"KNOW, MY BROTHER, that you will find great differences in interpretation of the Song of Songs. In truth they differ because the Song of Songs resembles locks to which the keys have been lost." So wrote Rabbi Saadia Gaon al-Fayyumi in the tenth century, in words that still ring true. Few texts in the Hebrew canon have been so impervious to our critical inquiries as the Song. Scholars versed in this interpretive quagmire know the score. The text of the Song is perennially enticing, as it constantly invites the reader into a narrative-like context that never quite takes shape. Is the Song a drama performed by two or even three characters, or is its narrative flavor an illusion played on us by a collection of disparate love songs? Is the text about human love, about divine love, or is it perhaps a political allegory? For answers to these questions, modern scholars have frequently turned to comparative literature from the ancient Near East, but this has often served as a two-edged hermeneutical sword. Although comparative considerations have emancipated us from rigid allegories, which preclude an appreciation of the Song's vivid portrayal of human love and sexuality, the comparative evidence has at the same time introduced a degree of generic confusion. On the basis of the ancient Near Eastern context, the book has been construed as a sacred marriage text (like the Inanna/Dumuzi texts), as a royal love song (like the Sumerian royal love songs),

I am grateful to several scholars who have read and commented on this manuscript, including Jack Sasson (of Vanderbilt University), Ray Van Leeuwen and Elisabeth Morgan (both of Eastern University). And, as always, I offer my gratitude to the anonymous associate editors of the CBQ.

1 Saadia Gaon et al., Ἱαμάδα ἱερής ἡ Πατρίδος Αἰγυπτίων (ed. nSNp ΠΠΟΠ; Jerusalem: Ἱαμάδα ἱερής ἡ Πατρίδος Αἰγυπτίων [1961]) 26. Quoted from Marvin H. Pope, Song of Songs: A new translation with introduction and commentary (AB 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 89.
as a ritual text (like the Babylonian "love lyrics"), and even as secular love poetry (like the Egyptian love songs). Moreover, those oft-belittled allegorical approaches—which interpret the book as a portrait of God's love for Israel or the church—nowadays appear more sensible, not only because postmodern readers no longer feel so constrained by notions of authorial intent but also because, historically speaking, it was perhaps through allegorical readings that the book entered the Hebrew canon in the first place.

I have no wish to relate a detailed history of the Song's interpretation. It is clear enough from any survey that there is something dissatisfying about the confusion that surrounds this engaging text. In this article I suggest a way through this interpretive impasse by offering a reading of the Song that, I believe, makes good sense of material we have at hand, both in the Song itself and from its ancient context. There will be little in my suggestion that is novel. In fact, my sense is that I am only fitting together the pieces of a puzzle that other capable scholars have provided for me. So, if there is something novel in my approach, it is in my synthesis of what others have so ably observed.

My thesis is this: The Song of Songs originated as a wisdom composition, as a collection of love songs edited to teach young Jewish women propriety in matters of love and sex. In certain respects, I have arrived at this reading by applying Ockham's proverbial razor to present discussions of the text, so the potential value of my approach should be demonstrable in fairly short order.

I. The Song as a Collection of Love Poems

Whether one takes the Song as an allegory or as something more concrete and literal, one important trend in the interpretation of it has been the tendency to view the text as a love story of some kind. A recent, thoroughgoing attempt to do this is found in Michael Goulder's little volume The Song of Fourteen Songs. Although in the end I will disagree with Goulder's basic thesis (and with similar theses), I wish to point out that his book is important reading for anyone interested in the Song. Goulder provides valuable insight into the Song's rich imagery and has a good appreciation of the narrative textures of its various poems. Because he con-

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3 For the history of the Song's interpretation, see the commentaries noted below and especially the recent book of Jean E. de Ena, *Sens et interprétations du Cantique des Cantiques* (LD 194; Paris: Cerf, 2004).

tends that the Song conveys a story of courtship and marriage—the very point that I wish to contest—his work provides a good springboard into my discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of reading the Song as a single, coherent story.

As his title partly implies, Goulder avers that the Song contains fourteen separate poetic compositions that together tell the story of a royal wedding. The text begins with the bride’s trek from the harem to the throne room, reflects on the king’s courtship of the young woman, relates an account of the wedding itself, and follows with a description of the marriage’s consummation and of the subsequent intimate relationship enjoyed by the king and queen. Other commentators have made similar claims, but in this case Goulder has undertaken a very careful reading of the text in order to uncover in some detail the referents that support his narrative reading. Let us consider several examples of Goulder’s exegesis. In his comments on Cant 1:4, Goulder amplifies "draw me after you," as "send a eunuch so that I can take my place in your procession into the throne room." Similarly, the “daughters of Jerusalem” become the “king’s harem” (p. 12), and the little refrain, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, / by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, / that you stir not up nor awaken love / until it please” [2:7; 3:5; cf. 8:4]), becomes a warning from the princess to the harem women that they should not stir up her fiancé’s passions with their dancing. The lovesick woman’s nocturnal search for her lover in 3:1-5 no longer originates from her own bed, as is commonly supposed by commentators, but rather from the royal bed.

Goulder’s agility with the text is especially visible in his interpretation of 3:4 and 8:2, where the young woman wishes to bring her lover into “her mother’s house.” The second of these texts presents a special problem for Goulder’s thesis. Scholars often view the motif of the “mother’s house” as an expression of the young woman’s longing for marriage, so that she is still hoping for marriage at the end of the book. This interpretation of 8:2 obviously contradicts Goulder’s suggestion that the royal wedding had taken place already in chap. 5. Goulder responds: “Girls lived in their fathers’ houses, not their mothers’, and even if her

5 Biblical quotations here and elsewhere are adapted from the RSV unless otherwise noted.
7 Goulder, Song of Fourteen Songs, 27.
father is dead, she has brothers: there is no biblical instance of a girl living in her ‘mother’s house.’" Consequently, Goulder feels that the text must be taken metaphorically, so that the girl’s invitation to her mother’s house becomes a sexual euphemism for “welcoming him into her womb.” So, according to Goulder, the beloved’s desire to bring her lover to “her mother’s house” does not contravene his thesis at all. Rather, it supports his reading.

