else in the Bible, but the reference to curtains is interesting because, apart from the tents and flocks of Kedar, it is precisely their curtains that are mentioned in Jer. 49:28-29.

The woman is concerned that all others see when they meet her is her dark skin (v. 6). She literally says, ‘do not see me that I am swarthy’, but the Hebrew syntax expresses her concern that onlookers might be put off by what is only a superficial aspect (cf. Prov. 23:31: ‘do not see wine that it has a reddish sparkle’). The following line then explains why she is black or dark. Interpreters who have read the book as a collection of wedding songs composed by Solomon on the occasion of his marriage to an Egyptian princess have taken the references to the woman’s blackness as an indication of her skin colour, but v. 6b clearly states that she is dark as a result of being sunburnt. My translation, ‘the sun has looked upon me’, renders the Hebrew quite literally; the secondary meaning of the verb שָׁזַפּ (*šāzap*) is ‘to tan, sunburn’.

‘My mother’s sons’ (see also 8:1; Gen. 43:29) implies special closeness, compared to ‘my father’s sons’ (1. Chron. 28:4), who would have been borne by a different mother. The anger of her brothers is prompted by the fact that she has not kept her own vineyard. This thought receives particular emphasis in the words ‘my vineyard, my very own (כַּרְמִי שְׁלִי *karmî šellî*), I have not kept’. Some have suggested that the woman’s neglect of her beauty by working outdoors is in view here, but this seems unlikely, partly because it had been her brothers themselves who had commanded her to keep the vineyards. More importantly, terms such as ‘vine’ and ‘vineyard’ in other parts of the Song (e.g. 6:11, 7:13) evoke her sexuality, which would imply that the brothers’ anger had been kindled by her failure to preserve her chastity.

The woman finishes her first speech, asking where she can meet her lover (v. 7). The first line literally reads ‘the one whom *my soul* loves’, but Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ (*nepes̄*) here stands for the whole person, hence it is best translated ‘I’. ‘At noon’ (v. 7c) can be meant in a general sense, as in ‘where do you usually let your flocks rest at noon’. Alternatively, the use of the definite article in the Hebrew might refer to ‘this noon’, i.e. today at noon, in which case the woman’s question would be marked by more urgency.

The penultimate line of v. 7 has been rendered variously by the translators. The most natural translation of the Hebrew verb עָטָה (*‘āṭāh*) is ‘veil’, as adopted, for instance, in the NRSV. However, the Old Latin, Symmachus, the Vulgate, the Peshitta and the Targum all read ‘one who loses her way, goes astray’. This is based on a variant reading טעה (*t‘h*), a by-form of תעה (*t‘h*) and a metathesis of עטה (*t‘h*), in which the second and third consonants have been transposed. Some would regard such an assump-

tion unnecessary, maintaining that ‘veil’ makes good sense. But Bloch and Bloch have made a strong case for adopting the reading of the ancient versions, pointing out that shepherding is frequently associated with getting lost (1995, p. 142). They note that the phonetically similar verbs for pasturing (רָעָה *rā’āh*) and losing one’s way (תָּעָה *tā’āh*) occur together elsewhere (for instance, in Gen. 37:15-16; Jer. 50:6). Hence Song 1:7-8, where we find the root רעה (*r’h*) three times, appears to feature another instance of the stock rhetorical theme of pasturing and losing one’s way. Bloch and Bloch also point out that the verb ‘to veil’ usually occurs with an indication of what is being covered or a reference to the article of clothing that is used as a veil, neither of which is the case in our text (1995, pp. 142-143).

The Man (1:8-11)

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| <p>1:8 If you don’t know,
most beautiful of women,
follow in the tracks of the sheep
and pasture your goats
by the shepherds’ tents.</p> | <p>אִם-לֹא תִדְעִי לְךָ
הַיָּפָה בְּנָשִׁים
צְאִי-לְךָ בְּעַקְבֵי הַצֹּאן
וּרְעִי אֶת-גְּדֵי־תֵיךְ
עַל מִשְׁכְּנֹת הָרֹעִים: ס</p> |
| <p>1:9 As my mare among Pharaoh’s chariots
I imagined you, my love.</p> | <p>לְסִסְתִּי בְּרִכְבֵּי פָרְעֹה
דָּמִיתִיךְ רַעֲיָתִי:</p> |
| <p>1:10 Lovely are your cheeks with those looped earrings,
your neck with that necklace of shells.</p> | <p>נְאוּן לְחַיִּיךְ בַּתָּרִים
צְוֹאֲרֶךְ בְּחֲרוֹזִים:</p> |
| <p>1:11 Golden earrings we’ll make you,
with silver beads.</p> | <p>תּוֹרֵי זָהָב נַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ
עִם נִקְדֹּת הַכֶּסֶף:</p> |

The man, in his reply (vv. 8-11), first answers the woman’s question as to where she can find him, before admiring her imposing and unsettling beauty.

Most translations render v. 9 in the form of a comparison, such as NRSV’s ‘I compare you, my love, to a mare’. While this is possible, the Hebrew verb דמה (*dmh* Piel) can also mean ‘to imagine’, as in Ps. 50:21, ‘you imagined that I was just like you’. The translation adopted here also differs in reading ‘my mare’ rather than ‘a mare’. As Bloch and Bloch have pointed out, Jewish and Christian interpreters have tended to devise various evasive moves to avoid the erotically charged imagery that compares the beloved woman to the lover’s own mare (1995, p. 144). In some translations, the mare has even been turned into a whole cavalry of horses. This goes back to the Vulgate but is also adopted in the KJV, which speaks of a ‘company of horses’, and the NEB. The decision to translate ‘a mare’ rather than ‘my mare’ appears to be motivated by a similar attempt to tone down the imagery.

The chariots may be metonymic for chariot horses, much like we might speak of ‘Westminster’ when we mean to refer to the Parliament of the UK. That they are called ‘Pharaoh’s chariots’ does not necessarily suggest that they are in Pharaoh’s possession but could indicate that they have come from Pharaoh, i.e. that they have been imported from Egypt (see 1 Kgs 10:28-29). The point of the imagery is to depict the beloved woman as truly special, much like those imported horses would have been noted for their excellence. But, as Bloch and Bloch note, there is no getting away from the erotic overtones of the imagery, especially when used in a text full of erotic language. Alter (1985, p. 193) comments that ‘a mare in heat, let loose among chariotry, could transform well-drawn battle lines into a chaos of wildly plunging stallions’.

In antiquity, royal horses were often decorated with ornaments. Verse 10 therefore elaborates on the imagery of v. 9. The word order adopted here (‘lovely are your cheeks’) reflects the exclamatory character of the Hebrew text. The word describing the ornament adorning the woman’s cheeks is unknown, but its root (תור *twr*), which means ‘to go around’, indicates that the writer was thinking of something circular, hence the somewhat tentative translation ‘looped earrings’ (for this rendering, see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 51). The second ornament has been variously translated as ‘necklace of shells’ (Koehler and Baumgartner, 2001, sub תַּרְוִיזִים), ‘string of beads’ (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 51) or ‘strings of jewels’ (Hess, 2005, p. 43).

There is an element of intensification in v. 11 in that the earrings of the previous verse have been replaced by golden ones that are studded with silver beads. In using the plural (‘we will make you’) the man may be including others in his statement. Alternatively, this line may be spoken by an unidentified group.

The Woman (1:12-14)

1:12 While the king is on his couch, my spikenard gives forth its fragrance.	עַד־שֶׁהַמֶּלֶךְ בַּמִּסְבּוֹ נִרְדֵי נִתְּנָה רִיחוֹ:
1:13 A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me, who spends the night between my breasts.	צָרוּר הַמָּרְדָּן דּוֹדִי לִי בֵּין שְׂדֵי יָלִין:
1:14 A cluster of henna blossoms is my lover to me in the vineyards of En Gedi.	אֶשְׁבֵּל הַכַּפְּפָר דּוֹדִי לִי בְּכַרְמֵי עֵין גִּדִּי: ס

When the woman speaks again, she remembers, in sensual language that focuses again on the sense of smell, their intimate time together. Again, as in v. 4, the lover is described as king. The last word of the first line has given rise to a variety of translations. The root סבב (*sbb*) means ‘to surround, encircle’. Some have suggested ‘table’ (KJV, NASB, NIV), but, as Alter (1995, p. 120) notes, this translation appears to have been adopted out of a ‘disposition to dilute the sexuality of the poem’. The scene depicted in the following verse clearly favours an item of furniture used for reclining, ‘Couch’

is therefore a more suitable rendering of the Hebrew term (thus RSV, NRSV, ESV, TNK). Spikenard is a valuable perfume made from a plant growing in the Himalayas.

Myrrh (v. 13) is an aromatic resin that is extracted from the stems and branches of a shrub growing in Arabia. It was used to perfume clothing and bedding. The second line is somewhat ambiguous in that the subject could be either the sachet of myrrh or the woman's lover. However, as he is compared to that sachet, it is in any case clear that it is him who is spending the night between her breasts.

Henna (v. 14) is a shrub with clusters of flowers whose scent resembles that of roses, while En Gedi is an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Throughout the Song, female eroticism is associated with vineyards. We have already encountered this association in v. 6, and it reappears here as the vineyards of En Gedi are paralleled by the woman's breasts in the previous verse, which features a similar construction to the current one.

The Man (1:15)

1:15 You are so beautiful, my love.
 You are so beautiful.
 Your eyes are doves.

הִנֵּךְ יָפָה רְעִיתִי
 הִנֵּךְ יָפָה
 עֵינֶיךָ יוֹנִים:

The man, in response, praises the woman's beauty, especially that of her eyes. It has been suggested that the point of comparing the woman's eyes to doves might be to praise their oval shape. Alternatively, it is the gentleness of doves that is in view here. The woman is called 'my dove' in 5:2, and she returns the man's compliment when she says that her lover's eyes are like doves (5:12).

The Woman (1:16-2:1)

1:16 You are so beautiful, my lover,
 so delightful!
 So verdant is our bed!
 1:17 The beams of our houses are cedars,
 our rafters junipers.
 2:1 I'm the lily of Sharon,
 the lotus of the valleys.

הִנֵּךְ יָפָה דוּדִי
 אַף נְעִים
 אַף־עֲרֻשָׁנוּ רֵעֲנָה:
 קִרֹּת בְּתֵינֹו אֲרָזִים
 רֵהִטְנוּ בְרוֹתֵים:¹
 אֲנִי חֲבַצְלֵת הַשָּׂדֶה
 שׁוֹשַׁנַּת הָעֲמָקִים:

The man's praise of her beauty is reciprocated by the woman, who also talks about their outside meeting places. The adjective used to describe the lovers' bed or couch is typically used of flourishing trees (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:23). When she talks about 'our

¹Ketib: רֵהִטְנוּ.

bed', 'our houses' and 'our rafters', the possessive pronoun 'our' does not imply ownership but intimacy, something that the lovers share. The Hebrew term translated 'cedars' (אַרְזִים *ʾarāzîm*; v. 17) can refer to the tree and its wood. Hence the beams are either literally cedars, or they are made of cedar wood. In the latter case, the lovers might be imagining themselves in Solomon's luxurious buildings (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 148), which would be in line with those verses that address the man as 'king'. However, given the reference to the verdant bed in the v. 16, it seems more likely that the woman is thinking of outdoor locations and that the actual trees are the beams of their houses.

The meaning of the term translated 'rafters' (רַהִיטָנוּ *rahîṭēnû*) is uncertain, but it is usually assumed that the word is related to the Syriac word for 'rafter'. The identification of the trees that provides the rafters is similarly unclear. Suggestions include firs, pines, cypresses and junipers.

As with the trees of the previous verse, the identification of the flowers in 2:1 is equally uncertain. The term here translated 'lily' (חַבְצֵלֶת *ḥābaṣṣelet*) is traditionally rendered 'rose' (see KJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV, TNK). Alternative identifications include tulip, crocus, asphodel, meadow saffron, narcissus, hyacinth, daffodil and wildflower (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 148; and Hess, 2005, pp. 44-43). The second flower (שׁוֹשַׁנָּה *šôšannāh*), usually translated 'lily', is perhaps better identified as the lotus, but once again alternatives such as hyacinth, narcissus, sea daffodil and water lily have been suggested. Many prefer the traditional renderings 'rose' and 'lily' simply because of their resonance in the tradition. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 148) aptly describe this verse as 'an expression of a young woman's proud awareness of her blossoming beauty'. After all, the two flowers mentioned by her are the epitome of blossoming in the Old Testament, as can be seen from Isaiah 35:1-2, where the blossoming חַבְצֵלֶת (*ḥābaṣṣelet*) is a key feature of the prophet's future vision of the wilderness, while in Hosea 14:6 [5] Israel itself is promised to blossom like the שׁוֹשַׁנָּה (*šôšannāh*).

The Man (2:2)

2:2 Like a lotus among the brambles,
so is my love among the young women.

כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחֹזְחִים
כֵּן רַעֲיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת:

The man's statement makes the point that his beloved is unique, distinguished from all the others.

The Woman (2:3-10a)

2:3 Like an apricot among the trees of the forest,
so is my lover among the young men.
In that shade I always delight to sit;
the fruit is sweet to my palate.

כַּתְּפֹחַח בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר
כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים
בְּצֵלוֹ חִמְדָּתִי וַיִּשְׁבְּתִי
וּפְרִיּוֹ מֵתוֹק לְחַפְּי:

- 2:4 He brought me to the house of wine;
his banner over me was love.
- 2:5 Prop me up among blossoms,
spread me out among apricots,
for I'm sick with love.
- 2:6 His left hand is under my head,
his right hand embraces me.
- 2:7 I ask you to promise, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the does of the field,
that you will not awaken nor arouse love
until it is ready.
- 2:8 Listen! My lover!
Here he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
- 2:9 My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag.
See! There he stands behind our wall,
peering in through the windows,
glancing in through the lattice.
- 2:10 My lover spoke and said to me:
- הִבִּיאֲנִי אֶל-בַּיִת הַיַּיִן
וְדָגְלוּ עָלַי אַהֲבָה:
סִמְכוּנִי בְּאַשְׁשׁוּת
רִפְדוּנִי בְּתַפּוּחִים
כִּי-יְחַלֵּת אַהֲבָה אֵנִי:
שָׁמְאֵלוּ תַּחַת לְרֹאשִׁי
וַיְמִינֵנוּ תַּחְבֵּקֵנִי:
הַשְּׁבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
בְּצִבְאוֹת אוֹ בְּאֵילוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה
אִם-תִּעְרְרוּ | וְאִם-תִּעְוְרוּ אֶת-הָאֲהָבָה
עַד שֶׁתִּחַפֵּץ: ס
- קוֹל דּוֹדִי
הִנֵּה-הֵּן בָּא
מְדַלֵּג עַל-הַהָרִים
מִקַּפֵּץ עַל-הַגְּבָעוֹת:
דּוֹמָה דּוֹדִי לְצִבִּי אוֹ לְעֹפֵר הָאֵילִים
הִנֵּה-הֵּן עוֹמֵד אַחַר כְּתִלְנוּ
מִשְׁגִּיחַ מִן-הַחַלְלוֹנוֹת
מִצִּיץ מִן-הַחַרְכִּים:
עָנָה דּוֹדִי וַאֲמַר לִי

English translations traditionally talk about an apple in v. 3, but the common apple is not native to Palestine; and its fruit, prior to the application of modern cultivation techniques, would have been small and acid. This has been pointed out by Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 149), who also note that modern botanists tend to identify the תפוח (*tappûah*) with the apricot tree. In the Hebrew, the shade and fruit can be that of the man or the apricot tree (i.e. ‘his/its shade’, ‘his/its fruit’). The ambiguity is here preserved by translating ‘that shade’ and ‘the fruit’. The image of the woman savouring the delicious fruit of the apricot tree, with which her lover is identified, has obvious erotic implications.

The third line literally reads ‘in his/its shade I delight and I sit’. When Hebrew verbs are combined in this way, the intended meaning is ‘I delight to sit’. The second verb, ‘sit’ (שב *yšb*), can also mean ‘stay awhile, linger on’, while the particular form of the verb ‘delight’ (חמד *hmd* Piel) may have been chosen to convey a sense of continuity or prolonged experience.² Bloch and Bloch, who render the phrase in past tense, suggest that a free translation such as ‘I took delight many times, and stayed on and on’ captures these

²See Waltke and O’Connor, 1990, pp. 414-416, on the frequentative Piel.

nuances (1995, p. 150). The translation adopted here, 'I always delight to sit', similarly attempts to convey the notions of lingering and repetition suggested by the Hebrew text.

The 'house of wine' to which her lover brought the woman (v. 4) could be a tavern, but it might also refer to an outside location, such as a vineyard, where the lovers secretly meet. If so, it would parallel the houses in the woods mentioned in 1:17. The appearance of the 'banner' has puzzled many commentators. Bloch and Bloch explain it by suggesting that to raise a banner means 'to make conspicuous'. Hence they conclude that the woman rejoices in her lover's exuberant demonstration of his love for her (1995, p. 151).

Verse 5 is difficult to translate. What is clear is that the woman is addressing a group of people, as the verb forms are in the plural, and that she is lovesick. We have already seen that the apples mentioned in the translations are more likely to have been apricots (see v. 3), but the raisin cakes found in many translations are far from certain, too. The relevant term (אֲשִׁישָׁה *'ăšišāh*) appears also in 2 Samuel 6:19; 1 Chronicles 16:3 and Hosea 3:1. In the latter case, the fact that raisin cakes are in view is explicitly spelled out by the addition of 'grapes' (אֲנָבִים *'ānābîm*). It has been suggested that אֲשִׁישָׁה (*'ăšišāh*) on its own refers to an 'inflorescence', i.e. a cluster of flowers arranged on a stem (see Fox, 1985, p. 109).

Another question concerns what the woman asks others to do to her. Most translations envisage this as providing some kind of sustenance or refreshment, but the second verb רָדַף (*rdp* Piel) makes that unlikely. Hess admits that it normally means 'to extend, spread out' (2005, p. 46), but he believes that the parallel in the first line demands an interpretation along the lines of refreshment. However, the first verb (סָמַךְ *smk*) is also better understood as 'to support, prop up'. It occurs in an intensified form here (i.e. in the Piel), but it is difficult to see in what sense 'refresh' is an intensification of 'support'.

As Fox has pointed out, 'the Shulamite wishes to lie among fruit clusters and apricots Following close upon the comparison of the youth to an apricot tree, mention of the fruits naturally makes one think of the youth's caresses. The girl wants to be surrounded by the sweet fragrance of his lovemaking' (1985, p. 109). One reason why this interpretation is preferable to the one that envisages the woman asking for sustenance is that it fits much better with what follows, which is the erotic encounter that the woman yearns for.

Seddon sees in v. 6 a suggestion of genital stimulation (2010, p. 4), but this reads too much into the text. Things are spelled out much more clearly in a text relating to a Sumerian sacred marriage rite: 'your right hand you have placed on my vulva, your left stroked my head' (see Kramer, 1969, p. 105), but nothing of the sort is mentioned in our passage. The verb that is used (חָבַק *ḥbq* Piel) can mean 'embrace' in a sexual sense, as in

Proverbs 5:20, but the same term is employed when Esau embraces his brother Jacob (Gen. 33:4). In our text it is clear that an amorous encounter is in view, and the description suggests that the lovers are in a reclining position. But that is all that can be said.

The next verse (v. 7) features an oath or adjuration formula, which is repeated in 3:5 and, with slight modifications, in 8:4. While Old Testament oaths are typically sworn in the name of God, here the references to gazelles and does fit in with the animal imagery found elsewhere in the Song. The formula, which in these poems is best understood as seeking a strong promise, implores the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken or arouse love until it is ready (תְּהַפְּסֵן *tehpās*). Ernst translates: ‘please do not stir up these passions until it is time to consummate them’ (2003, p. 30). Some have understood the phrase as ‘a request not to interrupt the lovers’. Thus, for instance, Jay (1975, p. 56), who translates: ‘not to disturb or interrupt our love till it is satisfied’ (p. 29).

Then the woman hears her lover approaching (v. 8). Many translations think of the lover’s voice, but the Hebrew term קוֹל (*qōl*) can also mean ‘sound’, which in the present context appears to refer to his footsteps that can be heard as he approaches over the mountains and hills.

Once again, animal imagery is employed when the woman likens her lover to a gazelle or a young stag (v. 9). In line with their understanding that the lovers’ meeting places are outside (see comment on 1:16-17), Bloch and Bloch suggest that the wall, windows and lattice should not be taken literally but refer rather to ‘a rough stone wall outdoors with gaps between the stones’ (1995, p. 153).

