1 Space and Gender in the Song of Songs

Is Zion a metaphor? Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem vigorously debated this question in 1916, the latter answering in the affirmative and the former answering in the negative.[1] One hundred years later, the field of Cultural Studies has taken on the semantics of space as one of its central objects of study. However, it remains no less open to debate whether this category provides a constitutive framework of human activity, as those who study geopolitics, ecology, and military terrain analysis tend to see it, or whether, conversely, it is a social construction that reflects traditional analytical parameters such as discourse, class, culture, and gender. On the whole, Scholem's position seems to have won out over Benjamin's. Noted urbanist Edward Soja remembers how, at the outset of the Spatial Turn in the 1960s, he had a hard time convincing his fellow Marxists that "spatial processes shaped social form just as much as social processes shaped spatial form."[2]

Soja's argument, which tries to avoid the lure of constructivism as well as the fallacy of retrospective determinism, will guide my approach to the issue of biblical philology that I will explore in this paper, namely, the entangled literary treatment of space and gender in the Song of Songs.[3] The multiple settings depicted in this beautiful and enigmatic book on love, which takes the reader in quick succession from the palace (1:4) to the vineyard (1:6), from the desert (1:8) to the forest (1:17), and from the king's populous harem (6:8) to the pastoral couple's blissful isolation (8:5), add up to a series of marked spatial contrasts. While the court of "King Solomon" and the city of the "daughters of Zion" seem to most interpreters to be mere metaphors for power

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1 Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 256; Günter Bader, *Die Emergenz des Namens: Amnesie, Aphasie, Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 252.

2 Edward Soja, "Taking Space Personally," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Barney Warf and Santa Arias (New York: Routledge, 2009), 11–35, here 21.

3 On the spatial turn in Biblical Studies, see Michal Kümper et al., ed., *Makom: Orte und Räume im Judentum* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2007); Jon Berquist and Claudia Camp, ed., *Constructions of Space*, 5 vols (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007–2013).

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and sanctity, respectively,[4] the blistering sun in the vineyard and the echo of steps in the market at night (3:2) acquire a hauntingly sensorial reality.

In the present study, I will argue that long-standing neglect of the poem's spatial diversity has led to oversimplified conclusions about its meaning. And this is particularly regrettable in a text that has been the major model in the West for divine love as well as for much of its profane variant. From antiquity until now, most interpreters have tended to view the poem's representation of love as a unified ideal, a concept which they define through the lens of their own predilections for asceticism, monogamy, romance, feminism, environmentalism, frugality, or hedonism. These ideological readings have supported such changing social conventions as affectionate piety, contemplative spirituality, bourgeois marriage ethics, and the ideal of egalitarian love; however, they have invariably been couched in a paradigmatic female character, whose name, "Shulamit," adapts an unclear generic term from 7:1 and whose voice is allegedly heard throughout the Song.

A critical approach, however, can and should distinguish between the text and its instrumentalizations by detecting the hermeneutical problems that dogmatic and moralistic interpretations have encountered. For example, the poem's most frequently quoted verse, "Love is as powerful as death" (8:6), is now generally understood as a call for life-long conjugal fidelity because of its liturgical enactment in wedding ceremonies and in popular culture more generally. Yet it is possible to peer through the smoke screen of this institutional reception and to ascertain a textual source that seems content with exalting the impact of emotion in its characteristic social ambivalence.

Opting for a skeptical reading that necessitates very little in the way of interpretive conjectures and textual emendations, I will suppose here that the poem's focus on love does not aim to streamline various emotional states toward a common institutional finality, but rather inversely depicts the centrifugal manifestations of a unique existential force. Rather than having a plot that progresses along a linear timeline, the Song has a plan that spreads out in a wide spatial grid. Rather than bundling its meaning in a moral message, the poem disperses it in a prism reflecting four different images of gender relations, the contradictions of which are conspicuously left unreconciled. Rather than blurring and blending social environments, it differentiates between them. In the evocations of elite and popular social life and erotic practice, difference is not denied, nor fought over, nor even made to disappear in an ideal unity: instead, it is maintained from one end to the other, bridged only by the universal experience of desire, pleasure, and reciprocity. In sum, I will suggest here a more adequate mapping and contextualization of the poem's manifold erotic attitudes and situations, which can be achieved through an exploration of its discontinuous spaces.

4 Samuel Krauss, "Die 'Landschaft' im biblischen Hohenliede," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 78,1 (1934), 81–97, here 96.

To start with, this point of view requires a new retrospective on the history of the text's exegesis. I do not need to return to the major debates about the content of the text (i.e. divine love, human love, or both?) and about its literary genre (i.e. drama, lyric anthology, or epic narrative?), but I will discuss and analyze previous interpretations of the poem according to the importance they accord to its spaces.