There is nothing inappropriate about taking a fresh look at the Song through a different sort of interpretive lens, as Goulder has done. Nevertheless, in the end I do not find his reading very convincing. Among other things, I cannot agree with his suggestion that the beloved’s desire to usher the young man into her mother’s house in 3:4 and 8:2 is a sexual euphemism rather than the expression of her more ambitious desire to marry him. In defense of his view, Goulder contends that the metaphor of a girl living in her “mother’s house” is foreign to Israelite thought, but this is not actually the case. An unmarried girl’s home is called her mother’s house in other Hebrew texts (Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8), and, in a twist on this theme, Isaac brings his wife Rebekah into his mother’s tent to consummate the marriage. The house of the mother also figures prominently in Egyptian and Sumerian love poetry, where entry into the bride’s house is the first formal act of marriage. Furthermore, it is precisely the unmarried status of the young woman that suits the context of Cant 8:2:

O that you were like a brother to me,
that nursed at my mother’s breast!
If I met you outside, I would kiss you,
and none would despise me.
I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother;
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the juice of my pomegranates. (Cant 8:1-2)

This motif, in which young lovers struggle to express their affections in the face of social constraint, is very common in ancient Near Eastern love poetry:

A Sumerian Exemplar

What can I present before my mother as a lie?
What can I present before my mother, Ningal, as a lie?
Let me teach you, let me teach you!
Inanna, let me teach you the lies of women:

8 Ibid., 27, 62.
[Say] “My girlfriend was dancing with me in the square
She ran around with me, playing the tambourine and recorder . . .
In rejoicing, sweetness, I pass the day there with her”
This as a lie do you present before your mother.
As for us—let us make love with you by the moonlight.  

Egyptian Exemplars

I passed close by his house, and found his door ajar.
My brother was standing beside his mother, and with him all his kin.
If only mother knew my heart—she would go inside for a while . . .
Then I could hurry to my brother and kiss him before his company,
And not be ashamed because of anyone.

The little sycamore . . . opens her mouth to speak . . .
Come, spend time where the young people are:
Under me are a festival booth and a hut . . .
The cloths are spread out beneath me,
While the sister “strolls about.”
But my lips are sealed
So as not to tell I’ve seen their “words.”

If we may judge from the ancient Near Eastern sources (and from present realities),  
we find that two things were often true of young people in love. Their sexual intimacy was covertly expressed, and they sometimes longed for parental endorsements that would permit its legitimate consummation in marriage. Matters of this sort seem to be presumed in Cant 3:4 and 8:2. The young woman is frustrated because the relationship with her beloved must be played out secretly, a situation that is further aggravated by the suspicion that her family would not accept the relationship were it revealed to them (which is presumably why she has not revealed it). If the Song’s protagonist faces the same frustrations at the beginning of the book (3:4) as at its end (8:2), then we should admit that our story, if it really is a narrative of some sort, does not take her very far. There is indeed a kind of narrative tension in the Song (more on this in a moment), but there is no denouement in its middle. Marital love is surely an important theme in the Song, but the Song is manifestly not a story of marriage.

My reading of the Song, which accentuates the single status of its protagonist(s), is further reinforced by the nocturnal experiences related in 3:1-5 and 5:2-7.

10 Sefati, Love Songs in Sumerian Literature, 187.
11 Fox, Song of Songs, 54-55, 46-47.
12 Rachel Martin has recently spotted this pattern in Muslim Afghanistan, where Kabul’s university students secretly rendezvous in local parks (as reported in “Text-Messaging Changes Dating in Afghanistan,” National Public Radio, Weekend Edition Sunday, April 9, 2006).
It is unclear whether these accounts are of dreams, realities, or both, but it is certain that these songs are not focalized through the eyes of a married woman. We have instead a frustrated, unmarried woman who seeks her lover in the dangerous city streets:

Upon my bed by night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
"I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves."
I sought him, but found him not.
The watchmen found me,
as they went about in the city.
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
Scarcely had I passed them,
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
until I had brought him into my mother's house,
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the hinds of the field,
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it please. (3:1-5)

I slept, but my heart was awake.
Hark! My beloved is knocking.
"Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one;
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night."
I had put off my garment,
how could I put it on?
I had bathed my feet,
how could I soil them?
My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
upon the handles of the bolt.
I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.  
The watchmen found me,  
as they went about in the city;  
they beat me, they wounded me,  
they took away my mantle,  
those watchmen of the walls. (5:2-7)

In sum, from beginning to end (3:1-4; 5:2-7; 8:2), the Song depicts frustrated young women (or a woman) who dream of marriage. So the Song’s content does not suit the thesis, whether Goulder’s or otherwise, that it is a love story consummated by marriage.

Still, the theme of marriage permeates the Song, not only as the young woman’s wish (see 3:4; 8:2) but also in the wedding poetry found in 3:6–5:1. On six occasions this pericope identifies the beloved as a šùš, who is apparently the bride of none other than “Solomon” himself. Given the length and central placement of this text in the book, it is no wonder that marital love has taken center stage in many interpretations of the Song. I too believe that marriage is an important theme in the Song, but what, specifically, is its place in the whole?

