

SONG OF SONGS 6:4-12
AN EXPRESSION OF TRANSCENDENT LOVE

A Paper Submitted to
Dr. André LaCocque
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of
CH 418 Song of Songs

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Preface

SONG OF SONGS 6:4-12

Translation by Marshall H. Lewis

4. You are beautiful, my love, as Tirzah,
Comely as Jerusalem,
Splendid as the brilliant stars.
5. Turn your eyes away from me,
For they arouse me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
Which recline from Gilead.
6. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
Which come up from the washing,
All of them bearing twins
And not one among them robbed of offspring.
7. Your temples are like a piece of pomegranate
Behind your veil.
8. Sixty of them are queens
And eighty concubines
And young women without number.
9. My dove, my perfect one, is [my] only one.
She is the only one to her mother;
She is the favorite of the one who bore her.
The daughters saw her and pronounced her happy,
And the queens and concubines praised her.
10. Who is this who looks down as the dawn,
Beautiful as the moon,
Pure as the sun,
Splendid as the brilliant stars?
11. I went down to the garden of nut trees
To see the fruits of the ravine,
To see if the vine had blossomed,
The pomegranates bloomed.
12. Before I knew it my will
Set me on the chariots of my noble people.

SONG OF SONGS 6:4-12
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The first task in examining Song of Songs 6:4-12 is to determine how it fits into context with the rest of the book. So many opinions have been written about the Song of Songs, however, that the novice exegete is at something of a loss to determine even the context. Schmokel, for example, believes that the Song is a sacred marriage ritual drama written in three scenes, of which our text would be placed partly into two. Robert divides the Song into five poems, of which our text belongs to the fifth. Exum also believes that our text belongs to the fifth poem, but has the Song divided into six parts.¹ One is tempted to simply translate the text for oneself to see what it says, but even this has its limits, for the Song of Songs contains forty-nine *hapax legomena*, once again making one dependent on the views of others. Nor can these views possibly be considered objective. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have tended to favor allegorical interpretations over the centuries;² in fact, were it not for the allegorical interpretation of Rabbi Akiba, it is unlikely that the Song would have even been included in the canon.³ An understanding of the plain meaning of the text has enjoyed an emphasis in modern times, but it is still unclear what is meant by "plain" in dealing with frankly sexual material. In the fourth century C.E., the plain meaning for Jovinian was marital sex. In the eighteenth century, Johann David Michaelis noted that the Song contains no mention of a marriage ceremony, and so the plain meaning was that of the love of a couple long married. J.G. von Herder, of the same era, also failed to find any meaning other than the obvious: true and chaste love in its various stages. In the nineteenth century, Christian D. Ginsburg plainly saw not the passion of marital love, but a celebration of fidelity. It was not until our own century that Nathaniel Schmidt (1911) dared to suggest the possibility that the Song dealt with extramarital love,⁴ as has also been discussed openly in the modern classroom by those accustomed to the separation of marriage and sex. Into this vast,

¹ Pope., M.H., *Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible Series. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964, 1977, pp. 43-46.

² Meek, T.J., Kerr, H.T. and Kerr, H.T., Jr., *The Song of Songs*, The Interpreter's Bible. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956, p. 92.

³ Class discussion, Song of Songs, CH 418, under the direction of Dr. André LaCocque and Rabbi Herman Schaalman. Chicago Theological Seminary, Winter Quarter 1995.

⁴ Pope, op. cit., pp. 120, 131, 136, 151.

churning sea I will throw my own translation (laid out both in the text of the paper and in the preface), comment on a selection of important exegetical points for each verse, and conclude with some more general speculations.

Verse 4 begins the lover's description of his beloved's beauty:

You are beautiful, my love, as Tirzah,
Comely as Jerusalem,
Splendid as the brilliant stars.

The Septuagint translated _____ as *eudokia*, meaning pleasurable or desirable, taking the Hebrew not as the name of a city, but as an adjective. Most commentators believe this was an error, the parallelism with Jerusalem being evident, although Pope disagrees and believes that "as Jerusalem" is a later addition. He offers his hypothetical original text as, "Fair are you, my darling, verily pleasing, Beautiful, awesome as (with) trophies."⁵ I believe Tirzah to be the correct translation and see in this passage a description of beauty in ascending degrees, beginning with a pleasant city that once was, but is no longer, a capital, moving up to the beauty of the eternal capital, and from there ascending to the sky dome itself. The implication may further be taken that not even this is high enough praise for the beauty of the beloved.

