

# GENDER IMAGERY IN THE SONG OF SONGS

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## *I. Introduction: Imagery in the Song*

In no other book of the Hebrew Bible does the imagery figure so prominently as it does in the Song of Songs. The rich and extravagant array of figurative language boldly draws the reader into the world so joyously inhabited by the ancient lovers. The poetic craft of the unknown author or authors succeeds at a descriptive level in conveying the lushness of the natural settings and also the beauty that the female and male characters each find in the physical appearance of the other. At the same time, the sensual language of the Song creates its own erotic tension, drawing the audience into the heightened emotions of the lovers themselves.

Small wonder, then, that this extraordinary poetry of love has been the object of so much attention. In past ages, concern with the presence of frequent and explicit attention to the human body and also to freely expressed passion led to the development of extensive allegorical treatments of the Song. The outpouring of such interpretations over the centuries probably attests to the ongoing attractions of the language of love on a physical level as much as it does to the spirituality of those who engaged in allegorical explanation. The interpreter must willy-nilly absorb the words at their primary level of meaning before proceeding to comprehend the higher and hidden levels that constitute the object of the allegorist's task.

The rise of critical biblical scholarship<sup>1</sup> rescued the Song from the fanciful twists and turns of spiritualized interpretation. Yet modern

1. One of the most extensive surveys of traditional and modern treatments of the Song can be found in the Introduction of Pope's commentary (1977, pp. 17-210). Pope's Bibliography (1977, pp. 233-90) is likewise comprehensive.

scholarly approaches have confronted the Song with agendas that, to a great extent, have been as unwilling to explore the use of physical imagery as were those of the traditional exegetes. Critical treatments, for example, have been preoccupied with dating the work as a whole or certain passages within it, with finding the locale, with identifying the characters, and with figuring out the relationship of the Song to Solomon, who is mentioned by name in the superscription and six other times in the text itself.

In short, while modern interpreters have readily accepted the fact that the Song speaks to us of human love, they have rarely explored that language as such. To be fair, the focus on matters other than the love poetry, as a genre worthy of exploration on that level, has been in keeping with the general direction of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The critical tools honed and sharpened in the analysis of the pentateuchal, prophetic, and historiographic literature of the Bible have been inadequate to deal with a biblical book that differs in essential ways from the rest of the scriptural corpus. The poems, after all, are fundamentally secular in their celebration of human love. Biblical scholarship oriented towards religious meaning and development, not surprisingly, has been disadvantaged in its approach to literature that extols emotion derived from human response to another human rather than to God.

Recently, however, scholars trained in literary analysis as such, rather than in the peculiar brand of literary criticism developed for or linked to the study of sacred writings, have begun to examine the Song of Songs. In so doing, they have explored its figurative languages and have liberated the rich imagery as well as the poetic craft from the inescapable though unintentional constraint imposed by the methodological predisposition of both traditional allegorists and critical exegetes. Alter's exuberant chapter on "The Garden of Metaphor" in his book on biblical poetry (1985, pp. 185–203) and Falk's insightful work (1982), which includes both translation and analysis, are noteworthy examples of exposition sensitive to the complex role of sensory metaphors in the Song.

Scholarship emerging from the study of literature *qua* literature is not the only recent development that has looked anew at the Song. Feminist interests in biblical studies, adumbrated in the nineteenth century by the energetic work of activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1895, 1898)<sup>2</sup> and also

2. Stanton's awareness of the biblical basis of political misogyny and oppression resulted in her organization and publication of an extraordinary document, *The Women's*

by the eloquent treatment of C. D. Ginsburg (1857), have naturally been drawn to the one biblical book in which female behavior and status stand apart from the largely male orientation of the rest of the biblical canon. Tribble's work (1973, 1978) is notable in this respect. The celebration of human love is inherently a matter of gender. Hence any consideration of gender in the biblical world would anticipate, in turning to the Song, a work replete with images depicting explicitly male or explicitly female attributes.