The Man (2:10b-14)

<p>2:10 ‘Arise, my love, my beauty, come!</p>	<p>קוּמִי לָךְ רְעִיתִי יַפְתִּי וּלְכִי־לָךְ:</p>
<p>2:11 Look, the winter has passed, the rains are over and gone.</p>	<p>בִּי־הִנֵּה³ הַסֵּתִיו עָבַר הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף הַלֵּךְ לוֹ:</p>
<p>2:12 Flowers have appeared on the ground. The time of singing has arrived; the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.</p>	<p>הַנִּצְּנִים נִרְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ עַתַּת הַזְּמִיר הִגִּיעַ וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר נִשְׁמַע בְּאֶרְצֵנוּ:</p>
<p>2:13 The fig tree sweetens its young, green fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, my love, my beauty, come!</p>	<p>וְהַתְּאֵנָה חֲנֹטָה פִּגְיָה וְהַגִּפְּנִים סִמְדָר נִתְּנוּ רִיחַ קוּמִי לָךְ⁴ רְעִיתִי יַפְתִּי וּלְכִי־לָךְ: ס</p>

³Ketib: הַסֵּתִיו.

⁴Ketib: לְכִי.

2:14 My dove in the clefts of the rock,
 in the crags of the cliff,
 let me see your sights,
 let me hear your voice,
 for your voice is sweet
 and your appearance is beautiful.’

יוֹנָתִי בְּחַגְוֵי הַפְּלֵעַ
 בְּסַתְרֵי הַמְּדַרְגָּה
 הִרְאִינִי אֶת־מְרְאִיךָ
 הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת־קוֹלְךָ
 כִּי־קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב
 וּמְרְאִיךָ נְאוּהָ: ס

The man now invites his beloved to come with him to experience the beauty of nature (v. 10). With the winter and its rains gone, nature has reawakened. O’Donohue (1997, p. 56) says that love is the ‘awakening of springtime’, and this is beautifully evoked in vv. 11-13. The second line of v. 12 can refer to a time of pruning (NASB, TNK) or singing (KJV, NRSV, ESV, NIV). Some interpreters believe this to be a two-directional pun, with the first meaning, ‘pruning’, referring back to the time of spring evoked in vv. 11-12a and the second connotation, ‘singing’, pointing forward to the voice of the turtle-dove in the following line. Bloch and Bloch suggest that the reference to ‘our land’ conveys intimacy in the same way that the use of ‘our bed’, ‘our houses’ and ‘our rafters’ in 1:16-17 and ‘our wall’ in 2:9 did (1995, p. 155).

The air is fragrant with enticing scents (v. 13), and the man repeats his invitation to his beloved to come and experience them for herself. The verb translated ‘sweeten’ is usually rendered ‘ripen’ on the assumption that there are two different verbs חָנַט (*hnt*), one meaning ‘ripen’, which is cognate with Akkadian *ḥunnuṭu* and appears only here, and one meaning ‘embalm, sweeten, spice’, which is found in Genesis 50:2-3, 26. While this is possible, the context, which talks about the fragrance of the vines, clearly allows for the possibility that the reference here is to the sweet fragrance of the young figs.

It appears that the woman is playfully hiding from her lover (v. 14), who, comparing her to a dove hiding in rocky crevices, is attempting to coax her out. The word translated ‘sights’ in line 3 and ‘appearance’ in line 6 is מְרְאָה (*mar’eh*), which can mean ‘sight, appearance, form, face, countenance’. Many translations opt for ‘face’ (e.g. NRSV, ESV, TNK, NIV), but this obscures the fact that the term appears in the plural in line 3 and in the singular in line 6. Bloch and Bloch suggest that the plural ‘is meaningful and fully motivated: the lover wants to see the Shulamite from every side’ (1995, p. 156).

The Couple (2:15)

2:15 Catch us the foxes,
 the little foxes
 that ruin the vineyards,
 for our vineyards are in blossom.

אֶחְזוּ־לָנוּ שׁוֹעָלִים
 שׁוֹעָלִים קְטָנִים
 מְחַבְּלִים כְּרָמִים
 וּכְרָמֵינוּ סָמְדָרִ: ס

While entirely unproblematic from a translator's point of view, v. 15 is somewhat enigmatic, as there are no hints regarding the intended speakers. Based on the notion that the vineyard elsewhere in the Song symbolises the woman's body (1:6; 8:12) and that the brothers are presented as her guardians (1:6; 8:8-9), it has been suggested that they are the speakers of v. 15 (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 175). Hess, on the other hand, has pointed out that the vineyard appears as a metaphor not only for the woman's body but also for the couple's union of love, concluding that 'this is a powerful statement about the need to protect the love that the lovers possess' (2005, p. 98). On this view, it is the couple themselves who are the speakers of these lines.

The Woman (2:16-3:5)

<p>2:16 My lover is mine and I am his. He feeds among the lotuses.</p> <p>2:17 Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, be like a gazelle, my lover, or like a young stag on the cleft mountains.</p>	<p>דוֹדִי לִי וְאֲנִי לוֹ הִרְעָה בְּשׁוֹשַׁנִּים: עַד שִׁפּוּחַ הַיּוֹם וְנָסוּ הַצִּלְלִים סֹבֵב דְּמַהֲלֵךְ דּוֹדִי לְצִבִּי אוֹ לְעֵפֶר הָאֵילִים עַל־הַרִי בְּתָר: ס</p>
<p>3:1 On my bed, during the nights, I sought the one I love. I sought him but didn't find him.</p> <p>3:2 I'll get up now and go about the city. In the streets and squares I'll seek the one I love. I sought him but didn't find him.</p> <p>3:3 The watchmen who roam the city met me. 'Have you seen the one I love?'</p> <p>3:4 Scarcely had I moved on from them when I found the one I love. I seized him and wouldn't let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, into the room of her who conceived me.</p> <p>3:5 I ask you to promise, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you will not awaken nor arouse love until it is ready.</p>	<p>עַל־מִשְׁכָּבִי בַלַּיְלוֹת בְּקִשְׁתִּי אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי בְּקִשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מָצָאתִיו: אֶקוּמָה נָא וְאֶסּוּבָבָה בְּעִיר בְּשׁוּקִים וּבְרַחֲבוֹת אֶבְקֹשֶׁה אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי בְּקִשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מָצָאתִיו: מְצֹאנֵי הַשְּׂמָרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בְּעִיר אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי רְאִיתֶם: כִּמְעַט שֶׁעֲבַרְתִּי מֵהֶם עַד שֶׁמָּצָאתִי אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי אֶחְזָתִיו וְלֹא אֶרְפֹּנוּ עַד־שֶׁהֵבִיאתִיו אֶל־בַּיִת אִמִּי וְאֶל־חֲדַר הוֹרְתִי: הַשְּׁבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּצִבְאוֹת אוֹ בְּאֵילוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תְּעִירוּ וְאִם־תְּעוּרְרוּ אֶת־הָאֵהָבָה עַד שֶׁתְּחַפֵּץ: ס</p>

The woman rejoices in their mutual relationship. As we said earlier, the flower traditionally translated 'lily' is perhaps better identified as the lotus (see comment on

2:1). Her lover is thus presented as feeding or grazing among the lotuses. The Hebrew verb רעה (*r'h*) basically means 'pasture', but, like its English equivalent, it can be used of a shepherd tending flocks as well as of grazing sheep. The lotuses reappear elsewhere in connection with the woman's body (7:3 [2]) and her lover's lips (5:13); and in 6:2, the lover is seen gathering lotuses in his garden, yet another reference to the woman's body. All this suggests that the image of the lover grazing among the lotuses is a *double entendre* hinting at the man's enjoyment of his beloved's erotic charms.

Reading '*before* the day breathes and the shadows flee', Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 157) understand v. 17 as the woman's request that her lover hurry away before day-break so that they will not be discovered. However, since the Hebrew preposition עַד (*ad še*) usually means 'until', rather than 'before', Alter (1985, p. 195) is right to suggest that she 'is inviting her lover to a night of pleasure, urging him to hasten to enjoy to the utmost before day breaks'. This implies that the lotuses and cleft mountains 'are on the landscape of her body' (Alter, *ibid.*), where, like a gazelle or young stag, the lover is invited to frolic through the night. That this is the intended meaning of the verse is reinforced by the parallel in 4:6, which features the same poetic allusion to the break of day and clearly expresses the man's intent to spend the night on what is there called 'the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense'.

The description of the mountains in our verse is somewhat unclear, as a comparison of the translations indicates. KJV and NASB read 'the mountains of Bether' (see also Hess, 2005, p. 86), thus construing the Hebrew term בֶּתֶר (*beter*) as a place name. Translations such as 'cleft mountains' (NRSV, ESV) or 'rugged hills' (NIV), on the other hand, relate it to the verb בָּתַר (*btr*), 'to cut, cleave, divide'.

During the nights, the woman is missing her lover (3:1). Suggested translations include 'at night' (NRSV, TNK), 'by night' (KJV, ESV), 'all night long' (NIV) and 'night after night' (NASB). The Hebrew text literally reads 'in the nights'; the plural is captured well by the NASB's 'night after night'. Here and in vv. 2-4 'the one I love' is literally 'the one whom my soul loves' (see comment on 1:7). Eventually, the woman decides to get up and look for him in the streets and squares of the city (v. 2). According to Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 158), whenever 'the city' (הָעִיר *hā'ir*) appears in the Old Testament, it is Jerusalem that is in view.

Most translations render the verbal phrase of the first line of v. 3 'the watchmen found me'. However, as this is an unintentional act (cf. Gen. 44:8; Num. 15:32; Prov. 25:16), the phrase is best translated 'met me', 'came across me' or 'crossed my path'. The woman's question to the watchmen is quoted without an introductory formula, such as 'I asked them', which increases the urgency. The same effect is achieved by the word order in the Hebrew, for the woman's question literally reads, 'the one I love, have you seen?' Having found her lover soon after, the woman takes him to her mother's

house (v. 4) where, it has been suggested, ‘matters pertaining to marriage may have been discussed’ (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 159). The concluding oath or adjuration formula (v. 5) is a verbatim repetition from 2:7.

The Daughters of Jerusalem (3:6)

3:6 Who’s this coming up from the desert
like columns of smoke,
more fragrant with myrrh and frankincense
than all the scented powder of the merchant?

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר
כְּתִימְרוֹת עָשָׁן
מְקַטְטֶרֶת מֹר וְלִבְנָה
מִכֹּל אֲבֻקַּת רוֹכֵל:

There is some debate over the identity of the speakers in v. 6 and also in the following verses. Verses 6-11 are often regarded as a self-contained unit, whose speakers have been variously identified as the daughters of Jerusalem or the male lover. However, while the object of contemplation in v. 6 is clearly the woman, the Hebrew word for ‘this’ (זֹאת *zōt*) being feminine, the focus shifts from v. 7 onwards. Verse 6 finds a parallel in 8:5 where the question ‘who’s this coming up from the desert’ is repeated. Since the one coming up from the desert in 8:5 is leaning upon her lover, the speaker cannot be the man. On the other hand, it does make good sense, both here and in 8:5, to attribute the questions to the daughters of Jerusalem, who, in both cases, had just been addressed in the woman’s adjurations in 3:5 and 8:4.

The rhetorical formula ‘who’s this’ (cf. Job 38:2; Isa. 63:1; Jer. 46:7) is used for dramatic purposes, allowing the Shulamite to make a triumphant and almost numinous appearance. The translations tend to interpret v. 6b as saying either that the woman is perfumed with myrrh, frankincense and all the scented powder of the merchant (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV) or that the myrrh and frankincense have come from the merchant’s powder (NIV, TNK). However, the Hebrew construction is better taken to mean that the woman is presented as *more* fragrant with myrrh and frankincense than all the merchant’s scented powder (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 160).

Song 3:6-11 is one of the texts that explain the book’s association with King Solomon, who is mentioned in vv. 7, 9 and 11. Given that connotation, the merchant in v. 6 evokes the Solomonic trade (see 1 Kgs 10:15). Readers may also have been reminded of the visit of the Queen of Sheba, who gave Solomon ‘a great quantity of spices’ (1 Kgs 10:10). Frankincense, a balsamic resin obtained from the wood of a variety of trees, is associated with Sheba in Jeremiah 6:20.

The Woman (3:7-11)

3:7 Look, here’s Solomon’s bed.
Sixty warriors surround it,
from the warriors of Israel,

הִנֵּה מִטַּתוֹ שֶׁל־סְלֹמֹן
שְׁשִׁים גִּבּוֹרִים סָבִיב לָהּ
מִגִּבּוֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

<p>3:8 all of them skilled in warfare and trained in battle, each with his sword at his thigh against the danger of the nights.</p>	<p>כָּלֵם אֶתְּזִי חֶרֶב מְלֻמְדֵי מְלַחְמָה אִישׁ חֶרְבּוֹ עַל-יָרְכוֹ מִפֶּחַד בַּלַּיְלוֹת: ס</p>
<p>3:9 A pavilion King Solomon made for himself from the wood of Lebanon.</p>	<p>אֶפְרִיזֹן עָשָׂה לּוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה מֵעֵצֵי הַלְּבָנוֹן:</p>
<p>3:10 Its pillars he made of silver, its ceiling of gold, its seat of purple, its interior paved with love by the daughters of Jerusalem.</p>	<p>עֲמֻדָיו עָשָׂה כֶּסֶף רִפְיֵדְתּוֹ זָהָב מִרְפָּבּוֹ אֲרָגָמָן תּוֹכוֹ רְצוּף אֶהָבָה מִבָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם:</p>
<p>3:11 Come out, daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day of his heart's delight.</p>	<p>צֵאֵינָה וְרֵאֵינָה בָּנוֹת צִיּוֹן בַּמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה בַּעֲטָרָה שֶׁעֲטָרָהּ-לּוֹ אִמּוֹ בְּיוֹם חֲתֻנָּתוֹ וּבְיוֹם שִׂמְחַת לְבוֹ: ס</p>

In v. 7 the focus shifts from the woman initially to Solomon's bed. If it is agreed that vv. 7-11 form a self-contained unit, then the daughters of Jerusalem cannot be the intended speakers, as they are addressed in v. 11. This leaves the man or the woman, with the woman being the more likely option, as is suggested by the fact that she similarly addresses the daughters of Jerusalem at the end of five of her other speeches (see 2:7; 3:5; 5:8, 16; 8:4).

The information about Solomon and his wedding in vv. 7-11 has no basis in other Old Testament passages. And yet it is presented in a way that suggests that the writer is referring to well-known Solomonic folklore. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 161) note that the language is that of an inventory, in which the items that are the focus of attention are named first, i.e. 'a pavilion King Solomon made for himself', 'its pillars he made of' etc. Similar inventories of Solomonic buildings and possessions can be found in 1 Kings 7:6-8 and Ecclesiastes 2:4-8.

This reading also follows Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 162) in treating 3:6 and 3:7-11 as two self-contained units rather than seeing v. 7 as the answer to v. 6. The latter understanding has led translators to render the interrogative particle מִי (*mî*) at the beginning of v. 6 'what' (NASB, NRSV, ESV) rather than 'who' (thus rightly KJV, NIV, TNK), even though מִי (*mî*) is always used with animate objects. Translators who treat v. 7 as the answer to v. 6 have also turned Solomon's bed (מִטָּה *mitṭāh*) into an ambulatory one, as it was thought to have come up from the desert. Hence we find translations such as 'litter' (NRSV, ESV), 'palanquin' (Hess, 2005, p. 109), 'travelling couch' (NASB) or 'carriage' (NIV; but see KJV: 'bed' and TNK: 'couch'). As Bloch and Bloch rightly point out, there is nothing

in the text that would suggest that the bed of v. 7 is moving. The sixty warriors surrounding it apparently have to be pictured inside a sizeable royal bedchamber.

The translations usually picture the warriors in v. 8a as ‘wearing’, ‘holding’ or being ‘equipped with’ a sword (KJV, NIV, NRSV, ESV), an understanding that reflects the standard meaning of the Hebrew verb אָחַז (*’haz*). The problem with that reading is that the text would portray the warriors as being ‘seized by a sword’ (אָחַזוּ הַרֶבֶב *’ăhūzê hereb*). Some commentators think that we must be dealing with a different term, which has been understood on the basis of Akkadian and Ugaritic parallels as meaning ‘skilled’ (see Pope, 1977, p. 435; Fox, 1985, p. 124). Such an interpretation (which has also been adopted by TNK) makes good sense in the light of the following line, especially given that repetition is a standard feature of Hebrew parallelism. The text then literally reads ‘skilled with the sword’. My translation ‘in warfare’ regards ‘the sword’ as a metonymy, in which a part of an experience (here the sword) stands for the whole experience (warfare).

The warriors guard the king against danger during the nights. The Hebrew term פָּחַד (*paḥad*) most commonly designates the psychological phenomenon of fear, terror or dread, as is reflected in the translations, but it can also mean ‘danger’ (see Koehler and Baumgartner, 2001, *sub voc.* 1.b). In our verse, the warriors clearly guard the king against the real danger of assassination.

The object made by Solomon in v. 9 has been variously construed as ‘a chariot’ (KJV), ‘a sedan chair’ (NASB), ‘a palanquin’ (NRSV, TNK), ‘a litter’ (Hess, 2005, p. 110) or ‘a carriage’ (ESV). The Hebrew term אֲפִרְיֹן (*’appiryôn*), probably a Persian or Greek loanword, occurs only here and is of uncertain meaning. The translations just cited are all governed by the idea that this construct is the object that is coming up from the desert. Once again, there is no suggestion in vv. 9-10 that the object is moving. Indeed, the description in v. 10 rather suggests that we are dealing with a stationary structure. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 163) note that it ‘recalls the grandeur of the royal pavilion in Esther 1:6 with its marble pillars, beds ... of gold and silver, and floor paved with precious stones’, and they point out that, for instance, Ibn Ezra understood the אֲפִרְיֹן (*’appiryôn*) as a ‘magnificent building’, while the Zohar saw it as a palace. They also draw attention to the house built by Solomon for Pharaoh’s daughter, the most distinguished among his many wives. Like the אֲפִרְיֹן (*’appiryôn*) in our verse, this was made with cedar wood and costly stones (1 Kgs 7:7-9).

Verse 10 offers a description of King Solomon’s pavilion. Its pillars are made of silver, which is to say that they were covered or decorated with silver. In the Old Testament language for craftsmanship, ‘to make’ (עָשָׂה *’sh*) frequently applies to surface work. Hebrew עַמּוּד (*’ammûd*) can refer to a variety of upright support structures. While those who think of the construction in terms of a palanquin translate ‘posts’, the Old Testament elsewhere admiringly talks about Solomonic pillars (see 1 Kgs 7:2-6, 15-16).

In 2 Kings 25:13, 16-17 (cf. Jer. 52:17, 20-23) these pillars are mentioned among the treasures destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE.

The second line of v. 10 has caused problems because the first word (רְפִידָה *rəpîdāh*) occurs only here. As Hess notes, interpreters and translators have taken it to refer to the back, the top or the bottom of the structure (2005, p. 110). The first option, which interprets the term as denoting the support, rest or back of the structure, is the one adopted by LXX and Vulgate as well as NASB, NRSV, ESV and TNK (see also Carr, 1984, p. 112). Several modern commentators have espoused the second option, understanding רְפִידָה (*rəpîdāh*) as some kind of cover, such as the ceiling (Gerlemann, 1981, p. 139) or the roof (Murphy, 1990, pp. 148-149; Munro, 1995, p. 58) of the structure. Those who relate it to the bottom have understood it as its carpets or blankets (thus Fox, 1985, p. 126, noting that it 'is a cloth one spreads'), its floor (Falk, 1982, p. 27) or its underpart (Hess, 2005, 110). This understanding has also been adopted by KJV ('bottom') and NIV ('base'). A reading that apparently combines the first and third options relating to the object's back and bottom leads to interpretations that regard it as some kind of upholstery or bedding, i.e. cushions or a couch (for this see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 165). Pope, arguing along similar lines, somewhat more vaguely translates 'bolster' (1977, p. 443).

The root רפד (*rpd*), from which רְפִידָה (*rəpîdāh*) is derived, means 'to spread, stretch out'. It occurs with that sense in 2:5. In my judgement, the evidence is genuinely inconclusive. The reading 'ceiling' has been adopted primarily for stylistic reasons. As Munro notes, 'together the pillars and the roof constitute the framework. That is surely why they appear as a pair in 3.10ab' (1995, p. 58). Gerlemann somewhat similarly maintains that, if it is correct that the description is of a house or building, then a reference to its ceiling is to be expected (1981, p. 139).

In the case of the seat made of purple, the reference is to its fabric or upholstery, as has been made explicit in the translations of NASB, NIV and TNK. Lastly, v. 10 talks about the pavilion's interior, which has been lovingly paved or inlaid (רצף *ršp*) by the daughters of Jerusalem. My translation, 'paved', assumes that the reference is to the floor (thus also KJV and Bloch and Bloch, 1995, pp. 71, 165). This seems to be confirmed by Esther 1:6, where the term רצפה (*rišpāh*), derived from רצף (*ršp*), refers to the mosaic floor of King Ahasuerus' court (see Gerlemann, 1981, p. 59). NRSV translates: 'a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones'. Something similar may well be in view in our text. Some modern commentators, finding the reference to the loving attitude of the daughters of Jerusalem puzzling and out of place, have suggested substantial emendations. The text, however, makes perfect sense as it stands.