This section of text has also played a role in the discussion concerning the date of the Song. Traditionalists argue that the Song must have been composed during the reign of Solomon, for after the kingdom was divided no poet of the south would mention Tirzah and no poet of the north would mention Jerusalem. They further argue that the description of Tirzah as beautiful fits the age of Solomon. Roland Murphy, who believes the Song is post-exilic, suggests that the Tirzah reference is earlier,⁶ however, this argument does not take into account that there would be no need to mention both a northern and a southern city during the reign of Solomon. Meek sees the reference as a survival from the period of the divided monarchy before Omri,⁷ while Robert Dentan sees evidence of archaizing from the post-exilic period, when Samaria was hated and would not have been mentioned.⁸

Another difficulty for translators is the word _____, which in the Prime Testament occurs only here and in verse 10. The traditional interpretation has been to take this in the sense of "beflagged things" and so the word "army" is often added, this

⁵ Ibid., pp. 558-559.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 22-25.

⁷ Meek, op. cit., p. 96.

⁸ Dentan, R.C., *Song of Solomon* in Laymon, C.M., ed., *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 327.

also seeming to fit the adjective *gloriosa*, with a rendering "awe-inspiring as an army with banners." Gerleman, however, questions this translation, arguing that "banner" is only a secondary meaning of the root and that the primary meaning is "see." Following this line of reasoning, Pope believes that what is meant are visual objects of distinction, hence his translation of the word as "trophies." Specifically, he has in mind trophies of battle collected by the ancient near eastern goddess of love and war, Anat to the Canaanites, and, to the present day, Kali to the Hindus. The trophies are a necklace of severed heads and a belt or girdle of severed hands collected by the goddess and she zealously butchers her enemies in battle, the belt and necklace growing larger as she works her way vigorously through their ranks. Pope notes that these same trophies were used throughout the ancient near east, from Mesopotamia to Rome, as symbols of the love and war goddess.⁹ Dentan further notes that there was also a semitic goddess of love and war named Shulmanitu, a name that could easily be corrupted into Shulammite (as her male counterpart, Shulman, could be changed to Solomon).¹⁰ Pope does not mean to suggest, however, that the Song is as ancient as Canaanite mythology. Rather, he suggests that this imagery had become an accepted part of the Israelite culture, much as the love god Cupid and the imagery of an arrow piercing a human heart have survived in our own culture as symbols of love and romance.

Similar in thought to Gerleman is the translation of Goitein, by whom I am persuaded, that the term *gloriosa* is actually a technical term from popular astronomy, designating the brightest stars in the sky, or stars of first magnitude,¹¹ like Sirius. Along the same line, some scholars amend this term to *gloriosa*, "like Nergal," an ancient name for the planet Mars,¹² but I see no compelling reason to do so. Further, S.H. Stephen, in a 1922 study comparing modern Palestinian parallels to the Song of Songs, discovered that Orion and the Pleiades were used as metaphors for feminine beauty, as well as "the moon and the stars."¹³ Thus, Goitein translates the passage as "splendid as the brilliant stars," which I have followed. This translation not only fits the ascending description of beauty mentioned above, but also fits nicely into verse 10 where the parallel descriptions of the beloved are the dawn, the moon and the sun.

Athanasuis applied this verse allegorically to Jewish-Christian relations: "Those who come from the Gentiles ought not to be unlike Jerusalem, that there may be but one

⁹ Pope, op. cit., pp. 561-562.

¹⁰ Dentan, op. cit., p. 327.

¹¹ Pope, op. cit., p. 561

¹² Meek, op. cit., p. 132.

¹³ Pope, op. cit., pp. 59, 62.

people, for this is so when we honor the Law and believe in Christ. For the God of the Law and the Gospels is One, and whoever is not made like Jerusalem does not become the Bridegroom's friend."¹⁴ Perhaps some future scholar will see the Song of Songs as an allegory for the love between Judaism and Christianity, but for this interpretation we must sadly wait.

