CHAPTER 23

The Psalms and Song of Songs

Two poetic books among the Writings occupy us in this chapter: the book of Psalms and the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon).

THE PSALMS

The book of Psalms (the Psalter) contains 150 psalms in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament. The name "Psalms" is derived from the Greek *psallein,* to sing to the accompaniment of a harp or lyre. In Hebrew the book is called *t'hillim,* "praises." The Greek Bible (LXX) contains an additional psalm (151), in which David celebrates his victory over Goliath. The Greek psalms are also numbered differently. In two cases consecutive Hebrew psalms (9–10; 114–115) are combined in the Greek (as Psalms 9 and 113), while Hebrew Psalms 116 and 147 are each divided into two (114–115 and 146–147) in the Greek.

Psalms is traditionally attributed to King David. David is depicted as a musician (1 Sam 16:16-23), who composes a lament (for Saul and Jonathan, 2 Sam 1:17), a song of thanksgiving (2 Samuel 22 = Psalm 18), and poetic "last words" (2 Sam 23:1-7). His name appears in the superscriptions of 73 psalms. In thirteen instances (3; 7; 18; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142) the psalm is associated with an event in David's life. One of these, Psalm 18, appears in 2 Samuel 22. These references were added by an editor long after the time of David. Several psalms are associated with other people in the Hebrew text, including Solomon (72; 127), Asaph (50; 73–83), the Korahites (42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88), and Moses (90). Nonetheless, the association with David was strengthened in the later tradition. In the LXX, eighty-five psalms are ascribed to David. The Psalms Scroll from Qumran claims that David wrote 3,600 psalms. By the first century B.C.E. it was possible to refer to "David" in the same context as Moses and the prophets, to indicate an authoritative body of Scripture. Similarly in the New Testament, citations from Psalms can be introduced as sayings of David (Acts 2:25, 31, 34).

Psalms is divided into five books: 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–50. Each book ends with a doxology, a short hymn of praise. Psalm 150 in its entirety is a doxology to mark the end of the Psalter. Several smaller clusters reflect earlier groupings of psalms, such as the Psalms of Asaph and of the Korahites, noted above, or the "Songs of Ascent" (130–134). In the first book (1–41), all but 1; 2; 10; and 33 have superscriptions that mention David. Another cluster of psalms with Davidic superscriptions is found in Psalms 51–70 (of which only 66–67 are exceptions). Moreover, Psalm 72 is followed by an epilogue, which says that the prayers of Jesse, son of David, are ended. This statement would seem to mark the end of an earlier collection. Psalms 42–83 (that is, the second book and most of the third) are sometimes called the Elohistic Psalter, since in these psalms God is called *elohim* more than four times as often as YHWH, whereas the latter name predominates in the rest of the Psalter by a ratio of better than two to one. It should be noted that this Elohistic Psalter overlaps the second and third books of the canonical collection.

New light has been shed on the history of the book of Psalms by a Psalms Scroll from Qumran (11Q5). This scroll contains most of the last third of the biblical Psalter, but in an unconventional arrangement (101–103; 109; 118; 104; 147; 105; 146–148; etc.). It also includes a poem identical with 2 Sam 23:1-7 ("the last words of David") and several apocryphal psalms. There is also a prose catalogue of David's compositions, placed toward the end of the collection but followed by four psalms. Several other manuscripts of the Psalms found at Qumran also show differences in the order of the psalms. The great majority of the variations are found in the last third of the Psalter. This evidence strongly suggests that the order, and even the content, of the latter part of the Psalter was still fluid in the first century B.C.E., and can only have been settled finally after that time.

The Different Kinds of Psalms

Hermann Gunkel, the founder of "form criticism," argued that the psalms were not the spontaneous prayers of individuals but reflect fixed forms that were transmitted from generation to generation. The truth of this insight is confirmed by the fact that the same forms of religious poetry appear all over the ancient Near East.