Space as Allegory: Premodern Readings

The incoherent, diatopical structure of the Song could rarely have been a source of embarrassment for exegetes, so long as they treated the landscapes of the poem as metaphors illustrating a unified system of meaning outside the text. In accordance with the rabbinic view, which apparently goes back to Rabbi Akiba (c. 55–135 CE), the settings of the poem's love dialogue allude to phases of sacred history.[5] In the most common Christian understanding of the text, which is that of Origen (185–254 CE), they outline a process of spiritual perfection.[6] Finally, the stations may express constellations of conjugal relations, as in a dissident view held by Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428 CE), which was proscribed as heretical until Hugo Grotius revived it in 1644.[7] According to rabbinic understanding, the deserts, mountains, valleys, vineyards, gardens, towers, and chambers alluded to holy places from the biblical past. For the Church Fathers, they signified a spiritual sanctuary: the mental and emotional states of divine love on the path to salvation. In Grotius' reading, all of these landscapes were discrete metaphors referring to the female body.

The three allegorical interpretations mentioned above – the collective, the spiritual, and the physical – share some basic assumptions. First, the various erotic situations evoked in the text are all inscribed into a conjugal framework. Second, all masculine and feminine speech in the text are attributed to one single couple: all masculine speech was believed to be that of the bridegroom, and all feminine speech is that of the bride. Third, and most importantly, all spaces are *only* metaphors and they therefore have to stand in a logical relation to their archetypes, but not necessarily to themselves. God, for example, may be hinted at by an inconsistent set of signifiers, here as a king, there as a shepherd. The allegorical bride may successively enjoy royal honors or graze goats; she may be tanned or ivory-skinned; and she may have brothers or be an only child. These qualifications could easily be understood as being complementary aspects of the same archetype, be it Israel, the soul, or the female body. Contradictory and/or discontinuous imagery is no obstacle, then, to driving home the allegory. On the contrary, the obvious impossibility of or-

5 *Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 9: *Esther, Song of Songs*, tr. Maurice Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1951).
6 Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentaries and Homilies*, tr. R.P. Lawson (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957).
7 Hugo Grotius, "Annotata ad Canticum Canticorum," in Grotius, *Annotata ad Vetus Testamentum* (3 vols, Paris: Cramoisy, 1644), I, 541–548.

ganizing the dialogues into a coherent and meaningful plot has been emphasized by various exegetes as an argument in favor of a merely allegorical reading of the text.[8]

The problem with the allegorical approach, however, is that it is entirely based on projection. The text of the poem offers no internal references to either the Exodus or to Christ. And it does not even refer or allude to monogamy; rather, it is a text about impulsive sexual love, with marriage only making a brief appearance in the middle of the text – and even here it is about King Solomon marrying his sixtieth wife.[9] Allegorists have indeed acknowledged that their readings of the Song were counterintuitive and that they could not be understood without a prior familiarity with religious doctrine.[10]

Space as Scenery: Nineteenth-Century Readings

A newfound sensitivity for the non-metaphorical significance of the Song of Song's spaces appeared in the eighteenth century. The text's persons and spaces were freed from the prison of allegorical semantics; they came to be understood as mimetic landscapes that form the natural scenery of a story. From signifiers, spaces now rose to the rank of the signified, and their relationships with one another had to meet the demand of inner coherence. A non-metaphorical plot had to be invented in order to connect the disparate settings of the poem, and this plot had to be given a moral message – for example, the praise of romantic monogamy[11] – that could compensate for the loss of the allegorical level of meaning.

Baroque taste would send the royal couple to the countryside for a pastoral dialogue, as this had already been proposed by John Milton in 1642.[12] Enlightenment optimism imagined that King Solomon, untainted by class prejudice, wedded a naïve and healthy village girl.[13] The romantic plot, which was first proposed by Johann Friedrich Jacobi in 1771 and which eventually came to dominate nineteenth-century interpretation of the poem, had the Shulamite prefer the true love of a shep-

8 Paul Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Commentaire philologique et exégétique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1909), 64–65; Joseph Carlebach, *Das Hohelied übertragen und gedeutet* (Frankfurt: Hermon, [1932]), 132–133.

9 André LaCoque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Songs of Songs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 7–8; Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 39.

10 Origen, *The Song of Songs*, 23.

11 Georg Heinrich August Ewald, *Das Hohelied Salomo's, übersetzt mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und einem Anhang über den Prediger* (Göttingen: Rudolph Deuerlich, 1826), 46: "Der Zweck des Dichters ist die Vorzüge der Monogamie zu zeigen."

12 Milton in his essay *The Reason of Church-Government Urged against Prelaty* (1642) refers to the Song of Songs as a "divine pastoral drama."

