



GANZ NOTES TO SHARE (IN PART) -

TNS 18, 1

THE SONG OF SONGS

(LATE 4TH TO EARLY 2ND BCE)

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*¹ – “The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.”

HUEY LEWIS & THE NEWS – “POWER OF LOVE” (1985)

See my Ganz Notes on this song.

¹ Wikipedia – “Letters to a Young Poet (original title, in German: *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*) is a collection of ten letters written by the Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) to Franz Xaver Kappus (1883–1966), a 19-year-old officer cadet at the Theresian Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt, between 1903 and 1908. Rilke, the son of an Austrian army officer, had studied at the academy's lower school at Sankt Pölten in the 1890s. Kappus corresponded with the popular poet and author from 1902 to 1908 seeking his advice as to the quality of his poetry, and in deciding between a literary career or a career as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Kappus compiled and published the letters in 1929 – three years after Rilke's death from leukemia.”

“BLESS THE BROKEN ROAD”

See my Ganz Notes on this song.

QUOTES

Renita J. Weems - The poet counts on the tensions experienced by audiences wanting to believe in both love and social propriety to create an arresting drama. **Sex forces audiences to confront head-on their deepest convictions, their unspoken preconceptions, and their own complicated desires.** When sex is combined with religion, boundaries are transgressed and lines are blurred, because sex is rarely about just sex. **It is about needs, longings, fears, fantasies – in a word, human passion.** And passion never quite conforms to the neat and tidy categories and labels of religion.²

Renita J. Weems - No other woman in the Bible describes herself in the way the black-skinned woman in Song of Songs does. Unlike Leah and Rachel, she is not seen through her male narrator's eyes (Gen 29:17). Unlike Tamar, she does not disguise who she really is to avoid rejection (Gen 38:15). And unlike Ruth, she does not apologize for being noticed, conspicuous, or different (Ruth 2:10). **She is the only woman in Scripture who describes herself in her own words.**³

All my life a ludicrous and portentous solemnization of sex has been going on. [Lewis, C. S. *The Four Loves* (p. 125). Kindle Edition.]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**portentous**” – 3. – 1805 – Overstated, grandiloquent; pretentious, pompous.

And at “**ludicrous**” – 3. – 1782 – Suited to occasion derisive laughter; ridiculous, laughably absurd. (The only current sense.)

² Weems, Renita J. [The Song of Songs.](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 381.

³ Weems, Renita J. [The Song of Songs.](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

G. Lloyd Carr (1984) - Many scholars argue that the Wisdom Literature, especially the Song of Solomon, was a late addition to the Hebrew canonical Scriptures, noting that as late as 90 CE the rabbis were still debating whether or not the Song should remain in the Canon. It was in the context of this debate that **Rabbi Aqiba's [50-135 CE]⁴ famous dictum** was uttered: 'No man in Israel has ever contested that the Song of Solomon defiles the hands.⁴ For in the entire world there is nothing to equal the day on which the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is most Holy, and if there has been dispute, it is only about Ecclesiastes.'⁵⁵

The New Jerusalem Bible, "Introduction" to Song of Songs - Apart from the old attribution to the great sage Solomon, the literal interpretation of the book still justifies its place among the Wisdom Books. Like them, it deals with human nature, and in fact treats of one of its most vital aspects. **In its own way, it teaches the excellence and dignity of the love that draws man and woman together, it exorcises the myths attaching to love in those remote times and presents a love as free of puritanical restraint as it is of licentious excess.⁶**

THE TITLE

⁴ See: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112059/jewish/Rabbi-Akiva-His-Life-and-Teachings.htm - You may know of **Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph**, about whom our sages say that he was one of the greatest scholars of all times. With his sharp mind, the sages said, he could "uproot mountains," and he explained every single letter of the Torah, even the little crowns that adorn many of the letters of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva was one of four great sages who tried to enter the deepest secrets of the Creation and of learning, and he was the only one who came out sound of body and sane of mind.