The main kinds of psalm are: (1) *Hymns* or songs of praise. These are especially prominent towards the end of the Psalter (the imperative "Hallelujah!" is found in 104–106; 111–113; 115–117; 135; and 146–150). (2) *Psalms of YHWH's Enthronement*. Psalms 93; 97; and 99 begin with the acclamation "YHWH is king!" It has been argued that these psalms were used in a festival of the enthronement of YHWH. There is no other evidence of such a festival, but it may be that the kingship of YHWH was celebrated in connection with the New Year, like the kingship of Marduk in Babylon, or in connection with the Festival of Sukkoth (Tabernacles), which was also known as "the feast of YHWH." (3) *Individual and Communal Complaints*, which Gunkel called "the basic material of the Psalter." These psalms describe a state of distress and appeal to God for help. Some go on to acknowledge a divine response. Their language is often stereotypical, and so they could be appropriated by numerous individuals over the centuries. There are many examples of this kind of psalm from ancient Babylon; some even provide for the person praying the psalm to insert his or her own name. (4) *Individual and Communal Thanksgivings*.

These are integrally related to the psalms of complaint. The latter often conclude by giving thanks for deliverance, whether actual or anticipated. These psalms would usually have been accompanied by a thanksgiving sacrifice.

The complaints, thanksgivings, and hymns are the major kinds of cultic poetry in the Psalter. Some psalms that do not fit any of these classifications nonetheless seem designed for ritual occasions. Psalms 15 and 24 are liturgies for people entering the temple. The Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 130–134) are presumably named because they were used by pilgrims, but the individual psalms are of different kinds. Psalm 132 commemorates the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, and may have been associated with a festival. In contrast, Psalm 131 is a simple, and beautiful, prayer of trust, while Psalm 133 is a meditation on the pleasures of harmonious fellowship.

I have already considered (5) the *royal psalms* in connection with the

Lyre players – possibly Phoenician – captured by Assyria depicted on the Lachish relief, ca. 700–692 B.C.E., from Nineveh Southwest Palace; now in the British Museum, London.

CLASSIFICATION OF PSALMS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE	
Hymns	8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 67, 68, 96, 98, 100, 103–5, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 145–50
Psalms of YHWH's Enthronement	93, 97, 99
Psalms of Individual Complaint	3, 5–7, 13, 17, 22, 25–28, 32, 38, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54–57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69–71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140–43.
Psalms of Communal Complaint	44, 74, 79, 80, 83, 89
Psalms of Thanksgiving	18, 30, 34, 40:1-11, 41, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138
Royal Psalms	2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144:1-11
Wisdom Psalms	1, 14, 37, 73, 91, 112, 119, 128

(Many psalms are difficult to classify and are omitted from this list.)

story of Solomon in 1 Kings. Psalms 2 and 110 are plausibly understood as coronation psalms. Psalm 45 is composed for a royal wedding. Some of the royal psalms fit the categories of complaint or thanksgiving (18; 89; 144).

Finally, (6) the *wisdom psalms* often reflect on the fate of the righteous and the wicked, a typical theme of wisdom literature. Gunkel felt that these poems did not originate in the context of worship. Others hold that they are liturgical pieces, and that they reflect the changed character of worship after the Babylonian exile. It is also possible that they originated in the synagogue, where study of the Torah replaced sacrifice as the focal point of worship. The Torah figures prominently in some of these psalms, most obviously in Psalm 119. Similarly in Psalm 1, the righteous are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord. Psalm 19 declares that "the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." The Torah was not an object of study in the older wisdom literature (Proverbs, Qoheleth). The wisdom psalms that refer to the Torah as the source of wisdom are likely to be relatively late (Hellenistic period).

The inclusion of the wisdom psalms had a significant impact on the shape and character of the Psalter. As the opening psalm in the collection, Psalm 1 sets the tone for what follows, suggesting that the Psalter should be read in light of the Torah as a source for wisdom. Psalm 119 has an impact on the impression made by the Psalter as a whole because of its sheer length (176 verses). These psalms give the Psalter a didactic character. At the same time, they make the point that study is a form of worship in Second Temple Judaism, and testify to the growing importance of the Torah for Jewish religious life.

The Psalms as Poetry

Most, if not all, of the Psalms were originally meant to be sung. They are written in rhythmic style and are usually regarded as poetry. The most prominent feature of

Hebrew poetry is parallelism, the correspondence between the second line of a poetic verse and the first.

The most typical kind of correspondence is *synonymous parallelism*, where both parts of the verse say essentially the same thing. For example, 1:1 declares blessed

> *those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,*
> *or take the path that sinners tread,*
> *or sit in the seat of scoffers.*

But even when there is a very close correspondence the later part is not necessarily identical with the first. In 1:2 the statement that "on his law they meditate day and night" is not strictly synonymous with the preceding statement that "their delight is in the law of the LORD." The second part of the verse provides some additional information. Hebrew parallelism complements the thought of the first line of a verse, and this may be done in various ways.