13 Johann Jakob Hess, *Geschichte Davids und Salomons* (Tübingen: Schramm und Balz, 1788), II, 373.

herd to King Solomon's decadent seduction.[14] Heinrich Graetz, who rejected this dramatic triangle as indecent, narrated instead the faithful couple's adventures at court, where the polygamous king appears only as a negative moral example, not as a rival.[15]

While these exegetes contributed an acute awareness of the Song's uneven spatial arrangement, they based their dramatic or narrative interpretations on imaginary and imagined stage directions, quite blatantly ignoring explicit textual details in the process. Only through a huge arsenal of hermeneutical twists and turns could the canonic plot of romantic monogamy, leading from infatuation to wedding and sexual consummation, be enforced on the Song's order (or disorder), which starts with a bedroom encounter and ends with a woman's voice dispatching her lover to the mountains.[16] Confronted with the Song's apparent discontinuity, many scholars found themselves having no choice but to suggest radical textual emendations.[17]

The failure of dramatic or narrative plotting assured lasting success for the fragment hypothesis that Johann Gottfried Herder formulated in 1778, during the very time in which he had been collecting and anthologizing German folksongs.[18] With the defenders of the dramatic hypothesis, however, Herder shared a mimetic under-

14 Johann Friedrich Jacobi, *Das durch eine leichte und ungekünstelte Erklärung von seinen Vorwürfen gerettete Hohe Lied* (Celle: Gsellius, 1771).

15 Heinrich Graetz, *Schir ha-schirim, oder, Das salomonische Hohelied* (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1871), 87–88. Graetz's explanation as to why the Song speaks more about polygamy than about monogamy still seems to be persuasive for Étan Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 219: "Even the Song of Songs with its manifold eroticism is exclusively monogamous: its only polygamous reference is to King Solomon, and that by invidious contrast to the monogamous love of the poet."

16 Wilhelm Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, das Hohe Lied, die Klagelieder* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962), 97. Those interpretors who espoused the canonic plot of romantic monogamy pointed to the central verse 5:1 as the moment of marriage consummation, which divides the poem equally between pre-coital flirting and affirmations of conjugal fidelity. Exegetes and translators committed to this linear interpretation had to reinterpret the past tense forms in the first half of the Song (e. g. הֱבִיאַנִי, "he has brought me" in 1:4 and 2:4) and the future tense forms appearing in the second half of the Song (e. g. אֲבִיאֲךָ, "I will bring you" in 8:2). The word תְּחַבְּקֵנִי ("may he embrace me," 2:6, 8:3) is thought to refer first to the future, then to the past. Much sagacity was spent in order to explain away the fact that even after various explicit love scenes, the girl still asks her friends not to wake up her love (2:7, 3:5) and her siblings believe that no man has yet shown interest in her (8:8). On the desperate efforts to harmonize the ending "flee!" (בְּרַח, 8:14) with the rest of the poem, see Chana Bloch (in collaboration with Ariel Bloch), *The Song of Songs: A New Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), 221.

17 See the total rewriting of the text in Paul Haupt, "Difficult Passages in the Song of Songs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 21 (1902): 51–73; and the criticism of this "vicious method" in Morris Jastrow, *The Song of Songs, Being a Collection of Love Lyrics of Ancient Palestine* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1921), 18–19.

18 J.G. von Herder, *Salomons Lieder der Liebe, die ältesten und schönsten aus dem Morgenlande. Nebst vierundvierzig alten Minneliedern und einem Anhang über die ebräische Elegie*, 1778, ed. Johann Georg Müller (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1827).

standing of literary landscapes; according to this presupposition, he concluded that the abrupt change between spaces in the Song of Songs was proof of the text's incoherence. The poem, then, should be seen as a concatenation of heterogeneous lyric fragments derived from courtly poems and peasant folksongs of different ages, which were haphazardly sewn together by a collector.

This folksong hypothesis, as it were, postulates that these allegedly oral materials preceded the Hebrew-Aramaic language change of the Persian period. However, its defenders rarely tried to show the existence of such sources on linguistic or formal grounds. Their only argument remains the discontinuity of the poem's settings and dialogues. "How different is everything here!" exclaimed Herder, when, at the turn of a verse, he was stepping off the purple tapestry of the palace onto the clay of an open field.[19] Conversely, advocates for a coherent narrative or drama in the text now felt forced to minimize the abrupt scenic shifts,[20] and Graetz went so far as to deny them altogether: "We do not remark the least change of scenery in the Song of Songs."[21]

Space as Travesty: Twentieth-Century Readings

Since the turn of the twentieth century, pressing the text into dramatic or narrative plots could no longer convince.[22] The exegetical pendulum swung back to a solution that combined a form of metaphorical reading with a compilation hypothesis. This time, however, the lavish scenes of harem lust and outdoor intercourse were not read as allegories that would express truth about the ideal form of love, but as travesties that act out its unrealized potential through role play.[23] On this view, the relationship between image and reality in the poem is not logical but dialectical, and the key to the text's understanding was its ancient ritual context.

On the basis of a dubious ethnographic parallel, Johann Gottfried Wetzstein claimed in 1873 that the poem's court scenes must have been fragments of a dramatic farce that supposedly accompanied ancient wedding rituals.[24] Meanwhile, in 1906 Wilhelm Erbt argued that a fertility ritual lay at the core of the text, in which the

19 Herder, *Salomons Lieder der Liebe*, 3: "Wie anders ist alles hier! Dort Duft und Salben, Wein und Freuden, Freundinnen und Königskammern; hier eine Hirtinn auf offener Flur."

