

FINDING THE DIVINE IN THE SONG OF SONGS: DIVINE DISTANCE INFORMING A
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Divine distance in the Song of Songs has long plagued the rabbis and church fathers. Instead of inserting the Lord allegorically, an exegetical analysis of the Song should contribute to the reader's biblical theology of sexuality. While God's name would be expected in Song 2:7 and 3:5, it is intentionally veiled. The unidentified speaker in Song 5:1b gives a divine blessing on the couple, and Song 8:6 contains only an homage to the Lord. The ancient fertility cults believed sexuality was a means to connect with the divine and gain favor. Through the "sacred marriage" ritual, the man [king] would unite with the woman [priestess] and procure the deity's blessing and agricultural prosperity. Against this ancient context, the Song intentionally distances the Lord from erotic union. Instead of removing any reference to the divine, however, the Song, as religious wisdom literature, makes three allusions to the Lord across four passages. Divine distance in the Song should guide the exegete's interpretation of the Song and serve as a biblical theological control against reading sexual transcendence into the God/Israel and Jesus/church metaphors. Biblical theologies that read transcendence into sexuality create an analogy that the Lord intentionally avoids in the Song of Songs. The Song therefore contributes to a biblical theology of sexuality: it teaches wisdom concerning love and sex rather than presenting sexuality as an allegorical, typological, or even analogical means of uniting with God.

Keywords: flame of the Lord, sexuality, sex, analogy, application

Date:

Biblical theology is, broadly, the theology of the Bible. Köstenberger and Goswell explain, “Biblical theology is not our own theology, or that of our church or denomination; it is the theology of the biblical writers themselves.”¹ Developing a theology from a biblical book where God does not appear has long been a mystery. Rabbi Akiva is known his strong stance on the canonicity of the Song of Songs yet infrequently mentioned was his condemnation that any “who warbles the Song of Songs in a banquet-hall and makes it into a kind of love-song has no portion in the world to come” (t. Sanh. 12:10, Neusner). While the rabbis claimed the Song should be included in the canon, they argued for its allegorization and condemned those who interpreted it literally.

The church, similarly, has a long history of allegorizing the Song of Songs. Keel correctly criticizes the allegorizers, “The results of the allegorizers’ search for a deeper meaning were arbitrary, unsatisfactory, and often revoltingly grotesque, as any history of interpretation of the Song will show.”² He latter notes, “If two allegorizers ever agree on the interpretation of a verse it is only because one has copied from the other.”³ The oldest attempts at crafting a biblical theology of the Song of Songs resorted to an allegorical hermeneutic.

Modern scholarship’s rejection of an allegorical hermeneutic is justified, but some, like Davis, identify both a sexual and religious message in the Song, “The sexual and the religious understandings of the Song are mutually informative.”⁴ The Song of Songs inclusion in the biblical canon seems to necessitate a spiritual meaning. The exegesis of the Song is disregarded and a whole biblical theology demands some divine inclusion. Naselli, for example, defines biblical theology, “Biblical theology studies how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ.”⁵ Similarly, Van Pelt argues, “Jesus is the theological center of the Old Testament.”⁶ These authors must, then, explain how the Song “climaxes in Christ.”

Biblical theologians should instead begin with an exegesis of the Song and develop their biblical theology from that content. The Lord’s absence is itself a theological statement. The thesis presented here is that God does not desire to be connected with sexuality in any way—allegorically, typologically, or analogically.

This article first argues that the author of the Song went to great lengths to disassociate the Lord from sexuality. The veiled references to the Lord argue that the Song is religious literature, but the Lord himself is distant. This divine distance should then inform the other marriage/bride metaphors in the Bible. Instead of looking at the entire Bible and demanding divine inclusion in the Song, the biblical theologian should allow the divine distance in the Song to inform one’s biblical theology of sexuality.

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Greg Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 2.

² Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 7.

³ Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 8.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 233.

⁵ Jason Shane DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions about Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 20.

⁶ Miles V. Van Pelt, “Introduction,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 25.

I. THE OMISSION OF GOD IN THE ADJURATION REFRAIN (SONG 2:7; 3:5)

In Song 2:7 and 3:5, the woman puts the daughters of Jerusalem under oath. She exhorts them to swear by the gazelles or the does of the field (בצבאות או באילות השדה). Longman correctly acknowledges, “This formulation of an oath strikes us as very odd.”⁷ One would expect an oath to be sworn by the Lord. Reasons for swearing by these animals can be combined into two categories: (1) the animals represent animals, or (2) the animals are an homage to the Lord.