A number of other literary devices are exhibited in the Psalms. Several psalms are acrostics, that is, each verse begins with a different letter of the alphabet, in sequence (Psalms 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111–112; 119; 145). Other common devices include repetition of a word or line to form an *inclusio* (causing the psalm to end in the same way that it began). For example, Psalm 136 begins and ends with the verse: "O give thanks to the LORD for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." Chiastic arrangements (ABBA or ABCBA) are also common, both in individual lines and in larger units.

Perhaps the most important poetic characteristic of the Psalter, however, is the use of metaphor and figurative language. Consider, for example, Psalm 69:1-2:

> *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.*
> *I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;*
> *I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.*

Later in the psalm it becomes clear that certain people hate the psalmist without cause and insult him. The language of drowning is entirely metaphorical and quite evocative. Metaphorical language is especially important in the attempt to speak about God (e.g., 23:1, "The LORD is my shepherd"). In other cases, the poets rely on simile, where the analogies are explicit, as when the author of Psalm 131 compares his peace of soul to that of a weaned child with its mother, or as when Psalm 49 says that human beings are like beasts that perish (49:20).

The Theology of the Psalms

The book of Psalms is not a unified composition in the sense of a modern treatise. It is a loosely edited anthology, in which certain themes are highlighted by the frequency with which they occur and by their placement in the collection. Nonetheless they provide an ample window on Israelite spirituality.

The Human Situation

As noted above, the most typical kind of psalm in the Psalter is the individual complaint or lament. These psalms, by definition, arise from situations of distress—"out of the depths," in the phrase of Psalm 130. They are often expressed in hyperbolic terms that picture the plaintiff before the jaws of death:

> *For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.*
> *I am counted among those who go down to the Pit . . .*
> *like those whom you remember no more. . . .*
>
> (88:3-5)

Sheol and the Pit are the netherworld, where the shade of the person goes after death. (The *nepeš* or soul survives after death as a shadowy spirit, like a ghost, but is not really alive.) There is no joy or vitality in Sheol.

> *The dead do not praise the* LORD *nor do any that go down into the silence."*
>
> (115:17; cf. 6:5)

This is the common destiny of all humankind in most of the Hebrew Bible. Even though the psalmist often thanks God for deliverance from death, the reprieve is short-lived.

> *O Lord, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them?*
> *They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow.*
>
> (144:4; cf. 39:5-6; 90:3-6; 103:15-16)

In light of this rather gloomy prospect, we might expect the Psalms to be depressing, but this is not at all the case. The psalms of complaint do not focus on the ultimacy of death but on more immediate dangers from which deliverance is possible. In Psalm 18 the psalmist confesses that, when "the cords of Sheol entangled me," God "reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters" (18:5, 16). Consequently, the psalms as a whole are animated by trust rather than fear.

> *Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death,*
> *I fear no evil; for you are with me.*
>
> (23:4)

Despite the inevitability of death and the abject circumstances implied in many complaints, the psalmists seldom indulge in self-abasement. The famous phrase of 22:6, "But I am a worm and not human," is atypical. The confidence of the psalmists is grounded in belief in a benevolent creator God. Psalm 8 marvels at the majesty of the heavens, and asks

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

But he goes on:

Yet you have made them a little lower than God [or "divine beings," elohim*],*
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all
things under their feet.

(cf. Genesis 1)

The value of life is ensured by the possibility of a relationship with God. This relationship reaches its fullest potential in connection with the presence of God in the temple. In Psalm 84 the psalmist declares, "My soul longs, it faints for the courts of the LORD," and adds, "a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere." We find here an indication of a transcendent experience that is not negated by human mortality. We find a similar kind of experience in the celebration of human love in the Song of Songs, which declares that "love is as strong as death" (Song 8:6).

In some psalms the confidence in divine deliverance seems to suggest that death may not be final after all, at least in special cases. Psalm 16:9-10 affirms:

Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol or let your faithful one see the Pit.