The wedding poems in 3:6–5:1 are immediately juxtaposed, both to the right and to the left, with the nocturnal frustrations depicted in 3:1–4 and 5:2–7. Given that these poetic frames portray the downside of unmarried love, it seems that the nuptials between them in 5:2–7 cannot be the actual marriage of the Song’s ostensible protagonist(s). This raises the question of how the Solomonic wedding song relates to the twin texts that frame it. One option is that Solomon and his bride represent the ideal fulfillment of the woman’s dream for marriage in 3:1–4. Such an interpretation is warranted by the comparative evidence. Ancient love songs frequently presented common couples in the guise of royalty (or royalty in the guise of gods). The same could be the case here. Another option, not wholly foreign to the first, is that the wedding song is not the young woman’s dream but serves instead as an editorial foil against which her dreams may be judged. In this case, the Song’s editor wished to juxtapose the ideal fulfillment of married love with the disappointments of unmarried love. I tend to prefer this second option because the wedding poetry is not closely integrated with the nocturnal sequences in 3:1–4 and 5:2–7. To my mind, this suggests that the Song’s editor has taken up older wedding poetry and joined it to the work. But, whether that is true or not, the editorial effect of the three-part sequence in 3:1–5:7 is the same: marital love is much better than the frustration of recklessly pursuing love.

But married love and unmarried frustrations may not be the only themes in the Song’s poetry. Given the single status of the young women in 3:1–4; 5:2–7; and

8:1-4, there is no reason to suppose that the powerful and intimate sex described so vividly in 2:3-17 and 7:1-13 is of a married couple. In 2:3-17 the young woman warns the nubile "daughters of Jerusalem" not to arouse love prematurely (i.e., before marriage), and in 7:1-13 the young man and woman rendezvous in the out-of-doors. This outdoor setting is strongly reminiscent of the adolescent love depicted in the Turin Love Song from Egypt, where young lovers find their freedom among the trees and foliage.\textsuperscript{14} Sexuality is powerful, whether one is married or not.

In the end, it seems to me that the Song does not give us a single love story but rather various and contrasting portraits of love. That is, as many scholars nowadays believe, the Song is a collection of love poems,\textsuperscript{15} and its songs therefore bear diverse impressions and implications. Some of them accentuate the power of love and sex, whether of married or single couples (2:3-13; 3:6-5:1; 7:1-13; 8:5b-7), while others—especially the songs in 3:1-4; 5:2-7; and 8:1-4—express the disappointments and frustrations that often attend the adolescent search for love and physical intimacy. The editorial juxtaposition of these images is a clue to the book's functional purpose. In what follows, I will explore this functional purpose and, in the process, offer additional evidence for my thesis that the Song is a collection of poems rather than a single, coherent story.

II. The Song as a Wisdom Composition

Solomon is the patron of Hebrew wisdom. His wisdom is a primary theme in the historical accounts of his life (1 Kgs 3:1-28; 4:29-34; 11:41-43), and the written texts associated with Solomon, whether in Hebrew or Greek, are presented as his wisdom (Proverbs, Qoheleth, Wisdom, Psalms of Solomon). If the Song of Songs is not a wisdom book, then it will be the only one associated with Solomon's name that is not such a composition. For this reason we have good warrant for considering the possibility that the Song is a wisdom text.\textsuperscript{16} Why Solomon should be a purveyor of the Song's wisdom in matters of love and sex is a matter that I will take up in a moment.

The chief purpose of wisdom texts is instructional, in that their authors seek to perpetuate knowledge and insight from one generation to the next. The Song

\textsuperscript{14} Fox, \textit{Song of Songs}, 44-51.

\textsuperscript{15} Richard J. Clifford, \textit{The Wisdom Literature} (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 157-65; Longman, \textit{Song of Songs}, 48-49; Murphy, \textit{Song of Songs}, 97-99; Snaith, \textit{Song of Songs}, 6-7; Weems, "Song of Songs," 371-73. See also Fox (\textit{Song of Songs}), who affirms both the original diversity of the Song's poems and their profound editorial unity.

\textsuperscript{16} Many scholars have categorized the Song as wisdom in some respect. See G. Lloyd Carr, \textit{The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary} (TynOTC 17; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984) 50-52; Clifford, \textit{Wisdom Literature}, 157-65; Longman, \textit{Song of Songs}, 48-49; Murphy, \textit{Song of Songs}, 97-99; Weems, "Song of Songs," 361-434.
offers many signs that this was its purpose. Foremost of these signs is the fourfold repetition of an oath charge, in which the female protagonist requires an oath from the “daughters of Jerusalem.” Three of these charges (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) read as follows:17

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, 
by the gazelles and the does of the field, 
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it please.

There are two basic tacks that commentators have taken on these oaths.18 One option assumes that the speaker’s lovemaking is at issue, so that she requests either that her friends not excite her prematurely (through their talk or rituals of stimulation)19 or that they not disturb her lovemaking, in which case the translation of the oath would run something like this: “That you disturb not, nor interrupt our love, until it be satiated.”20 The other option, which is increasingly popular, views the oath as an admonition or word of caution—that is, as wisdom. Tremper Longman expresses it this way: “More naturally, the verse is a warning of the woman to other women who may look on the relationship and want to experience something similar; she is, in essence, telling them not to force it.”21 Roland E. Murphy similarly argues: “Love has its own laws and is not to be achieved artificially. Only when it is truly present (‘until it is ready’) can the participants enjoy it.”22 This second approach, which makes the oath instructional, seems closer to the mark than the first, but I suspect that even this does not quite hit it.23 Both Longman and Murphy

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17 The third text, 8:4 (Eng. 8:3), omits “by the gazelles and the does of the field.” The somewhat different fourth oath formula in 5:8 will be discussed below.

18 Excepting Gerleman (Ruth, Das Hohelied, 120), for whom the daughters of Jerusalem provide an audience for the beloved’s descriptions of her love and lover.