⁵⁵ To 'defile the hands' is the standard rabbinic expression used to describe holy things, especially the holy (canonical) books. This unusual expression meant that the person who handled these books had to wash his hands before touching anything else (e.g. food, etc.) because the sanctity of the book would otherwise be transmitted via the hands to common or unworthy objects. (Cf. *Mishnah, Yadain 4:6*.) The origin of the expression is obscure, but Delitzsch, p. 13n., notes that the Torah scrolls (written on leather) and the food offerings (Lev. 7:11-14), especially the cakes, were considered holy and placed in the temple. 'It was discovered that the sacred books were thereby exposed to damage by mice; and hence to prevent their being brought any longer into contact with the *Theruma* [food], the Rabbins decided that they were henceforth to be regarded as unclean, and they gave forth the decree, "All Holy Scriptures pollute the hand." This decree was applicable only to *holy or inspired books*' (his italics).

⁵ *Mishnah, Yadain 3:5*.

⁵ Carr, G. Lloyd. *Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1984, pp. 17-18.

⁶ *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Doubleday, 1990.

Robert Alter concerning the title, “song of songs” – “In biblical idiom this formation indicates a superlative – the best of songs. The exquisite poetry that follows surely justifies the title.” **And Lloyd G. Carr:** “The book takes its title, in English as in Hebrew, from the opening words *šîr haššîrîm*. **The repetitive construction of the first two words is a Hebrew idiom that expresses the superlative. ‘Of all the songs, this is *the song*’, i.e. the best, or most beautiful one.** More familiar uses of this same idiom are the common *holy of holies*, i.e. the most holy place (Exod. 26:33f.), the innermost part of the tabernacle and temple containing the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, or the phrases *King of kings, Lord of lords*. The common abbreviation ‘Ct.’ comes from the Vulgate title, *Canticum Canticorum*.⁷

A SINGLE AUTHOR & COLLECTION & DATE

The origin of the Song may be sought in the festivities taking place at weddings, cf. Ps 45; Jr 7:34; 16:9, and useful comparisons have been made with the ceremonies and wedding-songs of the Syrian and Palestinian Arabs. **But the Song is not a collection of popular songs. Whatever ancient models the author of the Song may have known, he was an original poet and an able man of letters.** The closest parallels are to be found in the love-songs of ancient Egypt, which are also literary compositions; but he cannot be shown to have borrowed his poetic ideas from these. Israel, like the surrounding peoples, must have had its own love-poetry and, in a similar environment, the language of love would have employed similar images and similarly extravagant metaphors.⁸

The Song does not follow any definite plan. It is a collection of songs united only by their common theme of love. The ‘poems’ into which this translation has been divided merely suggest the possible grouping of shorter entities and, although a progression of passion may be detectable from first to last, **it is useless to look for any marked progression of thought or action from one to the next.** Surviving collections of Egyptian songs are set out in much the same way, offering a choice according to circumstance or audience; **and this explains why the compositions ring the changes on**

⁷ Carr, G. Lloyd. *Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1984, p. 75.

⁸ *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Doubleday, 1990, “Introduction” to the book.

the same themes and why there are so many doublets in them—since they were not intended all to be sung or recited at one sitting.⁹

Some scholars assign it to a date as early as the reign of Solomon, but the Aramaic features of the language, and the borrowing of one word from Persian, 4:13, and of another from Greek, 3:9, indicate a date after the Exile, in the fifth or fourth centuries BC. The place of composition was certainly Palestine.¹⁰

GENERAL REMARKS ABOUT WHOLE BOOK

Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 363-366.