20 Ernest Renan speaks of the "changement brusque de situation" (*Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Arléa, 1990 [1860]), 39. Cf. Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 32: "abrupte Wechsel von Schauplatz oder Adressaten."

21 Graetz, *Schir ha-schirim*, 16: "Wir nehmen durchaus keinen Scenenwechsel im H. L. wahr."

22 Stefan Schreiner, *Das Hohelied: Lied der Lieder von Schelomo* (Frankfurt/M.: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2007), 118.

23 See the references in Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 14.

24 Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, "Die syrische Dreschtafel," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 5 (1873): 270 – 302; Karl Budde, *Die fünf Megillot: Das Hohelied, das Buch Ruth, die Klagelieder, der Prediger, das Buch Esther* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1898), XVII-XXI.

holy marriage of two gods was reenacted.[25] In the 1960s, during the sexual revolution, it became common to consider the Song of Songs as a collection of profane love poems that had its social setting, its *Sitz im Leben*, in the animation for palace banquets, wine houses, and brothels,[26] an argument often based on superficial similarities between the poem and various love songs from Pharaonic Egypt.[27] In sum, twentieth-century readers assumed that ancient rituals of sexuality must have included burlesque role-play, which allowed participants to escape from the far more constrained and reserved realities of the institutions that these rituals stood for. After having been searched for deep metaphysical and/or ethical truths, the poem became a script for virtual erotic dalliance that scholars presumed was incorporated into the Jewish canon by an almost comical kind of accident.

The travesty hypothesis succeeded in explaining the variegated hedonistic landscapes in the Song of Songs as escapist fantasies, which were inconsistent by definition and which could only be characterized through a dialectical relation with the reality in which they were performed. Indeed, travesty is always the travesty of something; it acknowledges the ontological priority of being over imagination and, in the literary field, of mimesis over metaphor. While the Song's spaces were wholly metaphorical for the allegorists and wholly mimetic for the dramatists, the travesty hypothesis supposed, like Brechtian "epic theater," a double layer of dramatic fiction: a harem society enacts pastoral scenes, a peasant wedding enacts the harem, and an urban middle class enacts "upward" and "downward" travesties.[28]

With its inherently dichotomic structure, however, the travesty hypothesis also invited speculations about a social ideology in the text, which pitted, for example, nature against decadence. Feminist scholarship, in particular, starting with an essay by Phyllis Trible published in 1973, brought about a revaluation of the Song's presumed message.[29] While nineteenth-century exegetes had made their Shulamite embody bourgeois ideals of female "innocence," chastity, and passivity, feminist scholars rediscovered the female erotic agency in the Song. And whereas twentieth-century (still mostly male) scholars indulged in fantasies of frivolous, commodified, or ritualized sexual talk, feminist scholars sought after "serious emo-

25 Wilhelm Erbt, *Die Hebräer: Kanaan im Zeitalter der hebräischen Wanderung und hebräischer Staatengründungen* (Leipzig: Hinrichs 1906), 196–202.

26 See especially Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth,* and Oswald Loretz, *Gotteswort und menschliche Erfahrung: eine Auslegung der Bücher Jona, Rut, Hoheslied und Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963).

27 Max Müller, *Die Liebespoesie der alten Ägypter* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899); John Bradley White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

28 Hans-Peter Müller, "Travestien und geistige Landschaften: Zum Hintergrund einiger Motive bei Kohelet und im Hohenlied," *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 557–574.

29 Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973): 30–48.

tion" and strong theological statement.[30] The latter were particularly attracted by an interpretation that, since Karl Barth, had endowed the Song's egalitarian eroticism with a redemptive power that could overcome the misogynist curse of Eve found in Genesis.[31]

This feminist emphasis on gender as the dominant category of interpretation did not necessarily have to break with the fragment hypothesis. Marcia Falk and Athalya Brenner could accept the idea of a more or less haphazard anthology, if some or all of its ingredients were hypothetically traced back to female court entertainers and the poem could thus be considered to be "essentially female." Brenner admits that the Song depicts a "patriarchal society," but she also gives a feminist twist to the liberal tradition that has interpreted the courtly scenes as pieces of anti-monarchic satire.[32] The balance she tried to broker between sociology of literature and the gender approach should prove to be fragile.

Space as Agonizing Metaphor: A Twenty-First Century Trend

Advances in form analysis slowly eroded the idea of the Song of Songs as a heterogeneous collection of ritualized travesties. Even in the nineteenth century, some scholars objected to the fragment hypothesis, citing as evidence for their critique an abundance of stylistic symmetry and regularity in the text (e. g. catchwords, rhymes, refrains, chorus lines, double panels, chiasm).[33] Literary research since the 1970s has further confirmed these results and has shown that the impression of chaotic compilation is superficial.[34] The conclusion that scholars reached, however, is puzzling to say the least. The poem has pervasive marks of formal structural

30 Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible," in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. A. Brenner and F. van Dijk-Hemmes (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 17–109, here 75: "For women, love is a serious emotion."