1. The animals represent animals

Keel argues that the animals are literal animals that represent the goddess of love.⁸ He makes his case based upon iconographic evidence from seals, pendants, pottery, and coins that demonstrate a relationship between gazelles/does and love (copulation and new birth). Exum takes a similar view adding that the “choice of animals also establishes a link to the next verse.”⁹ She also notes that, “the oath is lighthearted, not solemn.”¹⁰ Thus the animals are invoked because they represent love, mate only at the appropriate time, infuse limited solemnity into the oath, and/or connect to the next scene (2:9, 17).

2. The animals are an intentional allusion to the divine names

Interpreting the animals literally fails to take the religion of the Hebrew Bible seriously. Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20 taught Israel to take their oaths in the name of the Lord. Israel followed this practice as well (Josh 2:12; 9:19; Judg 21:7; 1 Sam 24:22[21]; 1 Sam 28:10; 2 Sam 19:8[7]; 1 Kgs 1:17, 30; 2:8, 23; 18:10; 22:16; Isa 19:18; 48:1). The prophet Jeremiah rebuked the people for swearing falsely in the name of the Lord (Jer 5:2; 7:9) or for taking oaths in the name of Baal (Jer 12:16). If the animals represent something other than the Lord, then the woman is imploring the daughters of Jerusalem to take an oath contrary to Deuteronomic law. Taking an oath in the name of another deity was equivalent to idolatry.¹¹

More likely, the daughters of Jerusalem are exhorted to make an oath in the Lord’s name because the animals closely correspond to the divine names (see Table 1). LaCocque explains, “Clearly, *šeba’ôt* is the same word as in the well-known Yahwistic expression *YHWH šeba’ôt*, except that the term there designates the ‘armies’ in heaven (and on earth?). As to *’aylôt*, it looks both morphologically and etymologically like *’él*, *’elôah*, God. Finally, *sadeh* is in assonance with *šadday*; *’aylôt hassadeh* evokes *’el šadday*, ‘God Almighty.’”¹² LaCocque later asserts, “I claim that no one in the Israelite audience of the poem could have missed such transparent allusions.”¹³

⁷ Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 116.

⁸ Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 92.

⁹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 119.

¹⁰ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 119.

¹¹ Daniel J. Estes, “The Song of Songs,” in *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 321. See also *TDOT* 14:314; *TDNT* 5:459.

¹² André Lacocque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 63. Kingsmill comes to the same conclusion, though in a different way. He makes an intertextual link to the animals in Proverbs 5 which represent the wife who is a symbol for wisdom. He then explains that “Wisdom . . . is representative of God,” Edmée Kingsmill, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

¹³ Lacocque, *Romance, She Wrote*, 64.

Table 1

Song 2:7; 3:5	“gazelles”	צִבְאוֹת	“does of the field”	אֵילֹת הַשָּׂדֶה
Names for God	[Lord of] hosts	צִבְאוֹת [יהוה]	El Shaddai	אֵל שַׁדַּי

The use of “gazelles or does of the field” then begs the question—“why?” Why not refer to the Lord outright. Keel lists two reasons why the animals should be taken at face value as animals: “(1) such precautionary measures are otherwise unknown in the OT, and (2) when this substitution happens in modern languages or in postbiblical Hebrew, the replacement word makes no sense.”¹⁴ Keel’s arguments should be taken seriously, though they are not without response.

Concerning Keel’s first argument, the Song’s unique genre—religious wisdom literature concerning sexuality—would expect non-conformity with the rest of the Hebrew Bible. LaCocque answers the question a different way, claiming the use of “the formula of conjuration parod[ies] the religious language and make[s] fun of it.”¹⁵ This view, however, does not fit the solemnity of the oath nor the religion of the Hebrew Bible. Also, it assumes an unrealistic naivety of the rabbis who presumably preserved a book among their holy writings that mocked their beliefs. Fox, on the other hand, believes the Lord’s name was avoided directly because of its “secular context.”¹⁶ The presence, however, of even a veiled divine name argues that the Song is religious literature. Furthermore, the refrain in Song 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4 entreats the “daughters of Jerusalem” to *commit to something* arguing that the Song is instructive (wisdom) literature. More likely, the Song’s unique contribution to the biblical canon—religious wisdom literature concerning sexuality—distinguishes it from the other biblical literature sufficiently so that correspondence is unnecessary.