19 Pope, Song of Songs, 385-87.


21 Longman, Song of Songs, 115.

22 Murphy, Song of Songs, 137; cf. Hess, Song of Songs, 82-83; Weems, “Song of Songs,” 389-90.

23 Even in allegorical approaches to the oaths, such as those adopted in the targums, it is assumed that the love in question is of the daughters of Jerusalem and not of the girl, and that the object of their love is something they might, but should not, desire. See Isaac Jerusalmi, The Song of Songs in the Targumic Tradition: Vocalized Aramaic Text with Facing English Translation and Ladino Versions (Ladino Books 4; Cincinnati: Ladino, 1993) 59, 89, 215.
tacitly assume that the woman’s wisdom stems from her success (i.e., “follow my example”), but it strikes me as more likely that she actually speaks from her failure. The relative merit of these options can be weighed by carefully considering the context of the three oaths, as well as of the fourth, closely related oath in 5:8.

The first oath (2:7) comes immediately after a description of the young woman’s tryst with her lover. Contextually speaking, this does not help much, for its context could suit any of the interpretive options that have been offered. But in the other cases where the young woman adjures her friends, she does so on the heels of frustration or disappointment. In 3:1-4, the woman is forced to seek her lover in the streets, finally dragging him, apparently against his will, to her mother’s house. This is just before the oath in 3:5. In 8:1-3, the young woman laments her distance from the young man, wishing that she were his sister just to be near him. The oath immediately follows in 8:4. Then in 5:2-7, where we find the fourth oath, the woman is beaten in the streets while seeking her lost lover. Her immediate reflection on this experience is to require this oath of her friends: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love” (5:8). Her lovesickness is a symptom not of married love but rather of adolescent pursuits of love, which are often disappointing, as in these cases. The contextual evidence therefore suggests that the four oaths in the Song are offered by a single girl to her single friends, warning them away from love’s dangers. She has fallen in love too far and too quickly and is paying a high price for that; she hopes to protect her friends from the same fate. This is precisely why she makes her friends swear “by the gazelles and the does of the field.”

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and in the ancient Near East, oath formulas refer to those who witness the oath or oversee its discharge. One thinks here especially of the covenant in Deuteronomy, where Yhwh calls “heaven and earth” as witnesses against Israel (Deut 31:28; cf. 4:26; 30:19). In the case of the Song’s oaths, wild animals are the ideal witnesses, for in the Song as in other ancient love songs, it is in the out-of-doors that young lovers pursue their sexual liberty.

Other features in the Song reinforce this wisdom reading of the book. First, to return to Solomon—the mention of his name usually insinuates wisdom, but in this case especially so. According to Hebrew tradition, Solomon’s downfall could be traced back to his problematic preoccupation with women and sex, a point that

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24 Scholars have long pondered the significance of this odd oath formula. Expecting an oath by the deity, many scholars have accepted the thesis that נביאי אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא הוא אלוהים הוא he is a euphemism for God, which really means something like “by the God of hosts or by God almighty” (see Murphy, Song of Songs, 133). My solution to the problem renders this creative solution unnecessary, though the suggested parallel remains interesting.

25 For an overview and discussion of the relevant texts, see Sparks, Ancient Texts, 435-48.

26 This suggestion would resolve a long-standing interpretive conundrum presented by this text, namely, the mysterious use of wild animals in the oath formula.
Qohelet highlights in its portrait of the king’s life (cf. Deut 17:14-20; 1 Kgs 11:1-13; Eccl 2:1-11). So Solomon is an ideal spokesman in the Song, as a purveyor of wisdom in general and as one particularly experienced in love and sex, and in the threats that they represent. Along this line of thought, it cannot be an accident that the female persona in the Song is finally identified as שֻלָּםִית, “the Shulammit” (7:1 [Eng. 6:13]). Perhaps in this context the title signifies her perfect beauty, as it may for Solomon; but in this book of wisdom she speaks as the feminine counterpart of Solomon. Just as הִים utters words of sexual advice to the young Jewish men (Prov 5:1-23; 7:1-27), so the שֻלָּםִית counsels young Jewish women.

Another argument in favor of viewing the Song as wisdom involves its composition, which reflects patterns that appear in other works of Hebrew wisdom. As I have indicated already, it appears that the Song’s editor joined together various poems, with differing perspectives on love and sex, and then framed them to offer a message of wisdom. An effective strategy for doing this would have involved the use of songs that were already popular for the ancient audience, and there is some evidence that this describes the editor’s modus operandi. In terms of comparative evidence, I would note that our copies of Egyptian love songs are sometimes preserved in scribal exercises and often bear the rubric “Entertainment” (literally, “diverting the heart”). This suggests that the Egyptian songs were well known to young Egyptian men and probably served as entertainment at banquets and other public events. The songs were undoubtedly used in courting and weddings as well.

The Jewish evidence points us in the same direction. Although we have no direct evidence that the portions of the Song were popularly known and used before its composition, the rabbis complained that the Song itself was sometimes used in “secular” venues. Rabbi Aqiva, in particular, warned, “The one who trills his voice in chanting the Song of Songs in the banquet house and treats it as a sort of song has no part in the world to come” (t. Sanh. 12.10; cf. b. Sanh. 101a). So far as we can tell, his comment comes from a period in which the Song’s canonicity was still a matter of debate and when those who accepted its canonicity were already interpreting its love poetry as allegory. This last point may be inferred from

27 As Fox notes (Song of Songs, 157-58), the definite article requires that we interpret שֻלָּםִית as a title rather than a name.
29 Fox, Songs of Songs, 16, 26, 29, 77-79.
30 Ibid., 227-52.
31 Most modern scholars would accept this conclusion. See Aage Bentzen, “Remarks on the Canonization of the Song of Solomon,” Studia Orientalia 1 (1953) 41-47; Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 578; Gerleman, Ruth, Das
Aqiva's defense of the Song's status as Scripture: "for all of the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (see m. Yad. 3.5; cf. b. Sanh. 101a). If portions of the Song were actually used as secular ditties, and if allegories were required to render them "safe," then we can reasonably suppose that at least some of the Song's elements originated and were used in popular settings.