In the New Testament this passage is taken to refer to the Messiah, and is cited as a proof text for the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:24-28). In the context of the Hebrew Psalter, the passage may mean only that the psalmist is confident that God will not let him "see the Pit" on this occasion, or before his life has run its natural course. A more intriguing case is provided by Ps 49:15 (MT 49:16): "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will take me." The expression "take me" recalls the exceptional case of Enoch in Gen 5:24: "Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him." It was assumed, already in antiquity, that God had taken Enoch up to heaven, granting him an exception to the common human fate. It is possible that the psalmist hoped for a similar exception. The same verb is used in Ps 73:23-26:

Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me in glory. . . .

Here again the psalmist seems to hope that the relationship with God will not be terminated by death, as would be the case in Sheol. Immortality may also be envisioned in the case of the king. According to 21:4, "He asked you for life, you gave it to him—length of days forever and ever."

It should be emphasized that these cases are exceptional. The normal expectation in the Psalms is that people go to Sheol after death, where they can no longer even praise God. None of the psalms cited here offers any description of what eternal life might be like. They simply express confidence that God will "take" them. That they entertain such a hope at all is significant, however. Belief in the possibility of eternal life would eventually emerge in Judaism in the Hellenistic period, in the apocalyptic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls. This belief would be highly important for early Christianity.

The Kingship of God

The central image used to portray God is that of kingship, and the emphasis is on majesty and power. This theology is associated specifically with Zion, the holy mountain in Jerusalem (e.g., 48:1; 97:8; 99:2).

In the psalms celebrating his kingship, YHWH is said to manifest his power by thunder, lightning, and earthquake. This kind of storm language was often used to describe theophanies in the Ugaritic myths. It is associated with Baal, "the rider of the clouds," rather than with El. A classic example is found in Psalm 29. Apart from the name YHWH there is nothing in this psalm that could not have been said of Baal (compare also Psalm 97). Several of these hymns note that YHWH is exalted above the flood and is more majestic than the mighty waters (e.g., Psalm 93). This motif echoes the old Canaanite myth whereby Baal attained the kingship by defeating Yamm, the Sea (cf. 89:9-10). Some psalms use the same imagery in connection with the exodus (Ps 77:16; 114).

The kingship of YHWH derives from his role as creator and is attested by nature itself: "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19:1; cf. 8:3). Consequently, YHWH's kingship is supposed to be universal. The psalmists were surely aware that the kingship of YHWH was not, in fact, universally recognized, so it becomes an eschatological hope. So Psalm 96 calls on all nature to rejoice

> *before the* Lord*; for he is coming,*
> *for he is coming to judge the earth.*

Psalm 146 affirms:

> *The* Lord *will reign forever,*
> *your God, O Zion, for all generations.*

We do not find in the Psalms the prophetic critique of present political realities. The Psalter does, however, have an eschatological dimension insofar as it points to an ideal of the universal kingship of YHWH.

The Theology of Human Kingship

The kingship of YHWH has its earthly counterpart in the rule of the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem. The relationship is pictured vividly in Psalm 2, where the Lord proclaims, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy mountain," and in Psalm 110, where the king is invited to sit at the right hand of YHWH. The king is YHWH's son and his vicar on earth. He may even be addressed as *elohim*, "god," although he is clearly subordinate to the Most High (45:7). The promise to David, reported in 2 Samuel 7, is reflected in Psalms 89 and 132.

Like his divine counterpart, the king is committed to justice and righteousness (e.g., Psalm 72). This was the common theology of the ancient Near East. Hammurabi, no less than David or Josiah, proclaimed his purpose "to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak" (*ANET*, 164).

Just as the kingship of YHWH had an eschatological aspect, so too did the rule of the Davidic dynasty. After the Babylonian exile, the eschatological aspect of the royal psalms became more pronounced. When there was no longer a king on the throne, these psalms became monuments to the hope of restoration. Psalm 2, which explicitly uses the Hebrew word *mashiach* (anointed one), would provide a basis for the view that the Messiah is the son of God. This idea plays a central role in Christianity, but is also attested in Jewish texts, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q174 = the Florilegium; 4Q246 = the *Aramaic Apocalypse* or *Son of God* text), and again in *4 Ezra.* Psalm 110 is cited in Acts 2:34 as a proof text for the ascension of Jesus to heaven ("The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand"). The royal psalms were generally understood as messianic in later Jewish and Christian tradition.