Verses 5 through 7 continue the lover's description:

Turn your eyes away from me,
For they arouse me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
Which recline from Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
Which come up from the washing,
All of them bearing twins
And not one among them robbed of offspring.

Your temples are like a piece of pomegranate
Behind your veil.

is used only here and in Psalm 138:3, where it refers to an arousal of strength when prayer is answered. The simple stem is used of the disturbing behavior of youths in Isaiah 3:5 and of urgency in the need to be reconciled to a neighbor in Proverbs 6:3. Luther took this word to denote sexual arousal. Nevertheless, the term need not reflect a positive emotion or necessarily be welcomed. The Midrash tells a story depicting God as a king, angry with his queen, whom he exiles from the palace. The queen, however, presses her face against a pillar looking into the palace. The king, aroused, we may speculate by sorrow or guilt, cannot bear to see his queen in such a state and orders her removed.¹⁵ This desire to avert the eyes because of their effect may, in fact, suggest that the feeling is in some way unwelcome. Thus, I chose the word "arousal" for my translation, since it carries the same ambiguity.

In Jewish allegorical interpretation, this verse encourages the association of our passage with the second temple period, when, to some, it seemed as if God had averted his eyes from Israel. It is noted with sadness that the Shekinah did not descend on the second temple as on the first.¹⁶ The passage is also interpreted as referring to the end of prophecy in Israel. Further, one may note fewer descriptions of beauty here than in the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 563.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 564-565.

¹⁶ Scherman, N. and Zlotowitz, M., eds., *Shir haShirim*, The ArtScroll Tanach Series. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1977-1992, p. 164.

parallel passage in chapter 4. Again, this is to depict the second temple period as being of lesser beauty or worthiness than the first.¹⁷

In verses 8 and 9, the lover contrasts his devotion to his one true love with the multitude of other women:

Sixty of them are queens
And eighty concubines
And young women without number.

My dove, my perfect one, is [my] only one.
She is the only one to her mother;
She is the favorite of the one who bore her.
The daughters saw her and pronounced her happy,
And the queens and concubines praised her.

The queens and concubines are generally taken as a reference to Solomon's sizable harem, though the actual numbers here are much less than the 700 wives and 300 concubines reported in I Kings 11:3. Traditionalists argue that the time of composition must, therefore, have been early in Solomon's reign, before his harem grew to such an impressive size.¹⁸

W.F. Albright suggests that the numerical graduation 70-80 is common in Ugaritic poetry as well as used in Hurro-Hittite literature and, thus, the 60-80 graduation seen here is merely from a later date when the 70-80 form was no longer considered the norm.¹⁹ This does not consider the possibility, however, that the 70 was deleted on purpose by the author, as that number appears to have had particular meaning in ancient Israelite thought. Further, a normal graduation may still be present in the form of a three-score, four-score formula. This is the translation of the King James Version: "There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number."

Both Jewish and Christian allegorical interpreters have offered a number of thoughts on the symbolic meaning of these women. A table is presented in Figure I summarizing these offerings.

Although so many women are available, the lover is interested in only one. Pope points out, as does the text itself, that the beloved's uniqueness comes not from being an only child, but by being her mother's (and lover's) favorite. A parallel passage appears in Proverbs 4:3, rendered in the Revised Standard Version: "When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother..." Following Stephen's thesis -- that

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 165-166.

¹⁸ Pope, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 568.

contemporary usage may provide us with one means of understanding this ancient song -- I note that a common modern Turkish term of endearment is *bir tanem*, meaning, "my only one." This I have applied in my translation, though "my" does not appear in the text and is thus set off in brackets.

Allegorically, Israel is the "only one to her mother," the only one worthy to receive the Shekinah of God. Further, following the subversive thesis of André LaCocque, , applied most famously to God in Deuteronomy 6:4 could not fail to be remembered by any pious Jew reading this passage. To say that one's beloved is , while others say that of God, could well have been cause for some disputation.

The "daughters" mentioned in verse 9 are in parallel to the "young women" of verse 8. It is not known if they are intended to be identical with the "daughters of Jerusalem" used elsewhere in the Song.

