

IS GOD PRESENT IN THE SONG OF SONGS?

A close reading of the Song of Songs brings a fulfilling appreciation for God's intended plan for sexual intimacy.

Many commentators on the Song of Songs find no reference to God or the sound of God's voice in the book. Against the background of pagan fertility cults, when the very air was charged with the divinization of sex, it is understandable that the divine presence/voice would have to be muted in the context of sexuality. Nonetheless, God is clearly present in the Song—and He is not silent!

The Echo of God's Name

A veiled but striking allusion to God appears in Shalomit's solemn, thrice-repeated appeal: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the

field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4, NASB). In the first two occurrences of this refrain, Shulamit asks the women to bind themselves by the oath "by the gazelles or by the does of the field." Scholars have widely recognized the play on words between this phrase and the names for God: "by *Elohe Shabaoth*, the God of hosts" and "by *El Shaddai*, the Mighty God." The inspired poet has substituted similar-sound-

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ing names of animals (symbolic of love) for the customary divine names used in oaths.

Contrary to a secularization of the Song, this strongly affirms God's presence in it. Though His name is muted, to be sure, as a safeguard against any attempts to divinize sex after the order of the fertility-cults, it is actually heard even more distinctly through the animals of love that echo the divine names. The poet surely would not have even included the oath formula that throughout Scripture employs the divine name if he did not intend to allude intertextually to the divine presence behind the Song. And he would certainly have not used verbal echoes of the divine

names if he were seeking to remove any reference to God in the Song. By substituting for the divine name similar-sounding names of animals symbolizing love and then incorporating these into a divine oath formula, the refrain inextricably links Love (personified in the oath) with the divine presence without thereby divinizing sex.

George M. Schwab has accurately captured the use of circumlocutions for the divine name in this verse: "In

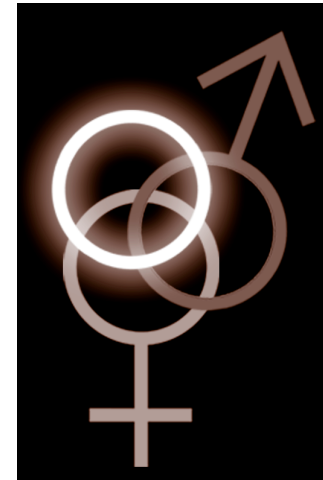
the Bible, there is no case where one swears by zoological specimens. . . . The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem—and the author desires the reader—to swear by God not to stir up love until it pleases. . . . The girl wants the young women to take an oath by the gazelle and doe. These terms serve as circumlocutions for God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts. But

they are also used as symbols throughout the Song for sexual endowment, appeal, comeliness, and fervor. The words, then, exist with three referents: animals in a symbolic forest, the divine warrior God Almighty and his Hosts, and ardent affection. . . . Thus the terms combine the concept of God with the concept of love

and its power. The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem to swear by sexuality and God—and these two concepts are fused into a single image. The Song should then be read as if love were conceived as a divine attribute of God. . . . Love is not simply a matter of feelings, social contracts, or trysts in the wood."¹

The Voice of God

Moving from the dominant recurring refrain of the Song to its



twin apexes, there is wide agreement that the two high points of Canticles are 4:16–5:1 and 8:5–7. One is the structural/symmetrical center of the Song; the other is the thematic peak. Francis Landy refers to these passages as “the two central foci: the centre and the conclusion.”² Ernst Wendland calls them the “middle climax” and “final peak” of the Song respectively,³ and amasses a persuasive display of literary evidence to support the choice of these passages as the Song’s twin summits.