Among the various genres of love poetry that have been identified in the Song of Songs, the descriptive songs or *wasfs* provide the most obvious materials for the consideration of gender imagery. The term *wasf*, which means "description" in Arabic, is used to designate those passages that depict the attractions of the human body. The female and the male body are each portrayed in the Song through a graphic series of verbal images. In addition to the explicit attention to gender in the *wasfs*, various other passages allude to attributes of one or the other of the human lovers.

The images in the *wasfs* have caused great difficulty for scholars of nearly all methodological persuasions. For the literary critic as for all those dealing with the literal, erotic meaning of the Song's language, some of the terms and phrases used to convey attributes of the human body are seen as bizarre or strange. Rather than seize on the apparent strangeness as an aspect demanding closer or different scrutiny, critics have paid scant attention to images that startle or shock or that seem inappropriate to what seems to be the task of depicting physical attractiveness. As Falk (1982, pp. 80-85) points out, even scholars familiar with the Hebrew original and also with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry find certain images peculiar and tend to dismiss them as appealing to an ancient aesthetic that is not present in contemporary standards of taste.

The striking imagery depicting body parts in the Song's *wasfs* calls for special consideration of the function of metaphor. Soulen (1967) shows how the sparks of association called forth instantly, without need or time for contemplation and reflection, by the Song's comparisons provide the excitement and stimulation that contribute to the Song's success. If the visual offerings of the biblical poet are not familiar to us, the scholar should explore them so that they become vivid and offer us the same

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*Bible*, which appeared in 1895 and 1898. See Welter's discussion of Stanton's work (1974, pp. v-xii).

associative potential that existed for the inhabitants of an ancient landscape for whom the images drawn from that environment were commonplace.

Our particular concern here with gender imagery in the Song of Songs will be with the gender of the objects used in the metaphoric figures. The ancient poet drew from a wide range of semantic fields in the images used to indicate aspects of the male's or female's body, behavior, and attractiveness. Some of those fields are patently neutral with respect to gender. Images drawn from the world of food, for example, betoken no special nuances for understanding gender. The nourishing sweet aspects of pomegranates or nectar, of honey or milk (5:6, 18, 20) are not related to any inherently gendered qualities. Floral images are likewise apparently neutral.

Images drawn from the natural world predominate. Indeed, the Song is sometimes referred to as nature poetry because of the richness and variety in the allusions to flora and fauna, to vineyards and gardens, and to uncultivated landscapes. One would think that images drawn from the non-human world might be generally neutral with respect to gender, even though in Hebrew all the forms are gendered. Such, however, is not necessarily the case. Vineyards and gardens in the Song apparently have nuances of female sexuality and have been examined in this way (Falk, 1982, pp. 101-104). There is also potential for discerning the Song's gender imagery in the faunal world, for the Song is replete with animal imagery. We shall examine some of those images below.

But there are some images in the Song drawn from settings other than the natural world. Few as they may be, they offer better potential for dealing with gender than do those supplied by nature. Thus, we turn first to the architectural images, found chiefly in the *wasfs*.

## II. *Architectural Imagery*

The poet uses his or her familiarity with various architectural structures mainly in the description of the human body; and it is the female body that is more frequently depicted through such imagery. The fact that of the four *wasfs* in the Song, three are descriptive of the female and only one of the male may mean a more limited opportunity for the poet to have indulged in architectural imagery in portraying the male. Yet there is a sample of architectural language in the one *wasf* dealing with the male, and it is strikingly different from the architectural figures in those describing the female.

The images examined here will not be explored for the purpose of identifying the particular way in which they function as metaphors in

developing the poet's awe for the beloved. Rather, these images are striking for the gender associations that they hold independently of the comparative purposes to which they have been put. All of these images have caused considerable difficulty for the exegete. Part of the problem lies in the use of rare terms or *hapax legomena*. But it is our contention that the application of images across the convention of gender lines in these instances is as much a cause of the exegetical consternation as is the apparent remoteness of the images themselves.