Concerning Keel’s second criticism, Keel has created a false analogy. He is correct in claiming that modern languages use a “replacement word (which) makes no sense,” but he has confused sacrilegious names for the divine with a biblically based solemn oath. Gordis illustrates, “In contemporary English, this phenomenon can be clearly observed. ‘Gosh darn’ does duty for ‘God damn,’ ‘Gee,’ for ‘Jesus,’ ‘Jiminy Crickets’ for ‘Jesus Christ,’ ‘Holy Cow’ for ‘Holy Christ.’”¹⁷ It would be irreverent, however, to take an oath by “Jiminy Crickets.” More likely, as Gordis writes, “The desire to avoid mentioning God’s name would be particularly strongly felt in connection with an oath concerned with the physical aspects of love.”¹⁸

II. THE LORD AS SPEAKER IN SONG 5:1

In Song 5:1, the man speaks metaphorically about enjoying his wife’s sexual delights, then a different speaker exhorts both lovers, “Eat, O friends! Drink! Be intoxicated, lovers!” The identity of this final speaker is an enigma. Berlin summarizes, “The speaker is unidentified; proposed identifications are the man, the woman, the man’s friends, the Jerusalem women, or the

¹⁴ Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 92.

¹⁵ Lacocque, *Romance, She Wrote*, 64.

¹⁶ Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 110.

¹⁷ Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954), 27.

¹⁸ Gordis, *The Song of Songs*, 28.

poet.”¹⁹ Bloch and Bloch claim it is a concluding epigram and that “there is no compelling reason to assume that they are spoken by a different voice.”²⁰ Yet the plural imperative and exhortation to the “friends” (רעים) implies a different speaker addresses the couple. Most likely, רעים refers to the lovers because they call each other this name [the female lover (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4); male lover (5:16)]. The command to be intoxicated with love creates an intertextual allusion to Gen 2:16 where God exhorted his creatures, “From all of the trees of the garden you shall surely eat.” Davidson agrees, “Most likely the voice of 5:1e is that of Yahweh himself, adding his divine blessing . . . as he did at the first garden.”²¹ Barbiero calls it, “a profession of faith in the goodness of love in its sexual, physical dimension.”²² The Lord’s presence, though directly absent, speaks volumes concerning the Lord’s role in sexuality. He created sex as something for his creatures to enjoy. The Lord, however, does not participate in their sexual union. Nor does the couple connect with the Lord in some spiritual/mystical way. The omniscient, omnipresent God of the Bible is present when the lovers copulate, but nothing mystical or spiritual happens between the lovers and the Lord.

III. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה

The strongest argument for a direct reference to God in the Song of Songs comes at the conclusion of Song 8:6 where the woman teaches the reader about the nature of love. She exhorts the man to “set her as a seal” on his heart and arm because, “love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame (שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה)” (NKJV). The meaning of the last word, שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה, continues to be debated. The ESV and NASB identify a direct reference to the Lord (e.g., ESV “the very flame of the Lord”), but most translations do not (e.g., JPS “a blazing flame”).

The significance of שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה also cannot be understated. The Song of Songs reaches its climax in this paean on love in Song 8:6–7. שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה’s location at the end of the verse marks it as the climactic definition of love. Furthermore, the expanding of the metaphor in vs. 7 makes it the most discussed metaphor. Mitchell calls שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה “the single most significant phrase in the Song.”²³ Mitchell, like many who see a direct reference to the Lord in שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה, understands the Lord’s appearance as further evidence of the word’s climactic nature, “It is the Song’s sole direct reference to God, or more specifically, to ‘Yah,’ the short form of ‘Yahweh.’”²⁴ This section argues that שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה is only an homage to the Lord, not a direct reference. A contextual and historical study of שְׁלֵהבְּתִיָּה supports this position.

¹⁹ Adele Berlin, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), 118. For proponents of the five views see Elie Assis, “Between Sacred and Profane: The Question of the Song of Songs’ Meaning in Ancient and Modern Exegesis,” in *The Song of Songs in Its Context: Words for Love, Love for Words*, ed. Pierre Van Hecke, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 193 n. 57; Havilah Dharamraj, *Altogether Lovely: A Thematic and Intertextual Reading of the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 164 n. 61.

²⁰ Ariel A. Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: The World’s First Great Love Poem* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 179.

²¹ Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 591. For additional support of this view see J. Grossman, “Eat, Friends; Drink Deep, O Lovers!": The Narrator’s Interjection in Song of Songs (5:1),” *Beit Mikra* 53 (2008): 79–88; Estes, “The Song of Songs,” 362.

²² Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 144 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 242.

²³ Christopher W. Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 1188.

²⁴ Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 1188.

1. Contextually, שלהבתיה concerns fire

Contextually, שלהבתיה concerns only a very hot fire. Some believe it refers to lightning because of its parallelism with רשף in the previous line.²⁵ Evidence for this view presumably comes from Psa 76:4; 78:48, and the Canaanite god Resheph. Fox explains, “The Canaanite god Resheph was known by the epithets *ršp ḥš* (in an inscription from Cyprus) and *b’l ḥš ršp*, ‘Resheph possessor of arrows.’”²⁶ Because of these associations, Barbiero asserts, “The meaning of the noun oscillates between ‘flames’ and ‘arrows, darts’: what is made explicit by the second part of the stich (‘darts of fire’) is already contained in the term *rešep*.”²⁷ One can perceive the correspondence between a “dart of fire” and then a lightning bolt from God.

More likely, רשף refers to flames which is supported by the etymology, history, other passages, and context of Song 8:6.²⁸ Habakkuk 3:5 places רשף in parallelism with דבר (pestilence) which has no correspondence to arrows. In this text, the idea appears to be heat (e.g., a fever). Similarly, in Job 5:7 the בני־רשף (sons of the flame) are sparks. One cannot understand Hab 3:5 and Job 5:7 as arrows, but Psa 78:48 (hail and fire, cf. Exod 9:23; Psa 148:8) and Psa 76:4 (fiery arrows) could correspond to fire. Correspondence to the Canaanite god Resheph has been overstated as well. As Hess and Berlin note, the construct plural, רשפִי אֵשׁ, argues against any correspondence to a deity.²⁹ A רשף, therefore, most likely refers to a flame.

Fire is a popular metaphor for love that continues into modern culture. It recalls Prov 6:25–29 where the young man is exhorted not to sleep with the prostitute “Can a man take fire in his lap and his clothes not be burned?” Love is a fire and if one plays with fire, somebody will get burned. It is a powerful force which can be used for good or ill. Barbiero notes, “Like jealousy, fire is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a consuming force, destructive. On the other hand, it is beneficent; it warms, it purifies, it establishes in unity what has been separate.”³⁰ For a fire to burn hot, it requires multiple logs to be near one another. Separating the logs from one another cause the flames to diminish and then extinguish. Spoken positively, the fire rages through *unity*. Negatively, fire can be all consuming in its jealousy. Garrett explains, “It is the fire of wrath, not the fire of compassion, that is in view here. The language describes the ardor and exclusivity of the bond of love between man and woman.”³¹ The fire rages in anger when one transgresses the exclusivity of love. But the fire rages in intensity when a couple draws close together according to the order of creation.

2. Historically, שלהבתיה referred to fire

שלהבתיה has a complicated history. The ancient translations understood it as a fire word. The “flame of the Lord” interpretation probably arose in the medieval period among the rabbis. The LXX translates *φλόγες αὐτῆς* (its flames) and the Vulgate *lampades eius lampades ignis atque flammarum* (its torches are torches of fire and flames). Barbiero claims, “The ancient

²⁵ Fox, *Song of Songs*, 170; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 274.

²⁶ Fox, *Song of Songs*, 170.

²⁷ Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 463.

²⁸ For the etymology see Mulder, “רשף,” *TDOT*, 14:10–11; *HALOT*, 3:1297. For the history, see the Peshitta, and Vulgate’s translations below. The LXX’s could go both ways.

²⁹ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, 173; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 239–40.

³⁰ Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 464.

³¹ Duane A. Garrett, “Song of Songs,” in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 255.

versions did not understand the term,” but this seems to be an overstatement.³² The word is a *hapax* and the ancient translators struggled with the יָה suffix, but they all understood the word referred to a fire. Wilson-Wright notes the Peshitta thought the word was a, “misspelling for the related noun *šalhebitā* (flame).”³³ While the Vulgate and Peshitta translated the word as flame/flames, the LXX identified a 3fs suffix at the end of the word (its flames). Notably, none of these ancient versions translated שלֵהבְתִּיהָ as the Lord’s abbreviated name like the ESV and NASB (the flame of the Lord).