31 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), III.2, 313–314; see also Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 375–377.

32 Athalya Brenner, *The Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 55.

33 See the list in Franz Delitzsch, *Das Hohelied* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1851), 4–6.

34 Joseph Angénieux, "Structure du Cantique des Cantiques en chants encadrés par des refrains alternants: Essai de reconstitution du texte primitif avec une introduction et des notes critiques," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 41 (1965), 96–142; J. Cheryl Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973), 47–79; Roland E. Murphy, "The Unity of the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979), 436–443; William H. Shea, "The Chiastic Structure of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980), 378–396; M. Timothea Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989); David A. Dorsey, "Literary Structuring in the Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990), 81–96; Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 30–35; J. Cheryl Exum, "On the Unity and Structure of the Song of Songs," in *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Its Language*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 305–316.

unity, but, at the same time, it does not show any signs of having a coherent narrative flow.[35] If the Song of Songs is neither a compilation nor a coherent narrative, then interpreters should pursue more sophisticated solutions, assuming either a redactor who skillfully connected disparate fragments[36] or, conversely, an author who conceived from the outset a deliberately discontinuous text.

Among twenty-first century scholars, there is, indeed, a tendency to treat the Song in the context of biblical wisdom literature and to return to the assumption of a unified narrative imposed by an author or an intelligent redactor. This narrative is no more axed on a linear progression toward marriage, but conceives the romantic couple as an ideal abstraction transcending chronological sequence, spatial boundaries, and social order. This trend reflects the results of form analysis, but also the idealized reading of the Song in feminist reception. The spatial and social cleavage between court and pastoral that had obsessed nineteenth-century readers and that was still at the core of the travesty hypothesis found itself mitigated, if not emphatically denied, in the interpretive mainstream starting in the 1980s.

In his Barthian reading, Francis Landy feels uneasy with the "petty social discriminations" that are formulated in the Song.[37] Hans-Josef Heinevetter systematically implemented textual emendations in order to expurgate the references to money and labor which had already incommodated Herder.[38] And Michael V. Fox, stepping beyond the travesty idea, reduces them to absurdities. If the relations between the sexes are distinguished by "egalitarianism," then class barriers also need to be porous: "In the lovers' world in Canticles the young shepherd becomes a king, the vineyard keeper a *bat nādîb*, a noblewoman." The Song, Fox claims, constructs a purely "psychological reality;" it "reflects a metaphysics of love rather than a social reality or even a social ideal."[39] From this perspective, it may even be said that the social

35 Brenner, *The Song of Songs*, 37: "The links between poems are effected by catch phrases or similarity of subject matter or imagery, but not of plot"; Walter Bühlmann, *Das Hohelied* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 12: "daß zwar eine Textstruktur, nicht aber eine damit verbundene Sinnstruktur aufgewiesen wird"; Elie Assis, *Flashes of Fire: A Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 16: "They speak of the unity of the book without depicting any development running through it." See also the rejoinder by Elliott, *The Literary Unity*, 33: "The poem not only *has* a structure, it *is* a structure." Defenders of the fragment hypothesis suppose in these cases either a process of *Zersingen*, that is, the spontaneous oral variation of common motifs in folk performance (Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 73), or a purposeful scheme set up by a highly competent compiler.

36 This approach was defended by Othmar Keel, *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1984), 11; Id., *Das Hohelied* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986); Id., *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, tr. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Hans-Josef Heinevetter, *"Komm nun, mein Liebster, Dein Garten ruft Dich!" Das Hohelied als programmatische Komposition* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1988).

37 Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983), 132.

38 Heinevetter, *Komm nun*, 166: "Wir wollen diesen Wunsch nun redaktionskritisch erfüllen."

39 Michael V. Fox, "Love, Passion, and Perception in Israelite and Egyptian Love Poetry," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 219 – 228, here 228. See Delitzsch, *Das Hohelied*, 156: "Sie stehen sich

ideal of the Song is the escape from society. Phyllis Trible writes that "love is fulfilled when the woman and the man close the circle of intimacy to all but themselves."[40] Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes the text as "an idyll of romantic love unconstrained by societal considerations."[41] Carey Walsh flattens out the Song's diversity by suspending the principle of non-contradiction: "Identity is cloaked, undisclosed, and therefore forever open. The lover could be Solomon, he could be a shepherd, he could be both."[42] Tremper Longman III likewise believes in the impersonal character of the personae: "The woman is not a particular woman but stands for all women. The same may be said for the man."[43] For J. Cheryl Exum, the "blurring" of time-space categories is the Song's central aesthetic principle.[44] And according to Elie Assis, the social characteristics of the figures are likewise blurred, metaphorical, and ultimately indifferent: "We cannot, in fact, say with any certainty what the woman's occupation is."[45] This accords well with the view of Gianni Barbiero, who posits that the references that the Song makes to social reality are "not historical information but literary artifice, psychological projection." In love, says Barbiero, "the social conventions and conditions of daily life no longer apply."[46] Like Exum, Assis, and Barbiero, Stefan Fischer supposes a meandering plot in the text and defines it roughly as "the seeking and finding of two lovers, with the use of several travesties and locations."[47] As opposed to the basic reality of the couple, the poem's "locations" are contradictory and chaotic fictions.[48] Yvonne Sophie Thöne devoted her thesis to the "dynamic" reading of the Song's spaces as metaphorical projections of a

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Person gegen Person, Seele gegen Seele, gleichsam entkleidet der Zufälligkeiten irdischer Verhältnisse gegenüber."