The first passage to be considered is the most complex. In 4:4, the female's neck is likened to a "tower." The visual aspect of this comparison has been the subject of much scholarly discussion, all of which may be important for establishing the metaphorical dynamics of the image. The expansion of the image in the three phases developing upon the original simile of verse 4a ("your neck is like the tower of David") has evoked considerable interpretation. The expression *bānūy lētalpīyyōt* (4:4b), for example, is explained variously as a ziggurat or stepped tower (Honeyman, 1949), or as coursed masonry (Isserlin, 1958). Other explanations (summarized by Pope, 1977, pp. 466–7) assume, because of the content of the following two lines, that weapons are involved.

While purely architectural possibilities may be present in the verse, the military nuances should not be rejected (as by Crim, 1971). A tower, after all, is first and foremost a military structure. Its height is greater than that of surrounding buildings. It thereby gives those on top of it a vantage point from which to see whatever may threaten them. Whether as an isolated structure in the field (Isa 5:2; Mic 4:9; Gen 35:21) or as the stronghold of a city (Judg 9:46–49; Neh 3:1; 12:39), a tower represents strength and protection. Built wider and taller than ordinary walls, towers stand above the surrounding landscape, be it urban or rural, signifying an advantage to its occupants.

Because, in this verse, the tower is associated with David, the military might of an urban tower is probably the dominant aspect of the image. David is the warrior *par excellence* in the Israelite tradition. The Hebrew word *migdāl* ("tower") is linked in the Bible with a number of Palestinian sites in reference to their fortified appearance; and several Jerusalem towers are mentioned by name. None of those references are to a "tower of David." Thus, its use here would seem to be not necessarily a reference to any existing structure, but rather to an abstraction: the (military) might of an architectural form.

The language of the rest of the verse intensifies the notion of military power. The word for "shield," *māgēn*, is clearly a military term that itself is intensified by the quantitative information "thousand." Similarly,

another term for “shield,” *šelet*, appears with “warriors” or “mighty men” and completes the depiction of the tower. The visual aspect of the imagery may well be beauty. The similarity of the language to that of Ezek 27:10–11, where beauty and splendor are produced by towers hung with shields and helmets, is surely relevant; and the overall intention of a *wasf* to celebrate the physical qualities of the person being described should not be ignored. Yet the very repetition of military terms remains an unmistakable and prominent part of the poetic terminology.

A second passage contributes further to the tower imagery. In 7:5, the female’s nose (face?) is likened to a “tower of Lebanon.” This could be either a tower on the mountains of Lebanon or the towering mountains of Lebanon themselves (cf. Pope, 1977, pp. 626–27). In either case, the military advantage of the *migdāl* is emphasized by the relational information of the next phrase: “overlooking Damascus.” Damascus, itself on a high plateau, was a major military threat to Israel between the reign of Solomon and the Assyrian conquest in 732 B.C.E. The Aramean rulers in Damascus alternately allied themselves with or opposed various Judean and Israelite rulers. The military vantage point of a tower above Damascus provides a strong suggestion of strategic advantage and hence of military power.

The tower image appears also in 7:4, in the first clause of the verse, where the female’s neck is likened to a tower. Since it is within another *wasf*-type passage, it may be a reprise or alternate version of the 4:1–5 description where “neck” and “tower” are linked. In this instance, the tower image is not so developed as in chapter 4. Yet it is accompanied by a series of related comparisons of bodily parts to public features. The “pools” in Hebron to which the woman’s eyes are likened are most likely artificial pools—reservoirs—constructed for military, not agricultural, purposes (Paul and Dever, 1973, pp. 127–43). And the “gate” of Bat Rabbim is part of the military defenses of a city and also a public place, a place frequented by males (cf. Prov 31:23) and not by females. The architectural image of a tower in 7:4 is surely again, along with gates and pools, derived from the world of military structures.