The content of Song of Songs, sometimes referred to as the Song of Solomon, represents a remarkable departure from that of other books in the Bible. To open the pages of this brief volume of poetry is to leave the world of exceptional heroism, tribal conflict, political disputes, royal intrigue, religious reforms, and divine judgment and to enter the world of domestic relations, private sentiments, and interpersonal discourse. **Filled with language of sensuality, longing, intimacy, playfulness, and human affection, Song of Songs introduces the reader to the non-public world of ancient Israel.** The relationships are private (i.e., a man and a woman), the conversation is between intimates (e.g., “darling,” “beloved,” “friend”), and the language hints of kinship bonds (e.g., **mother, sister, brother, daughter**). At last, readers of Scripture have the opportunity to focus not so much on the external politics that organized and dominated the lives of Hebrew people (e.g., palace intrigue, temple politics, prophetic conflict, international doom, natural disasters) but on the internal systems and attitudes that also shaped the lives of the people of Israel.¹¹

Song of Songs stands out in sharp contrast to the rest of the biblical books in two other ways. **First, nowhere in its eight chapters is God mentioned.** The book of Esther is the only work that shares this distinction. Although the religious significance of the latter is frequently debated as well, its religious significance is a little more self-evident, referring as it does to the rituals of fasting and prayer (Esth 4:16) and to the celebration

⁹ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#). Doubleday, 1990, “Introduction” to the book.

¹⁰ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#). Doubleday, 1990, “Introduction” to the book.

¹¹ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 363.

of the Feast of Purim (Esth 9:20–32). A decidedly secular tone permeates *Song of Songs*; not only is *God's name not mentioned in the book*, but also no allusions are made to any of Israel's sacred religious traditions, be they covenant traditions (the Davidic or Sinai covenants) or God's saving acts in Israel's history (e.g., deliverance at the sea).¹²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “secular” – I.2.a. - c1290 – Belonging to the world and its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion; civil, lay, temporal. Chiefly used as a negative term, with the meaning non-ecclesiastical, non-religious, or non-sacred.

Second, *Song of Songs* is the only biblical book in which a female voice predominates. In fact, the protagonist's voice in *Song of Songs* is the only unmediated female voice in all of Scripture. Elsewhere, women's perspectives are rehearsed through the voice of narrators, presumably male (e.g., Esther and Ruth), and their contributions are overshadowed by male heroism and assorted male-identified dramas. But in *Song of Songs*, where more than fifty-six verses are ascribed to a female speaker (compared to the man's thirty-six), the experiences, thoughts, imagination, emotions, and words of this anonymous, black-skinned woman are central to the book's unfolding.

Moreover, the protagonist is not merely verbal; unlike many of the women in the Bible, she is assertive, uninhibited, and unabashed about her sexual desires.¹³

FROM A WOMAN'S HEART - The presence of such important female imagery allows *Song of Songs* to be seen as *a collection of meditations from a woman's heart*. Casting the book as the private, journal-like reflections of a female may provide us just the insight needed to unlock the mystery behind the decision to include such patently erotic and secular musings within the canon. As **meditations of a woman's heart, *Song of Songs* might have been viewed as the feminine counterpart to a book like, say, Ecclesiastes.** In the latter, an unnamed speaker, who is most likely male, reflects on the chasm between traditional wisdom teachings and actual human experience. He does not hesitate to express profound disdain for traditional wisdom, arguing that even the best of life is plagued with transience, unpredictability, absurdity, vanity, and ultimately ends in death. And he is openly cynical about the contradictions he has observed in life, one being that good deeds do not always lead to good consequences. **In the light of the patent limitation of human wisdom, and in the face of death and**

¹² Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, pp. 363–64.

¹³ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 364.

vanity, the Preacher repeatedly urges his audience to indulge themselves in life's few genuine pleasures - food, drink, love, work, and play – as gifts of God.¹⁴

In the end, she is as *impatient* with traditional wisdom as her male counterpart in Ecclesiastes is *scornful*. But instead of expressing openly her contempt for and cynicism toward traditional wisdom, the speaker in Song of Songs takes the subtle approach and extols the erotic happiness she has found – despite all of its complications and limitations. One can see from both the striking amount of female speech and the decidedly female angle of vision of the book how easy it is to imagine that a female sage is responsible for the stirring meditations contained in Song of Songs.¹⁵