If the foregoing is correct, then the Song is, at heart, a collection of various love songs that have been framed to serve the needs of wisdom. This compositional pattern points us directly into the world of Hebrew wisdom. As is commonly observed by scholars, in both Qohelet and Job the editors taught wisdom by juxtaposing one viewpoint within the framework of another. In each book the voices of pessimism are framed and ultimately eclipsed by the orthodoxy of retributive justice. Proverbs also uses framing and juxtaposition to teach wisdom, and in a manner closely resembling my reading of the Song. I have in mind the way the discourses in Proverbs 1-9 juxtapose the sexual threat of adultery (5:1-23; 6:20-7:27) with one's love for Lady Wisdom (chaps. 8-9) and for one's spouse (5:15-20).

The presence of this compositional technique in other Hebrew wisdom texts reinforces the conclusion that this is also what is going on in the Song.

I have no wish to belabor the arguments for the Song's wisdom character, but there is one last piece of evidence that should be adduced in the discussion. Near the end of the book there is a sequence in which the young woman responds to comments made by others, either by her friends or more likely by her brothers (8:8-12).

Brothers

We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.

What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for?


32 Longman, Song of Songs, 21.


35 So Fox, Song of Songs, 171-72.
If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.

**Beloved**

I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace.

Like so many sequences in the Song, this one has perennially befuddled interpreters. But the exegetical loose ends aside, it seems to me that there is a surprising scholarly consensus about the text’s essential point. Most commentators recognize that this part of the Song offers a lesson on chastity. Whether the young woman actually accepts this lesson or defies it is a matter that I will take up below, but chastity seems to be the theme in play. This naturally suits the reading that I have offered of the Song: the Song of Songs originated as a wisdom composition, as a collection of love songs edited to teach young Jewish women propriety in matters of love and sex. This word of wisdom was vitally important in a culture where the virginity of nubile women was so highly prized (Gen 24:16; Exod 22:15 [Eng. 22:16]; Lev 21:13-14) and where premarital sex was sometimes harshly condemned (Gen 38:24; Deut 22:14-21). Scholars have rightly noted the perceived importance of female virginity and the protection of that virginity in the economic and political life of Israel’s patriarchal society. Yet the theme of protecting that social fiber is not foregrounded in the Song. Its editor, although admitting the power of sexuality, characterizes that power not in terms of its potentially negative effects on society but rather as a dangerous threat to the individual woman, which can quickly land her in a sea of emotional pain and disappointment. Better to wait patiently for marriage and to avoid letting young love get the best of you.

The dangling exegetical question is whether the young woman in these final words of the Song has actually heeded or only ignored the wisdom of her broth-

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ers and of the Song itself. My own tentative judgment is that the Song concludes here not with the words of an unwise girl, frustrated by love, but with the words of a wise woman entering the bliss of marriage. My rationale for this conclusion is as follows. The sequence begins with the young girl’s brothers, looking protectively upon their youthful sister in her physical immaturity. Though she is not yet nubile, they ask what they will do when she is of marriageable age. “If she is a wall,” they say, “we will build battlements of silver upon her.” “If she is a door,” they say, “we will enclose her with boards of cedar.” Although some commentators take the “wall” and “door” as synonymous metaphors, this seems to me unlikely, especially given that the young woman chooses one of them in her answer. Because the issue in this text is chastity, a sensible paraphrase of the brothers’ comments would run something like this: “If she is a wall [chaste], we will decorate her; but if she is a door [one given to unchastity], then we shall wall her in.” Though this is my reading of the text, in the end it will not matter much whether we take the wall and door as conceptual antitheses or as synonyms. The essential point of the text will still be that the brothers wish to protect their sister’s reputation and, if possible, her virginity.

The young woman’s response to their comment is from a different horizon. Though her brothers first spoke when she was a mere girl, the situation is so no longer. Now she is a nubile and mature woman, ready for marriage. And though her “breasts are like towers,” she tells us that in matters of love and sex she has been “a wall.” She reiterates her declaration through the metaphor of the vineyard that follows in 8:11-12:

Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;
he let out the vineyard to keepers;
each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.
My vineyard, my very own, is for myself;
you, O Solomon, may have the thousand,
and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.

I must confess, along with many commentators, that I am at a loss to make complete sense of this metaphor, particularly its final comments about the garden tenders (המַטְלָבִים) and their share of the silver. But it seems that contextually the theme

38 Bergant, Song of Songs, 101-2; Carr, Song of Solomon, 172; Gordis, Song of Songs and Lamentations, 100.
40 Fox, Song of Songs, 171-73; Pope, Song of Songs, 680.
of the poem has to do with the young woman's propriety in love and sex, with the fact that she has not been promiscuous with "her vineyard" (cf. 1:6) but has reserved it for her one and only "Solomon." As a virgin bride, she brings "contentment" (לִשְׂפָט) to her husband (8:10) and so offers him these closing words of sexual encouragement: "Make haste, my beloved, / and be like a gazelle / or a young stag / upon the mountains of spices" (8:14). Although the Song as a whole warns young women away from the dangers of premature love and sex, it concludes with a bit of that old wisdom that "good things come to those who wait."

In the end, it is wrong to suggest, as some do, that the Song is "a completely secular collection of love lyrics." Even apart from its allegorical interpretations, the editorial shape of the Song imbibes Yhwh's wisdom, where the created order sets out the proper boundaries for human sexuality.