Apart from v. 11, there is no other reference in the Old Testament to Solomon's mother crowning him, a detail that Bloch and Bloch once again assign to Solomonic legends (1995, p. 166). The translation of the last line as 'the day of his heart's delight' ren-

ders the Hebrew quite literally (similarly KJV, NASB, NRSV and ESV). The heart, as is frequently the case, here refers to Solomon's whole person, or more properly, his affective faculties. TNK captures the sense of the Hebrew brilliantly in rendering the line simply as 'his day of bliss'.

One of the key questions regarding vv. 7-11 concerns their connection with the rest of the Song. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 166) offer three suggestions, i.e. that King Solomon functions as a counterpart to the woman's lover, who is described as her 'king' in 1:4, 12; that Solomon features as an object of the daughters of Jerusalem's admiration, much like the woman's lover (see 1:3); and that the focus on Solomon's mother on the occasion of his wedding mirrors the Song's interest in the woman's mother in 3:4 and 8:2.

The Man (4:1-15)

<p>4:1 You are so beautiful, my love. You are so beautiful. Your eyes are doves looking out from behind your locks. Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead.</p>	<p>הַנָּדָה יָפָה רְעִיתִי הַנָּדָה יָפָה עֵינַיִךְ יוֹנִים מִבְּעַד לְצַמְתָּךְ שְׂעָרֶךְ כְּעֵדֵר הָעֵזִים שֹׁגְלָשׁוֹ מֵהַר גִּלְעָד:</p>
<p>4:2 Your teeth are like a shorn flock that have come up from the washing pool, every one of them bearing twins, not one of them bereaved of offspring.</p>	<p>שְׁנֵיךְ כְּעֵדֵר הַקְּצוּבוֹת שֶׁעָלוּ מִן־הַרְחֵצָה שְׂכָלָם מִתְּאִימוֹת וְשִׁכְלָהּ אֵין בָּהֶם:</p>
<p>4:3 Like a scarlet thread are your lips; your mouth is beautiful. Like a slice of pomegranate gleams your brow from behind your locks.</p>	<p>כְּחוּט הַשָּׁנִי שֶׁפִּתְתִּיךְ וּמִדְּבָרֶיךָ נְאוּה כְּפֶלַח הָרְמוֹז רִקְתָּךְ מִבְּעַד לְצַמְתָּךְ:</p>
<p>4:4 Like the tower of David is your neck, built to perfection. A thousand bucklers hang on it, all of them shields of warriors.</p>	<p>כְּמִגְדַּל דָּוִד צֹאֲרֶךְ בְּנוֹי לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת אֶלֶף הַמִּגָּן תִּלְוֵי עֲלָיו כֹּל שְׁלֹטֵי הַגְּבוּרִים:</p>
<p>4:5 Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lotuses.</p>	<p>שְׁנֵי שְׂדֵיךְ כְּשְׁנֵי עֲפָרַיִם תְּאוּמֵי צְבִיָּה הָרוּעִים בְּשׁוֹשַׁנִּים:</p>
<p>4:6 Until the day breathes and the shadows flee I'll go to the mountain of myrrh, to the hill of frankincense.</p>	<p>עַד שִׁיִּפוּחַ הַיּוֹם וְנָסוּ הַצִּלְלִים אֵלַי לִי אֶל־הַר הַמִּזְר וְאֶל־גִּבְעַת הַלְּבוֹנָה:</p>

- 4:7 All of you is beautiful, my love;
there's no flaw in you. כָּלְךָ יָפָה רַעֲיָתִי
וּמוֹם אֵין בְּךָ: ס
- 4:8 Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
come with me from Lebanon,
come down from the peak of Amana,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards. אֶתִּי מִלְּבָנוֹן כָּלָה
אֶתִּי מִלְּבָנוֹן תָּבֹואִי
תְּשׁוּרִי מִרֹאשׁ אַמָּנָה
מִרֹאשׁ שֵׁנִיר וְחֶרְמוֹן
מִמְעֵנוֹת אַרְיֹת
מִהַרְרֵי נְמָרִים:
- 4:9 You've stolen my heart, my sister, my bride.
You've stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes,
with one coil of your necklace. לִבְבְּתִנִּי אָחַתִּי כָלָה
לִבְבְּתִינִי⁵ בְּאַחַת מַעֲיִנֶיךָ
בְּאַחַד עֲנָק מִצְוֹרְנֶיךָ:
- 4:10 How beautiful is your lovemaking,
my sister, my bride!
How much better is your lovemaking than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than all the spices! מֵה־יָפּוֹ דְדָיֶךָ
אָחַתִּי כָלָה
מֵה־טֹבוֹ דְדִילְךָ מִיַּיִן
וְרִיחַ שְׁמֶנֶיךָ מִכָּל־בְּשָׂמִים:
- 4:11 Your lips drip honey, my bride.
Honey and milk are under your tongue;
and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of
Lebanon. נֹפֶת תִּטְפֶּנָּה שִׁפְתֹתֶיךָ כָלָה
דְּבַשׁ וְחֶלֶב תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנֶיךָ
וְרִיחַ שְׁלֹמֹתֶיךָ כְּרִיחַ לְבָנוֹן: ס
- 4:12 You are a locked garden,
my sister, my bride,
a locked pool,
a sealed spring. גִּזְן נֶעוּל
אָחַתִּי כָלָה
גִּל נֶעוּל
מִעַיִן חֲתוּם:
- 4:13 Your branches are a pomegranate grove
with delicious fruits,
henna with spikenards, עֵם פְּרֵי מְגֻדִים
כְּפָרִים עִם־נֶרְדִים:
- 4:14 spikenard and saffron,
cane and cinnamon,
with all aromatic trees,
myrrh and aloes,
with all the finest spices. נֶרְדָּא וְכַרְפֹּם
קָנָה וְקַנְמֹן
עִם כָּל־עֵצֵי לְבוֹנָה
מֶר וְאַהֲלוֹת
עִם כָּל־רֹאשֵׁי בְשָׂמִים:
- 4:15 You are a garden spring,
a well of living water,
flowing streams from Lebanon. מִעַיִן גַּיִם
בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים
וְנוֹלִים מִן־לְבָנוֹן:

⁵Ketib: בְּאַחַד.

The man now offers a description of his beloved’s physical charms, beginning with the woman’s eyes. Modern English translations and most commentators picture them behind a veil. The Hebrew term **צִמָּה** (*šammāh*) occurs only four times in the Old Testament, here, in 4:3; 6:7 and Isaiah 47:2. Based on the latter text, Bloch and Bloch (1995, pp. 166-168) have argued that **צִמָּה** (*šammāh*) does not mean ‘veil’. In order to follow their argument, we need to take a look at the relevant lines from Isaiah 47:2-3, a passage that talks about the eventual humiliation of Babylon. The following table features the translation of the NRSV, the relevant Hebrew terms and the suggested translation where it differs from the NRSV:

NRSV	Hebrew verb	Hebrew noun	Suggested translation
remove your <u>veil</u>	גלה (<i>glh</i>)	צִמָּה (<i>šammāh</i>)	uncover your <u>locks</u>
strip off your <u>robe</u>	חשף (<i>hšp</i>)	שֹׁבֵל (<i>šōbel</i>)	expose your <u>underskirt</u>
uncover your <u>legs</u>	גלה (<i>glh</i>)	שׁוֹק (<i>šōq</i>)	uncover your <u>thigh</u>
your <u>nakedness</u> shall be <i>uncovered</i> and your shame shall be seen	גלה (<i>glh</i>)	עֲרֹוּה (<i>erwāh</i>)	

Three times the verb **גלה** (*glh*) appears. Twice, in connection with the legs and the nakedness, it is translated ‘uncover’. In the first line, however, in connection with **צִמָּה** (*šammāh*), here also translated ‘veil’, the verb is rendered ‘remove’. Yet that is not what **גלה** (*glh*) means. That translation has been chosen simply because it makes little sense to say ‘uncover your veil’. As Bloch and Bloch point out, in the context of Isaiah 47:2-3, the **צִמָּה** (*šammāh*) must be something that the Babylonians would be reluctant to expose. Noting that, in addition to the translation ‘veil’, there is also an ancient tradition (exemplified, for instance, by Ibn Ezra) of rendering the term along the lines of ‘locks, tresses, mass of hair, braided hair’, they suggest that a reference to hair makes good sense since ‘in ancient Mesopotamian society, it was improper for a woman, especially one of the higher classes, to bare her head in public’ (p. 167).⁶

Bloch and Bloch offer two further arguments in support of their reading. One is based on Hebrew morphology, i.e. the observation that nouns that follow the rare pattern in which the doubled middle consonant is preceded by *a* and followed by *āh* are frequently associated with body parts. Two examples of this pattern occur in the Song: **רִקְקָה** (*raqqāh*), ‘brow’ (4:3; 6:7), and **דָּלָה** (*dallāh*), ‘thrums’ (7:6). Interestingly, both are associated with the woman’s head and hair. Secondly, Bloch and Bloch point out that all the nouns in vv. 1-5 that carry the possessive pronoun ‘your’ (-*ēk*, -*ayik*) refer to body parts, i.e. **עֵינַיִךְ** (*ēnayik*), ‘your eyes’, **שְׁעָרֶיךָ** (*šarēk*), ‘your hair’, **שִׁנַּיִךְ** (*šinnayik*), ‘your

⁶Bloch and Bloch similarly argue that **חָשַׁף** (*hāšap*) does not mean ‘strip off’ but ‘expose, lay bare, show’; and they tentatively suggest that **שֹׁבֵל** (*šōbel*), a *hapax legomenon* of uncertain meaning, might refer to an underskirt. Lastly, **שׁוֹק** (*šōq*) is more precisely rendered ‘thigh’ rather than ‘legs’.

teeth', שִׁפְתֹתַיִךְ (*šiptōtayik*), 'your lips', רִקְתֶּךָ (*raqqātēk*), 'your brow', צִוְאַרְךָ (*šawwā'rēk*), 'your neck', and שְׁדַיִךְ (*šādayik*), 'your breasts'. 'Veil' would be the only exception. All this suggests that KJV appears to be along the right lines in translating צִמָּה (*šammāh*) as 'locks'.

It has to be said that the understanding of צִמָּה (*šammāh*) as 'veil' is an ancient one, going back to LXX and Symmachus. But Bloch and Bloch may well be correct to surmise that it appealed to translators and commentators primarily because 'the image of a Shulamite whose face is modestly covered with a veil was in perfect harmony with the apologetic approach that governed much of traditional Jewish and Christian scholarship' (p. 168).

The Hebrew text literally reads 'your eyes are doves from behind your locks'. The words 'looking out' have been added in order to indicate that the woman's eyes are not merely the man's object of observation but are perceived as actively looking out from behind her hair.

Having mentioned her locks, the lover then moves on to the woman's hair, depicted as a flock of goats 'streaming down' the mountainside. The verb גִּלְשׁ (*glš*), which occurs only here, has been explained, with reference to a Ugaritic cognate, as denoting the streaming or surging of waters. Hess (2005, p. 111) translates 'descend in waves'; and Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 169) note that the image suggests 'heavy, thick, wavy hair in flowing motion'.

Verse 2, which moves on to the woman's teeth, is repeated verbatim in 6:6, with one exception. In 6:6, we read of a flock of ewes (רְחֵלִים *rēḥēlīm*), while 4:2 literally talks about a 'flock of shorn ones' (עֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת *edēr haqqəšûbôt*). That they are ewes is implied. That they have come up from the washing pool underlines the whiteness of the woman's teeth. But they are also remarkable for being complete, not necessarily a given in an ancient society, and of an even and regular shape. This is emphasised in the image of the twins and the notion that none of them are bereaved of offspring. The point of the latter is that, since lambs are typically walking beside their mother, in the case of a ewe having lost its lamb, there would be an empty place beside it.

The second line of v. 3 – we have now moved on to the woman's mouth – is ambiguous in that the Hebrew noun מִדְּבָר (*midbār*) can refer to her 'speech' (KJV) or 'voice' (Ibn Ezra, Rashi), or to her mouth (NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV, TNK). Because of a perceived parallel with 2:14 (the adjective נְאֻוָּה [*nā'weh*] occurs in both verses), where the focus is on acoustic and visual aspects (the woman's voice and appearance), and due to the focus on the beauty of the woman's lips and mouth being seen as redundant, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 170) translate מִדְּבָר (*midbār*) as 'voice', which is praised as being delicious. However, this interpretation fails to observe that the focus throughout vv. 1-5 is on visual aspects. Moreover, far from being redundant, the praise of the beauty of the wom-

an's mouth rounds off the description in vv. 2-3a, which began by praising the whiteness, regularity and completeness of her teeth before moving on to the deep redness of her lips, by summing up and depicting her entire mouth as beautiful.

Translators and commentators are not agreed on the identity of the next body part. 'Cheeks' (NRSV, ESV) or 'temples' (KJV, NASB, NIV) are popular proposals. Yet these translations obscure the fact that the Hebrew noun *רֵקֶה* (*raqqāh*) is in the singular. Nor does the text talk about pieces or halves of a pomegranate, as some imply (e.g. NRSV, ESV, NIV; Hess, 2005, p. 112). Again, the relevant term (*פֶּלֶחַח* *peleḥḥ*) appears in the singular. All this is best captured in the translation of TNK, which reads, 'your brow ... gleams like a pomegranate split open'. The point of comparison appears to be the colour of the pomegranate, which her brow equals. The verb 'gleams', which does not occur in the Hebrew text, has been added in order to convey the sense, implied by the phrase 'from behind', of the woman's brow actively, as it were, shimmering through her hair. As in v. 1, *צִמָּה* (*šammāh*) is best translated 'locks', not 'veil'.

Turning to the woman's neck (v. 4), this is compared to the tower of David. But is that tower built 'in rows of stone' (ESV; similarly NASB: 'with rows of stones'), 'in courses' (NRSV), 'with elegance' (NIV) or 'to hold weapons' (TNK; see also KJV: 'builded for an amoury')? Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 170) note that these widely differing renderings of the Hebrew phrase *לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת* (*lētālpiyyôt*) 'are mostly based on pure speculation and dubious etymologies'. Many modern commentators prefer readings such as 'in courses' (Pope, 1977, pp. 6, 466-468), 'in terraces' or 'in layers' (Hess, 2005, p. 112), which are explained by suggesting that the woman's necklace, consisting of rows of beads, might evoke a tower built in rows, or courses, of stones. However, as Bloch and Bloch (p. 171) indicate, Hebrew grammar seems to rule this out since verbs meaning 'build', 'make', 'shape' etc. typically occur with two objects and no preposition. The following example illustrates the construction well: 'he built the inner court [with] three courses of dressed stone' (1 Kgs 6:36). NRSV adds the preposition 'with' in order to clarify the meaning of the sentence; the Hebrew merely features two objects: 'the inner court', 'three courses of dressed stone'. When a preposition does occur, as in 1 Kings 6:15-16, it is *בְּ* (*bē-*) rather than *לְ* (*lē-*): 'he lined the walls of the house on the inside *with* boards of cedar' (*בְּצִלְעוֹת אֲרָזִים* *bēṣal'ôt 'ārāzîm*).

Commentators also generally assume that *תַּלְפִּיּוֹת* (*talpiyyôt*) is a plural noun. Once again, Bloch and Bloch have questioned this, pointing out that there are several Hebrew words that are plurals in form (i.e. ending in *-ôt* or *-îm*) but that function as adverbs. Examples include *נֹרְאוֹת* (*nôrā'ôt*), 'awesomely' (Ps. 139:14 [NRSV has 'fearfully']); *עוֹלָמִים* (*'ôlāmîm*), 'forever' (1 Kgs 8:13); and *מִישָׁרִים* (*mêšārîm*), 'rightly' (Song 1:4). Importantly for our purposes, adverbially used words are frequently preceded by the preposition *לְ*

(*lě-*) as in the case of *לְהַפְלִי' (lěhaplî')*, ‘wondrously’ (Joel 2:26), and *לְעוֹלָמִים (lě‘ōlāmîm)*, ‘forever’ (Ps. 77:8), one of the plural forms mentioned above.

None of this establishes the actual meaning of the enigmatic term *לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת (lětalpiyyôt)*, but based on these grammatical considerations and the context in which it appears, Bloch and Bloch (p. 172) suggest a meaning along the lines of ‘wondrously, magnificently, to perfection’. Indeed, they point out that, according to Ibn Ezra, early Jewish interpreters tended to paraphrase *לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת (lětalpiyyôt)* ‘without equal’. Among modern translations, this approach has been adopted by NIV, which, as already mentioned, translates ‘with elegance’. If this is generally along the right lines, it would be the neck itself, rather than the neck with its necklace, that is praised by the lover, as indeed is the case with all the other body parts mentioned in vv. 1-5. Having marvelled at the beauty of his beloved’s neck, the necklace is then singled out for special comment in the last two lines of v. 4.

Those two lines, in turn, become far more transparent in the light of Ezekiel 27:10-11, a passage that talks about warriors hanging their weaponry on towers and city walls in a display that lends a city splendour and beauty. Several key terms appear in both texts: tower (*מִגְדָּל migdāl*), buckler (*מָגֵן māgēn*),⁷ shield (*שֵׁלֶט šelet*) and the verb ‘to hang’ (*תלה tlh*). In addition to these, the ‘men of war’ (*אֲנָשֵׁי מִלְחָמָה ‘ansê milḥāmāh*) in Ezekiel 27:10 (NRSV translates ‘mighty warriors’, but the term is different from the one found in the Song of Songs) correspond to the ‘warriors’ (*גִּבּוֹרִים gibbôrîm*) in Song 4:4; and in mentioning beauty (*יָפִי yōpî*), Ezekiel 27:11 employs a term whose derivatives occur repeatedly in the Song. Obscured by some translations (e.g. NIV, ESV), our verse uses two distinct terms for different types of shields, here translated ‘bucklers’ and ‘shields’ (similarly KJV, NRSV; NASB reads ‘shields’ and ‘round shields’).

It is the woman’s stunning necklace, on display on her beautiful neck, that evokes the image of the weaponry displayed on King David’s tower, an image of awe-inspiring grandeur and beauty. Indeed, the purpose of the military imagery employed in connection with the woman, not only here but also in other parts of the Song, appears to be to draw attention to the awesomeness of her physical appearance.

Turning to the woman’s breasts (v. 5), the lover praises their identical shape, as is indicated by the reference to twins. Gazelles may have been selected for their gracefulness and gentleness. Alter (1995, p. 128) suggests that ‘an invitation to caress’ might perhaps also be implied. The grazing of the gazelles among the lotuses calls to mind the

⁷The Hebrew of v. 4 literally reads ‘the thousand buckler hang’, with both the noun and the verb occurring in the singular. The noun thus functions as a collective singular, as is frequently the case with large round numbers, but the singular verb indicates that the whole group of bucklers is treated as a single object. Bloch and Bloch (1995, pp. 172-173) suggest that the grammatical construction marks the object as something that would have been well-known, i.e. ‘those famous bucklers of which we have all heard’, yet another instance of Davidic folklore that they find throughout the Song.

earlier reference to the lover himself feeding among the lotuses, an erotic *double entendre* that describes his amorous encounter with his beloved in 2:16.

Having thus enumerated the woman's charms, the man voices his determination to go and be with her until the day dawns (v. 6). Once again, the beautiful image of the day breathing and the shadows fleeing is used to refer to the early morning (cf. 2:17); and the woman, who had been depicted as 'more fragrant with myrrh and frankincense' than the aromatic powders of the spice merchants (3:6), is here called a 'mountain of myrrh' and a 'hill of frankincense', images that call to mind the spice mountains well-known to us from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Of course, the point of comparison is not the colourful display but the breathtakingly enticing fragrance, while the notion of mountains and hills may also evoke the *mons pubis* (cf. Alter, 1985, p. 201).

Having praised his beloved's beauty before (see 1:8, 15; 2:10, 13; 4:1) and having just dwelled on her bodily charms in some detail, the lover now concludes that she is all beautiful and flawless. Colloquially, the first line of v. 7 might well be rendered 'every inch of you is beautiful' (for this suggestion, see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 173).

The wish, expressed in v. 8, that his bride come with him from the mountains of Lebanon is not to be taken literally. The three mountains and the wild animals that inhabit them are part of the lovers' fantasy world, which evokes their freedom and vitality as well as a sense of danger and majestic beauty (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 174).

The meaning of v. 9 hinges upon the verb, which has led to much discussion. The phrase 'you've stolen my heart' is a translation of the Hebrew verb לִבַּבְתִּינִי (libbabtīnī). It is clear that the verb לִבַּב (lbb) is related to לֵבָב (lēbāb), the Hebrew word for the heart. The precise meaning of the verb, however, is far from clear. One suggestion, adopted here, is that it means something along the lines of 'steal,⁸ enchant, captivate, ravish the heart'. Another possibility is to translate 'you have heartened, encouraged, emboldened me' (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 175).

In calling his beloved 'sister', the man is using a term of endearment that is found also in ancient Egyptian love songs. As Fox (1985, p. 136) points out, 'the basis of [the] expression is the closeness of the relationship between brother and sister'. The phrase 'my sister, my bride', which is a leitmotif in 4:8–5:2, thus 'asserts both current intimacy and future relationship' (*ibid.*). The Hebrew text literally reads 'you have stolen my heart with one of your eyes'. In line with the translations (see NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV, TNK; also Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 77; Hess, 2005, p. 113; however, KJV omits it), 'glance' has been added here as the most reasonable explanation of the text's meaning.