	Queens	Concubines	Young Women
Midrash Rabbah	tractates of halakot	sections of Leviticus	additional halakot
	nations with language, no script	nations without own language	nations without language or script
	nations knowing father, not mother	nations knowing mother, not father	nations knowing neither father or mother
Targum	Allies of Alexander:		
	from Esau	from Ishmael	from other nations
Origen	perfect souls	those progressing	those beginning
Gregory of Nyssa	those serving God from love	those serving God from fear	imperfect believers
Philo of Carpasia	those righteous before the Law	Gentiles under the Law of Nature	general mass of Christians
Epiphanius	Patriarchs	Christian heretical sects	heathen schools of philosophy

Figure I
Allegorical Interpretations of Verse 8

Verse 10 may be a continuation of the lover's speech, or it may contain the words of a chorus inserted between the male part and the upcoming female part:

Who is this who looks down as the dawn,
Beautiful as the moon,
Pure as the sun,
Splendid as the brilliant stars?

The verb means to look out from above, as God looking down from heaven or Juliet looking down from her balcony. The beauty of the beloved is here compared to the beauty of heavenly bodies, the interpretation of "splendid as the brilliant stars" having already been commented upon. One may imagine a play in which the lover has been speaking; now the beloved arrives on stage in all her radiant beauty. Jewish allegorical interpreters have seen in this verse the beginning of the acclaim of Israel by heathen nations, as she looks out upon the world from the temple.²⁰ Christian allegory likens the dawn to the time of the Patriarchs, the moon to the Mosaic law, waxing gradually to fullness, reflecting the true light while not being the true light, and the sun to the full light of the Gospel.²¹

Thus the description of the beloved ends in this section of the Song. Some discussion has been held on the notion that the description of the female is a description of parts, whereas the description of the male in other passages of the Song, while also containing a description of parts, becomes more unified. This supports the notion that the author of Song of Songs is a woman and that she is describing herself. Psychological research into perception has found that we see others as a whole, though, of course, we may describe them in parts if we wish. It is more difficult for an observer to see her or himself as a whole, however, as this occurs rarely and then only in reflection. Thus, physical self-perception is usually as a series of parts. For example, people worry about the size of their nose, or the location of their hairline in assessing their own attractiveness, but do not consider these specifics in assessing the attractiveness of others, such assessment being based on the total physical presentation.²²

The beloved now speaks in verses 11 and 12:

I went down to the garden of nut trees
To see the fruits of the ravine,
To see if the vine had blossomed,

²⁰ Scherman and Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 168.

²¹ Pope, op. cit., p. 573.

²² Scotland, E. and Canon, L.K., *Social Psychology: A Cognitive Approach*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1972, p. 201.

The pomegranate bloomed.

Before I knew it, my will
Set me on the chariots of my noble people.

Much comment has been made on _____, another *hapax legomenon*, which, in post-biblical Hebrew, is a common generic term for nut and a specific term for the walnut.²³ Wittekindt notes that the nut was believed to be a "love food" in ancient cultures, particularly in Greece, and was associated with female genitalia. The nut, also, was considered an aphrodisiac because of its similarity in shape to the male gonad,²⁴ an association preserved in American English slang. In Turkish, however, the nut is associated with being of perfect form and to be called a nut (*fistik*) is a complement to one's beauty.

Allegorically, Israel is compared to the nut. In the Midrash, Israel is the nut tree, pruned for its own benefit. Further, the nut tree has a smooth trunk, such that the careless climber may well fall to his death. This symbolizes the fate of those who rise to power in Israel and misuse it.²⁵ In addition, the nut is unpretentious on the outside, as is Israel, but the inside is full of the sweet meat of wisdom. Finally, and perhaps most beautifully, even if the nut should fall into the dirt, the purity of its contents remains undefiled.²⁶

Dentan sees in verse 11 a reference to spring, which may explain the Song's liturgical association with Passover.²⁷ Pope is suspicious of verse 11, however, which a plain reading would suggest is the escape of the couple into a garden where they may enjoy the privacy that love demands. Pope here sees a parallel with a Ugaritic myth which demands descent into the valley to look for signs of blossoming as a ritual quest for assurance that Baal has revived for the coming year. This, of course, is much in line with his belief that old Canaanite images are used throughout the Song, as is the case for "trophies" in verses 4 and 10. Moreover, he notes that the Qidron Valley (known in modern Arabic as the Walnut Valley) was known to the prophets of Israel as a place used for sacrificing children to Baal, as well as other forms of idolatry.²⁸ This is the same valley used by Jesus in the New Testament as a metaphor for hell. If verse 11 does, in fact, refer to this specific valley, then an association with the ancient fertility cults may be present, but it appears this must remain speculative at this time.