III. Loose Ends: Answering a Few Objections

Here I will address several of the most important objections that might be raised against my thesis. First, whenever one assumes that the Song is more of a collection than a coherent composition, one objection will be that this takes the easy way out. It stops short of pushing hard to do what most texts call for, which is to understand their coherence. If the Song does not work as a simple story of marriage, why not introduce more complexity into our readings, as is done, for instance, by those who add a rural shepherd to compete with Solomon for the woman's love? My response to this objection is straightforward. As I take up my reading of the Song, I have behind me a long tradition of those who have tried and failed to find coherence in its diversity. So it is not as though I am the first to recognize the hermeneutical impasse. Nevertheless, I have not ignored the issue of coherence. I have only argued that the coherence lies in a particular rhetorical strategy, which combines diverse points of view into a single piece. This approach to the Song has an obvious advantage over other approaches and is increasingly popular among scholars, because it will mean that the Song's most vexing exegetical problems inhere in the solution. That is, every instance of diversity in the Song confirms that it is a collection rather than an entirely coherent composition.

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42 So far as I know, the most thoroughgoing attempt to do this is found in Calvin Seerveld, The Greatest Song: In Critique of Solomon (Palos Heights, IL: Trinity Pennyasheet Press, 1967). Seerveld achieves the illusion of success by adding detailed rubrics to his edition of the Song, but these are artificial and unconvincing. Especially awkward are those instances in which the woman, who ostensibly resists Solomon, seems to share loving words with him (see 1:10–2:7; cf. Seerveld, 25).
But there is one important exception to this rule, and it constitutes a second objection that could be raised. I have in mind Song's introduction, which will not immediately strike us as a voice of caution for young women:

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is oil poured out;
therefore the maidens love you.
Draw me after you, let us make haste.
The king has brought me into his chambers.
We will exult and rejoice in you;
we will extol your love more than wine;
rightly do they love you. (Cant 1:2-4)

With these words the book begins as it ends, with a celebration of love and sexuality (cf. 8:14), but this need not contravene my thesis. If the Song is a wisdom composition, it will not be the first wisdom book that begins with the theme it will reframe. The same phenomenon appears in Qohelet, where its initial words of skepticism are eventually reframed by conventional orthodoxy. Perhaps more important, the beloved's initial words in the Song are immediately juxtaposed with words of subtle disappointment about her appearance (she is sun darkened and has not "kept her own vineyard") and about the absence of her lover, whom she is seeking (see 1:5-8). Whatever else we may say, all is not well in Denmark. I do not make light of the interpretive problems in this early part of the book, nor in other parts of it. All readers of the Song are challenged by it. What I say instead is that my approach to the Song makes better sense of the whole than do other readings—even when the Song's introduction is duly considered. Nevertheless, I freely confess at this point that the Song's first few verses do not strike me as the best way to introduce its sapiential theme. This is a problem that I will address in the conclusion below.

The essentials of my thesis have been presented, so at this point I take up three issues that follow from it: (1) the methodologies of the Song's editor, (2) the *Sitze im Leben* in which the Song was most likely used and what this might imply about the gender of its editor(s), and (3) why a thesis such as mine has not quite appeared in other interpretations of the Song.

IV. The Song's Editor

Scholars tend to describe the Song's origins in terms of either a "single composition" or a "collection." If one must choose between these two options, the col-

43 The young woman's defense of and explanation for her appearance is predicated on the fact that she judges herself to be "dark but lovely" (see 1:5).
lection model is better, inasmuch as thematic variations in the Song point to several minds and situations. At the same time, the role of an editor in collecting and arranging sources can vary significantly from text to text. Does the editor merely slide the pearls onto the string, or does the editor so shape the sources, and add to them, as to create links in a chain? As editors go, the Song's editor was an active editor. In each of the four speeches by the young woman, a wisdom oath is inserted for the young women under her charge. These speeches are also very close to one another thematically and contextually, as is especially true of the young woman's two nocturnal experiences, in 3:1-5 and 5:2-8, where each ends with a wisdom oath (3:5; 5:8). There are also numerous Stichwörter, motifs, and sequences that link the various poems. I will not recount these here, as they are ably summarized in Michael V. Fox's landmark work. But the upshot of these observations is that the editor of the Song is very nearly an author, in spite of depending on various "secular" poems to make a case for wisdom.

Evidence of the editor's source poetry remains visible, however. If one examines the various links that Fox has noted, these are not at all prominent in either the wedding poetry of 3:6–5:1 or in the so-called wasfs, in which the young man and woman employ imagery to describe their lover's body. If we are looking for the active hand of the editor, the place to look is not here but in other parts of the Song, where the editorial links are more pronounced. Yet, when I turn to those other materials, I am uncertain about how to evaluate the editor's role. Has the editor mainly edited the sources or actually composed new songs? That is a question I cannot answer in this short space, but in my estimation the Song is neither a mere anthology of diverse poems nor a fully coherent composition. It lies between these extremes.

At this point we can return for a brief moment to Goulder's thesis, discussed at the outset, that the Song aims to tell a story. We are now in a position to explain more clearly why Goulder and others have followed this false path. The Song brings together a number of love poems that provide narrative snapshots of differing human situations, "a series of scenes on an imaginative plane." Some of these settings stem from the editor and others from the editor's sources, but the

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44 See 2:1-13 (oath in 2:7); 2:16–3:11 (oath in 3:5); 5:2-16 (oath in 5:8); 7:10b–8:7 (oath in 8:4).
46 Scholars use this Arabic term, meaning "description," to refer to a genre of love poetry that appears in Arabic and in the Hebrew Song. The relevant texts of the Song include 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-7; and 7:2-8. As we might expect, there appear to be links between these songs, but they are not linked closely to the book as a whole.
net effect of these texts does not depend on their respective origins. It is a natural function of the reader’s mind to seek a coherent narrative sense from these diverse narrative portraits, and many minds have attempted to do so. But in the end that coherence eludes us precisely because the portraits are not from a single story but of young women in different situations, often caught in the liminal space between sex and marriage, where, according to this wisdom, a young woman should not be. These narrative morsels easily deceive us, creating the illusion of a story. The same effect can be experienced by reading some collections of Egyptian love songs, but neither those collections nor the Song is a complete story.