Apart from her eyes, which here feature again, having already been mentioned in v. 1, it is the woman's necklace that captivates the man. The Hebrew term (צַוָּרֹן) saw-

⁸See Waltke and O'Connor, 1990, p. 412, who note that the Piel can denote the taking away of something, citing Song 4:9 as one of their examples.

wārôn) appears in the plural, thus indicating that it consists of multiple strands. While in its totality it inspired the military imagery of v. 4, the lover now declares that a single coil is enough to enthrall him.

The man's praise of the woman as a lover (v. 10) equals her earlier praise of him (1:2-3). Both describe the partner's lovemaking as better than wine; both praise the fragrance of the other's anointing oils. And both delight in each other's kisses. In 1:2 the woman longs for them; here, in v. 11, the man compares the sweetness of her kisses to honey and milk. In addition to the standard term for honey (דְּבַשׁ *děbaš*), which is found in the second line, the lover talks about the best honey, honey fresh from the honeycomb (נֹפֶת *nōpet*), that is dripping from her lips. Commentators have pointed out that the first line could also refer to the woman's sweet words, but given the context, which envisages the man tasting the honey and milk found under the woman's tongue, and the parallel text in 1:2-3, which explicitly mentions kissing, this seems unlikely. And there is yet another reference to the woman's fragrance here, or, more precisely, that of her garments. The 'fragrance of Lebanon' has been linked by commentators to its forests and wines, the fragrance of the latter being mentioned in Hosea 14:7.

Having begun his speech by praising the woman's physical charms (vv. 1-5), the man in vv. 12-15 describes her sexuality in terms of a garden rich in fruit and spices, a garden that is locked to all but him. Because v. 12 does not contain a finite verb, it is not clear whether the man is still addressing his beloved or whether he is talking about her. Many English translations (e.g. KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV, TNK; also Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 79) have come to the latter conclusion, translating along the lines of 'a garden locked is my sister'. However, the personal pronoun 'your' in the next verse indicates that the woman continues to be the addressee throughout the man's speech. NIV thus correctly translates 'you are a garden locked up' (see also Hess, 2005, p. 114).

NRSV repeats the words 'a garden locked', thus accepting the variant reading found in LXX, Vulgate, Peshitta and some Hebrew manuscripts, but it is unlikely that a scribe would have mistakenly written גַּל (*gal*) instead of גַּן (*gan*). גַּל (*gal*), variously rendered 'spring' (KJV, NIV, ESV), 'rock garden' (NASB) or 'fountain' (TNK), usually refers to a wave, but, based on Ugaritic, Akkadian and Greek parallels and the presence of a similar word גִּלְגָּל (*gullāh*), Pope (1977, pp. 488-489) has argued that the reference here is to a bowl-shaped pool. Proverbs 5:15-19 similarly applies the imagery of a fountain and other water supplies to the female sexual partner.

Having compared his beloved to a locked garden full of refreshing water, the man now describes her body as a pomegranate grove full of delicious fruits and aromatic spices (vv. 13-14). It is not entirely clear, however, which body part the writer had in mind. The term translated 'your branches' (שֵׁלַחַיִּיק *šēlāḥayik*) occurs only here. Its meaning is uncertain, but, derived from the verb שָׁלַח (*šlh*), 'to stretch out, send', the image

might be that of roots or branches sent forth by trees (cf. Jer. 17:8; Ps. 80:12 [11]). Translations such as ‘shoots’ (NASB, ESV) or ‘plants’ (KJV, NIV) reflect a similar understanding. Another option is to interpret שְׁלַח (*šelah*) as a canal or channel (thus NRSV). While in the latter case the reference may be to the woman’s vagina (thus e.g. Keel, 1994, p. 176), it has been suggested that the branches similarly depict her pubic area, which in female Egyptian deities of the Middle Bronze Age was represented by branches (see Görg, 1993).⁹ Some interpreters prefer a vaguer reference to the woman’s body generally (e.g. Hess, 2005, p. 114), which is also reflected in TNK’s ‘your limbs’.



Commenting on the spices mentioned in vv. 13-14, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 177) note that only saffron and henna are known to have grown in Palestine. Myrrh, cinnamon and cane are likely imports, while spikenard, frankincense and aloes would clearly have been luxury imports from far-away places such as India, Arabia, Somalia and perhaps even China. Another interesting feature in v. 13 is the occurrence of the term פְּרָדִים (*pardēs*), from which, via the Greek παράδεισος (*paradeisos*), we derive the English term ‘paradise’. A Persian loanword with the original meaning ‘enclosed park’ or ‘pleasure ground’, it is only found with the meaning ‘orchard’ from the third century BCE (thus Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 177).

The opening line of v. 15 literally reads ‘a spring of gardens’. As in v. 12, the words ‘you are’ have been added for clarity. The phrase ‘a spring of gardens’, where גַּנִּים (*gannîm*) is a generic plural, designates a spring that is typically found in gardens, hence ‘a garden spring’. The syntax of the last line allows for two interpretations, since the Hebrew term נוֹזְלִים (*nōzlîm*) can be understood as a plural noun meaning ‘flowing streams’ (ESV, NRSV) or as a participle modifying ‘water’, i.e. ‘living and flowing water’ (see NIV’s ‘flowing water streaming down’). The first reading has been adopted here, because נוֹזְלִים (*nōzlîm*) is used elsewhere as a synonym for water (see e.g. Ps. 78:16; Prov. 5:15; Isa. 44:3).

The Woman (4:16)

4:16 Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind!
 Blow upon my garden that its spices may stream out.
 Let my lover come to his garden
 and eat its delicious fruit.

עוֹרֵי צָפוֹן וּבֹאֵי תִימָן
 הַפִּיחֵי גַנִּי יִזְלוּ בְּשִׁמְיֹו
 יָבֹא דוֹדִי לְגַנּוֹ
 וַיֹּאכַל פְּרֵי מְגֻדָּיו:

In her response, the woman makes it clear that she desires for the spices of her garden to stream out and call attention to it. She desires for her lover to come to what is now his garden and enjoy its delicious fruit. Because the verb ‘blow, breathe’ (פּוּחַ *pwh*) ap-

⁹See also the Ugaritic pendant (14th-13th-century) displaying a naked goddess (reproduced from Keel, 1994, p. 175).

pears in the causative Hiphil stem, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 178) note that it might have the sense of ‘to cause to breathe’, perhaps implying a bringing to life. Referring to the parallel found in Ezekiel 37:9, they suggest that the implication might be that ‘the Shulamite’s garden ... is dormant and magically brought to life by the winds she summons’.

The Man (5:1)

5:1 I’ve come to my garden, my sister, my bride.
I’ve plucked my myrrh with my spices.
I’ve eaten my honeycomb with my honey.
I’ve drunk my wine with my milk.

בָּאתִי לְגַנִּי אֶחְתִּי כְּלֵה
אֶרִיתִי מִזֵּי עֵם־בְּשָׁמִי
אֶכְלֵתִי יַעֲרִי עֵם־דְּבָשִׁי
שָׁתִיתִי יַיִן עִם־חֲלָבִי

Eat, friends,
drink and get drunk on lovemaking.

אֶכְלוּ רַעִים
שָׁתוּ וְשָׁכְרוּ דֹדִים: ט

One of the key questions regarding the man’s reply concerns the tense of the verbs, as a comparison of the translations indicates. While some (e.g. NASB, NIV, TNK; see also ESV’s ‘I came’) translate ‘I have come’, NRSV reads ‘I come’, taking the man’s words as a statement of intent. However, as Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 178) maintain, ‘while the Hebrew “perfect” verb is indeed able to express a variety of temporal and aspectual nuances, its most typical role – especially in the Song – is to denote a narrative past’. In other words, the man’s statement is best taken as implying consummation. Ernst (2003, p. 49) summarises the gist of 4:12–5:1 in these words:

Perhaps his bride is a closed garden to all but him, for whom she is a flowing fountain. In fact, she implores the wind to blow upon her garden, so that its spicy fragrance flows out, enticing her lover to come in and enjoy the fruits there. And he does. He has come into his garden, he has plucked, he has eaten, and he has drunk.

Sexual connotations are implied not only in the plucking, eating and drinking but even in the coming into his garden since the Hebrew verb בוא (*bw*), ‘come to, enter’, is regularly used to denote sexual intercourse.

A notable feature of v. 1 is the repeated use of the preposition ‘with’ (עִם *im*), i.e. ‘my myrrh *with* my spices’, ‘my honeycomb *with* my honey’ and ‘my wine *with* my milk’, instead of ‘and’. This provides a note of exuberance, as if to say ‘I have plucked my myrrh, and my spices too’ (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 179). We have already encountered the same construction in the list of rare spices mentioned in 4:13-14.

The last two lines of v. 1 have been understood by some commentators as a kind of chorus, perhaps spoken by the daughters of Jerusalem, who, on that view, might be addressing the couple. As Hess (2005, p. 156) notes, ‘it is not clear who is being addressed or even who is doing the talking’. He prefers to see the switch to plural verbs as signal-

ling a different speaker (p. 157), but that need not be the case. It seems equally possible that the man in his exuberance, which is palpable throughout v. 1, is now inviting others to taste love for themselves and get drunk on lovemaking just as he did. As again Hess points out, the Hebrew term שֶׁכַר (*škr*), which can mean ‘drinking without restraint’, commonly refers to intoxication and thus should be taken in that way also in the present context.

While NRSV and ESV share this interpretation of the final line, some translators have come to different conclusions. The reason for this is that the last word (דוֹדִים *dôdîm*) can also be translated ‘lovers’ instead of ‘lovemaking’. Hence, for instance, NIV’s ‘drink your fill, O lovers’ (see also KJV, RSV, NASB as well as LXX, Peshitta and Vulgate). However, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 179) are right to point out that it makes little sense to assume that a term that is consistently used throughout the Song to refer to lovemaking should acquire, just this once, a different meaning. Indeed, they aptly comment that ‘one can see why this reading was preferred by those to whom the notion of getting drunk on love may have been too blatantly erotic’.

The Woman (5:2-8)

5:2 I slept, but my heart was awake.

Listen! My lover is knocking.

‘Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one,

for my head is drenched with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.’

5:3 ‘I’ve taken off my garment,

how could I put it on?

I’ve bathed my feet,

how could I soil them?’

5:4 My lover thrust his hand into the hole,

and my longing was aroused for him.

5:5 I arose to open to my lover.

My hands dripped myrrh,

my fingers liquid myrrh,

upon the handles of the bolt.

5:6 I opened to my lover,

but my lover had turned and gone.

I fainted when he left.

I sought him but couldn’t find him.

I called him, but he didn’t answer me.

אָנִי יָשָׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֹר
קוֹל | דּוֹדֵי דוֹפֵק
פִּתְחֵי-לִי אֲחֹתִי רַעֲיָתִי
יוֹנָתִי תַמְתִּי
שָׁרָאֲשִׁי נִמְלֵא-טֶל
קוֹצוֹתַי רְסִיִּי לַיְלָה:
פָּשַׁטְתִּי אֶת-כִּתְנֹנֹתַי
אֵיכָכָה אֶלְבָּשֶׁנָּה
רָחַצְתִּי אֶת-רַגְלֵי
אֵיכָכָה אֶטְנַפֶּם:
דּוֹדֵי שָׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן-הַחֹר
וּמַעֵי הָמוּ עָלָיו:
קָמָתִי אָנִי לִפְתֹּחַ לְדוֹדֵי
וַיִּדְּנִי נִטְפוֹ-מֹר
וְאֶצְבְּעוֹתַי מֹר עֵבֶר
עַל כַּפּוֹת הַמְּנַעוּל:
פִּתְחֹתַי אָנִי לְדוֹדֵי
וְדוֹדֵי חָמַק עֵבֶר
נִפְשִׁי יֵצְאָה בְּדַבְרוֹ
בְּקִשְׁתִּיהוּ וְלֹא מָצָאתִיהוּ
קָרָאתִיו וְלֹא עָנָנִי:

<p>5:7 The watchmen who roam the city met me. They beat me, they bruised me, they took my shawl from me, those watchmen of the walls.</p>	<p>מִצְאֵי הַשְּׁמָרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בְּעִיר הַכּוֹנֵי פְצָעוֹנֵי נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־רִדְדֵי מַעְלֵי שְׁמָרֵי הַחֲמוֹת: הַשֹּׁבְעֵתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם אִם־תִּמְצְאוּ אֶת־דּוֹדֵי מִהֲתַגִּידוּ לוֹ שְׁחֹלֶת אֶהְבֶּה אֹנִי:</p>
<p>5:8 I ask you to promise, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my lover, what will you tell him? That I'm sick with love.</p>	<p>מִצְאֵי הַשְּׁמָרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בְּעִיר הַכּוֹנֵי פְצָעוֹנֵי נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־רִדְדֵי מַעְלֵי שְׁמָרֵי הַחֲמוֹת: הַשֹּׁבְעֵתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם אִם־תִּמְצְאוּ אֶת־דּוֹדֵי מִהֲתַגִּידוּ לוֹ שְׁחֹלֶת אֶהְבֶּה אֹנִי:</p>

In the next scene we read about the woman yearning for her lover at night. This recalls her earlier yearnings, expressed in 3:1 in a passage that shares several parallels with the present one. Apart from the woman's nightly yearning for her lover, these include her seeking him in the city, a meeting with the city's watchmen and the concluding adjuration addressed to the daughters of Jerusalem (cf. 3:1-5). It has been suggested that vv. 2-7 describe a dream, but Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 180) maintain that they do not exhibit the typical characteristics of Old Testament dream narratives. However, they rightly add that the text can be read as a dream, a fantasy or the description of an actual event.

The beautifully evocative opening line, 'I slept, but my heart was awake', refers to the kind of restless sleep in which the mind remains alert to, in this case, expectant excitement. By quoting the man's request, 'open to me', without any introductory words, such as 'he said to me', the poet achieves a heightened sense of urgency. The request also is tantalisingly vague. Pardes (1992, p. 131) notes:

The sleeping Shulamite ... is beckoned by her lover to rise and open what is usually taken to be the door. Yet the door is never really mentioned, which is why the lover's request calls for double readings. Is the lover ... asking his beloved to unlock the door, is he trying to gain access to her body, or both? Here as elsewhere in the Song, supposedly literal verses lend themselves to a figurative reading. Nothing remains purely literal; nothing can escape erotic coloring.

Some readers, apparently uncomfortable with the text's erotic connotations, have been quick to supply the missing object. An ancient example of this can be found in LXX, which reads ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν ἀνοιξόν (*epi tēn thuran anoixon*), 'open the door'.

The last two lines of v. 2 exhibit the typical features of Hebrew parallelism. The unique phrase 'drops of the night' (רְסִסֵי לַיְלָה *rēsîsê lāylāh*) thus parallels the dew of the previous line, just as the 'locks', which also feature only here and in v. 11, complement the head. It is the parallelism, together with the occurrence of the verb רָסַס (*rss*), 'to moisten', in Ezekiel 46:14, that allow us to determine the meaning of רְסִסִים (*rēsîsîm*).

In v. 3 the woman is somewhat reticent in her response. Pardes comments that her eroticism is somewhat restrained not only by the male guards of v. 7 but also by her own hesitation to open to her lover. She interprets this partly as internalised patriarchal

restrictions and partly as the woman's desire to maintain her equilibrium (1992, p. 139). Murphy (1990, p. 165) has suggested that the article of clothing mentioned by the woman (קַטְנוֹת *kuttonet*) is an undergarment that is removed before sleeping. Once again, Pardes offers an interesting comment when she paraphrases: "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" [the woman] asks her lover, but teasingly remains naked behind the door' (1992, p. 136).

Verses 4-5 are one of the most teasingly ambiguous passages of the Song. The first line of v. 4 reads, 'my lover thrust his hand into the hole' (cf. NASB, NRSV). On one level, this refers to the keyhole. Pope (1977, pp. 518-519) explains that door keys in ancient Near Eastern villages tended to be of considerable size, i.e. over a foot in length. This called for correspondingly large keyholes that one could put one's hand through in order to open the door from the outside, provided it was unlocked, by lifting the inside bolt. This understanding is reflected, for instance, in KJV and NIV, which respectively translate 'the hole of the door' and 'the latch-opening'. Some translations talk about a 'latch' (RSV, ESV, TNK), but, as Pope points out, 'it is hard to see how a hole can be a latch' (p. 518).

But the unspecified hole clearly triggers additional connotations, especially coming after the tantalisingly vague 'open to me' of v. 2 and the woman's potential nakedness of v. 3. The text's ambiguity is heightened by the fact that יָד (*yād*), the Hebrew term for 'hand', is sometimes used as a euphemism for the penis as, for instance, in Isaiah 57:8, 10.

The last words of Isaiah 57:8 are often translated along the lines of 'you have looked on their nakedness' (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NIV). NASB says 'you have looked on their manhood', TNK renders the phrase 'you have chosen lust', and KJV has the rather amusing 'thou sawest it'. The object seen by the people is the יָד (*yād*), here clearly a euphemism for the penis. The relevant phrase in Isaiah 57:10 is frequently understood as a reference to strength, as in ESV's 'you found new life for your strength' (similarly RSV, NASB, NIV). NRSV renders it 'you found your desire rekindled', while TNK, in line with its translation of v. 8, has 'you found gratification for your lust'. The Hebrew, somewhat obscurely, reads 'you found the life of your hand' (rendered literally by KJV), with the reference once again apparently being to the penis.

The same meaning is also reflected in the Community Rule from Qumran, which says 'the person who spits in the course of a meeting of the Many shall be punished thirty days. And whoever takes out "his hand" from under his clothes' (1QS 7:13). Pope (1977, p. 519) therefore comments: 'given the attested use of "hand" as a surrogate for the phallus, there can be no question that ... the statement "my love thrust his 'hand' into the hole" would be suggestive of coital intromission'. That brings us briefly to the verb (שָׁלַח *šlḥ*), here translated 'thrust', only to note, again with Pope, that some transla-

tors have chosen a verb ‘with minimum motion such as “put”’ (see e.g. KJV, RSV, ESV; NASB reads ‘extended’).

Fox (1985, pp. 144-145) objects to Pope’s interpretation on the grounds that the perceived *double entendre* does not fit with the events described in the narrative, i.e. the fact that the lover still finds himself outside the woman’s house. Fox therefore rejects reading these verses ‘as a euphemistic description of coition’ (p. 144). While Fox is right that there is no description of actual coition in our passage, he perhaps misunderstands what Pope is suggesting. On the narrative level, what is being described is a lover desiring entrance to the woman’s house. Yet the language employed by the poet is richly evocative. It makes our mind wander, as it were, as Fox in fact himself confirms when he admits that the phrase ‘stretched his hand in through the hole’ ‘makes one think of intercourse’ (p. 144).

The second line of v. 4 features a phrase (i.e. מְעִים [mē’îm] with הַמָּה [hmmh]) that is used to express emotions, including desire and yearning (e.g. Jer. 31:20). Translated literally, the line could be rendered ‘my inwards stirred for him’. The noun מְעִים [mē’îm] refers primarily to the intestines, bowels or guts, understood as the seat of the emotions, but it can also denote the womb (e.g. Gen. 25:23; Ps. 71:6; Isa. 49:1). In 5:14 it is used externally to refer to the abdomen. Here, the reference appears to be to what Pope calls ‘erotic emotion’ (1977, p. 519). Pardes (1992, p. 131) regards the phrase as ‘a daring, though curiously indirect, description of sexual arousal’ (Hess, 2005, p. 161 similarly speaks of ‘a sense of clear sexual arousal’), noting that, in light of ‘the exuberant eroticism of this text’, the connotation of the מְעִים [mē’îm] as the procreative organs ‘is surely activated’ and that ‘the stirring’ therefore ‘affects the womb at least as much as it affects the soul’ (p. 132).

Verse 5 is equally evocative. Having been hesitant at first, the woman eventually decides to get up. ‘I arose to open to my lover’, she says, once again without specifying the object. But it is the image of her hands and fingers dripping with myrrh that the poet dwells on. Fox (1985, p. 145) notes that for the woman to have anointed ‘herself with fragrant spices before going to bed [is] a sign that she had expected a visit from her lover and had prepared for it’. Of course, if that is the case, her words in v. 3 had not been an expression of hesitancy but a form of teasing. The implications of such preparations are spelled out in Proverbs 7:17-18: ‘I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love’. Fox also talks about the profusion of spices being suggestive of sensual pleasures, noting that, for instance, the Egyptians enjoyed such profusion of spices and perfumes and concluding that ‘it would not be unrealistic (and certainly not unappealing) for the Shulammitte to claim that she had put on so much myrrh that it dripped from her hands onto the lock handles’ (1985, p. 145).