40 Phyllis Trible, "Love's Lyrics Redeemed," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 100 – 120, here 120.

41 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 197.

42 Carey Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), 127.

43 Tremper Longman III, *The Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 91; See also ibid., 108: "We are dealing with figurative language here. We are not to interpret this as an actual event. The Song is not telling the story of a specific couple. The country, as opposed to the city, is a place of private intimacy in the Song."

44 J. Cheryl Exum, "The Poetic Genius of the Song of Songs," in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 78 – 95, here 85.

45 Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 13.

46 Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 14.

47 Stefan Fischer, *Das Hohelied Salomos zwischen Poesie und Erzählung: Erzähltextanalyse eines poetischen Textes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 228: "Handlung um das Suchen und Finden zweier Liebender, dazu werden mehrere Travestien und Handlungsorte verwendet."

48 Ibid., 56: "Die Protagonistin *Frau* befindet sich einerseits in einer idealen Situation, nämlich der Zuwendung des Königs an dessen Hof (I,2 – 4), und andererseits in einer Konfliktsituation mit ihren Brüdern in ländlicher Umgebung (I,5 – 8). Einmal ist sie mit ihrem Geliebten vereint, das andere Mal getrennt. Verschiedene Szenen, die miteinander verwoben und aufeinander bezogen sind, führen zum zentralen Ereignis der Begegnung und Vereinigung im Garten (4,16 – 5,1)."

unique couple's gendered experiences,[49] while for Annette Schellenberg, the Song dreams up an ideal world of unlimited mobility, an "immersion in a paradise-like counterworld characterized by anti-structure and boundary mergers."[50]

As these borrowings from the vocabulary of globalization indicate, the interpreters' common reluctance to address the social frameworks of intimacy reveals less about the literary ideals of the Bible than about contemporary assumptions, which tend to give romantic love a key role in family-building, socialization, and the leisure economy while turning the sociocultural construction of love into a taboo. American sociologist Jessi Streib stated in a recent publication that "there are many myths about social class. One myth is that class has nothing to do with love and marriage."[51] Susan Goodwin and Joanne Finkelstein explain the rise of this myth during the second half of the twentieth century: "While intimate relationships are subject to cultural regulation in contemporary Western societies, they are also, ironically, the aspect of social life most associated with ideas about personal choice, freedom and privacy [...] Love, not economics and social class, seems to be the cement that sustains the modern relationship."[52] Simon May has perhaps offered the most acute deconstruction of this modern ideal of autonomous love: "By imputing to human love features properly reserved for divine love, such as the unconditional and the eternal, we falsify the nature of the most conditional and time-bound and earthly emotion, and force it to labour under intolerable expectations."[53]

In the thrall of this pseudo-religious conception, then, the post-feminist cultural horizon has ensured that the molding of the Song's dialogues into a monolithic male-female duality remains as much a commonplace in the most recent interpretations as it was in medieval allegory. Still in 2015, Edwin M. Good adheres to the latter as if he was stating unquestionable textual evidence: "I find three speakers in the book: a woman, whom I identify as 'she,' a man, whom I name 'he,' and a group of women referred to as 'Jerusalem's daughters.'"[54] Most, if not all, modern Bible translations indeed supply these specifications as if they were part of the original text.

In sum, the pattern of monotheistic tradition, where one feminized humanity craves for one masculine God, still informs all contemporary interpretations of the

49 Yvonne Sophie Thöne, *Liebe zwischen Stadt und Feld: Raum und Geschlecht im Hohelied* (Berlin: Lit, 2012).

50 Annette Schellenberg, "Boundary Crossing in and through the Song of Songs: Observations on the Liminal Character and Function of the Song," in *Reading a Tendentious Bible: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Coote*, ed. M.L. Chaney et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 140–154, here 152.

51 Jessi Streib, *The Power of the Past: Understanding Cross-Class Marriages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

52 Susan Goodwin and Joanne Finkelstein, *The Sociological Bent: Inside Metro Culture* (Victoria: Thomson, 2005), 71–72. See also Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Paul James Johnson and Steph Lawler, "Coming Home to Love and Class," *Sociological Research Online* 10 (2005).

53 Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 4–5.