Many recognize that Song 4:16–5:1 comes at the very center of the symmetrical literary structure of the Song. It is probably the voice of God Himself that resounds in the climactic last line of this central apex to the Song, giving His divine benediction upon the marriage and its consummation: “Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers” (5:1, NIV). Many suggest that it is the groom extending an invitation to the guests to join in the wedding banquet. This is improbable, however, since the two terms *friend* and *lovers* used are the words used elsewhere in the Song for the couple, not for the companions/guests. If the terms in 5:1 refer to the couple, they could not be spoken by either bride or groom. The omniscient narrator/poet at this high point in the Song seems to have a ring of divine authority and power—to be able to bestow a blessing upon the con-

summation of the marriage of the bride and groom. It is most likely that the voice of 5:1 is that of Yahweh Himself, adding His divine blessing to the marriage, as He did at the first garden wedding in Eden. In the wedding service, only He has the ultimate authority to pronounce them husband and wife. On the wedding night, only He is the unseen Guest able to express consent for their uniting into one flesh.

God’s voice is central and omniscient. His authoritative voice here at the climax to the Song is reminiscent of that in Eden, to another divine blessing upon the sexual union He already had proclaimed “very good” in the beginning. By speaking here at the focal point of the Song, and speaking to both lovers, He underscores that sexual fulfillment is in the center of the divine will for both partners.

The Covenant Name of God: Yahweh

The echo of God’s names resonates in the dominant recurring refrain of the Song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), and the actual voice of God resounds from the Song’s central summit (5:1). But when one moves to Canticles’ thematic climax and conclusion, the great paean to love (8:6), the actual name of Yahweh makes its single explicit appearance in the book, and his flaming presence encapsulates the entire message of

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the Song: “Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame” (vs. 6, NIV).

Wendland demonstrates that “A host of Hebrew literary devices converge here [Cant. 8:6] to mark this as the main peak of the entire message. . . . In this verse we have the fullest, most sustained attempt to describe (or is it evoke?) the supreme subject of the Song, namely ‘love.’”⁴ He also incisively points out that the Hebrew word selected by the inspired poet to occupy the “ultimate, climactic position”⁵ of this verse—and thus of the final peak of the Song—is “the flame of Yah[weh].”

Some have suggested that this Hebrew word be excised from the text as a gloss, but no manuscript evidence exists for such revision, and the word fits the context precisely. “Some commentators have questioned the integrity of the text,” writes Roland E. Murphy, “but without substantial support from the ancient versions.”⁶

Yah(weh) as an Indication of the Superlative?

Although it is generally conceded that the name of Yah(weh) appears in this passage, many insist that this is simply another instance of the Hebrew idiom for expressing the superlative, e.g., “A most vehement flame.”⁷ This is a theoretical possibility, although valid examples of using a divine name to express the superlative in the Hebrew Bible are not nearly as common as has been claimed, and any instance of the covenant name ever being used as a superlative has been questioned. “While the generic term for god does function as a semantic device for superlatives, this [Song 8:6] verse would be the sole case where the proper name of *Yahweh* does. And it would be a surprising use, really. Considerable care [was] taken around the divine name in the Bible, illustrated by the Third Commandment, which prohibited the wrongful use of the divine name (Exod. 20:7). . . . The reverence

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“The Flame of Yahweh”

A number of crucial considerations lead to the conclusion of dozens of commentaries and translations that the expression *shalhebetya* in this context moves beyond the superlative to describe “the very flame of Yahweh.”

Multi-dimensional evidence supporting the acceptance of *shalhebetya* as an integral part of the text and constituting an explicit mention of *Yahweh* refutes various arguments against this position. Landy cogently summarizes the main points of opposition and diffuses them by going to the root causes for such resistance to the presence of the divine name in this passage. To those who wish to emend the text, he chides: “the postulation of glosses seems to me questionable, since it is uncomfortably like an excuse for eliminating anything inconvenient. Numerous and

ungainly are the emendations proposed for ‘*shalhebetya*.’” To those who do textual surgery as well as to those who attenuate the divine name into hyperbole, he cuts to their unstated (and perhaps unconscious) motivation: “misguided prurience.” To those who argue that this would be Yahweh’s sole entry in the book and therefore it cannot refer to Him, he replies that this “is no argument . . . it is equally as valid to say that its uniqueness reinforces its solemnity.” To those who maintain that sexuality is inconsistent with sanctity, he says: “References and comparisons to divinity are found in the love-literature of all ages. . . . It is a remarkable irony that just those commentators who populate the Song with concealed deities refuse to recognize his presence there when he comes to the surface!”⁹