However, in connection with the description, in 4:14, of the woman's sexuality as a garden full of aromatic spices, including myrrh, and the man's statement that he has come into that garden and gathered his myrrh (5:1), the reader's imagination is once again kindled. Hence Pardes (1992, p. 132) suggests that, 'if in the previous sequence the lover likened the beloved to a "spring shut up" ..., referring particularly, one may assume, to her virginal womb ...[,] at this point the dripping of myrrh from the beloved's body suggests that the spring is not entirely sealed, that the beloved's genital juices "flow forth" in quest of an opening'. Indeed, according to Pardes, the dripping fingers come close 'to a masturbatory fantasy'.

Yet, when the woman finally opens to her lover (v. 6), he is gone and she is unable to consummate her desire. One question that has intrigued interpreters is why the man has suddenly disappeared. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 182) suggest that he may have been worried about the watchmen making their rounds through the city. The translations of the third line vary. Many read along the lines of 'my soul failed me when he spoke' (e.g. KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) or 'I was faint because of what he said' (TNK). NIV, however, translates 'my heart sank at his departure'.

The first two Hebrew words literally read 'my soul left' (נַפְשִׁי יָצְאָה *napsî yāšē'āh*). This can be an expression for dying (Gen. 35:18), but in the present context it signifies a deep emotional reaction (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 182) or even that the woman fainted (Fox, 1985, p. 146; Hess, 2005, p. 162). The reaction was caused by her lover's דָּבַר (*dbar*), but Hebrew has two such roots, one, the more common one, meaning 'to speak' and one meaning 'to turn aside, go away'. If the former is intended, then this is a recollection of the woman's strong reaction to her lover's words, but it seems more likely that the reaction was caused by her lover's departure, which she had just talked about.

Going after her lover, the woman is once more met by the city's watchmen (v. 7). This time, however, the encounter is less amicable than on the previous occasion (3:3). Commenting on the beating, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 182) note that the incident 'reveals a tension between the conventional social mores and the behavior of the young lovers'. Feminist interpreters have emphasised that the watchmen's role in the narrative evinces the patriarchal character of the society that produced the Song. However, this is at least subtly criticised by the poet turning the woman into the focaliser with whose yearnings and struggle to break free readers are invited to empathise (see Pardes, 1992, pp. 132-133).

The watchmen also relieve the woman of an article of clothing, a רֶדֶד (*rēḏīd*), which occurs in only one other text, Isaiah 3:23, where it is listed among the stylish clothes and ornaments worn by the women of Jerusalem. The LXX thinks of a θέριστρον (*theristron*), a light summer coat. Hess (2005, p. 162) considers 'headband' to be a possible translation, while also noting that the term was used in later Hebrew to designate 'a thin outer

garment'. He rightly points out that the context indicates that the removed item would have caused the woman some suffering or humiliation. This would be the case especially if, as Fox (1985, p. 146) suggests, 'we are to imagine the Shulammitte running about the city hastily dressed and half-naked'. Translations such as 'veil', 'shawl' or 'light overcloak' would seem to be on the right track.

Pardes explains the woman's unveiling by the watchmen with reference to punishments found in the prophets (Ezek. 16:36-37; Hos. 2:2-10) and in Assyrian law, according to which illicit sexuality must be exposed. She comments that 'a woman who does not maintain her nakedness under cover exposes herself to the danger of being undressed in public' (Pardes, 1992, p. 135). Pardes adds that 'by stripping off the Shulammitte's veil, the watchmen intend to punish her for her wanton ways; but at the same time their punitive methods seem to lay bare their own desire to uncover' (1992, p. 139).

Some translations, such as RSV, NRSV, ESV and NIV, capture the dramatizing effect of the Hebrew text well, which, if the liturgical accents are followed, presents the words, 'the watchmen of the walls', as an independent phrase. Hence: 'they beat me, they bruised me, they took my shawl from me, *those watchmen of the walls*'. The poet's words capture the woman's exasperation as she recounts the encounter superbly. Unfortunately, the effect has been missed by some translators (see KJV, NASB, TNK).

The woman ends her speech with the third instance of the adjuration formula 'I ask you to promise, O daughters of Jerusalem' (v. 8; cf. 2:7; 3:5). If they meet her lover, she insists, they must tell him that she is sick with love (cf. 2:5). Most translations obscure the question-answer formula employed in the Hebrew text, which serves to emphasise the message: 'if you find my lover, what will you tell him? That I am sick with love.' Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 183) suggest that the wording may reflect the poet's endeavour to capture the woman's broken speech.

The Daughters of Jerusalem (5:9)

5:9 How's your lover different from any other lover,
 most beautiful of women?
 How's your lover different from any other lover
 that you make us promise this?

מֵהֲדֹדֶיךָ מְדוֹד
 הַיִּפָּה בְּנָשִׁים
 מֵהֲדֹדֶיךָ מְדוֹד
 שְׂפָכָה הַשְּׂבַעְתָּנוּ:

This time the woman's entreaty leads to a response by the daughters of Jerusalem, who wish to know what it is that distinguishes her lover from everyone else. The formula employed by the writer (*māh X min Y*; literally 'what/how X from Y?'), while unique in the Old Testament, is a common feature in later rabbinic writings. It is best known from the Passover Haggadah: 'How is this night different from all other nights?' According to Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 184), it is best understood as differentiating (i.e.

‘how is your lover different from?’) rather than as comparative (‘how is your lover better/more than?’).

The Woman (5:10-16)

5:10 My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand.	דוֹדֵי צַח וְאֲדוֹם דָּגוּל מִרְבָּבָה:
5:11 His head is burnished gold, his locks clusters of dates, black as a raven.	רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז קוֹצוֹתָיו תַּלְתְּלִים שְׁחֹרוֹת כְּעוֹרֵב: עֵינָיו כִּיּוֹנִים עַל־אֶפְיָקִי מִים רְחֻצוֹת בְּחֶלֶב יִשְׁבּוֹת עַל־מְלֵאֹת: לְחָיו כְּעֵרוֹגֵת הַבָּשָׂם מִגְדְּלוֹת מְרֻקָּחִים שִׁפְתוֹתָיו שׁוֹשְׁנוֹיִם נֹטְפוֹת מֹזֶר עֵבֶר: יָדָיו גְּלִילֵי זָהָב מִמְלָאִים בַּתְּרֻשִׁישׁ מֵעֵז עֵשֶׂת שֵׁן מִעֲלֻפֹת סַפִּירִים: שׁוֹקָיו עֲמוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִיִּסְדִּים עַל־אֲדָנִי־פָז מְרֵאָהוּ כְּלִבְנוֹן בְּחֹר כְּאֲרָזִים: חֶכוֹ מִמֵּתֻקִּים וְכָלוּ מִחֲמָדִים זֶה דוֹדִי וְזֶה רֵעִי בָנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם:
5:12 His eyes are like doves by streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting by a full basin.	
5:13 His cheeks are like a bed of spice, towers of herbal spices. His lips are lotuses, dripping liquid myrrh.	
5:14 His arms are cylinders of gold, set with gems. His belly is a bar of ivory, encrusted with sapphires.	
5:15 His legs are alabaster columns, set on sockets of fine gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars.	
5:16 His palate is sweet wine; all of him is desirable. This is my lover; this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.	

In response to the women’s question, it is now the Shulamite’s turn to offer a description of her lover (vv. 10-16). She begins with his general appearance. The first adjective (צַח *ṣah*), here rendered ‘radiant’, conveys a sense of shining or glimmering; the second (אֲדוֹם *’ādôm*) denotes the ruddy colour of his skin. More importantly, he stands out among the crowds (Hess, 2005, p. 163, translates דָּגוּל [*dāgûl*] as ‘better looking’).

Moving from the man’s general appearance to the particulars, the woman first turns to his head (v. 11), which is described as pure, refined or burnished gold. The Hebrew uses two terms for gold here (כֶּתֶם פָּז *ketem pāz*), whose combination suggests the very best of highly refined gold (see Hess, 2005, p. 163). But what about his locks? Are they

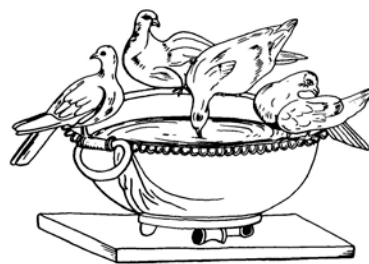
bushy (KJV), wavy (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NIV) or curled (TNK)? The meaning of the Hebrew term תַּלְתָּלִים (*taltallîm*), which occurs nowhere else, has so far defied a definite solution. An interpretation favoured by many is to think of ‘date panicles’ (Keel, 1994, p. 196; Hess, 2005, p. 163; cf. NASB’s ‘like clusters of dates’) or ‘fronds of a palm’ (Fox, 1985, p. 147). Keel (1994, p. 199) explains that ‘the “date panicles,” 20 inches ... long ..., testify to the wild and unruly character of his hair’. What is clear, however, is that his hair is black, black as a raven, thus contrasting sharply with the gleaming gold.

Having had her own eyes described as doves (1:5; 4:1), the woman now compares her lover’s eyes to doves by streams of water, bathed in milk (v. 12). The notion of being bathed or awash in milk has been called ‘a hyperbole of abundance’ by Bloch and Bloch, who capture the sense of the imagery well, noting that ‘the images of abundant waters and sensuous bathing in milk suggest lushness and a tranquil sensuality’ (1995, pp. 185-186). The milk appears to be a reference to the colour of the doves or the whites of the man’s eyes, or possibly both.

The last line presents greater difficulties, as a comparison of the translations indicates. They describe the eyes as ‘fitly set’ (KJV, RSV, NRSV), ‘reposed in their setting’ (NASB), ‘mounted like jewels’ (NIV), or ‘sitting beside a full pool’ (ESV; similarly TNK). It is the noun מְלֵאָת (*millēʾt*), another *hapax legomenon*, that is causing translators problems. Its root מלא (*mlʾ*) suggests the notion of ‘fullness’. Keel (1994, pp. 199-201), convinced that the term ‘designates a full container of some kind’, renders it ‘full basin’. Adducing pictorial support from ancient Cypress and Rome (see below),¹⁰ Keel notes that the emphasis of the dove metaphor in this verse is on ‘the freshness, radiance, and happiness characteristic of eyes that proclaim love’ (p. 201).



Clay vessel from Vounos, Cypress, c. 2000 BCE



Painting from Hadrian's villa near Rome, c. 125 CE

When the woman turns to her lover’s cheeks (v. 13), which are likened to a bed of spice, the reference might well be to a perfumed beard (thus Murphy, 1990, p. 166). The second line literally talks about ‘towers’ (מִגְדָּלוֹת *migdēlôt*) of spices or perfumes. Some translators render ‘mounds’ (ESV) or ‘banks’ (NASB, TNK), but these are not the usual

¹⁰Both illustrations have been reproduced from Keel, 1994, p. 200.

meanings of the term. Others prefer to revocalise the Hebrew, reading the Piel participle מְגַדְלוֹת (*mēgaddēlōt*), ‘which grow’, instead (this is reflected in RSV, NRSV, NIV, which read ‘yielding’; see also Hess, 2005, p. 164: ‘abundant’). However, Fox (1985, p. 148) rejects this, pointing out that מִגְדָּל (*migdāl*) is used with the meaning ‘tower’ elsewhere in the Song (see 4:4; 7:5; 8:10). He maintains that the man’s cheeks are as fragrant as ‘a tower full of spices’, noting that this ‘is a hyperbolic and somewhat fantastic image, as many of the images in the Song are, but the towers of spices needs not have been real any more than doves that bathe in milk’.

When, in the second half of v. 13, the lips are singled out for attention, the references to lotuses and liquid myrrh both continue the olfactory focus of the first two lines, while also appealing to the senses of sight and touch.

The descriptions of the lover’s arms, belly and legs in vv. 14-15a pick up the gold metaphor of v. 11, adding precious stones and ivory to what reads like the depiction of an impressive sculpture. As Keel (1994, p. 202) notes, the woman conjures up an image of ‘a figure who is extraordinarily valuable’. English translations tend to describe the arms as ‘rods of gold’ (NASB, NIV, ESV) or as ‘rounded gold’ (RSV, NRSV, TNK). The Hebrew term גָּלִיל (*gālīl*), here rendered ‘cylinder’, refers to rounded or circular objects. The arms (lit. ‘hands’, יָדַיִם *yādayim*) are ‘filled’ (מְמַלְאִים *mēmullā’im*), i.e. studded or inlaid, with some unidentifiable precious stones, called תַּרְשִׁישׁ (*taršīš*). Pope (1977, p. 543) notes that these have been variously understood as beryl, chrysolite, rubies and topaz, but a vaguer translation, such as ‘gems’, more accurately reflects our ignorance regarding their precise nature.

The man’s belly is next on the woman’s list. The term translated ‘belly’, מְעִים (*mē’im*), which normally denotes the inner organs and the emotions associated with it (see 5:4), here refers to the visible belly as in Daniel 2:32, where it is used of a statue. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 187) offer an intriguing explanation for the peculiar term. Noting that, while the woman’s belly, called by the standard term בֶּטֶן (*beten*; 7:3 [2]), is compared to a mound of wheat, thus underlining its softness, the man’s hard muscular belly is referred to by a term possibly borrowed from the technical vocabulary of sculpture. In line with this it is described as a bar of ivory, as Fox (1985, p. 149) observes: ‘the youth’s flat and muscular stomach (or perhaps specifically the stomach muscles) resembles a bar of ivory’. עֲשֶׂת (*ešet*), ‘bar’, used only here in the Old Testament, denotes a work of artistic craftsmanship, in this case made of ivory, treasured as a rare and precious material by the ancient Israelites. Its value is further enhanced by the addition of the sapphires that adorn it.

The legs (lit. ‘thighs’, שׁוֹקִיִּם *sôqîm*) are alabaster columns (v. 15). As in v. 14, where the Hebrew text literally reads ‘hands’ (יָדַיִם *yādayim*), the thighs here stand for the legs more generally. Hess (2005, p. 186) suggests that the stress is on the thighs as ‘the most

muscular part of the leg, revealing [the man's] strength'. Alabaster is a strong stone of beautiful white colour that can be carved into exquisite forms. When the feet are described as golden pedestals we have come full circle in that the man's head had been said to be of the same material.

Having begun with a general statement, in which her lover was seen as distinguished among ten thousand (v. 10), the woman now reverts to his whole appearance, which is compared with majestic Mount Lebanon, 10,000 feet high, 'whose resin-rich forests, flowers, and fragrant plants make it seem a garden of the gods' (Keel, 1994, p. 206). The cedars of Lebanon (cf. Ps. 29:5) were famous, too, known for their strength, height and value, but also for their pleasant aroma and lushness.

The lover's palate, which is described as sweet wine (v. 16), stands for his kisses (cf. 7:10 [9]). Some translators have taken the reference to be to the man's speech (e.g. RSV, NRSV), which, while reflecting a possible rendering of the Hebrew term *הֶכֶּה* (*hēk*), is unlikely in the present context. As Keel (1994, p. 206) has shown, the descriptions of the two lovers usually lead to a statement that expresses their determination of sensual enjoyment (cf. e.g. 4:6; 4:16–5:1).

The Daughters of Jerusalem (6:1)

6:1 Where has your lover gone,
most beautiful of women?
Which way has your lover turned,
that we may seek him with you?

אָנָּה הֵלֵךְ דּוֹדֶיךָ
הַיִּפְּהָ בְּנָשִׁים
אָנָּה פָּנָה דּוֹדֶיךָ
וַיִּבְקָשְׁנוּ עִמָּךְ:

Having first asked the woman what distinguishes her lover from other men (5:9), in response to which she then outlines his charms (5:10-16), the daughters of Jerusalem now enquire which way he has gone so that they may join her in her search.

The Woman (6:2-3)

6:2 My lover has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spice,
to feed in the garden
and gather lotuses.
6:3 I'm my lover's and he is mine.
He feeds among the lotuses.

דּוֹדִי יָרַד לְגַנּוֹ
לְעֵרוֹגוֹת הַבָּשָׂם
לְרֵעוֹת בְּגָנִים
וּלְלֶקֶט שׁוֹשְׁנִים:
אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי
הֵרְעָה בְּשׁוֹשְׁנִים: ס

The Shulamite's reply does not truly answer the women's question. Instead of giving them directions, she once again evokes the erotic garden metaphor, including the beds of spice (cf. 5:13) and the feeding among lotuses, describing her lover as a grazing gazelle or stag (see 2:9-17; 8:14). Verse 3 is a verbatim repetition of 2:16. The lover is

depicted as going down to the garden, because this is what people would have done at a time when settlements were generally built on hills, with gardens being located alongside streams in the valleys. The translations generally read ‘gardens’ in line 3 of v. 2, but Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 188) plausibly suggest that the plural גַּנִּים (*gannîm*) is to be understood as a plural of local extension that refers to a single garden area (cf. Waltke and O’Connor, 1990, p. 120).

The Man (6:4-12)

- | | | |
|------|--|--|
| 6:4 | You are beautiful, my love, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
awesome as the stars. | יִפָּה אֶת רַעֲיָתִי כְּתִרְצָה
נְאוּה כִּירוּשָׁלַם
אַיִמָּה בְּנִדְגָלוֹת:
הַסְבִּי עֵינַיִךְ מִנְגְדֵי
שָׁהם הִרְהִיבֵנִי
שְׁעָרֶךָ כְּעֵדֵר הָעֹזִים
שֶׁגָּלְשׁוּ מִזֶּה-הַגִּלְעָד:
שְׁנֵיִךְ כְּעֵדֵר הָרְחִלִים
שְׁעָלוּ מִזֶּה-הָרְחֵצָה
שְׁכָלָם מִתְאַיְמוֹת
וְשִׁכְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם:
כְּפֶלֶח הָרִמּוֹן רִקְתָּךְ
מִבְּעַד לְצַמְתָּךְ:
שְׁשִׁים הֵמָּה מְלָכוֹת
וְשִׁמְנִים פִּילֻגְשִׁים
וְעַלְמוֹת אֵין מִסְפָּר:
אַחַת הִיא יוֹנָתִי תִמְתִּי
אַחַת הִיא לְאַמָּה
בָּרָה הִיא לְיוֹלְדֶתָהּ
רְאוּהָ בְנוֹת וַיֵּאשְׁרוּהָ
מְלָכוֹת וּפִילֻגְשִׁים וַיְהִלְלוּהָ: ס
מִי־זֹאת הַנְּשֻׁקָה כְּמו־שַׁחַר
יִפָּה כְּלִבְנָה
בָּרָה כְּחַמָּה
אַיִמָּה בְּנִדְגָלוֹת: ס
אֶל-גִּנַּת אֶגּוֹז יִרְדֹתִי
לְרֹאוֹת בְּאֵבֵי הַנַּחַל
לְרֹאוֹת הַפְּרֻחַת הַגִּפְזִן
הַנִּצּוֹ הָרִמְנִים:
לֹא יָדַעְתִּי נַפְשִׁי |
| 6:5 | Turn your eyes away from me,
for they make me tremble.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
streaming down from Gilead. | |
| 6:6 | Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
that have come up from the washing pool,
every one of them bearing twins,
not one of them bereaved of offspring. | |
| 6:7 | Like a slice of pomegranate gleams your brow
from behind your locks. | |
| 6:8 | There are sixty queens
and eighty concubines
and maidens without number. | |
| 6:9 | She’s unique, my dove, my perfect one.
She’s unique to her mother.
She’s special to the one who bore her.
The daughters saw her and blessed her,
queens and concubines, and praised her: | |
| 6:10 | ‘Who’s this that looks down like the morning star,
beautiful as the moon,
special as the sun,
awesome as the stars?’ | |
| 6:11 | I went down to the nut grove
to see the fresh shoots in the riverbed,
to see if the vine had blossomed,
if the pomegranates were in bloom. | |
| 6:12 | I don’t know myself – | |

she has placed me in the most wonderful chariot.

שִׁמְתָנִי מִרֶכֶבֹּת עֲמִי-נָדִיב

When the man speaks again, he compares the beauty of his beloved to that of Tirzah and Jerusalem. Assuming that the reference is to the capitals of Israel and Judah, Jay (1975, p. 58) believes that ‘the comparisons gain point ... if the poem was written while Tirzah was still a capital’, i.e. prior to 887 BCE, but Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 189) maintain that ‘Tirzah is yet another element in the rich allusive web that links the Song with the long bygone era when this ancient royal city, like Heshbon (7:5), was part of Solomon’s vast empire’.

The third line of v. 4, which in the Hebrew consists of only two words, has given rise to a variety of interpretations. The second term נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*), which reappears in v. 10, is the more problematic of the two. Its root דגל (*dgl*) links it with two other words in the Song, דֶּגֶל (*degel*), ‘banner’, in 2:4 and דָּגוּל (*dāgûl*), translated ‘outstanding’, in 5:10. Based on this, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 191) suggest a literal translation of ‘those who are prominent, conspicuous’, much like a banner would be. However, a rendering along the lines of ‘an army with banners’ (KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) reads too much into the phrase, as the Hebrew text does not mention an army. Ernst (2003, p. 62), going even further, relates the metaphor to the ‘battle of the sexes’, the ‘push and pull experienced in male/female relationships caused by what we suppose is the inherent difference in perspective between the sexes’.