54 Edwin M. Good, *The Song of Songs: Codes of Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 19.

text. It is tempting to explain the resilience of this mystical dyad as being part of the modern philosophical struggle, accurately described by Michel Foucault, to defend the continuity and sovereignty of the subject against the de-centering assaults of Marxist social dialectic, Nietzschean psychological insights, and – we may add – the cultural relativism of Franz Boaz's posterity.[55] The postulate of essential subjectivity obtained in this case not only the victory, but even the unanimity. Before the twentieth century, interpreting the Song meant that one had to tie it down to the rules and roles prescribed by normative marriage ethics. To a present-day reader, the same text is conversely advertised as a void projection screen, an antidote to the androcentric normativity enshrined elsewhere inside the biblical canon. Yet the result is largely the same: a single, ideal heterosexual couple is construed as the dual protagonist of the text, while the significance of spatial, social, and historical diversity is quite consciously discounted. Though occasionally proclaiming a "spatial turn," twenty-first century exegeses treat spaces as agonizing metaphors: they only exist to signify their own insignificance.

Space as Life-World: Preliminary Considerations for a Pluralistic Reading

In order to explore the stakes of today's dominant approach, it is instructive to go back to its most eloquent expression, which can be found in J. Cheryl Exum's detailed and well-argued presentation. While Michael Fox argues that social difference is irrelevant for love and may therefore be ignored, Exum maintains that it is so strongly divisive that it *must* remain unacknowledged. Only an erotic love beyond space, she claims, can resonate with readers regardless of their historical, social, cultural, and psychological backgrounds:

> The Song's lovers are archetypal lovers – composite figures, types of lovers rather than any specific lovers. In the course of the poem, they take on various guises or personalities and assume different roles. The man is a king and a shepherd; the woman is a member of the royal court and an outsider who tends vineyards or keeps sheep. She is black (1:5), as well as like the white moon and radiant sun (6:10), with a neck like an ivory tower (7:4 [5H]) – an impossible combination in one person according to many commentators. By providing access only to the voices of the lovers, to what they say not who they are, the poet is able to identify them with all lovers. Their love is timeless. All this makes it easier for readers to relate the Song's lovers' experience to their own experience of love, real or fantasized.[56]

Several elements of Exum's reasoning, however, appear to be problematic. To start with, abstract couples have never been particularly successful in fiction. No one, ex-

55 Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 23.

56 J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2005), 8; similarly ead., "The Poetic Genius of the Song of Songs," 83–84.

cept medievalists, still reads the allegorical novel *Roman de la Rose*. The most paradigmatic lovers in world literature, such as Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet, Carmen and José, and Odette and Swann, have always been perceived as members of a concrete, often strange social fabric that most readers do not know from their own experience, but explore through the eyes of the couple. Literary love seems to need this friction with society. And, of course, the lovers in the Song *do* say where and who they are. As Exum recognizes, they are connected to their social status with abundant concrete and time-specific details about skin color, domestic animals, perfumes, weaponry, punch recipes, and agricultural finance. These precise (albeit conflicting) textual elements only appear blurred in the eyes of the beholder, provided he or she makes the conscious effort to process them in order to uphold the pure male-female polarity. In a gesture similar to Graetz's apodictic denial of scenery changes, Exum proclaims: "The Song offers no clue that the male and female speaking voices belong to different men and women."[57] This is not the only case in which Exum, after having enumerated some of the many textual clues pointing to social diversity in the Song, ultimately decides to ignore them.[58]

The unified narrative, then, is the result of a doubly laborious enterprise trying to make a visibly discontinuous text conform to the postulate of coherence. As social mobility and class fusion are not described anywhere in the Song, they have to be exegetically generated through the mixing of motifs from neighboring verses. The third chapter of the poem gives us an illustrative example of such forced narrative synthesis. In verse 3:6, a person, grammatically feminine, is said to transport myrrh and frankincense through the desert in the midst of a dust cloud. In the following verses (3:7–8), King Solomon sleeps in his bed at night guarded by soldiers. Most exegetes maintain that the words "who is she?" (מִי-זֹאת) in the first verse are the question to which "here is Solomon's bed," in the second verse, is the answer.[59] Scholarly literature thus invariably imagines how the king, bedded and with incense fuming around him, is carried by his soldiers through the desert in the dead of night. The strange scene of a "wedding procession through the desert"[60] needs either textual emendation or some sort of free translation in order to justify the ungrammatical reading of a feminine interrogative pronoun ("who is she?")[61] as a neuter form ("what is that?"). Exum picks this presumed "procession" as the main example for

57 Exum, *The Song of Songs*, 34.

58 In an earlier study, she perceives a psychological contradiction in the woman's view of herself, but then insists on invalidating her observation in order to save the protagonist's unity; see Exum, "Asseverative *'al* in Canticles 1,6?" *Biblica* 62 (1981): 416–419, here 418.

59 Heinevetter, *Komm nun*, 110–112.

60 Fischer, *Das Hohelied Salomos*, 145, 147, "Hochzeitszug durch die Wüste." The title of the scene is "Ein nächtlicher Hochzeitszug" already in Günter Krinetzki, *Kommentar zum Hohenlied: Bildsprache und theologische Botschaft* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981), 118.