The book's charm is its ability to elaborate on the erotic while at the same time critiquing prevailing cultural norms. In fact, the poet cunningly uses the former **subtly to denounce the latter**. So forward, so uncompromising, so urgent is the maiden's desire for and attachment to her lover that her comments border on the contentious in some places. Her insistence on three occasions that her beloved suitor belongs to her (2:16; 6:3; 7:10) is not mere assertion. Rather, seen in the context of her **defense of her complexion (1:4), her bodily integrity (1:5; 6:13b), her small breasts (8:10), her continual adjuration¹⁶ (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), and in view of the Jerusalem daughters' continual skepticism (5:9; 6:13a), the protagonist's words have a polemical tone**. For one thing, her black skin color, she suspects, immediately places her at odds with those around her (1:5–6).¹⁷

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**polemical**” – 1. – 1615 – Of the nature of, exhibiting, given to, or relating to dispute or controversy; contentious, disputatious, combative.

COMMENTARY

¹⁴ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 364.

¹⁵ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 365.

¹⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**adjuration**” – 3. – 1782 – More generally: a solemn or earnest appeal; an exhortation; a command.

¹⁷ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, pp. 367–68.

The Song begins (and ends) with a woman's voice. Not only is the attention the woman receives in the Song unique in the Bible; so too is her characterization, for there is no other female character in the Bible whom we get to know so well through her intimate and innermost thoughts and feelings. She expresses her sexuality as freely as the man does. Without any introduction — out of nowhere, so to speak — the first words of the poem voice her desire ("let him kiss me") and present us with a love affair already in progress. There is no indication that the woman and man are married, although they are lovers, at least on the level of erotic suggestiveness or *double entendre*.¹⁸

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**double entendre**" — A double meaning; a word or phrase having a double sense, *esp.* as used to convey an indelicate meaning.

SONG OF SONGS – CHAPTER ONE

Verse 1 – Associating poetry luxuriating in human passion with such a renowned king [Solomon] accomplished three things: (1) It lent the work a semblance of authority, thus assuring its preservation and transmission; (2) it connected the book with a privileged school of thinking that was associated with Solomon—the wisdom tradition; and (3) **it brought together for sacred reflection three topics (sex, power, and wisdom) that, combined, could evoke deeply felt emotions and tap into widely held social beliefs.**¹⁹

Some of the most memorable hymns, anthems, and praise songs make imaginable and comprehensible to our congregations ideas and notions that continue to elude our best exegetical sermons: God's amazing grace, Jesus' redemptive love at the cross of Calvary, the faith of our beloved ancestors, a people's prayers for their children's children. Epiphanies like these tend to break the back of mundane speech. **Often, music and poetry are needed to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, the world of strangers and enemies, the world of women and men. Love lyrics, like those in Song of Songs, invite their audience into the private world of intimates.**²⁰

¹⁸ Exum, J. Cheryl. ["Song of Songs."](#) *Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom et al., Revised and Updated, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p. 249.

¹⁹ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 377.

²⁰ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 378.

Oxford English Dictionary at “**to yearn**” – I.2.a. - **Old English** – *intransitive*. To feel strong desire or longing; to long for (also *after*, †*to*) a place, person, thing, situation, etc. Also in extended use. This sense and sense I.1b are the most common senses in recent use.

Verse 2- The first speech opens on a note of yearning. The speaker is female. She introduces herself to the reader, not by giving her name, but by announcing her wish to be kissed by her lover: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” **In a culture where casual touch between the opposite sexes was rare, a kiss was fantasized as the climax of sexual pleasure.** After addressing no one in particular, but everyone in earshot, the woman turns to address her lover directly, beckoning him by speaking adoringly of his love, his scent, and his name (vv. 2b–3). She cherishes his “love” over wine (v. 2b) – **no trivial matter when one considers that the black-skinned woman lives in a part of the world where vineyards were greatly prized and specially handled** (cf. Exod 22:5; 23:11; Deut 20:6; 23:24).²¹