It is, as again Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 191) have shown, the use of נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*) in v. 10 that can help us arrive at a more probable meaning of the term. They point out that, when ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ in the Old Testament are followed by a third term, it is one that refers to the stars (see e.g. Gen. 37:9; Deut. 4:19; Ps. 148:3; Jer. 31:35). Thus, when the woman, in v. 10, is compared to the two primary celestial bodies, Bloch and Bloch suggest that נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*) is here best understood as an epithet for the stars or a group of stars. This conclusion is supported by the structure of the verse, which can be depicted as an interlocking parallelism in which day and night alternate:

- (a) day (morning star)
- (b) night (moon)
- (a) day (sun)
- (b) night (stars)

Alternatively, the structure can also be understood in chiasmic terms (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 191, for these structural observations):

- (a) star
- (b) moon
- (b) sun
- (a) stars

Either way, a reference to an army with banners seems out of place. Hess (2005, p. 194) accepts this for v. 10 and translates ‘terrible as the display of the stars’. Yet he still maintains that ‘the banners of earthly conflict’ are required in v. 4. It is not clear though why that should be the case. The context does not require military imagery, and it seems more likely that the term carries the same connotations in both instances.

So, if the reference is to the stars, how are they portrayed in vv. 4 and 10? The adjective אַיִם (*‘āyōm*) literally means ‘terrible’ or ‘frightening’, but it is here best rendered along the lines of ‘awesome’ or ‘awe-inspiring’ (cf. NASB, ESV, TNK). The woman is as awesome and perhaps daunting as the stars, ‘the prominent, conspicuous ones’.

The man is deeply unsettled by her, as his next words indicate (v. 5): ‘turn your eyes away from me, for they make me tremble’. Readers have grappled with the precise meaning of the Hebrew verb רָהַב (*rhb* Hiphil), but translations such as ‘overwhelm’ (NRSV, ESV, NIV, TNK; Hess, 2005, p. 193), ‘overcome’ (KJV), ‘confuse’ (NASB), ‘disturb’ (RSV), ‘dazzle’ (NEB; Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 93), ‘make tremble’ (Fox, 1985, p. 150), ‘make crazy’ (Keel, 1994, p. 211) all indicate its basic force. A literal translation of ‘frighten’ would also be possible. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 189) perceptively note the intensification in the man’s references to his beloved’s eyes. At first (1:15; 4:1), they are merely portrayed as doves. Later on (4:9), the lover admits that they have stolen his heart with a single glance, and now he is completely undone by them.

Is it the shock that propels him to repeat almost exactly verbatim his earlier description of the woman’s hair, teeth and brow (vv. 5b-7; cf. 4:1c-3)? Or is it the need to turn away from her eyes that leads him to focus on her other features? Difficult to say, but we might just note the three variations in these verses compared to the earlier description in 4:1c-3. Most notably the depiction of the lips is omitted. Apart from that, the goats in v. 5 come down Gilead rather than *Mount* Gilead, as in 4:1, and the teeth are more simply described as a flow of ewes (עֵדֶר הָרְחֵלִים *‘ēder hārēḥēlīm*) rather than a ‘shorn flock’, as in 4:2.

Having omitted the description of the woman’s lips, the man also stops short of moving on to her neck and breasts (cf. 4:4-5). Instead, in what appears to be another reference to Solomonic folklore (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 190), he compares her to the king’s numerous queens, concubines and maidens (v. 8), only to celebrate his beloved’s uniqueness (v. 9). This is expressed beautifully in the Hebrew, which literally reads:

Sixty they are, the queens
and eighty the concubines
and maidens without number.

One she is, my dove, my perfect one,
one she is to her mother,
special she is to the one who bore her.

There is some debate regarding the meaning of the adjective in line 3, which recurs in v. 10 with reference to the sun. While some have understood it to mean ‘pure’ (NASB, ESV; Fox, 1985, p. 150) or ‘flawless’ (RSV, NRSV; Keel, 1994, p. 217), others have translated it as ‘choice’ (KJV), ‘favourite’ (NIV) or ‘special’ (Hess, 2005, p. 194). The different translations in this case result from disagreements regarding the root of the Hebrew term בָּרָה (*bārāh*), which has been variously derived from ברר (*brr*), ‘to be clear’, and בור (*bwr*), ‘to choose’. Two considerations would seem to support the second understanding, for not only is this the rendering in the ancient versions, the LXX, Peshitta and Vulgate, the context, too, demands a term that depicts the woman as special, as someone who stands out among the crowds (thus rightly Hess, 2005, p. 194).

It is the women, the daughters, queens and concubines, who compare the Shulamite’s majestic beauty to the celestial bodies (v. 10). Having already looked at the final line, a verbatim repetition from v. 4, we can now focus on the other three luminaries. Most English translations prefer to see the first line as a reference to the dawn, but the Hebrew term שָׁחַר (*šahar*) can also mean ‘morning star’ (cf. Fox, 1985, p. 150; Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 95), which in the present context with its references to the heavenly bodies is preferable.

The moon, sun and stars in the next three lines are not referred to by their usual names but by poetic terms that draw attention to some of their attributes. Thus the moon is לְבָנָה (*lěbānāh*), ‘the white one’, most likely an allusion to the full moon, the sun is חַמָּה (*hāmmāh*), ‘the hot one’, and the stars, as we saw earlier, are נִדְגָלוֹת (*nidgālôt*), which might be rendered as ‘the prominent ones’. The sun, as the previous discussion of בָּרָה (*bārāh*) suggests (see under v. 9), is described as ‘special’ rather than ‘bright’ (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NIV) or ‘pure’ (NASB).

Many translators and interpreters assign vv. 11-12 to the woman, partly because they detect a reference to a prince in v. 12. Hebrew grammar does not offer any clues as to the speaker’s identity in v. 11, but Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 192) have argued that the speaker in both verses is the man because the garden metaphor in the Song elsewhere refers to the woman and her sexuality (4:12–5:1; see also 8:13), vines and pomegranates are associated with her erotic charms (1:6; 4:13; 7:9 [8], 13 [12]; 8:2) and it is always the man who visits her, rather than the other way around (2:8-14; 5:1, 2-6; 6:2). The going down to the nut garden (which is the literal translation of גִּנַּת אֶגְזִיז *ginnat ’ēgôz*) in v. 11 thus parallels the man’s going down to his garden in v. 2.

The man wanted to find out whether the moment for lovemaking had come in what Keel (1994, p. 223) describes as an ‘example of the sense of partnership and the consideration for the other that characterize the encounter’ of the couple in the Song. English translations almost unanimously refer to the ‘valley’, but the Hebrew term נַחַל (*nahal*) also designates a ‘stream’ or ‘brook’. Keel (1994, p. 223) points out that it refers to ‘the

usually dry streambeds of Palestine/Israel' where the first green appears after the fall of the early rains.

Verse 12 is widely considered to be the most difficult verse in the Song. Some commentators have despaired and have declined to translate or comment on it at all (see e.g. Falk, 1982, pp. 40-41, 134). While it is clear that the Hebrew text consists of two phrases, commentators are divided over the function and precise meaning of the third word נַפְשִׁי (*napšî*). Many regard it as the initial word of the second phrase and translate 'my soul' (KJV, NASB), 'my desire' (NIV, ESV, TNK) or 'my fancy' (RSV, NRSV). However, נַפְשִׁי (*napšî*) can also simply mean 'I', and it is best considered to belong to the first part of the sentence, which then literally reads 'I did not know myself'. Gordis (1974, p. 95) has argued that this is an idiomatic phrase expressing deep emotional agitation in the sense of losing one's balance or composure. The reason for such loss of equilibrium can be great joy and excitement, as in the present context, or despair, as in Job 9:21.

The second phrase, which literally reads 'she placed me in the chariots of עַמִּי-נָדִיב (*'ammî-nādîb*)', is the one that has given commentators sleepless nights. If my reading of the previous line is correct, then the subject is not the man's soul, desire or fancy but the woman. But what precisely has she done? And what are the chariots of עַמִּי-נָדִיב (*'ammî-nādîb*)? Countless solutions have been proposed, usually involving some emendations of the Hebrew text, literally 'my people-noble/nobleman', which is unintelligible.

Translations that take the phrase as it stands tend to see it as a proper name and read 'the chariots of Amminadib' (KJV, TNK). While theoretically possible, this leaves us none the wiser concerning the significance of this otherwise unknown individual and his chariots. LXX and Vulgate read 'Amminadab', which, while giving us a name that is attested elsewhere, does not enlighten us any further. Readings such as 'with a nobleman/prince' (Fox, 1985, p. 154; Hess, 2005, p. 195) change עַמִּי (*'ammî*), 'my people', to עִמִּי (*'im*), 'with'. As Hess explains (2005, p. 208), on this reading, the woman, who is perceived to be the speaker of this line, is expressing the fantasy of being 'placed beside her princely lover in a dramatic and public display of power'. This reading understands the verse in analogy to some of the Solomonic folklore encountered earlier.

However, if נַפְשִׁי (*napšî*), meaning 'I', is to be taken with the previous line, then the speaker is the man and it is the woman who places him in the mysterious chariots. Is there then another way of understanding their significance? Bloch and Bloch (1995, pp. 194-195) have offered an intriguing suggestion that makes good sense against the context in which the phrase occurs. Their solution, too, requires a textual emendation, in this case a reversal of the word order,¹¹ i.e. reading עַמִּי נָדִיב (*nēdîb 'ammî*), 'the nobleman of my people' or, in a superlative sense, 'the most noble of my people', instead of

¹¹They point to other cases of erroneous inversions in Deut. 33:21; Jer. 17:3 and Ezek. 24:17 (Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 194).

עַמֵּי־נְדִיב (*‘ammî-nādîb*). But in what sense does that reading elucidate the meaning of the text? What does it mean for the man to be placed in the chariots of the most noble of his people?

To begin with, Bloch and Bloch point out that the phrase ‘the nobles of the people’ occurs, with minor variations, in several passages (e.g. Num. 21:18; Ps. 47:10; 113:7-8). The most instructive is Psalm 113:7-8 where the poor and needy is raised from the dust and lifted from the ash heap to be seated ‘with princes, with the princes of his people’ (וְהוֹשִׁיבָם לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עַם־נְדִיבִים עִם נְדִיבֵי עַמּוֹ) (*lēhōšîbî ‘im-nēdîbîm ‘im nēdîbê ‘ammô*). The same notion occurs in 1 Samuel 2:8, albeit without עַם (*‘am*), ‘people’ (וְהוֹשִׁיבָם לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עַם־נְדִיבִים) (*lēhōšîb ‘im-nēdîbîm*; ‘to seat them with princes’). As Bloch and Bloch explain (1995, p. 194), to seat somebody with nobles means raising them up, elevating them to a higher position.

Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 195) also note that the plural ‘chariots’ is another example of the plural of local extension (cf. on גַּנָּיִם *gannîm* ‘gardens’ in 6:2), which is thus to be rendered in the singular. And they comment that ‘to be placed “in the chariot of the most noble of my people” evokes the notion of an “elevation,” a grace granted by the Shulamite to her lover, in this case serving as a metaphor for the erotic act’. As they point out, to be sitting in a royal chariot would have been a great honour (Gen. 41:43), as was being allowed to ride a horse (Esth. 6:9, 11). Of course, in Song 6:12 the riding metaphor has obvious sexual connotations, which link it with the image of the mare in 1:9. Finally, in the light of these considerations, the superlative sense of the phrase ‘the chariot of the most noble of my people’ is perhaps best rendered along the lines of ‘the most wonderful chariot’ (see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 195).

This interpretation fits the context in that v. 12 now describes the consummation of the couples’ relationship that v. 11 (‘I went down to the nut grove ... to see if the vine had budded’) anticipated. The sequence thus parallels the one found in 4:16 (‘let my lover come to his garden and eats its delicious fruit’) and 5:1 (‘I have come to my garden ... I have eaten’).

The Dancers (7:1 [6:13])

7:1 Again, again, O Shulamite!
 Again, again, that we may gaze at you!
 Why would you gaze at the Shulamite
 in the dance of the two camps?

שׁוֹבֵי שׁוּבֵי הַשְּׁוֹלְמִית
 שׁוֹבֵי שׁוּבֵי וְנַחְזֶה בָּךְ
 מִהֲתַחְזוּ בַשְּׁוֹלְמִית
 בְּמַחְלַת הַמַּחֲנֵי:

In 7:1 [6:13] the scene and speakers change. The question–answer pattern and the plural verb forms indicate that this is an exchange between two unidentified groups. As the text mentions a dance, it is commonly assumed that the groups face each other while engaged in a dance with the woman, who is only here called the Shulamite and who is clearly at the centre of everyone’s attention. While one group cheers her on, the

other asks a question that prompts her lover's praise. Alternatively, the plural address in the question may also be aimed at an unspecified audience, i.e. at 'everybody'.

English translations usually read 'return, return' (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) or 'come back, come back' (NASB, NIV), but Hebrew **שוב** (*šûb*) is also frequently used in the sense of doing something again. It normally acquires that sense when modifying another verb, as, for instance, in Genesis 30:31: 'I will again pasture your flock' (**אָשׁוּבָה אֶרְעֶה צֹאנֶךָ**) (*'āšûbāh 'er'eh šō'nēkā*; lit. 'I will return (and) pasture your flock'). However, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 196) suggest that the accompanying verb may be omitted in situations where the activity is evident from the context. Their translation of **שובי** (*šûbî*) has been adopted not least because it results in a more elegant reading of the people's request.

As already said, it is only in this verse that the woman is called the Shulamite (**שׁוּלָמִית** *šûlammît*), a term that has led to many attempts to determine its meaning. Suggestions include 'the peaceable one' or 'the perfect one' (from Hebrew **שלם** *šlm*), that it is a feminine name corresponding to Solomon (**שְׁלֹמֹה** *šlōmōh*), that it should be rendered 'Shunammite', i.e. from Shunem (see Josh. 19:18; 1 Kgs 1:3, 15; 2 Kgs 4:8, 12), and that it means the Jerusalemite. Favouring the latter option, Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 197) note that gentilics, names for residents of a certain locality, frequently feature the ending *-î/-ît*, as in English loanwords from Arabic and Hebrew, such as 'Iraqi', 'Israeli' or 'Saudi'. They show (p. 198) that **שׁוּלָמִית** (*šûlammît*), which derives from **שָׁלֵם** (*šālēm*), the city's old name and its poetic epithet (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 76:3), retains the root **שלם** (*šlm*) while adopting the vowel pattern *u - a* of **יְרוּשָׁלַיִם** (*yērûšālayim*). And they note that the echoes of peace or perfection and of Solomon's name may well have been the reason why the epithet appealed to the poet.

The other issue in this verse concerns the dance, according to some translations 'a dance before two armies' (RSV, NRSV, ESV). There are two reasons for this interpretation. First, the qualifier **מַחֲנֶה** (*maḥăneh*) frequently refers to a military camp or an army. Secondly, the dance (**מְחֻלָּה** *mēḥōlāh*), evidently an exuberant, joyful one, as the root **חול** (*ḥwl*) suggests, is often performed in celebration of a victory in battle (see Exod. 15:20; Judg. 11:34). However, this is not the only occasion for a **מְחֻלָּה** (*mēḥōlāh*), as, for instance, Exodus 32:19 indicates, and there is no particular reason for a militaristic interpretation in the present context in the Song. After all, **מַחֲנֶה** (*maḥăneh*) similarly is not exclusively used in a military context but can also refer to a camp as the temporary dwelling place of any group of people (see Gen. 32:8; 33:8; 2 Kgs 5:15). It seems more likely, as indeed a number of commentators have concluded, that the 'dance of the two camps' is a technical term for a dance performed by two groups dancing in formation.

My reading ('in the dance') follows Symmachus and some other ancient manuscripts, i.e. reading **בְּמְחֻלָּת** (*bimḥōlat*) rather than **כְּמְחֻלָּת** (*kimḥōlat*; 'as/like the dance').

The Man (7:2-10a [7:1-9a])

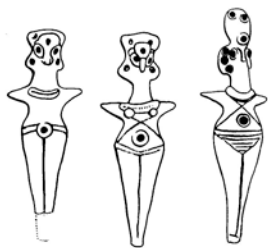
- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>7:2 How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
O noble daughter.
The curves of your hips are like ornaments,
the work of the hands of a master.</p> | <p>מֵה־יָפוּ פְעָמַיךָ בַּנְעָלִים
בַּת־נָדִיב
חֲמוּקֵי יָרְכִיךָ כְּמוֹ חֲלָאִים
מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי אֲמֹן:
שָׁרְרָךְ אֲגִן הַסֶּהַר
אֶל־יַחְסֵר הַמְּזֹג
בְּטֶגֶף עֲרַמַת חֲטָיִם
סוּגָה בְּשׁוֹשָׁנִים:</p> |
| <p>7:3 Your navel is a rounded bowl –
may it never lack mixed wine!
Your belly is a heap of wheat
fenced about with lotuses.</p> | <p>שְׁנֵי שָׁדַיִךְ כְּשְׁנֵי עֶפְרַיִם
תְּאֵמִי צְבִיָּה:
צִוְאַרְךָ כְּמִגְדַל הַשֵּׁן
עֵינֶיךָ בְּרִכּוֹת בְּחֶשְׁבּוֹן
עַל־שַׁעַר בַּת־רַבִּים
אִפְּךָ כְּמִגְדַל הַלְּבָנוֹן
צוּפָה פָּנֵי דַמְשֶׁק:</p> |
| <p>7:4 Your breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.</p> | <p>רֵאשֵׁךְ עַל־יָדְךָ כְּכַרְמֶל
וְדֹלֶת רֵאשֵׁךְ כְּאַרְגָּמָן
מֶלֶךְ אֶסּוּר בְּרֹהֲטִים:
מֵה־יָפִית וּמֵה־נִעְמָת
אֶהְבֶּה בַּת־עֲנוּגִים:</p> |
| <p>7:5 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon
by the gate of Bath-Rabbim.
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon,
overlooking Damascus.</p> | <p>זֹאת קוֹמַתְךָ דְּמִתָּה לְתֹמֶר
וְשָׁדַיִךְ לְאַשְׁכְּלוֹת:
אֲמַרְתִּי אֶעֱלֶה בְּתֹמֶר
אֶחֱזֶה בְּסִסְנִי
וַיְהִי־וַנֵּא שָׁדַיִךְ כְּאַשְׁכְּלוֹת הַגֶּפֶן
וְרִיחַ אִפְּךָ כִּתְפוּחִים:
וְחֶכְךָ כִּיֵּן הַטּוֹב</p> |
| <p>7:6 Your head sits upon you like the Carmel;
the flowing locks of your head are like purple.
A king is captured by the tresses.
7:7 How beautiful you are, how pleasant,
O love, O daughter of delights.</p> | <p>7:8 This stature of yours is like a palm tree
and your breasts like the clusters.</p> |
| <p>7:9 I said to myself, I shall climb the palm tree.
I shall seize its branches.
May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine,
the scent of your breath like apricots,
7:10 your palate like the best wine ...</p> | <p>7:9 I said to myself, I shall climb the palm tree.
I shall seize its branches.
May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine,
the scent of your breath like apricots,
7:10 your palate like the best wine ...</p> |

In response to the question of the previous verse, the man again enumerates his beloved's charms. In contrast to the earlier descriptions found in the Song (4:1-5; 5:11-15; 6:5-7), this one moves from the woman's feet up rather than from her head down. The reason for this appears to be that he is observing her dancing and is thus arrested by her feet. Some translations speak of the woman's rounded thighs in line 3 (RSV, NRSV, TNK), which is a possible translation. The Hebrew term *יָרֵךְ* (*yārēk*) can refer to the upper thigh, the area of the genitals (Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29) and the outer area of the hips where,

for instance, a sword is worn (Exod. 32:27; Judg. 3:16, 21; Song 3:8). It is therefore equally possible that the reference is to the curved hips (see NASB), as assumed here.

From the hips we move on to the navel, or do we (v. 3 [2])? The identity of the next body part has been disputed by the commentators. The rare Hebrew term שֶׁר (šōr) is also found in Ezekiel 16:4 where it denotes the umbilical cord.¹² It is partly for this reason that interpreters have concluded that the reference in our text must be to the related navel. The comparison with a rounded bowl supports this. Yet the wish that it never lack wine would seem to point in another direction.

Keel (1994, p. 234), amongst others, has argued that this requires “navel” to be understood as a euphemism for vulva’. He draws our attention to Syrian and Palestinian terra-cotta figurines featuring a rounded bowl that somewhat interchangeably depicts either the goddess’s navel or her vulva. The same interchangeability of navel and genitalia is demonstrated by pendants from Ugarit and Tell el-Adshul, south of Gaza. Each of these features a branch or stylised tree, which variously grows from the pubic area or out of the navel. Keel adds that the moist vulva is regularly cherished as an intoxicating drink for the male lover in Sumerian sacred marriage texts.