The Character of God

By definition, the God of the psalmists is a God who is expected to answer prayer. Naturally, the psalmists emphasize the mercy of God:

> *The Lord is gracious and merciful,*
> *slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
>
> (Ps 145:9)

This is essentially the same characterization of God that is found in Exod 34:6 and repeated several times in the Scriptures (e.g., Ps 103:8). The psalmists praise the faithfulness of God: in the words of the refrain of Psalm 136, "His steadfast love endures forever." The mercy and fidelity of God are the basis for the psalmists' appeals "from the depths" and the subject of profuse thanksgiving.

In many cases, the psalmists pray not only for deliverance but also for vengeance. So we read in Psalm 94:

> *O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance shine forth!*
> *Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve.*

The psalmists' idea of what the wicked deserve is sometimes expressed quite vividly:

> *O God, break the teeth in their mouths! Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! . . .*
> *Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime; like an untimely birth that never sees the sun!*
>
> (Ps 58:6, 8)

The most chilling prayer in the Psalter is found in 137:8-9:

> *O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!*
> *Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!*
> *Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*

The sentiment is quite understandable, in view of what the Babylonians had done to Jerusalem, but it is none the more edifying for that. Again in 139:19 the psalmist prays: "O that you would kill the wicked, O God," and goes on to plead "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? ... I hate them with perfect hatred."

These psalms are presented explicitly as expressions of human sentiments, but it is clear that at least some psalmists see God as a God of vengeance, just as surely as they see him as a God of mercy. The two sides of the divine character were stated explicitly in Exod 34:6-7: The same God who is gracious and merciful by no means acquits the guilty but visits the iniquity of the parents on their children even to the third and fourth generation. The justice of God typically entails a threat of violence toward wrongdoers. The Psalms routinely affirm that God will destroy the wicked, even when they are not at all vengeful in tone.

Emotion or Instruction?

The vengeance of God can be a reason for human restraint if it is understood that vengeance is something that should be left to God, not pursued by human beings. It makes a difference here whether we view these psalms as emotive expressions or as moral instructions. There can be little doubt that most of the psalms originated as emotive expressions. Their strength lies precisely in their ability to articulate the full range of human emotions, from anguish to joy. But anger and the desire for vengeance are also basic human emotions that should not be denied or suppressed. For victims of Babylonian terror, or victims of analogous terror in the modern world, Psalm 137 is cathartic. To be sure, it does not express the most noble of sentiments, but it is at least honest and forthright. By providing verbal expression for anger and vengeance, the psalm can act as a kind of safety valve that acknowledges the feelings without necessarily acting on them. If the psalmist took it upon himself to take Babylonian children and dash their heads against the rock, that would be a different matter. The power of the Psalms is that they depict human nature *as it is*, not necessarily as it should be.

Many argue that the editors of the Psalter wished to present it precisely as a book of instruction. This argument derives primarily from the inclusion of the wisdom psalms,

and especially from the placement of Psalm 1 at the beginning of the collection and from the sheer length of the Torah psalm, Psalm 119. No doubt there is much to be learned from the Psalms. They teach the majesty of God and the needfulness of humanity, and they encourage people to trust in the mercy and fidelity of God. Yet the prayers for vengeance serve as a reminder that the Psalms must also be read critically. The book of Psalms is not a book of moral instruction. It is primarily a record of ancient Israel and Judah at prayer. Countless generations of Jews and Christians have felt the words of the Psalter appropriate to express their own prayers and feelings. The need to express feelings, however, is no guarantee that those feelings are edifying or that they can serve as moral guidelines.

THE SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs ("the greatest of songs," often called the Song of Solomon or Canticles in English Bibles) resembles the Psalms only insofar as both are collections of poems. In the Hebrew Bible it is placed among the Writings, after Job, as the first of the five Scrolls or Megillot that are read in on major holidays: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth, Esther. In Christian Bibles, the Song is usually grouped with Proverbs and Qoheleth on the grounds that all three are supposed to be Solomonic compositions. In fact, however, the Song or Canticle is a unique composition, without any close analogy elsewhere in the biblical corpus. It is a collection of love songs, a celebration of erotic love between man and woman.