Verse 3 – The maiden insists that no one can escape her lover’s powers: “No wonder the maidens love you!” (NIV). But she carefully refrains from divulging his name, simply comparing it to the perfumed oils of Mediterranean cultures. **Such oils, regarded by the populace as powerful aphrodisiacs, were produced by combining perfumes with olive oil. Like spilled perfume, whose aroma fills the air, her lover’s name is pleasant to the senses.** Demonstrating in this verse her powers as a poet, the protagonist relies more on inference and imagination than on candor and the mundane to describe her love. She invites her audience to experience her suitor as she does, with the nose (e.g., perfume) and the tastebuds (e.g., kisses and wine).²²

Verse 4 – In this verse, the protagonist’s voice becomes insistent, and her request is cast in the imperative: “Draw me after you.” She speaks assertively, insisting that her suitor take her quickly to his chambers (lit., “Draw me after you-let us hurry [until] the king has brought me into his chambers”).²³

²¹ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 379.

NIV New International Version of the Bible

²² Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 380.

lit. literally

²³ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 380.

Verse 4 – Modern readers might marvel at such a bold portrait of a woman in biblical antiquity. Such immodest desires on a woman’s lips run counter to the passive, reserved, submissive image of Hebrew women one finds in many other portions of the Old Testament. Hebrew women do not initiate sex, one might suppose, except in the cases of women like Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth (Ruth 3), who wanted to become pregnant. Yet there is no hint in these verses, or elsewhere in the poem, that the female protagonist has procreation on her mind as she yearns for her suitor. Indeed, the protagonist presents a portrait of Hebrew women different from the one cast throughout much of the Old Testament – indeed, the entire Bible. She boldly longs for intimacy with a special lover and does not hesitate to pursue him.²⁴

Perhaps our ancestors were not so squeamish about using the erotic to contemplate transcendence as we have supposed. In *Song of Songs* all of the created order is invited to join in this paean to human eroticism, where two souls pine for each other in a lyrical drama of suspense, intrigue, and desperation. Audiences are invited to identify with a female protagonist who longs to be kissed and swept away by her lover. Does the woman’s voice in *Song of Songs*, which is unparalleled in the rest of Scripture, make us recoil or surrender? How, if at all, might we react differently had her suitor opened the book with the same words and his was the dominant perspective? If the male voice were predominant, would the work’s religious import be more apparent or plausible?²⁵

Hearing a woman talk explicitly about her sexual fantasies can arrest an audience’s wandering thoughts.²⁶

The poet counts on the tensions experienced by audiences wanting to believe in both love and social propriety to create an arresting drama. Sex forces audiences to confront head-on their deepest convictions, their unspoken preconceptions, and their own complicated desires. When sex is combined with religion, boundaries are transgressed and lines are blurred, because sex is rarely about just sex. It is about needs, longings,

²⁴ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 380.

²⁵ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 380.

²⁶ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 381.

fears, fantasies – in a word, human passion. And passion never quite conforms to the neat and tidy categories and labels of religion.²⁷

Female sexuality poses problems for men and, according to our male narrators, for God. Unrestricted contact with women threatens boundaries and portends turmoil. Repeatedly fathers warn sons against falling into the sexual snares of loose women (cf. Prov 2:16–19; 5:3–14, 20–21; 6:24–35; 7:1–27; 9:13–18); and in both canonical and non-canonical literature one finds male narrators openly declaring their contempt for women (Eccl 7:26; Sir 25:24; 42:14).²⁸

Song of Songs represents a remarkable departure from much religious literature because the book's opening verses hurl the unsuspecting reader straight into the clutches of a woman's sexual fantasies. It forces the reader to see herself or himself, the world, and God (for those who read the book as an allegory of God and Israel's relationship) in an unfamiliar way – namely, through a woman's libidinous cravings. Whatever ambivalences one may have about hearing from God or discovering the sacred through the messy mysteries of the female body are forced to the surface. By beckoning the reader into the private world of female imagination and longing, the poet gambles on her audience's curiosity about sex and romance and fascination with tales of obstructed love winning out over whatever squeamishness the readers may have about associating women's bodies with divine revelations. Hence, the meaning of the opening verses of Song of Songs lies not only in what they tell us about God, but also in what they tell us about ourselves.²⁹

Verse 5 – After romancing her lover with flattery in 1:2–4, the protagonist speaks with pride, self-confidence, and, contrary to what some have argued, without apology as she describes herself (v. 5). She is, in her own words, “black and beautiful” (NRSV). The Hebrew word she uses to describe her complexion (הַרְחֵשׁ šēhôrâ) is unambiguous,

²⁷ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 381.