13th/12th-century terra-cotta figurines displaying a naked Syrian goddess¹³



15th-13th-century pendants from Ugarit and Tell el-Adshul displaying naked goddesses¹⁴

Others, such as Fox and Hess, are adamant that it is the navel that is described here, not the vulva. Countering Pope’s (1977, pp. 617-618) comment that ‘navels are not notable for their capacity to store or dispense moisture’, Fox (1985, p. 159) asserts that ‘it is not the navel but the bowl that is supposed to do so’. Hess (2005, p. 196) similarly points out that ‘the wine is related to the bowl, not the navel It is the function of such a bowl to contain wine; it is the perceived beauty of the navel to be large and deep like such a bowl’. Commenting on the figurines presented by Keel, Hess also notes that the prominent display of the navel indicates that it must have been perceived as an object of significance and beauty in itself.

¹²Its additional occurrence in Prov. 3:8, a difficult text that has given rise to all manner of conjectures, does not appear to elucidate the meaning of our verse.

¹³Reproduced from Keel, 1994, p. 232.

¹⁴Reproduced from Keel, 1994, p. 175.

It would seem that the poet's reference to the navel is not so much a euphemism as a *double entendre*. The comparison with a rounded bowl suits the navel well, but when the wish that it never lack mixed wine is uttered the audience's imagination is stirred and begins to wander. Alter's reading proceeds along similar lines. Having originally rendered the line 'your sex a rounded bowl' and commented that the description here moves to the vagina (1985, pp. 196-197), he later on questioned that reading, pointing out (1995, p. 127) that

it is utterly implausible to imagine the Shulamite dancing naked, her sex visible to the audience, and the poetic decorum of the Song precludes the direct naming of sexual organs, though the poet may well intimate *correspondences* between navel, or mouth, or door latch, and the woman's hidden parts.¹⁵

This is essentially the position taken here. It is best to translate שֹׁר (šōr) as navel, for that is what the term seems to mean. And yet, the association of the rounded bowl with wine clearly evokes additional possibilities of meaning.

Wine, it should be noted, was frequently mixed with water, other wines or spices, in the latter case in order to boost its intoxicating effect. The English translations tend to regard the second line as a description: 'a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine', but the Hebrew phrase is better rendered as a wish (thus TNK; see Fox, 1985, p. 159, who notes that אֵל [ʾal] does not normally indicate the negative indicative).

In what respect is the woman's belly a heap of wheat? Several suggestions have been made, including that the image highlights its softness in comparison to the man's belly, which is a polished block of ivory (5:14; see Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 201), that it indicates a gentle curve and tawny hue (Fox, 1985, p. 159) and that it evokes fertility and nourishment (Keel, 1994, pp. 234-235). The last line of v. 3 [2] refers to the custom of protecting heaps of wheat with thorn hedges in order to guard them against cattle and prevent them from being scattered. In the case of the woman's precious belly only a hedge of lotuses will do. The image as a whole, the heap of wheat with its surrounding lotuses, evokes the *mons pubis*.

Verse 4 [3], which focuses on the woman's breasts, is a slightly abbreviated repetition of 4:5.

Having been compared with the tower of David in 4:4, the woman's neck is said to be 'like an ivory tower' (v. 5 [4]). This suggests a long neck, a quality appreciated in women also in ancient Egyptian love poetry (see Fox, 1985, p. 160). The image is that of a tall, proudly erect woman.

Bathed in milk in 5:12, the eyes are now depicted as pools. The association, which, according to Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 202), 'suggests a tranquil and lush sensuality', was a natural one for the poet in that Hebrew עֵינַי/עֵינַי (ʿayin/ʿên) can refer to 'eyes' and

¹⁵To be sure, Alter also invoked the notion of *double entente* in his earlier work (1985, p. 197), and yet he was content to present the line as a description of the vagina.

‘springs’. Heshbon, the ancient capital of the Amorites (Num. 21:25-34), which was renowned for its fertile fields and vineyards (Isa. 16:8-9), like Tirzah, evokes a ‘glorious bygone era’ and, when applied to the woman, her ‘great beauty and regal appearance’ (thus again Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 202).

Bath-Rabbim may simply have been the name of the gate near the pools that the poet had in mind. Alternatively, as Fox (1985, p. 160) points out, it might have been mentioned because of the meaning of the phrase. רַבִּים (*rabbîm*) can refer to ‘important people’, ‘grandeess’ or ‘nobles’, as in Jeremiah 39:13 (‘the chief officers of the king of Babylon’). בַּת (*bat*), in turn, means ‘daughter’, hence yielding the meaning ‘O noble daughter’. The phrase would thus resemble בַּת־נָדִיב (*bat-nādîb*) in v. 2 [1]. Bloch and Bloch (1995, pp. 202-203) take this a step further in noting that בַּת (*bat*), ‘daughter’, is frequently employed as an epithet for cities, as in ‘Daughter of Zion’, ‘Daughter of Jerusalem’ and ‘Daughter of Babylon’. Preserving the plural of רַבִּים (*rabbîm*), they translate ‘Daughter of Nobles’, which they regard as a fitting epithet for the legendary city of Heshbon, possibly created impromptu by our poet since it is not attested elsewhere.

It is commonly assumed that the quality praised in the woman’s nose, which is compared to the tower of Lebanon, is its straightness. If so, then the reference is probably not to Mount Lebanon but to an actual tower.

Her head sits upon the rest of her body like Mount Carmel (v. 6 [5]), known for its imposing beauty and lush vegetation (Isa. 33:9; 35:2; Amos 1:2; Nah. 1:4). Her hair is described in terms of thrums, i.e. the threads hanging down in a weaver’s loom, as the only other occurrence of דָּלָה (*dallāh*) in Isaiah 38:12 indicates. It is derived from דָּלַל (*dll*), ‘to hang down, dangle’. Fox (1985, p. 161) points out that Egyptian paintings depict women wearing their hair in long cascading curls, hence the comparison of the woman’s hair in 4:1; 6:5 with a flock of goats streaming down a mountain slope. It is said to be like purple because the sheen of dark black hair may appear dark blue or purple. Fox (p. 160) also points to an interesting pun, noting that Carmel sounds like כַּרְמִיל (*karmîl*), ‘crimson’, a term that occurs three times (2 Chron. 2:6, 13; 3:14), always together with אַרְגָּמָן (*’argāmān*), ‘purple’.

The king captured by the tresses is, of course, none other than her lover, who is also depicted as a king in 1:4, 12. Fox (1985, p. 161) notes that ancient Egyptian love songs feature images of a lover captured by the woman’s hair like a bird in a trap or caught by it as with a lasso (see the relevant lines in Fox, 1985, pp. 9, 73); and Alter (1995, p. 129) comments that ‘the encompassing of beauty from a distance with the eye is [here] suddenly transformed into tactile entanglement’, an entanglement that, he says, might lead to ‘other interlacings’. The term used in the last line to refer to the woman’s hair (רְהָטִים) (*rēhāṭîm*) is used in Genesis 30:38, 41 and Exodus 2:16 to designate ‘water troughs’. The

word for ‘rafters’ (רַהִיטְנֹוּ *rahîṭēnû*) in Song 1:17 is derived from the same root רהט (*rht*), ‘to run’. In our verse long, flowing tresses appear to be in view.

Having admired his beloved’s body parts, the man now pauses to marvel at how beautiful and pleasant she generally is (v. 7 [6]). This reading interprets ‘love’ (אַהֲבָה *’ahăbāh*) as a vocative addressed to the woman, ‘O love’ (cf. LXX, Vulgate, Peshitta), and reads בַּת תִּעֲנוּגִים (*bat ta’ănûgîm*), ‘daughter of delights’. Alternatively, the man might be marvelling at the beauty and pleasantness of love *among* the delights (thus MT’s בַּת־תִּעֲנוּגִים *batta’ănûgîm*). However, the former seems more likely in the current context, as the man returns to his beloved’s body in the following verse.

The admiration of her overall beauty leads him to take in her stature (v. 8 [7]), which he compares to a tall, stately palm tree, thus matching her earlier comparison of him to a cedar (5:15). Like the depiction of her as a ‘dove in the clefts of the rock’ (2:14), the image also conveys a sense of her inaccessibility. As most translations indicate, the clusters, with which the woman’s breasts are compared, are not specifically identified. However, in the present verse, which talks about a date palm, they must be dates rather than κῖϐ’s ‘grapes’. Once again, the point is that the date clusters, being the fruit of a tall tree, cannot be easily reached.

Once again, the description of the woman’s charms in terms of sweet, aromatic fruit leads to consumption or, in this case, the lover expressing his intent to consume what she has to offer (v. 9 [8]). The precise meaning of the term translated ‘branches’ (סְסִינִים *śanśinnîm*) is uncertain, but Fox (1985, p. 163) points out that Akkadian *sinsinnu/sissinnu* refers to the date panicle. The reference thus appears to be to the stalks that hold the dates. Applied to the woman, her arms would seem to be in view here.

The remainder of the man’s speech is expressed as a wish (cf. the Hebrew particle נָא *nā’*). He is hoping that her breasts will be his to enjoy like grapes (the presence of grape clusters in the present verse probably explains why κῖϐ found them in v. 8 [7] as well). He also anticipates the sweetness of her breath (Hebrew אָפ *’ap* literally refers to the nose, but as the organ associated with breathing, it here serves as a metonymy for ‘breath’), which is compared to apricots, and he is looking forward to the intoxicating effect of her kisses, describing her palate as the best wine (v. 10 [9]). All this evokes earlier passages in the Song. At the outset, the woman expressed the wish that her lover would kiss her (1:2), describing his lovemaking as better than wine. In 2:3 she compares him to an apricot tree, whose fruit is sweet to her palate. In 4:11 the woman’s lips are said to drip honey, and the sweetness of her kisses is conveyed by the notion of honey and milk being found under her tongue; and in 5:16 she again praises his palate as sweet wine.

The Woman (7:10b–8:4 [7:9b–8:4])

7:10 ... flowing smoothly to my lover,
gliding over scarlet lips.

הוֹלֵךְ לְדוֹדִי לְמִישָׁרִים
דוֹבֵב שִׁפְתַי יִשְׁנִים:

7:11 I'm my lover's,
and his desire is for me.

אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי
וְעָלֵי תְשׁוּקָתוֹ: ס

7:12 Come, my lover,
let's go out into the countryside,
let's spend the night among the henna shrubs.

לָכֵה דוֹדִי
נֵצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה
נָלִינָה בְּכַפְרִים:

7:13 Let's go early to the vineyards
to see if the vine has blossomed,
if their blossoms have opened,
if the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I'll give you my love.

נִשְׁכְּמָה לְכַרְמִים
נִרְאָה אִם פָּרְחָה הַגֶּפֶן
פָּתַח הַסְּמֹדָר
הַנִּצּוֹ הַרְמוֹנִים
שָׁם אֶתֶן אֶת־דְּדֵי לִךְ:

7:14 The mandrakes give off their fragrance;
at our doors are all kinds of delicious fruits,
new as well as old,
which I've stored up for you, my lover.

הַדּוֹדָאִים נִתְנוּרֵיחַ
וְעַל־פֶּתַח־יְנִיב כָּל־מִגְדִּים
חֲדָשִׁים גַּם־יִשְׁנִים
דוֹדִי צָפַנְתִּי לָךְ:

8:1 If only you were like a brother to me,
one who nursed at my mother's breasts.
If I met you outside, I'd kiss you,
yet no one would despise me.

מִי יִתְנַדְּ כַּאֲחֵי לִי
יוֹנֵק שְׂדֵי אִמִּי
אֶמְצְאֶךָ בַּחוּץ אֶשְׁקֶךָ
גַּם לֹא־יְבוֹזוּ לִי:

8:2 I'd lead you,
I'd bring you to my mother's house.
You'd teach me.
I'd give you spiced wine to drink
from the juice of my pomegranates.

אֶנְהַגִּיד
אֶבְיֹאֶךָ אֶל־בַּיִת אִמִּי
תִלְמַדְנִי
אֶשְׁקֶךָ מִיַּיִן הַרְקָח
מִעֵסִיס רְמוֹנִי:

8:3 His left hand is under my head
and his right hand embraces me.

שָׁמְאלוֹ תַחַת רֵאשִׁי
וְיָמִינוֹ תַחְבֵּקְנִי:

8:4 I ask you to promise, O daughters of Jerusalem,
that you will not awaken nor arouse love
until it is ready.

הַשְּׁבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
מֵהִתְעוּרֹו וּמֵהִתְעוּרְרוּ אֶת־הָאֲהָבָה
עַד שֶׁתִּחַפֵּץ: ס

As soon as the man moves on to her sweet palate, he is interrupted by the woman, who completes his sentence for him, her words indicating that she reciprocates his desire. The notion of wine flowing down smoothly is also found in Proverbs 23:31 (where it is expressed with the same terms, i.e. הלך *hlk* and מִישָׁרִים *mêšārîm*). Her se-

cond line is somewhat enigmatic though. The verb **דבב** (*dbb*) occurs only here, but commentators are largely agreed that it means ‘to flow, glide, drip’ (see e.g. Fox, 1985, p. 163; Hess, 2005, p. 198). However, a literal reading of the entire phrase yields ‘gliding over sleepers’ lips’, which some regard as unlikely.

Some ancient versions (Peshitta and Aquila) translate ‘my lips and my teeth’, thus reading **וּשְׁנֵי שִׁפְתָי** (*siptê ûšnê*) instead of **וּשְׁנֵי שִׁפְתָי יְשֻׁנִים** (*siptê yěšēnîm*). However, as Fox (1985, p. 163) points out, this makes little sense, as the wine here is not gliding over her lips and teeth but those of her lover. Modern translations that, somewhat less specifically and more plausibly in terms of the imagery, read ‘gliding over lips and teeth’ (i.e. RSV, NRSV, ESV; see also NIV) similarly have to change the Hebrew text, in this case to **וּשְׁנֵי שִׁפְתָי** (*siptîm ûšnîm*). KJV’s ‘causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak’ reflects an old interpretation found already in Rashi and Ibn Ezra, according to which the wine is so powerful that it even arouses one from sleep.

I have adopted Fox’s reading (1985, p. 163), which requires only a minor change to the Hebrew text to yield **וּשְׁנֵי שִׁפְתָי** (*siptê šānîm*), thus assuming a dittography in the initial *yôd* of **וּשְׁנֵי** (*yěšēnîm*). Apart from the changes to the consonantal text of MT being minimal in this reading, it is also made more likely by the fact that the woman’s lips are similarly compared to a scarlet thread in 4:3.

The woman once again rejoices in the mutuality of their relationship (v. 11 [10]), which she had already celebrated in 2:16 and 6:3. This time, the poet introduces a fascinating term, ‘desire’ (**תְּשׁוּקָה** *těšûqāh*), which only occurs twice more in the Old Testament, both times in a distinctly negative context. In Genesis 4:7 we read of sin’s desire for Cain, which he must ‘rule over’ (**מִשְׁלֵב** *misl-bě*). In Genesis 3:16 the woman is told that her desire shall be for her husband, who shall ‘rule over’ her (**מִשְׁלֵב** *misl-bě*). In all three cases, the object of desire – Cain, the man in Genesis 3 and the woman in the Song – is mentioned at the beginning of the phrase for emphasis (e.g. ‘and *for me* is his desire’; Song 7:11 [10]).

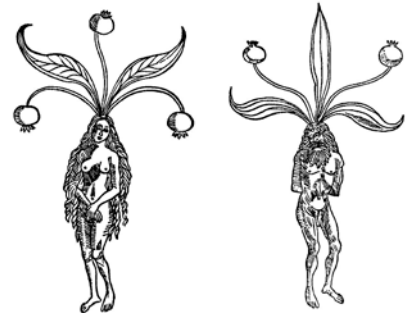
In the two Genesis passages, desire appears in negative contexts, being associated with sin, on the one hand, and male domination, on the other. The Song of Songs, by contrast, not only speaks of a relationship of mutuality but also reverses the directionality of desire. Whereas in Genesis 3:16 the woman experiences desire for her husband that is not reciprocated but is met by male domination, in Song 7:11 (10) it is the man who desires his beloved in a context of true mutuality. Tribble (1978b) therefore suggests that the Song of Songs offers a deliberate reversal of the gender roles envisaged in Genesis 3.

The woman then invites her lover out into the countryside (lit. ‘the field’), enticing him to spend the night among the henna shrubs (v. 12 [11]). The last line is ambiguous because the final word can also mean ‘villages’ (thus KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV, NASB, NIV; see also Hess, 2005, p. 198). However, this appears less likely once the similarities between vv.

12-13 (11-12) and 1:13-14 are taken into account. In both passages the verb ‘to spend the night’ (לִיַן *lyn*) appears, which features nowhere else in the Song, both talk about henna blossoms or bushes (כֹּפֶר *kōper*; elsewhere only in 4:13) and both feature vineyards (כְּרָמִים *kērāmîm*).

Her invitation to visit the vineyards and see whether the vine has blossomed and the pomegranates are in bloom (v. 13 [12]) sounds familiar, too. The last time the man looked for those signs (cf. 6:11, which also features blossoming [פָּרַח *prḥ*] vine [נָפַן *gepen*] and pomegranates [רִמּוֹנִים *rimmônîm*] in bloom [נָצַץ *nṣṣ* Hiphil]), he ended up riding in that most wonderful chariot (6:12), which, as we saw earlier, was a metaphor for the consummation of their love. Here, too, the blossoming vines and blooming pomegranates are an indication of the woman’s readiness for a sexual encounter, as she herself points out. Again, the physical concreteness implied in the Hebrew term דוֹדִים (*dôdîm*) warrants a translation such as ‘lovemaking’, but in this context the phrase ‘there I’ll give you my love’ would seem to convey those implications. Hess (2005, p. 198), more freely but entirely appropriately, translates ‘there I will make love to you’.

Mandrakes, which are found in most parts of Israel, make their first and only appearance in the Song in v. 14 (13). Pope (1977, p. 649) notes that their odour, which is referred to here, was ‘pungent and distinctive’ but also ‘presumably pleasant or exciting’. Their only other occurrence in the Old Testament is in Genesis 30:14-16, a text that illustrates their reputation as an aphrodisiac, once again documented by Pope, who includes a line drawing from a fifteenth-century publication featuring male and female mandrakes (1977, p. 594). Their appearance in the Song is not solely due to their fragrance, however, but was most likely inspired also by the fact that דוֹדָאִים (*dūdā’îm*), ‘mandrakes’, sounds similar to דוֹדִים (*dôdîm*), ‘lovemaking’. As the woman ‘gives’ (נָתַן *ntn*) the man ‘her lovemaking’, so the mandrakes ‘give’ (נָתַן *ntn*) their fragrance.



‘All kinds of delicious things’ are available at ‘our doors’, says the woman. The reference could be to all manner of delicacies, but as מְגָדִים (*mĕgādîm*) was used with reference to fruits in 4:13, 16, the same is probably in view here, too. As before (see 1:16-17; 2:9, 12), the possessive pronoun ‘our’ in ‘our doors’ does not convey ownership but refers to something shared by the lovers. Fox (1985, p. 165) explains that the old fruit might be those that had grown on the trees earlier rather than last year’s.

The woman fervently wishes for her lover to be like her brother, because then she could kiss him openly in public without being taken for a harlot (8:1). It is this worry that causes her to use the strong term ‘despise’. Proverbs 7:13 illustrates the practice of a prostitute (זוֹנָה *zônāh*) who openly kisses her punter in public. When she pictures her

lover as someone who had nursed at her mother's breasts, she uses 'an expression of tenderness and intimacy', as Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 209) have pointed out, wishing to be as close to him as if they had been nursing at their mother's breasts together.

Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 210) note that in v. 2, as in 3:4, we find a departure from the tradition according to which it is the man who brings the woman into his mother's tent (cf. Gen. 24:67).

The third line, consisting of only one word in Hebrew (תְּלַמְּדֵנִי *təllammēdēnī*), has caused interpreters some difficulties. Some regard it as corrupt and change it, in line with the parallel in 3:4, to 'to the room of her who bore me' (thus RSV, NRSV and Fox, 1985, p. 165, following an ancient tradition reflected in LXX and Peshitta). The text does, however, make sense as it stands, even if the notion of teaching may seem somewhat surprising at first. Most English translations render it along the lines of 'she who used to teach me' or 'she who has taught me' (see KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, TNK), thus understanding it as a general statement defining the mother.

Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 210) point out that it can also be rendered as future tense, 'she will teach me', thus implying that the woman expects her mother to teach her 'in the art of love'. They adduce Ruth 3:3-4 in support of their interpretation, where Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law in how to prepare for her nightly encounter with Boaz. Landy (1983, p. 250) similarly suggests that the mother 'participates in their amorous education'.

However, the Hebrew is ambiguous, with the result that it is not clear who is doing the teaching. As we have seen, it can be read as the third-person feminine singular, 'she would teach me', but it can also be the second-person masculine singular, 'you (masculine) would teach me' (thus e.g. Keel, 1994, p. 256; Hess, 2005, p. 199), in which case it is the woman's lover who is the expected teacher. Landy (1983, p. 100) regards the ambiguity as intentional, commenting that, just as the woman had expressed her wish for her lover to be like her brother, so he is here, by means of the ambiguity of her words, 'assimilated to the figure of the mother': 'as the one who initiates her, he adopts the part of the mother, through whose guidance the child enters the world'.