There was some dispute among the rabbis as to whether the Song should be included in the canon of Scripture. Rabbi Akiba, who died about 135 C.E., is said to have declared that the whole world was not worth the day on which the Song was given to Israel, "for all the scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah, *Yadaim* 3:5). But the rabbis preserved the sanctity of the Song by interpreting it as an allegory for the love between YHWH and Israel (despite the fact that the Song never mentions God). According to another Rabbinic saying, anyone who sang the Song in a banquet house, like a profane song, would have no share in the world to come. In Christian tradition the Song was most often read as an allegory for the love between Christ and the church.

The association of the Song with Solomon is due to the fact that his name is mentioned six times (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12), while there are references to a "king" in 1:4, 12, and 7:5. Opinions vary widely on the actual date of the poems. The appearance of a Persian word, *pardes*, "garden," in 4:13, requires a postexilic date. Some scholars place it as late as the Hellenistic period, but decisive evidence is lacking.

The crucial factor in appreciating the literary structure of the text is the recognition that there are several changes of speaker. Most often, the speaker is a woman, sometimes addressing the beloved directly, sometimes speaking to "the daughters of Jerusalem." In 1:7—2:7 there is a dialogue between male and female. In 4:1-15 the voice is that of the man, and this is again the case in 6:1-10 and 7:1-9. In view of the changing voices and perspectives, it is difficult to defend the structural unity of the poem. Even

those who argue for an overarching unity still distinguish a number of songs within the composition. The number of songs is also a matter of disagreement, ranging from as few as six to more than thirty.

The Song of Songs contains some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible. It is rich in similes and repeatedly evokes scenes from nature. The beloved is compared to a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley, a lily among brambles (2:1-2), or to a dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14). The beloved speaks at a time when winter is past, flowers appear on the earth, and the sound of the turtledove is heard in the land (2:10-12). A number of poems are descriptions of the physical beauty of the woman (4:1—5:1; 7:1-9). This kind of poem is called a *waṣf*, and is typical of Near Eastern love poetry.

Admittedly, some of the similes are startling to the ears of an urban, Western reader: "I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9). "Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing. . . . Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (4:1-5). The poetry reflects a bucolic, rural setting, with a ready appreciation of the beauty of animal life.

The most striking aspect of the Song, however, is its uninhibited celebration of sexual love. Just how uninhibited it is, is a matter of interpretation. Several passages lend themselves readily to sexual interpretations (e.g., 5:4: "My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him"). There is little to indicate that the lovers are married. The poem in 3:6-11 may celebrate a wedding procession, but in most of the poems the lovers evidently do not live together. This is why the woman has to go in search of the man. In 1:7 she asks where he pastures his flock. In 3:2 she rises from her bed and goes around the city to seek him. When she finds him, she brings him to her mother's house. On another occasion she is beaten by the sentinels as she searches for her lover (5:7). In 7:10-13 she urges him to go with her to the vineyards, so that "there I will give you my love." The impropriety of this love is reflected in 8:1: "O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me." The love is not protected by the institution of marriage. There is no indication that it is adulterous (that either party is married to anyone else). Most probably, the lovers are young and unmarried.

All of this contrasts sharply with the kind of sexual ethic that we meet elsewhere in the Bible, which imposes penalties (often draconian) for sexual irregularities. The primary concern in the biblical laws is with the institution of marriage. According to Deuteronomy 22, if a man is caught lying with the wife of another, both must die. Also if a man lies with a woman who is betrothed, both are subject to the death penalty, except that if the incident happens in an isolated area the woman is not held accountable. In the case of a woman who is neither married nor betrothed, the penalty is much less severe: "The man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father and she shall become his wife" (Deut 22:29). The formulation in Deuteronomy implies that the young woman was forced. It does not appear, however, that premarital sex was regarded as a grievous matter so long as a marriage ensued.

The perspective from which the Song of Songs is written, however, differs greatly from that of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is concerned with social control. The Song of Songs articulates the viewpoint of the lovers, who find love intoxicating, delightful, and irresistible. From this perspective there can be no question of condemnation, regardless of social disapproval. The Song is unique in the Bible in giving expression to the romantic and erotic feelings of a woman.

The Song is one of only two books in the Hebrew Bible that does not mention God (the other is the book of Esther). Nonetheless, Rabbi Akiba declared it to be "the Holy of Holies." The reason, perhaps, was the purity of the love expressed, which validates itself by its strength and beauty. Love is affirmed as an ultimate value in life. Nowhere is this expressed more powerfully than in 8:6-7: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. . . . Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned."

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