²⁸ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 381.

²⁹ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 381.

despite the numerous efforts by translators to render it more euphemistically and palatably as “dark,” “very dark,” “swarthy,” “blackish,” and so on.³⁰

Verse 5 – No other woman in the Bible describes herself in the way the black-skinned woman in Song of Songs does. Unlike Leah and Rachel, she is not seen through her male narrator’s eyes (Gen 29:17). Unlike Tamar, she does not disguise who she really is to avoid rejection (Gen 38:15). And unlike Ruth, she does not apologize for being noticed, conspicuous, or different (Ruth 2:10). **She is the only woman in Scripture who describes herself in her own words.**³¹

Verses 5-6 – She is careful to explain how she became the color she is. Her brothers, she insists, forced her to work outdoors in their vineyards. **She is not a freak, she insists, but a casualty of the sun (v. 6).** **Although there is no mistaking the defensive tone in her words,** there is no reason to believe that the protagonist is apologetic about her color. **That she is not embarrassed by her complexion can be seen in the fact that she compares her color to the stark sable fabric characteristic of the imposing tents of the Syro-Arabian nomadic tribe known as Kedar** (whose root connotes darkness; cf. Jer 8:21; 14:2; Mic 3:6), and to the striking curtains in Solomon’s palace. The inference is that hers is a color of distinction and nobility (at least in her own mind), hence her insistence that she is beautiful (נָאַ nā’wā').³²

Verses 5-6 – Likewise, no mention is made of her patronymic or matronymic, which could shed light on her ancestral lineage. **We are left to take heart in her bold act of self-assertion and description: She speaks up for herself; she is the object of her own gaze: she is, by her own estimation, black and beautiful.**³³

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³⁰ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 382.

³¹ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

³² Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

³³ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

avoid rejection (Gen 38:15). And unlike Ruth, she does not apologize for being noticed, conspicuous, or different (Ruth 2:10). ³⁴

Verse 6 – The protagonist's complaint that she was forced to labor in vineyards, a term with erotic overtones throughout Song of Songs (2:15; 7:12; 8:12), has led some commentators to draw sexual inferences from the verse. Marvin Pope, who has written an important commentary on the book, says, "The well-attested sexual symbolism of vineyard and field strongly suggests that the import of her statement is that she has not preserved her own virginity."¹⁷ Specifically, Pope (and others) sees the protagonist as referring here to her body and sexual parts.¹⁸ **Taken this way, then, the woman admits here that she has not been able to safeguard her own virginity – as she ought or would have liked. Such an interpretation is consonant with the overall image throughout the book of a woman who persists in the face of incredible odds in pursuing an elusive relationship.**³⁵

Curiously, God's name is never mentioned in Song of Songs. Neither is there any explicit comment on traditional religious themes. **Readers are left to draw on their experiences of love, longing, mutuality, sensuality, and human connectedness to contemplate the book's meaning for conventional religious doctrines of faith, covenant, law, justice, hope, revelation, and reconciliation.** We are invited to find God in ourselves, to perceive the parallels between human passion and religious pathos, to weigh our noblest ideas against our most senseless prejudices, **and to let our deepest yearnings direct us to what is eternal.** What better way of prompting audiences to probe the depths of their thinking about God, **to examine their unexamined prejudices,** and to dive below the surface of their narrow notions than to invite them to contemplate simultaneously love and bigotry? Indeed, to read the poetry of Song of Songs is to be caught up in unrelenting and enormous swings in emotions. The reader must be willing to switch from one emotion to another, sometimes in a span of one, two, or three verses, surrendering to passion and then playfulness, longing and then reserve, vanity and then defensiveness, awe and then anguish. **It is also to be torn between one's deep cultural prejudices and one's noblest cultural ideals.** We have

³⁴ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

*¹⁷ Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB 7C (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 329.