Nearly at the end of the Song the tower image appears once more (8:10). The military context for the architectural reality of this usage, which comes in a simile referring to the two breasts of the female, is evident because of the related architectural terminology in the passage. The towers here are part of a wall system. The beloved herself is equated to a wall, with her breasts being compared to its towers. Similarly, in the previous verse (8:9) the young sister of the desired female is said to be a wall upon which “battlements” or “buttresses” (Pope, 1977, p. 680) or

“turrets” (Gordis, 1974, p. 100) are built. The passage also mentions a board of cedar, which apparently refers to a plank of some sort used in military operations connected with siege.

At the end of this short catalogue of military architecture, the female asserts that she—and here the Hebrew *môš'et šālôm* is difficult—brings about or finds “peace.” The one to whom all the military allusions have been made secures the opposite of what they represent. Well-being is the outcome, rather than war, danger, or hostility. Despite the appearance of “peace” after the last instance of military architectural terminology, the Song as a whole presents a significant corpus of images and terms derived from the military—and hence the male—world. Without exception, these terms are applied to the female.<sup>3</sup> Since military language is derived from an aspect of ancient life almost exclusively associated with men, its use in the Song in reference to the woman constitutes an unexpected reversal of conventional imagery or of stereotypical gender association.

### III. *Faunal Images*

Our discovery that the military, and consequently the masculine, aspect of architectural imagery is part of the depiction of the female and not the male is echoed in the way the poet uses animal imagery. In examining the usage of the many faunal metaphors, we have sought to determine first whether the metaphors are applied to the humans and, if so, whether they are used for both males and females or for only one gender. When only one gender is depicted by an animal image, we have endeavored to ascertain whether the animal image conveys a characteristic associated with behavior stereotypical of one gender more than the other.

Over a dozen kinds of animals appear in the Song. Some (turtledove, 2:12; foxes, 2:15) are part of the setting and are not used to develop the imagery of any of the characters. Others are used conventionally; they are found, for example, in the description of a character’s occupation as shepherd of kids (1:8) of sheep (1:8). Two others, while associated with only one gender, are used figuratively in similes depicting hair. In these

3. The only architectural imagery associated with the male is that of royal, or palatial, buildings. But the image is not of a complete structure. The *wasf* describing the male compares his legs to columns of fine stone set upon golden bases (5:15). Richness and royalty are suggested, attributes that are difficult to limit to one gender or the other, especially since the woman is also compared to jewels (7:1) and royal allusions are also part of her description (7:5).

cases, a particular visual feature of the animal—the blackness of the raven (5:11) in relation to the male's dark hair, and the movement of goats on a hillside (4:1; 6:5) in relationship to the female's flowing hair—is its contribution to the figurative usage.

For two other animals, those most often mentioned, the imagery serves to enhance the depictions of both the male and the female. One of these is the dove. The eyes of each of the lovers are compared to doves (1:15; 4:1; 5:12), though only the female as a person (in 2:12 and 6:9) is metaphorically related to a dove. The general association of doves with love and peace is surely a dominant enough motif in ancient art and literature (see Pope, 1977, pp. 356–58, 399–400) to provide an understanding of the force of this comparison. Because of the connection of doves with love and love goddesses in the Near Eastern world, a female aspect to the dove may be supposed, in which case the metaphoric use of the dove for the female and not the male would conform to gender stereotyping.

The other animal appearing in the faunal imagery portraying both the male and the female is the gazelle (*šēbī*). For the male, the gazelle is paired with the deer (*ʿayyāl*) three times in a stock phrase (2:9, 17; 8:14). The grace and free movement of these wild creatures would seem to underlie the poet's choice (cf. Alter, 1985, pp. 194–95). This pair is used in two other places (2:7; 3:5): neither is descriptive of one of the lovers, and both come in an apostrophic address to “daughters of Jerusalem.” For the female, the tenderness and softness and perhaps suppleness (Alter, 1985, p. 198) of these young animals (4:5; 7:5) have led the poet to use them in a simile celebrating the attractiveness of her breasts.

