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For Strong as Death is Love

Jonathan Stökl

The Bible is a rich and diverse library. It contains stories and reflections on many topics, often from at least two opposing perspectives. These texts invite further contemplation. As one might expect, a number of biblical narrative texts contain examples of relationships that we might understand as loving, or for which the Hebrew word אהבה (*ahava*) is used. We can think of Jacob's love for Rachel (Gen 29:20; the text is curiously silent about her feelings for him), Jonathan's love for David (e.g., 1 Sam 18:3), but also Adonai's (God's) love for Israel (Deut 7:8) and the love of Jerusalem (standing in metonymicaly for its inhabitants) for Adonai (Jer 2:2). Scholars debate how best to understand what this 'love' (אהבה) really signifies, as it is also used in considerably more troublesome contexts. We will leave this question for another day.

In this contribution I will focus on the Song of Songs, often considered the epitome of ancient expressions of love. The text, likely an anthology of several love poems, is unusual in the biblical corpus by taking a female perspective and talking quite openly about female and male sexual desire. It is comparable in nature to ancient Egyptian and the lesser-known Mesopotamian love literature. Indeed, like such texts, also the Song of Songs at times speaks in imagery that is metaphoric – but quite explicit.

Indeed, after the heading ascribing the Song to Solomon, a female voice encourages a male interlocutor to kiss her because his caresses are more delightful than wine. His body is described as fragrant as the result of oil (=cosmetics). Young women are said to desire him (Song 1:2–4).

Such descriptions which appear tame in comparison to current popular culture have nonetheless been read as powerful expressions of physical desire. Some (especially in a culture that has traditionally been impacted by Calvinist morality) may wonder what such a text is doing in the Hebrew Bible (roughly the same

corpus as the Christian Old Testament, but with the individual books in a different order, and of course, not in the same volume as the New Testament). Indeed, one does not expect what some have dubbed 'soft porn' in the Bible.

The reason is, when it comes down to it, rather simple. The anthology of racy poems was read as expressions of the love of Israel towards its/her God and the love of the deity towards Israel. The fervour expressed by the two lovers is thus understood not as an expression of love and sexual desire, but of religious devotion. At least one scholar has even gone so far as to suggest that the Song of Song was consciously composed for that purpose, playing with the pre-existing genre of ancient Near Eastern love poetry. Throughout the last 2,000 or so years that has certainly been the way that it has largely been interpreted, and it has inspired mystical movements in both Judaism and Christianity to express their religious devotion in similar language (one can look at the Targum, the Aramaic translation of the Song of Songs, or the mystical poetry by Hildegard von Bingen).

More recently, the texts' likely origin as sexualized love poems for consumption at court has been recognised again. It has been compared extensively with Egyptian love poetry, itself richly attested. It appears that the genre had its *Sitz im Leben* – its original setting – as entertainment in the context of large gatherings in palaces. The same appears to be true in similar compositions in Akkadian, where this genre is much less well attested.

Taking their cue from the realisation of the texts' likely original setting, a number of scholars suggested that the author of these poems was a woman, largely based on the fact that this is the only biblical text in which female sexual desire is expressed so freely – two of the main scholars associated with this view worked here in the Netherlands: Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner-Idan. There are some excellent

additional reasons to assume female authorship: not only does the text speak of female sexual desire freely, but the female character also has many more lines than the male character. In later central Asian literature this genre of literature was a largely female-composed literature. The linguistic profile of the text is different from most other biblical texts. But there are also good reasons to doubt the identification of the texts' author(s) as female. The ancient Near Eastern genre is not especially attested as associated with female authors. Indeed, Cheryl Exum, emeritus professor in Sheffield, who worked closely with van Dijk-Hemmes and Brenner-Idan is rather hesitant about the identification of the author as female. She points to the possibility of the creation of a female character by a male author – the Songs' female character(s) would then become the result of male fantasy and

projection rather than female authorship. Similarly, she points out that the Song of Songs is far from the harmonious text it is often said to be (e.g., Song 5:6–7); the book contains scenes that speak of physical abuse towards the female character in the scene. In what I consider one of the best contributions to the wider field of biblical studies, Exum – an avowed, political and strong feminist – argues that it may be our desire as modern readers of this ancient text to associate the relatively egalitarian position and freedom expressed in the text with a female author.¹

Whoever the author was, the Song of Songs expresses its delight in human bodies often in bold metaphors. It would be remiss not to give a few examples of this. Thus, the male lover describes his beloved in the following words:

- 1 Ah, you are beautiful, my darling – Oh, you – how beautiful.
Your eyes are doves behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead.
- 2 Your teeth are like a flock of ewes climbing up from the washing pool;
All of them bear twins, (and) not one loses her young.
- 3 Your lips are like a crimson thread, your mouth is lovely.
Like the halves of a pomegranate are your brows behind your veil.
- 4 Like David's Tower is your neck, built to hold weapons,
A thousand shields are hanging from it; all the warriors' quivers.
- 5 Your breasts are like two fawns,
Twins of a gazelle, grazing among the lilies.
- 6 Until the day blows gently and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mount of myrrh, to the hill of frankincense.
- 7 Every part of you is fair, my darling – there is no blemish in you.
(Song 4:1–7)

There are further descriptions of the female lover's body. The female lover often speaks of her

desire for the male lover, but rarely does she describe him:

- 10 My beloved is resplendent and ruddy,
Preeminent among ten thousand.
- 11 His head is finest gold,
His locks are curled
Black as a raven.
- 12 His eyes are like doves by streams,
Bathed in milk, sitting by a brimming pool.
- 13 His cheeks are like beds of balsam, producing perfume,
His lips are lilies dripping of flowing myrrh.
- 14 His hands are rods of gold studded with beryl;
His belly a tablet of ivory adorned with sapphires.

- 15 His legs are marble pillars set in sockets of fine gold.
His appearance is like the Lebanon, stately as the cedars.
16 His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful.
Such is my beloved, such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem!
(Song 5:10–16)

The desire of the lovers for each other is palpable, quite literally dripping off the poetic lines. Both lovers are the *subject* of explicit desiring as well as the *object* of explicit desire. Considering what we might connect with ideas about male beauty and the Bible it is perhaps unexpected to see the praise of the use of what we today would call cosmetics by the male lover.

The love described in the Song of Songs is intensely physical. Perhaps, we could even deem it ‘desire’ rather than ‘love’? At first glance this may be thought to hinder the metaphorised traditional reading as referring to the love of Israel to God and vice versa. Interestingly, Israel is then read as female – mirroring the traditional reading of the highly disturbing chapters 16 and 23 in Ezekiel. But the devotion of the lovers for each other goes further than the purely physical – for the female love says, ‘my beloved is mine and I am his’ (Song 2:16).

What, then, is love, according to the Song of Songs? Whatever other texts in the Hebrew Bible may say, to the Song of Songs it is certainly not a purely platonic affair – no, it is something that is intensely physical and comes with physical desire – which is combined with something that we might call emotional. Other biblical texts provide different perspectives, but to the Song of Songs, being a human in love envelops the whole of the human experience.

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¹ J.C. EXUM (2000). “Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs”, in: A. BRENNER & C.R. FONTAIN eds., *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Sheffield.