*¹⁸ Ibid., 330.

³⁵ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 383.

already seen in vv. 5–6 that the reader follows the lovesick woman through at least two extremes of the human heart: **confidence and defensiveness.**³⁶

Forced to get into the skin of this black woman, the reader is made to see her as neither Amazon nor demon, the two extreme fears of the bigot. Her quest for love, her desire to be loved genuinely, and her willingness to give herself unselfishly to love are so familiar that even the bigot can identify with the protagonist. **All of us are reminded that love has its own logic. It refuses to succumb to the human will. It is rarely predictable, and it delights in the unexpected. It forces us to do things we never anticipated, to say things we never heard ourselves say before, to submit to feelings we never felt before, and to pair ourselves with people we never imagined for ourselves. Love helps us risk stretching beyond our comfort zones.** Indeed, nothing exposes us for who we really are—and who we are not—nothing divulges our secrets and unmasks our preconceptions like love. **Song of Songs, with its hint at color prejudice, taps into our deepest cultural prejudices by making us confront the way they keep us from seeing certain people as individuals with needs, desires, ambitions for love, and intimacy just like ourselves.**³⁷

Verses 1:7 to 2:7 – Turning to 1:7–2:7, we cannot help feeling that we are eavesdropping on an intimate tête-à-tête between lovers. It seems as though we are intruding upon a conversation intended for only the special ears involved. **This is profoundly private talk between two people who share special intimacies and who have special intentions toward each other.** Theirs is love talk, lusty and mischievous. Such talk is ablaze with mutual admiration and longing, while at the same time shrouded in cryptic references and secret allusions. What keeps it from careening toward the vulgar, besides the fact that it is consensual, is that love talk is not blunt speech. Lovers bristling with passion and yearning rarely talk about their desires forthrightly. Instead, they talk around them. **They talk in codes, relying on analogies, hiding behind innuendoes and figurative speech to convey what they are too shy, too embarrassed, too nervous, too straitlaced, or perhaps too modest to say outright.** As for the subject of their whispers, why, it is sex, of course.³⁸

³⁶ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, pp. 383–84.

³⁷ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 384.

³⁸ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 385.

Verse 7 – One detects a petulant tone in the protagonist’s voice as she inquires as to her lover’s whereabouts, a query repeated in one way or another throughout the book. To soften her impatience and boldness in asking, however, the black-skinned woman addresses her lover with a term of endearment that melts away any possible taking of offense. The NRSV captures poetically her seduction: “you whom my soul loves.” She inquires as to where he pastures his flock (which suggests that he is a shepherd), particularly where he leads his flock, as shepherds do, at the noon hour to rest. **The implication is that midday might be the ideal time when she and her mate could steal away for some adventure.** Almost pouting, but maintaining a tone of seductiveness, **the protagonist lets her lover know that she resents being in the dark as to his whereabouts**, having to stumble about blindly, as if she wore a veil over her face, groping for him: “Why should I be like one who is veiled beside the flocks of your friends?” (v. 7b).³⁹

But the poetry makes clear throughout that it is not the woman who is evasive, but her lover. She is continually looking for him, groping for him, inquiring about him (2:8; 3:1–2; 5:6; 6:1–2). **He is elusive, but she is persistent.** The veil that she speaks of is the figurative one she feels she wears, which keeps her always uncertain about him.⁴⁰

Verse 8 – To her question about his whereabouts, he answers with a tease: “If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds.” **Like other maidens in antiquity who resided in rural, bedouin-like, semi-pastoral cultures, the protagonist was responsible for her share of the chores in the household, which among other things included tending the fields, dressing vines, and leading the family goats to grazing ground during the day.** Seen in the light of her duties, her lover’s comment in this verse should be taken to mean: “I am right under your nose.”⁴¹

Verse 8 – Such a forthright answer on the shepherd’s part contradicts his reputation throughout the book as inaccessible and elusive. **More likely, his comment represents the kind of cryptic retort that skittish, evasive lovers are wont to make when pressed for more accountability: “You know where to find me.”** But that remains to be seen. So

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

³⁹ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, pp. 385–86.