V. The *Sitz im Leben* of the Song

Few texts can be rigidly associated with only or mainly one situation or context. The Song is no exception, for we know that it was certainly read and understood as both secular love poetry and serious devotional literature. Yet there is nothing untoward about suggesting that the Song’s editor had a particular context or *Sitz im Leben* in mind when the text was assembled. In some manner or other, the editor imagined that the wisdom of the Song would be heard and heeded by young Jewish women, and this raises the question of who wrote this text and how that author envisioned the dissemination of its wisdom.

Anyone familiar with the Song has realized that more than half of the piece is focalized through female eyes—not the eyes of a particular female but female eyes in general. Given that this is so, we can hardly overlook the possibility—seemingly remote in Near Eastern antiquity—that the Song was the work of a woman. One way of getting at this question is illustrated by Athalya Brenner, who asks the insightful question: “Can it be that some or certain poems [in the Song] are not only presented as spoken by a woman or women but also reflect a woman’s emotions and world in such an authentic manner that no man is likely to have written them?”

This will strike some readers as an odd and even gender-insensitive question, but there is perhaps something to this line of inquiry. In her much-discussed book on romance novels, Janice Radway has pointed out that female readers of the novels claim they can distinguish between books written by women and those written by men under female pseudonyms. It is unnecessary to debate whether the gender differences involved might be traced to nature or nurture. What

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is important is that readers might sometimes be able to infer the gender of an author merely by considering the textual evidence.

Brenner explores the question by concentrating especially on the two dream sequences in 3:1-5 and 5:2-7, which describe the female’s pursuit of her lover. In the first the young woman more or less compels—or at least wishes to compel—her lover into the marriage chamber; in the second she is beaten in the streets, apparently because she, as a young unmarried woman, is where she should not be. Judging these ancient scenarios from a modern perspective is always dicey business, even when we are somewhat informed about the situation in antiquity. But judge we must, and Brenner believes that these viewpoints would be “typically female” in an ancient patriarchal society, being “so essentially feminine that a male could hardly imitate their tone and texture successfully.”

Perhaps the same could be said of 8:1-2, which describes similar female frustrations. Another portion of the book that strikes me as uniquely female is the dreamy vision of Solomon’s marriage in 3:6-11. Here Solomon appears as the consummate but sensitive hero, arriving in his ornate wedding carriage with a crown placed upon his head by his mother. The vision is focalized through female eyes and might very well have originated in the female mind. It would be a woman, not a king, who would envision being whisked away and married by her “king.”

Alongside these specific cases, it seems that the book as a whole reflects a female viewpoint. As I have mentioned already, and as others have pointed out, a chief concern of male Israelites and Jews was the virginity of young women, but this is not the primary concern of the Song. The Song concentrates instead on how young women can avoid being hurt and disappointed in the world of young love. From this I conclude that not only parts of the Song but also its editorial shape are informed by a female viewpoint. So, although it is impossible to state a position on this matter categorically, it is likely that women played a vital role in the composition of the Song. The chief question is whether women filled this role by actually composing parts of the Song or mainly by informing its male author or editor.

Women trained in the scribal arts were rare in antiquity. The paucity of exceptions, such as Enheduanna of Akkad and Jezebel of Israel, only confirms the basic rule. Yet the composition of poem and song was never circumscribed by scribal skill. The well-known songs of Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah illustrate what must have been a vast corpus of oral poetic and musical art created and performed by Israelite women. As some texts make clear, this artistic corpus was a matter of genuine tradition, passed on from one generation to the next:

52 See Sparks, Ancient Texts, 85-86; and 1 Kgs 21:8.
Thus says Yhwh of hosts: "Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skilful women to come; let them make haste and raise a wailing over us. . . . Hear, O women, the word of Yhwh, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a lament, and each to her neighbor a dirge." (Jer 9:17-18, 20)

We can surmise that what was true of these Hebrew laments was true also of Hebrew love songs, and of the Song in particular. For there is evidence that some of the Egyptian love songs—the closest comparative exemplars to the Song—were composed by women. When this is added to the evidence already cited, that the Song itself is focalized through female eyes, then the role of women in the Song’s composition seems secure indeed. So probability sides strongly with the conclusion that women “composed” parts of the Song. This would be so even if the Song were finally written down, and its editorial structure provided, by male scribes.

This brings us back to the question that introduced this part of my discussion, the question of how and where the Song’s wisdom was passed on to young women. I would point out, first, that there is at least one confirmed instance in which Hebrew wisdom was written for women. The writing entitled “Sapiential Work” from Qumran (4Q415) directs a portion of its wisdom to the wife/wives of its male audience. We do not know how women came by this wisdom, whether by listening to others read it or by reading it themselves. The first possibility seems more likely, but whatever we make of this wisdom exemplar, its mere existence shows that wisdom could be written for female audiences.

By comparison, the Song would of course be a more ambitious venture in female wisdom than the Qumran document, but the context for its delivery to women could have been similar. To be more specific, one possible option is that the Song, like other wisdom compositions, was used in the upper classes to teach propriety to privileged young women. In this scenario it would be more likely (though not inherently evident) that women could actually read the text. But even if they could not, memorizing wisdom texts and sayings was a common part of the curriculum for those in the upper classes. Another option, which is by no means contrary to the first but could stand alongside it, is that the Song and its parts were well known as an oral tradition that extended beyond the confines of upper-crust society to the common folk in Judaism. That the Song was recited in popular, let us say “secular,” settings makes this a possibility. But perhaps these ribald uses of the Song, which Rabbi Aqiva critiqued so harshly, suggest that we should reckon with another possibility.