Three other animals remain in the faunal catalogue of the Song. Two of these are the lions and leopards of 4:8. Like the military towers and battlements of the architectural imagery, these wild animals have posed vexing problems for commentators. The difficulty lies in the fact that the female is the one associated with the wild beasts and with their wild habitations in the highest peaks of Lebanon, the mountains of Amana, Senir, and Hermon. Nothing would be further from a domestic association for a female. Nor does the wildness, danger, might, strength, aggressiveness, and other dramatic features of these predators fit any stereotypical female qualities. Even for a female lion, the salient aspect of her behavior in biblical passages lies not in nurturing the young but in teaching them to catch prey (Ezek 19:2f).

The lion, which appears frequently in the figurative language of the Bible (Botterweck, 1974), is consistently a superior, terrifying, powerful, and majestic animal. These qualities underlie the common portrayal of

Yahweh in figures using lions. All the figurative biblical appearances of the lion underscore the masculinity of the imagery, insofar as the attributes of aggression and power are stereotypical male qualities. Similarly, the depictions of lions in Near Eastern art, with certain exceptions to be mentioned below, are in the male world of the hunt or the hero (e.g., Pritchard, 1954, nos. 127, 182, 184, 192, 228, 290, 351, 615, 626, 681). Little wonder, then, that the Song's image of the female emerging from the dens and lairs of leopards and lions has been troublesome and that exegetes (see the examples cited by Pope, 1977, pp. 475-77) have gone to considerable—and preposterous—lengths in attempting to deal with it.

The final faunal image has been similarly perplexing. In 1:9 the female is likened to a mare. In this case, the animal is female, so the gender of the animal is not at the root of the problem. Rather, the context is apparently enigmatic, for the mare is portrayed in a battle scene, amidst Pharaoh's chariots. However, the ancient midrashic commentators as well as several recent ones (e.g., Pope, 1970 and 1977, pp. 336-41; Alter, 1985, p. 193; Falk, 1982, pp. 111-12) have recognized the military ploy alluded to in this image. The female horse set loose among the stallions of the chariotry does violence to the military effectiveness of the charioteers. The female has a power of her own that can offset the mighty forces of a trained army. The military allusions and significance found in the architectural imagery used for the female are here also part of the poet's unconventional use of a figure drawn from the animal world and used to portray the female.

#### IV. *Discussion*

Both the architectural and faunal images in the Song of Songs contain depictions of the female that are counter to stereotypical gender conceptions. These images convey might, strength, aggression, even danger. Before considering the role of such striking figurative language, I would like to point out that military language in relationship to the female appears in two other instances in the Song. Although they both involve difficult readings of the Hebrew text, their significance as war terminology linked with females is nonetheless apparent.

The first text is the comparison of the beloved in 6:4 initially to two cities (Tirzah and Jerusalem; but see Pope, 1977, pp. 558-60) and then to the terror of awesomeness (*ʿāyummāh*) of *nidgālôt*. The latter word appears in the Hebrew Bible only here and in the reprise below in verse 10. The many ingenious solutions proposed by commentators are reviewed by Pope (1977, pp. 560-63). Perhaps the banners of an army

are intended (from *degel*, “flag” or “banner”); or maybe awful trophies of war, that is, human limbs or heads, are implied (on the basis of a possible mythological background for the term, as Pope, 1977). Either way, the language of war appears in this elaboration of the female.

Somewhat less obscure is the depiction in 7:6. One of the Hebrew words (*rēhāṭîm*) is problematic; but the overall sense is clear. The most powerful human—the king—is somehow imprisoned or captured by the female, perhaps in her tresses. The reversal of conventional gender typing is again apparent.