The spiced wine that she would give him to drink clearly refers to her kisses, as the repeated association between kissing and wine in the Song indicates (cf. 1:2; 4:11; 5:16; 7:10 [9]). This is reinforced in the Hebrew text by means of the phonetic similarity between אֶשְׁקֶכָּהּ (*'eššāqēkā*), 'I would kiss you', in v. 1 and אֶשְׁקֶכָּהּ (*'ašqēkā*), 'I would give you to drink' in the present verse. The juice of her pomegranates (עֵסִים רִמּוֹנִי *'āsīs rimmōnī*) that she promises him is sweet and powerful stuff, as the other poetic occurrences of עֵסִים (*'āsīs*) in Isaiah 49:26; Joel 1:5; 4:18 (3:18) and Amos 9:13 suggest.

Verse 3 is a verbatim repetition of 2:6. It envisions an amorous encounter that is, however, not as daring in its suggestion of lovemaking as the earlier invitation to look

for blossoming vines and blooming pomegranates, most likely because it is taking place in her mother's house. The adjuration, addressed to the daughters of Jerusalem, not to arouse love until it is ready (v. 4), similarly, though in a slightly abbreviated (the reference to 'the gazelles or the does of the field is missing') and modified form (מה *mah* is used instead of אַיִם *'im*), repeats earlier ones in 2:7 and 3:5. In 2:7, it also followed upon an encounter as described in v. 3, while in the case of 3:5 the context similarly is that of a meeting in her mother's house.

The Daughters of Jerusalem (8:5a)

8:5a Who's this coming up from the desert,
leaning upon her lover?

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר
מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ

As in 3:5-6, the woman's address to the daughters of Jerusalem prompts them to utter a question in response. Indeed, the opening words of their question are a verbatim repetition of 3:6.

The Woman (8:5b-7)

8:5b Under the apricot I awakened you.
There your mother conceived you.
There she who gave birth to you conceived.

תַּחַת הַתְּפוּחַ עוֹרְרִתִיךְ
שָׁמָּה חִבַּלְתְּךְ אִמֶּךָ
שָׁמָּה חִבְּלָה יְלִדְתְּךָ:
שִׁימְנֵי כַחוֹתֶם עַל־לִבֶּךָ
כַחוֹתֶם עַל־זְרוּעֶךָ
כִּי־עֲזָה כַמּוֹת אֶהְיֶה
קָשָׁה כַשְּׂאוֹל קִנְיָה
רְשָׁפֶיהָ רְשָׁפֵי אֵשׁ
שְׁלֵה־בַתֶּיהָ:

8:6 Place me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is as strong as death,
jealousy as hard as Sheol.
Its flames are flames of fire,
an almighty flame.

מִים רַבִּים לֹא יוּכְלוּ לְכַבּוֹת אֶת־הָאֵהָבָה
וְנַהֲרוֹת לֹא יִשְׁטַפּוּהָ
אִם־יִתֵּן אִישׁ אֶת־כָּל־הוֹן בֵּיתוֹ בְּאֶהָבָה
בוֹז יְבוֹזוּ לוֹ: ס

8:7 Mighty waters can't quench love,
nor will rivers wash it away.
If one gave all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

Rather than answering the question posed by the daughters of Jerusalem, the woman's words hark back to her own adjuration in v. 4 by picking up the verb עור (*wr*), used twice in her plea not to awaken or arouse love until it is ready. Now she says that she herself had awakened her lover under the apricot tree, and the erotic connotations of her words are apparent. Her words also establish a link with 2:3 where the lover himself had been compared to an apricot tree.

The last two lines of v. 5 have been variously understood by translators and interpreters, partly because the verb (חבל *hbl* Piel) that features in both can mean 'give birth'

(KJV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, ESV) as well as ‘conceive’ (NIV [which translates ‘conceive’ in one case and ‘be in labour’ in the other], TNK). In the present context, where giving birth is expressed by יָלַד (*yld*) in the last line, it is best to render חָבַל (*ḥbl* Piel) as ‘conceive’. This would parallel the sequence in Psalm 7:15 (14), which also begins with חָבַל (*ḥbl* Piel) and ends with יָלַד (*yld*).

The second issue that has given rise to different understandings is the ostensible presence of two finite verbs in the last line: ‘she conceived’ and ‘she gave birth’ (cf. NASB, which, however, translates the first ‘was in labor’; see also Hess, 2005, p. 233). However, as Fox (1985, p. 168) has pointed out, it is better to see the second verb יִלְדָתֶךָ (*yēlādat-kā*) as serving as a noun, ‘she-who-gave-birth-to-you’, and thus the subject of the sentence. The two lines thus feature a parallel arrangement, in which the subject comes last in both cases:

There	conceived-you	your-mother.
There	conceived	she-who-gave-birth-to-you. ¹⁶

According to this reading, it was the conception that took place under the apricot tree (thus also TNK) rather than her lover’s birth (as in KJV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, ESV). There where he had been conceived, his beloved awakened the man. NIV, by translating חָבַל (*ḥbl* Piel) ‘conceived’ in the penultimate line and ‘be in labour’ in the last one, conjures up the scenario of his conception *and* birth having taken place under the apricot tree.

Having consummated their love, the woman desires to be placed like a seal upon her lover’s heart and arm (v. 6) and thus, as Fox (1985, p. 169) suggests, ‘to be bound to [him] in all his thoughts and actions’. To be placed as a seal on someone’s heart and arm was of profound symbolic significance and indicated belonging and intimacy (see Jer. 22:24; Hag. 2:23). Alter (1995, p. 131) notes that the language might even be a ‘daring adaptation’ of the divine command to bind God’s words on one’s heart and hand (see Deut. 11:18). The following lines explain the woman’s plea that her lover bind her tightly to himself. Love is here portrayed as powerful as death’s irresistible force, while jealousy is said to be as possessive as Sheol, the netherworld, from where no one returned.

Some modern translations read ‘passion’ instead of ‘jealousy’ (see e.g. NRSV, TNK), but Fox (pp. 169-170) maintains that the root קָנָא (*qn*) does not denote sexual desire but either ‘the anger or suspicion that a jealous person feels toward that which causes jealousy’ or ‘envy’, if applied to a third party that wishes to possess something belonging to another. In the Song, this jealousy does not appear to be directed at other women, however. In fact, the Shulamite even proudly boasts that other women love her lover (1:3). As again Fox (p. 170) has noted, in the context of the Song, the perceived danger is that of an interfering society, represented by the city’s watchmen (3:3; 5:7) and the woman’s brothers (8:8-9).

¹⁶Hyphenated phrases are one word in the Hebrew text.

The interpretation of the last two lines is rendered difficult by the fact that the repeated term רֶשֶׁף (*rešep*), here translated ‘flame’, is rare and of uncertain meaning, while the last word שְׁלֵה־בְּתִיָּה (*šalhebetyāh*), ‘an almighty flame’, occurs only here. In Psalm 76:4 (3) רֶשֶׁף (*rešep*) modifies ‘arrows’, possibly yielding the meaning ‘flaming arrows’. The plural also occurs in Psalm 78:48 where it parallels hail and seems to refer to bolts of lightning. שְׁלֵה־בְּתִיָּה (*šalhebetyāh*), on the other hand, appears to denote an enormous flame or possibly lightning. It has been suggested that it contains the theophoric element יָהּ (*yāh-*), which has led to the translation ‘the flame of the LORD’ (NASB, ESV; Hess, 2005, p. 233). However, as Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 213) have pointed out, the ending, having lost its association with God’s name long ago, came to signify the intensity of that to which it was attached, as in ‘thick darkness’ (מֵאֲפֵלְיָהּ *ma’pēlyāh*; Jer. 2:31) – hence my rendering ‘almighty flame’.

Being as strong as death, love cannot be quenched or washed away (v. 7). But neither can it be bought, as the proverb in the second half of v. 7 indicates (cf. Prov. 6:31, which also features the phrase ‘give all the wealth of his house’). The last words are ambiguous in that it could be the man or his wealth that will be scorned.

The Brothers (8:8-9)

8:8 We have a sister, a little one,
who has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
on the day when she is spoken for?

8:9 If she’s a wall,
we’ll build on it a silver turret,
but if she’s a door,
we’ll barricade it with a cedar board.

אָחוֹת לָנוּ קְטַנָּה
וְשָׁדַיִם אֵין לָהּ
מָה נַעֲשֶׂה לְאַחֵינוּ
בְּיוֹם שִׁדְּבָרָהּ:
אִם-חוֹמָה הִיא
נִבְנֶה עָלֶיהָ טִירַת כֶּסֶף
וְאִם-דֶּלֶת הִיא
נִצּוֹר עָלֶיהָ לֹחַ אֶרֶז:

Many interpreters assume that vv. 8-9 are spoken by the woman’s brothers, who have already made an appearance in 1:6, though other proposals include some unidentified suitors, the daughters of Jerusalem, the lover, and the woman herself, who, it has been suggested, is quoting an earlier speech by her brothers. The identity of the sister has been similarly disputed, with some suggesting that it must be the Shulamite’s little sister. This reading assumes that the speakers are the woman’s brothers while the sister is the female protagonist of the Song herself.

Old Testament passages, such as Genesis 24:29-60, involving Rebekah’s brother Laban, and 34:6-18, featuring Dinah’s brothers, illustrate the role a woman’s brothers played in matters affecting her sexuality and marriage, as did the earlier reference to the woman’s brothers in Song 1:6. Fox (1985, p. 173) has drawn attention to the fact that קְטַנָּה (*qēṭannāh*), here translated ‘a little one’, is not an adjective modifying ‘sister’

but a noun that stands in apposition to it. Later on, in the Mishnah, it came to designate a minor, i.e. a girl under the age of twelve, but it should not be automatically assumed that this is its meaning in the Song.

It is evident though that קְטַנָּה (*qəṭannāh*) similarly denotes a woman who is perceived to be sexually immature by her brothers. Their statement regarding the lack of breasts clearly makes that point. Ezekiel 16:7-8 mentions developed breasts and the appearance of pubic hair as signs that a woman had reached the 'age for lovemaking' (עַת דֹּדִים *‘et dōdīm*). As their sister had no yet reached that stage in her brothers' perception, they are wondering what to do when the moment arrives that she will be spoken for (cf. 1 Sam. 25:39 where דָּבַר *dbar* Piel with בָּ *bē-* is used in the same sense). All the while, we, the readers of the Song, know that the brothers' assessment of their sister's sexual maturity is based on a misperception, which she herself defiantly points out: 'my breasts are like towers' (v. 10). And even if that is taken to be an exaggeration, then the same apparently applies to her brothers' statement as well (thus Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 215).

Verse 9 is another one of the Song's enigmas. The first question revolves around the issue of whether the metaphors are to be understood as synonymous or antithetical.¹⁷ If, as is assumed in this reading in line with most commentators, the statement is antithetical then the issue is the woman's sexual inaccessibility, expressed by means of the wall metaphor, vis-à-vis her accessibility, symbolised by the door. If she is a wall, then she has her brothers' support, as it were. If, however, she turns out to be a door, then the brothers will step in and barricade that door. The verb צֹר (*ṣwr*) that is used here is a harsh one that is frequently used with the meaning 'to lay siege to'. In both cases, the object of the verbs can either be the woman ('build on her', 'barricade her'), as in most modern English translations, or the wall and door of the metaphor, as assumed in this translation (thus also TNK).

Fox (1985, p. 172) has argued that chastity cannot be the issue since we already know that the two lovers have indulged in the pleasures of lovemaking. However, since their meetings, as suggested by the outdoor locations, appear to have been furtive ones, we, the readers of the Song, may once again be much better informed than the woman's brothers. Pardes compares their attitude to that of the watchmen featuring earlier on in the Song, both of whom she sees as representing the values of a patriarchal society. As she points out (1992, p. 140), both 'watch over walls', which in the present verse stand for the woman's body, 'in a rather hostile manner'.

The Woman (8:10)

8:10 I'm a wall,

אֲנִי חוֹמָה

¹⁷See Bloch and Bloch, 1995, pp. 215-216, for further discussion.

and my breasts are like towers!
 So I've become with my lover
 as one who has found peace.

וְשָׁדַי כַּמְגִדְלוֹת
 אֲזָ הָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו
 כְּמוֹצֵאת שְׁלוֹם: פ

In her reply, the woman insists that she is by no means a door (v. 10). 'I am a wall', she says, thus asserting that she is not easily accessible. Interpreters have wondered how she can make such a claim, given the strong indications in the Song that the lovers have already consummated their relationship. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 217) have made the interesting suggestion that the woman's words are best understood in connection with the metaphor of the locked garden in 4:12, a garden that 'is inaccessible to anyone but her lover'. Thus, in her reply, she is rejecting the insinuation that she might be easily accessible while at the same time reserving the right to determine matters regarding her sexual life herself.

Indeed, as Pardes (1992, p. 141) has pointed out, she 'teases those who attempt to set limits to her desires', insisting that she has no need for additional fortifications, the silver turret offered by her brothers, for she has 'breasts like towers'. Of course, her words are highly suggestive. While on one level rejecting her brother's interference in matters of her sexuality, the woman at the same time opposes their claim regarding her sexual immaturity.

The following two lines, which literally read 'then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace' (see KJV, NASB, ESV, TNK; by contrast, RSV and NRSV read '*brings* peace', thus understanding the participle מוֹצֵאת *môš'et* as יצא *yś'* Hiphil rather than מצא *mś'* Qal), are once again enigmatic. The notion of peace (שְׁלוֹם *šālôm*) is intriguing in a context that has clear military associations in the turret (v. 9), the towers (v. 10) and the verb צור (*šwr*), 'barricade' (v. 9), which, as we saw, frequently occurs with the meaning 'to lay siege to' a city. As Falk (1982, p. 132) has pointed out, the words 'finding peace' are 'consonant with the fortress imagery of the poem'. While the wall has not been entirely impenetrable after all, her lover's advances have been more than welcome. Falk expresses this in the translation: 'So I have found peace / Here with my lover' (1982, p. 49). Pardes (1992, p. 141), coming back to the woman's breasts, comments that it was precisely 'the Shulamite's formidable fortification', in the form of her 'towering' breasts, that 'brings about a peaceful amorous encounter'.

The Man (8:11-13)

8:11 Solomon had a vineyard
 in Baal-Hamon.
 He entrusted the vineyard to keepers;
 each would obtain for its fruit
 a thousand pieces of silver.

בָּרַם הָיָה לְשִׁלְמָה
 בְּבַעַל הַמֶּזֶן
 נָתַן אֶת־הַבָּרַם לְנֹטְרִים
 אִישׁ יִבֶּא בִפְרִי
 אֶלֶף בָּסָף:

8:12 My vineyard, my very own, is before me.
The thousand may be yours, O Solomon,
and two hundred for the keepers of its fruit.

פְּרָמִי שְׁלִי לְפָנַי
הָאֶלֶף לְךָ שְׁלֹמֹה
וּמֵאֲתָתִים לְנֹטְרִים אֶת־פְּרִיָּו:

8:13 O you who dwells in the gardens,
the companions are listening to your voice.
Let me hear it.

הַיּוֹשֵׁבֶת בַּגַּנִּים
חֲבֵרִים מְקֻשְׁבִּים לְקוֹלְךָ
הַשְׁמִיעֵנִי:

The meaning of the Parable of the Vineyard in vv. 11-12 is easy enough to grasp. It reemphasises a point already made in v. 7, namely that love, or more specifically in this case lovemaking, the pleasures of sexual encounter enjoyed with the beloved partner, far outweigh the riches of this world. Solomon, in all his splendour, does not have anything comparable to these joys. His vineyard is envisaged in Baal-Hamon, an imaginary place with symbolic significance. Understood as ‘owner of wealth’ it underlines the point about the riches, which is developed further in the following lines. Isaiah 7:23 suggests that vineyards that earned their owners a thousand pieces of silver were regarded as valuable. Solomon’s vineyard is depicted as even more lucrative since each of the keepers, upon selling the fruit in his charge, makes that sum. But Solomon can keep his money, just as the keepers are welcome to their share.

In the context of the Song the vineyard in v. 12 clearly refers to the woman, or more specifically to her sexuality. This, together with the fact that the term Baal-Hamon is somewhat ambiguous, suggests that something more than Solomon’s economic riches are in view in this parable. Another possible translation of Baal-Hamon is ‘husband of a multitude’, which would seem to be an allusion to Solomon’s famous harem. 1 Kings 11:3 mentions seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines and hence a grand total of one thousand women. As Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 220) indicate, ‘the tone’ in these lines of the Song ‘is mocking: Have your thousand, [Solomon], whatever they be!’

Some have come to the conclusion that the speaker in vv. 11-12 is the woman (thus e.g. Hess, 2005, p. 234). This is a possible interpretation in the sense that she could be expressing her preference for her own vineyard, her own sexuality and all the pleasures that this affords her, to all Solomon’s wealth and opulence. One reason for that reading is that the only other time the terms ‘keeper’ (נֹטֵר *nōtēr*) and ‘to keep’ (נָטַר *ntr*) are used in the Song, also in connection with a vineyard, is in 1:6 where the woman, who is the speaker in that verse, reflects upon not having kept her own vineyard.

The reading adopted here follows those who see the man as the speaker in these lines (e.g. Fox, 1985, p. 174; Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 218). Just as the garden, another reference to the woman’s sexuality, is both her own and that of her lover (see 4:16, which has גַּנִּי [*gannî*], ‘my garden’, and גַּנּוֹ [*gannô*], ‘his garden’), so the vineyard is hers

(1:6) and her lover's (8:12). It is thus the man who is marvelling at the fact that he has his very own vineyard. As in 1:6, the addition of 'my very own' (שְׁלִי *šelli*) is emphatic. If this reading is correct, then there is a sense of closure here in that the vineyard, which the woman had failed to keep (1:6), is now in the care of her lover (cf. Fox, 1985, p. 174; Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 220). Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:4, somewhat similarly envisages marriage partners enjoying each other's bodies, but while his emphasis appears to be on their respective rights over their spouse's body (see the discussion of ἐξουσιάζω [*exousiazō*] in Thiselton, 2000, pp. 504-506), the Song's focus is on caretaking.

In v. 13 the woman is addressed as the one who dwells in the gardens (הַיּוֹשֶׁבֶת בַּגְּנִים *hayyôšebet bagganîm*), apparently because she spends much time in the fields, vineyards and gardens (cf. Fox, 1985, p. 176). This is certainly the impression one gets from reading the Song, which envisages the lovers enjoying the countryside, the gardens and vineyards so beautifully evoked in its imagery. The reference to unspecified companions is somewhat puzzling. Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 220) read the man's words as implying that 'all friends – his, hers, always! – listen for her voice'. But it seems preferable to take them as a reference to the companions that are with the man at the time. They, as much as he, enjoy her voice, but he in particular desires to hear it.

The Woman (8:14)

8:14 Slip away, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or a young stag
on the spice mountains.

בָּרַח | דּוֹדִי
וְדָמָה-לָךְ לְצִבִּי
אִו לְעֵפֶר הָאֵילִים
עַל הָרֵי בְשָׂמִים:

The Song ends with these words, as the woman addresses her lover one last time. But what is she asking him to do? The imagery is already familiar to us, as she had compared her lover to a gazelle and a young stag in 2:9, 17. Spices and mountains, too, have featured repeatedly. Most importantly, in 4:6, the woman is described as a 'mountain of myrrh' and a 'hill of frankincense'. Everything in this last verse hinges upon our understanding of the verb בָּרַח (*brḥ*), 'to flee, run away, slip away'. Most English versions translate along the lines of 'make haste' (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) or 'hurry' (NASB, TNK). The rationale for these readings *may* be the translators' wish to see the two lovers united, although that depends on how one understands the metaphor of the spice mountains. The desire for the lovers' union is, however, clearly apparent in translations such as 'flee with me', 'flee to me' or 'return'. Yet Hebrew בָּרַח (*brḥ*) does not mean 'make haste', 'hurry' or 'return'. Nor does the text say 'with me' or 'to me'.

Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 221), noting that the verb can only mean 'flee away from someone', conclude that the woman is asking her lover to flee away from her, apparently so that the two will not get caught together. According to them, the Song 'ends with

the motif of the lovers parting at dawn'. Verse 14 is thus understood in much the same way as their reading of the woman's earlier plea that her lover be like a gazelle or a young stag and bound away before daybreak (2:17). However, in contrast to Bloch and Bloch, I concluded that those words were an invitation to her lover to frolic through the night, with the mountains depicting 'the landscape of her body', to use once again Alter's terminology (see Alter, 1985, p. 195). The same is in view in the Song's closing lines.

Translators who see the lovers united as we take leave of them are correct. But how is this possible if בָּרַח (*brḥ*) means 'to flee away from someone'? Who or what is the woman asking her lover to flee away from? The answer is found in the previous verse, which envisages the man in the company of his friends, calling out to her to let him hear her voice. She does, and she invites him to something more. 'Slip away', she says, imploring him to leave his friends and come to her, to be like a gazelle or a young stag once more and explore the mountains of spice.

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