If I am correct in my reading of the Song, and if my reading is largely foreign to the opinions of both ancient and modern exegetes, then it becomes likely that

54 Siegfried Schott, Les chants d’amour de l’Egypte ancienne (L’Orient ancien illustré 9; Paris: Maisonneuve, 1956) 61-62, 68-69, 82; Fox, Song of Songs, 55-56.
the Song's editor did not fully achieve his/her aim. That this describes the situation is more or less implied by the confusion surrounding the Song's interpretation, both in antiquity and in our own day. My reading of the Song provides a partial explanation for what has gone wrong. Though the Song's editor wished to accentuate the threats posed by sexual folly, the strong sexual component in the Song essentially overpowered its wisdom lesson. The gutsy gambit to open the Song with a celebration of love and sexuality undoubtedly contributed to this effect (1:1-4). As a result, the Song's original purpose, which I have tried to lay bare by attending to the exegetical troubles it presents, has not been fully realized. And this would be precisely the reason for its allegorical interpretations, for allegories appear most readily when the so-called plain meaning of a text is problematic. On the one hand, the Song was popular and traditionally Solomonic, so the impulse to redeem it was strong. On the other hand, in popular circles the Song's powerful sexual content was being put to uses that were contrary to traditional Jewish wisdom. Allegory was the natural result. The story of "Little Red Riding Hood" provides a subtle parallel to this phenomenon, since most of us have forgotten its original wisdom purpose: to teach naïve young women how to remain chaste in the "woods" of Louis the XIV's licentious court. Its lesson of wisdom was eventually domesticated by the Brothers Grimm, who stripped the tale of its sexual overtones and used it to teach obedience to children. The Song is also a domesticated wisdom text, but it was domesticated not by altering its text but by reading it allegorically.

Does this mean that I am taking an unequivocal stand against allegorical interpretations of the Song? Not at all. Though I doubt that allegory had any role in the Song's composition, this does not mean that allegorical interpretations of the Song are merely exegetical illusions. To the extent that Jewish and Christian interpreters believe that God's love finds its close metaphor in human marriage, to that same extent the Song's images of marital love and sex, and to some extent its images of deep sexual power (whether marital or not), provide glimpses into theological mysteries. To those with ears to hear, let them hear.

VI. Reflections and Conclusions

I conclude by making good on my promise to discuss the relative novelty of my thesis. As I pointed out at the outset, the basic elements in my interpretation of

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the Song are not entirely new. Many scholars have closely identified the Song with wisdom and have explained its composition in terms of an editorial collection. Nor is the Song’s lesson on sexual caution for young women entirely new, given that it appears subtly in some commentaries and more forcefully in the recent work of George M. Schwab. For Schwab, however, the Song’s message of caution is truly secondary to its positive endorsement of human sexuality. My thesis heads in a more extreme direction, inasmuch as I view the Song’s chief protagonist(s) as unmarried and its lesson on caution as central to both the contents and editorial shape of the Song. Given that this is my position, it is only right that I try to explain why such a thesis has not arisen (so far as I know) in the history of the Song’s interpretation.

It is well known that allegorical interpretations of the Song have dominated the exegetical history of the book, and it is very likely that this pattern goes back to the canonical process itself. It is only in modern times, as interpreters have moved beyond the allegories and the influences of the Victorian era and have become familiar with ancient Near Eastern love poetry that a new critical consensus has emerged. That new consensus understands the Song as a depiction of human love and sexuality. What has hardly been considered, however, is whether the Song’s sensual images were intended as wholesome or unhealthy. I suspect that this question has not been considered because modern readings of the Song, although no longer allegorical, still bask in the shadow of the old allegories. Though the allegory of God and God’s people is no longer in play for many interpreters, the essential goodness of the male–female relationship has been preserved. It will not be a surprise that conservative theological traditions, which have struggled hard enough to overcome the allegories—and sometimes still use them—would have a difficult time raising the question that I am raising. To interpret the image of love and sex in the Song negatively would amount to a genuine about-face in the interpretive tradition, something that traditional readers generally do not much like.

But what of modern, liberal, post-Enlightenment readers? Surely these readers are not so steeped in the conservative tradition as to overlook the question. Indeed, if my reading of the Song is correct, I do not believe that “left-wing” biblical scholars have missed it because they are subtly steeped in the conservative tradition. Rather, they are steeped in a different tradition, which also tends to foreclose certain interpretations of the Song. Among other things, modernism and post-

59 Perhaps Seerveld’s Greatest Song comes closer than any other treatment of the Song to my own thesis. For Seerveld, however, the Song presents Solomon as an unwise interloper between the young woman and her shepherd lover. As a result, the Song describes two contrasting male lovers—one healthy and one warped—and its wisdom message is essentially that true love cannot be bought.
modernism breathe an egalitarian spirit, a Zeitgeist that is little interested in another traditional and asymmetrical lesson on female (as opposed to male) chastity and celibacy. Au contraire, according to Phyllis Trible the Song is best understood as a message of sexual equality (à la 1 Cor 7:4): “Female and male are born to mutuality and love. They are naked without shame; they are equal without duplication. . . . Even though Song of Songs is the poetry of history, it speaks not at all of sin and disobedience. Life knows no prohibition.”60 Trible is not alone in this matter. In her editorial introduction to A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs, Brenner can comfortably assert, “The social attitudes expressed in passing in the SoS are generally non-sexist,” displaying a profile of “personal equality” in which “if anything, the female figure(s) and voice(s) are more prominent.”61 To read the Song in the way that I am reading it would essentially point us back in the patriarchal direction, since it is precisely within the patriarchalism of ancient Israel and traditional Judaism that female virginity is so much prized. But of course, this would not be a surprising outcome, given that, even according to Brenner, the Song’s vision for gender equality is “singular in the literature of the Old Testament.” Now we can see that even this “singular” example is at least a partial illusion. So, contrary to the opinions of Francis Landy and André LaCocque, the Song’s editor was not resisting social norms for women; its editor was admonishing, in a remarkably sensitive way, those who were testing the norms of Jewish society.62

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