61 This expression refers explicitly to a woman in the parallels in 6:10 and 8:5; see Yair Zakovitch, "'Al shelosh she'elot 'mi zot' be-Shir ha-Shirim," *Mirqamim* 1 (2013): 33–40. Against the reading as a neuter, see also Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 104.

her theory of blurred spaces. Amalgamating the two verses, she makes the meaninglessness of the hybrid scene homiletically meaningful: the undefined spatiality of the nightly desert trip is meant to proclaim the boundless character of poetry as well as love as being "always already in progress."[62] The exegetical blending of actors and spaces has given the text a nonsensical appearance, which in turn is considered as proof of its deeper truth.

Contemplating the sheer amount of discursive artifice that is necessary in order to explain away this and other diatopical shifts in the Song, one might stop for a moment and consider whether we are not heading in the wrong direction. It might do more justice to the text if, by a turnaround, we tried to focus our attention instead on its many space-related contradictions, testing the one hypothesis that Exum is so eager to discard, namely, "that the male and female speaking voices belong to different men and women." However reluctantly a historian risks jeopardizing the Shulamite's "archetypal" beauty, a notion with which readers over the centuries have cooperated, and however unwillingly one might discover that past ages affirmed social contrasts and boundaries more positively than our own, we can nevertheless hope to be rewarded by a fuller appreciation of the poetic topography of this text, shaped by a variety of speakers, themes, and human erotic experiences that are hidden below the (allegedly unified) surface. If we therefore decide to break with the common exegetical subordination of class to gender, the alternative should not be a Marxist reading subordinating gender to class, but rather the search for a plurality of human conditions that are characterized by the juxtaposition of both categories.

If one were to search for such pluralistic readings in the vast scholarly literature on the Song of Songs, one would be astonished to discover how rare they actually are. To be sure, the romantic "shepherd hypothesis" (*Hirtenhypothese*) has frequently distributed the male voices between two persons of different social class, but we have to return to its more extreme forms in order to find interpretations that also assume multiple female lovers. Ferdinand Hitzig and Ernest Renan, in particular, introduced in chapter 7 of the poem a second female protagonist, a harem dancer, in order to spare their virgin heroine the shame of dancing publicly before the court.[63] In 1888, Johann Gustav Stickel envisioned the possibility that the Song's pastoral scenes represent a parallel, non-interacting dramatic plot and so thereby posited an additional couple of lovers in the story. It seems, however, that he simply could not make up his mind between the "king hypothesis" and the "shepherd hypothesis," and he therefore conflated the unlikely presuppositions of both.[64]

In a 1989 publication, Athalya Brenner calls out for the necessity of searching for the presence of diversity in the text. In her interpretation of the Song, which is a var-

62 J. Cheryl Exum, "Seeing Solomon's Palanquin (Song of Songs 3:6–11)," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 301–316, here 312.

63 Renan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 71.

64 Johann Gustav Stickel, *Das Hohelied in seiner Einheit und dramatischen Gliederung* (Berlin: Reuther, 1888); cf. Budde, *Die fünf Megillot*, XIV.

iation on the fragment hypothesis (discussed above), Brenner argues that, in principle, "a plurality of voices should be looked for, several loving couples,"[65] though she prefers not to push the issue further.[66] Among the more recent exegetes of the Song, the feminist tendency to present "the" Shulamite as the hegemonic symbol of liberated womanhood has apparently been an obstacle to admitting the existence of multiple femininities. Apart from Brenner's lucid, but cautious and hitherto unheeded appeal,[67] the hypothesis of "several loving couples" hardly has any scholarly precedents to support it. I will therefore have to review the text's structure anew from a different perspective, one that takes as its starting point the poem's imagined correlation between space, class, and gender.

65 Brenner, *The Song of Songs*, 29. Cf. already Krauss, "Die 'Landschaft' im biblischen Hohenliede," 95: "daß der Dichter mehrere Liebespaare vor Augen hat."

66 Athalya Brenner, "'Come Back, Come Back the Shulammite' (Song of Songs 7:1–10): A Parody of the *waṣf* Genre," in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion*, 234–259, here 236: "I do not wish to make a stand here either on the question of the homogeneous vs. collective nature of the SoS, or on that of its dating."

67 Marcia Falk likewise presumes that the love poems in the Song presented the love of a number of couples; see her *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 113. Thöne, *Liebe zwischen Stadt und Feld*, 86, is aware of the critical horizon of the fragment theory, but concludes that our understanding may safely follow the traditional unification of the speakers: "Unter Berücksichtigung des Sachverhalts, dass das Hohelied eine *Sammlung* von Liebesliedern darstellt, ist davon auszugehen, dass hier ursprünglich ganz unterschiedliche Frauen- und Männergestalten beschrieben worden sind. Mit einem synchronen Blick auf den vorliegenden Endtext jedoch ist es gerechtfertigt, die Figuren als eine Frau, einen Mann, ein Liebespaar zu betrachten."