⁴⁰ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 386.

⁴¹ Weems, Renita J. [“The Song of Songs.”](#) *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 386.

far, we have a typical scene in love poetry: **One party is frantic with desire, and the other party feigns disinterest by remaining elusive, not to be mean, but to heighten the romance and to prolong the foreplay.**⁴²

Verse 9 – Some scholars think the suffix added to the word for “mare” is not a possessive but an archaic form occasionally used in construct combinations. Ariel and Chana Bloch argue against this on philological grounds, accepted here, and it makes more sense for the lover to claim possession of the metaphorical mare. Marvin Pope has proposed that the reference of this image is to the strategy of Thutmose III, at the battle of Qadesh, of sending mares in heat among the enemy cavalry in order to drive them into disarray. **Alternatively, since Egypt was known as an exporter of horses, this could simply mean that the beloved, compared to a fine mare, would stand out among the best of horses.** Egyptian horses, one should note, were sometimes decked with ornaments around their necks. [Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (pp. 6162-6163). Kindle Edition.]

Verse 12 regarding the note that this is “Duo” – The lovers are together; the rare and heady perfumes, nard, myrrh, henna-flowers, symbolize the pleasures of their meeting, vv. 12-14. There follows a battle of compliments, vv. 15-16; 2:1-3. The meeting-place is ill-defined: a bed of greenery. v. 16, a palace, v. 17, a cellar, 2:4, but *see note 2b*.

Contrastingly, however, the outcome of the meeting is clear: the lovers are enfolded in each other’s arms, 2:6, and the man begs that no one shall disturb his Beloved, 2:7; this will be taken up as a refrain in 3:5 and 8:3-4. This is perfectly fitting if the Song is considered as a collection of marriage-songs and if no attempt is made to find a continuous development from one poem to another, *see Introduction.*⁴³

Verse 12 – It is the maiden’s turn to return the compliment. Again, she affectionately refers to the shepherd as “king.” But what exactly are we to make of “While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance” (v. 12)? Is she fantasizing about a future moment, recalling a past event, or describing a present happening? She leaves those eavesdropping to wonder. On the one hand, v. 12 is simply too tantalizing not to be taken literally. **On the other hand, it is one of those cryptic allusions to private intimacies only the lovers are able to decode.** As for its meaning, is it “an allusion to the sexual smell” the woman emits when aroused in anticipation? To her lover’s

⁴² Weems, Renita J. “[The Song of Songs.](#)” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 386.

⁴³ Wansbrough, Henry, editor. [The New Jerusalem Bible](#). Doubleday, 1990, p. 1031.

exclamation of her beauty (vv. 9–10), does she comment explicitly on his power to excite her (v. 12)?⁴⁴

Verse 13 – The combination of delightfulness and sensuality in this metaphor is one of the hallmarks of the Song of Songs. **The lover is playfully miniaturized as a sachet of perfume strung around the neck of the beloved on a cord and resting between her breasts** even as their night of sweet physical intimacy is beautifully evoked. [Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (p. 6163). Kindle Edition.]

Verses 15–17 – The Hebrew in vv. 15–17 leaves open the possibility that two voices are heard here. **Their words are precisely the kind of sweet talk lovers whisper to each other as they relax together.** He admires her beauty (v. 15); she compliments him on being handsome (v. 16). With large broad trees towering above them, and with their leafy, green couch (or nuptial bed) spread beneath them, they are presumably ready for love.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, pp. 387–88.

⁴⁵ Weems, Renita J. ["The Song of Songs."](#) *New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 5, Abingdon Press, 1994–2004, p. 388.