How are we to interpret the frequent use of military and/or male language in depiction of the female and its virtual absence for the male? Our analysis must set this reversing of conventional or traditional gender imagery alongside other unusual aspects of gender portrayal in the Song of Songs.

In the patriarchal world of ancient Israel and in the biblical literature that is its legacy, an androcentric perspective prevails. The Hebrew Bible, it has been said (Bird, 1974, p. 41), is a “man’s book” where women appear for the most part simply as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of men’s activities. The society depicted in the Bible is portrayed primarily from a male perspective, in terms of male accomplishments and in relation to a God for whom andromorphic imagery predominates. Yet in the Song, such characteristics disappear and in fact the opposite may be true; that is, a gynocentric mode predominates.

A number of features of the Song, as Tribble has pointed out (1978, pp. 144-65), reverse the male dominance of the rest of scripture. First, of the three voices in the poem (male; female; a group), the female is most prominent: she speaks more often, and she initiates exchanges more often. Second, the third voice consists of females, the daughters of Jerusalem, who play a strong supporting role in the ebb and flow of emotions. Third, the word “mother” occurs *seven* times in the Song, whereas the male parent, the father, is not mentioned at all. Fourth, the motifs and structures of the Song can be seen as a development or midrash on the Eden story, where the action and initiative shown for the female also are more prominent than for the male.

Another item should be added to this list. The poem twice mentions *bēt-’ēm* “mother’s house” (3:4; 8:2). Nowhere does the masculine equivalent appear, although the poet does speak of the male in relation to “his” house. The appearance of “mother’s house” is striking in view of the overriding importance of “father’s house” in the Bible. The latter

phrase<sup>4</sup> denotes a major social construct in ancient Israel. It refers to the family household, which was the primary economic and social unit during the formative period of Israelite existence and which continued thereafter as the dominant frame of reference for family life.

In light of the importance of the concept of “father’s house” in Israelite society and the frequent use of that phrase in the Hebrew Bible, the appearance of “mother’s house” startles the reader. The normal masculine-oriented terminology for family and/or household derives from lineage concerns, from descent and property transmission reckoned along patrilineal lines. But here in the Song we encounter a situation devoid of such concerns. Perhaps, then, it is no accident that without the public orientation of lineage reckoning, the internal functional aspect of family and home life is rightly expressed by “mother’s house” rather than by “father’s house.”<sup>5</sup>

This last point arises from a consideration of the social world or setting of the Song of Songs. In the varied and intermingled landscapes of the Song one can hardly isolate a setting. Yet, even though one catches glimpses of urban and palatial (public) life, there can be no doubt that two other settings predominate: the rural or pastoral, and the domestic. These two are not alternative settings but rather complementary ones. A peasant household, with its members coming and going about their daily business, forms the human and natural context for the lovers’ trysts and longings. The prevailing rural atmosphere is also an important feature and one that sets this biblical book apart from all other parts of the Hebrew canon.

Even if the extraordinary literary quality of the Song’s poetry bespeaks the talents of educated and therefore perhaps upper-class poets, the love genre is one that transcends social class. The language of love is an everyday language, one that permeates all social settings (Gottwald, 1985, pp. 549–50). I have pointed out elsewhere (Meyers, forthcoming) that the Bible as a whole is an elitist, urban, male-oriented document.

4. “Father’s house” is examined extensively from a sociological perspective by Gottwald (1979, *passim* and especially pp. 285–92). Its social and spatial configurations are described by Stager (1985). See also Ringgren (1974, pp. 8–9) and Hoffner (1975, pp. 113–15). A summary of the scholarly literature can be seen in Chapter 6 (“Eve’s World: The Family Household”) in Meyers forthcoming, my monograph dealing with ancient Israelite (not biblical) women.