²³ Pope, *op. cit.*, p. 574.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

²⁶ Scherman and Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁷ Dentan, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

²⁸ Pope, *op. cit.*, pp. 580-581.

Verse 12 presents a challenging problem for translation and interpretation. In fact, Pope notes that it is generally conceded to be the most difficult verse of the entire Song. A full understanding of this verse must await the publication of an upcoming paper by André LaCocque. In the mean time, we must be content with a few observations: The sentence

usually means " I do not know." Pope reports that the general consensus of scholars is that here it should be translated as "Before I knew it."²⁹ Speculation concerning the chariot has been that it may be a poetic reference to a bed, a model chariot used in a pagan ritual,³⁰ a chariot used in a funeral march, an allegorical use referring to the future triumph and redemption of Israel,³¹ or a subversive use of Jewish religious imagery (i.e., the chariot upon which the throne of God is transported, as in Ezekiel).³² In Tournay's interpretation by historical allegory, verse 12 recalls the return of the ark of the covenant from Philistine territory to Jerusalem, which, in turn, prefigures the great return of Israel in eschatological times.³³ The owner of the chariot, , is also something of a mystery. The Septuagint and Vulgate translated these words as a proper name, Amminadib, while contemporary scholars, in line with Jewish tradition, translate them as "my noble people," or so forth.³⁴ The subversive thesis may suggest that both meanings would occur to the reader.

Turning now to some general considerations: The plain meaning of the text, a man praising the beauty of the woman with whom he is in love, is, in and of itself, a beautiful piece of literature. The insistence that she is his only one, while perhaps not directly supporting monogamy, does speak of the exclusiveness of true love. Nor is there great fault in the allegorical interpretations that see in human love a reflection of the divine. A related idea comes from Dr. LaCocque's thoughts on the Decalogue,³⁵ which, among other possibilities, reflect the way in which a free people live, and may thus be primarily descriptive rather than imperative. If so, they reflect the way God sees his people, not as they actually are, but as he, being in love with them, wishes them to be. We humans do the same thing when in love, seeing our loved ones as lacking the human faults that only become apparent when our passion cools. Moreover, if we view the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 585.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 586.

³¹ Scherman and Zlotowitz, op. cit., p. 173.

³² Classroom discussion, Song of Songs.

³³ Pope, op. cit., p. 181.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 587-589.

³⁵ Classroom discussion, The People and Faith of Israel, CH 501, under the direction of Dr. André LaCocque. Chicago Theological Seminary, Fall Quarter, 1994.

Decalogue as being written by humans, rather than having come down from on high, then another possibility arises: The Decalogue may be the way we wish God would see us, as the author of Song of Songs (if a woman) wishes 6:4-9 is the way her lover sees her.

Allegory, however, has its limits. Here, the limit is universal human experience which tells us that this degree of passionate love generally does not long endure.³⁶ The Masters and Johnson research team determined that a feeling of *eros* lasts from six months to two years, while biological researchers have suggested that this passion fades due to neuro-chemical changes, lasting a maximum of four years with the same partner. This is not to say that couples fall out of love, but that love changes qualitatively over the course of a relationship, normally becoming more comfortable, less passionate. The point is that using passionate love as a metaphor for God's love of his people is dangerous, in that one may conclude that God's passion, too, will cool (indeed, may have cooled just prior to the exile). To anyone in a relationship with God, this is a disturbing notion. Perhaps the more comfortable, companionate love characterizing couples that have been in love for years would have made a better, though less compelling, allegory for Akiba's holy of holies. However, we may also conclude that God's love is both passionate and unending, far exceeding any human experience or hope. If so, then the passion of God, as the passion of the lover forever preserved in this text, transcends all.

³⁶ Berscheid, E., *Interpersonal Attraction* in Lindzey, G. and Aronson, E., eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. New York: Random House, 1985, p. 437.

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