Significance and Implications

Landy has rightly assessed the importance of *shalhebetya* in the wisdom credo of Song 8:6, 7, and of the

entire book. He states dramatically: “‘The flame of God’ is the apex of the credo, and of the Song.”¹⁰ LaCocque concurs: “‘A flame of Yah[weh]’. . . . The whole of the Canticle is encapsulated in this phrase.”¹¹ Wendland summarizes: “YHWH is the Source not only of love in all its power and passion, but also of the paired, male-female (= marriage) relationship in which love is most completely and intimately experienced.”¹²

If the blaze of love—ardent love—such as between a man and woman, is indeed the Flame of Yahweh, then this human love is explicitly described as originating in God, “a spark off the Holy Flame.” It is, therefore, a holy love. Such a conclusion has profound significance for the whole reading of the Song of Songs—and for the quality and motivation of human sexual love. Song 8:6 makes explicit what was already implicit in the woman’s adjurations of her companions not to awaken love until it is ready (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). As already hinted in these verses by the play on words with the names of God, love is not ready capriciously or randomly, but according to the will of Him from whom this holy love originated.

Song 8:6 also makes explicit what was implicit in the divine approbation of the lovers’ consummation of their marriage on their wedding night (5:1). The love between husband and wife is not just animal pas-

sion, or evolved natural attraction, but a love approved—yes, even ignited—by Yahweh Himself! The love relationship within the context of marriage is not only beautiful, wholesome, and good, but also holy. Lovers then will treat each other with godly self-giving because they are animated by a holy, self-giving Love.

To put it another way, if human love is the very Flame of Yahweh, then this human love at its best—as described in the Song—points beyond itself to the Lord of love. The human “spark off the Eternal Flame” reveals the character of that Divine Flame. The love relationship of male and female, made in the image of God, reflects the I-Thou love relationship inherent in the very nature of the triune God. The various characteristics and qualities of holy human love that emerge from the Song of Songs—mutuality, reciprocity, egalitarianism, wholeness, joy-of-presence, pain-of-absence, exclusivity (yet inclusiveness), permanence, intimacy, oneness, disinterestedness, wholesomeness, beauty, goodness, etc.—all reflect the divine love within the very nature of God’s being. By beholding the love relationship within the Song, and within contemporary godly marriages reflecting the relationship depicted in the Song, one may catch a glimpse of the divine holy love. These marriages preach to us of the awesome love of God!

In the final analysis, then, the allegorical interpretation of the Song may be right in its conclusion that the Song reveals God's love for His people, although wrong in the way in which the conclusion is reached. The human love relationship between Solomon and Shulamit is not the worthless "husk" to be stripped away allegorically to find the kernel, the "true" meaning, the love between God and His covenant community.

Rather, the love relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, described in the Song, has independent meaning and value of its own to be affirmed and extolled, while at the same time to be given even greater significance as, according to the Song's climax (8:6), it typologically points beyond itself to the divine Lover. Far different from the allegorical approach, with its fanciful, externally and arbitrarily imposed meaning alien to the plain and literal sense, the Song itself calls for a typological approach that remains faithful to, and even enhances, the literal sense of the Song, by recognizing what the text itself indicates—that human love typifies

the divine. Thereby human sexual love, already so highly esteemed elsewhere in Scripture, is here given its highest acclamation. □

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⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶ *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 192.

⁷ Duane Garrett, "Song of Songs," in Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), vol. 23B, p. 255.

⁸ Carey Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 205.

⁹ Landy, *op cit.*, pp. 127, 315, 316.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹¹ André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on the Song of Songs* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998), p. 172.

¹² Wendland, *op cit.*, p. 44.