5. The possibility that “mother’s house” might also have some relationship to female lineage reckoning should be suggested in light of Malamat’s work (1979) on Babylonian *ummatum*, Ugaritic *ʾumt*, and Hebrew *ʾummāh*.

Only in a work that emanates from a situation—love—in which females play a part equal to males can anything else be expected in an androcentric setting. In the Song we find that one exception: a love-world that is dependent upon females as well as males. Despite its literary sophistication, this one biblical book is truly folk literature. It has no national focus and so, as Alter puts it, is “splendidly accessible to the folk” (1985, p. 186), a fact which alone may explain the significant formal as well as thematic differences between the Song and all other examples of biblical poetry.

How might female participation in folk culture be reflected in the Song? Anthropologists and cultural historians now recognize that, despite the near universal androcentricity of human culture, there is an underlying sub-culture in which women’s roles are not subordinate and may even dominate.<sup>6</sup> In pre-modern societies, the domestic realm is recognized as a female realm. Women, even if appearances seem otherwise to external observers, control the basic functions of that arena of life: the technologies, the procreation, the spirituality, the socializing processes. As long as agrarian societies are organized in non-statist forms, the family household tends to be the dominant economic and social unit; and in such cases, the female’s role is hardly secondary or subordinate.

The Song of Songs, set apart from the stratifying consequences of institutional and public life, reveals a balance between male and female (cf. Meyers, 1983). The domestic setting allows for the mutual intimacy of male and female relationships to be expressed. The Song has a preponderance of females, but that situation does not obtain at the cost of a sustained sense of gender mutuality. Neither male nor female is set in an advantageous position with respect to the other. Some images may be limited to one gender; but there is also a long list of images or phrases that are used interchangeably (Broadribb, 1961–1962, p. 15; Exum, 1973, p. 47) and that create the mood of shared love. In the erotic world of human emotion, there is no subordination of female to the male.

Yet even within this spirit of erotic mutuality and shared love, the predominance of female characters and language and also the presence of strong (masculine) figurative language in reference to females cannot be ignored. These two special features of the Song are related to its exceptional status as, perhaps uniquely among the books of the biblical

6. See, for example, the way Rogers (1978) and Rosaldo (1980) call for a rethinking of the way hierarchical relationships between male and female are perceived.

canon, a "popular" work, a compendium of love songs arising from the non-official and non-public arena of daily life. Precisely because it is set apart from the national and the institutional settings that constitute the compelling religious and historical originality of the biblical corpus, the Song depicts that aspect of life in which the female role was primary. Public life looms large in the Bible, and females consequently are virtually invisible. But where private life can be seen apart from the myopic focus on the people Israel, one glimpses a life with lively female prominence. The idea of female power projected by the military architectural imagery and by some of the animal figures is stunningly appropriate to the internal world of Israelite households, where women exercised strong and authoritative positions (Meyers, forthcoming).

The military structures set forth in relation to the woman, and the association of lions and leopards with the female beloved, are strong and innovative metaphors (see Alter's categorization, 1985, pp. 189, 193). They should no more be taken literally, as supposed indications of mythic female warriors or of primeval huntresses, than should the graphic equivalent of the Song's military and faunal symbols of female might. I refer now to the artistic convention of depicting certain Near Eastern goddesses—often deities of love and war—holding implements of war or surmounted on ferocious beasts, notably lions (e.g., Pritchard, 1954, nos. 470–74, 522, 525, 526, 537, 685, 704).

Gender was not a constraint on power in the world of the gods. Nor, if we listen to the words of might in the *wasfs* and other passages portraying the beloved female, was gender a constraint on power in the intimate world of a couple in love. From a social perspective, the domestic realm is the setting for such love, and therein exists the arena in which female power is expressed. Luckily for feminists, who often despair of discovering meaningful material in the man's world of the official canon, a single biblical book has preserved this non-public world and allows us to see the private realm that dominated the social landscape for much of ancient Israel's population.

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