Some historical evidence presumably exists for understanding שלֵהבְתִּיהָ as the flame of the Lord. Wilson-Wright notes that the ancient witnesses that identify יָה as the Lord are “the Ben Naphtali vocalization of the MT, Ibn Ezra, and the Targum of Canticles.”³⁴ The Masoretes have handed down two textual traditions: שְׁלֵהֲבֵתִיָּה (Ben Asher) and שְׁלֵהֲבֵתִיָּה (Ben Naphtali) but only the Ben Asher tradition (שְׁלֵהֲבֵתִיָּה) has been preserved. The Ben Naphtali tradition exists only as a collection of differences that existed with the Ben Asher tradition.³⁵ In other words, no actual manuscripts exist that contain the text שְׁלֵהֲבֵתִיָּה leading to its complete omission in the textual apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. While BHK3 referenced the Ben Naphtali tradition explicitly in the apparatus, BHQ has relegated it to the textual commentary. Lipschütz claims the difference in Song 8:6 is one of only eight consonantal differences which Mishael ben Uzziel found between the two manuscripts.³⁶ The existence of the Ben Naphtali tradition does not outweigh the preserved Ben Asher text with which all of the translations agree.³⁷

Targum Canticles chronicles Israel’s history making any textual evidence difficult to discern. Song 8:6b states, “which the Lord created on the second day to burn forever in it the ones who perform foreign worship” (יִתִּיהָ יִי בְיוֹמָא תִנְיָנָא לְבְרִית עֲלֵמָא לְאוּקְדָא בֵּה פִלְחִי פִלְחָן נֹכְרָאֵהּ:).” Wilson-Wright acknowledges that “it is difficult to determine what became of the word שלֵהבְתִּיהָ in this highly expansionistic rendering.”³⁸ She, nevertheless, claims that “the Targum based its interpretation on a *Vorlage* containing יָה שלֵהבְתִּיהָ (‘flame of Yah’)” because “YHWH creates the ‘coals of the fires of Gehinnom,’ so in that sense they are ‘Yah’s fires.’”³⁹ Wilson-Wright’s argument is possible, but it is difficult to determine if this idea originated in the *Vorlage* considering the *meturgeman*’s allegorization.⁴⁰

³² Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 464.

³³ Aren Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All: Song of Songs 8:6b-7a as a Reflex of the Northwest Semitic Combat Myth,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (December 2015): 341 n. 28.

³⁴ Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” 341. Ginsburg adds Rashi to this list, Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs* (Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 188.

³⁵ Christian David Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1897), 245.

³⁶ Mishael ben Uzziel, *Kitab Al-Khilaf: Mishael Ben Uzziel’s Treatise on the Differences between Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1965), 16. Ginsburg notes seven consonantal differences but does not include Song 8:6, Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible*, 245–48.

Interestingly, he adopts the Ben Naphtali tradition in his commentary, Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 188.

³⁷ Dirksen reflects the insignificance of the Ben Naphtali tradition by removing all reference to it from the textual apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* and making mention of it only in the textual commentary where he states, “שְׁלֵהֲבֵתִיָּה: Mishael ben Uzziel mentions this case as one of the eight cases where the text of Ben Naphtali differs from that of Ben Asher: שלֵהבְתִּיהָ,” Peter B. Dirksen, “Canticles,” in *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Megilloth*, ed. A. Schenker (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2020), 64*.

³⁸ Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” 341.

³⁹ Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” 341.

⁴⁰ Even if Targum Canticles reflects שלֵהבְתִּיהָ, Targum Canticles’s reference to Muslims (1:7; 6:8) argues for a late composition. Litke notes that “many scholars” have dated Targum Canticles to “the seventh or eighth century. More recent analysis of the evidence suggests that it is more likely that Targum Song of Songs emerged . . . in the tenth or

Considering the rampant allegorization of the Song, it is quite surprising to find so little historical evidence to supporting “the flame of the Lord” in Song 8:6. Such sparse and questionable evidence makes the “flame of the Lord” interpretation even less likely.

3. Conclusion

Etymologically, *שלהבתיה* combines the Aramaic *ש* prefix with *להבה* (flame, cf. Psa 29:7) to create a more intense flame.⁴¹ *שלהבת* (flame) by itself is a very hot fire (cf. Ezek 20:47 [H: 21:3], Job 15:30). Song 8:6 adds the *ה* suffix making it an even hotter fire—an unquenchable fire (Song 8:7).⁴² Just as the Lord is intentionally avoided in Song 2:7; 3:5, so also is a direct reference to the Lord avoided here. Translations which make an homage to the Lord are preferable (cf. Longman’s “god-like flame”; Exum’s “almighty flame”; or Berlin’s “Supreme flame”).⁴³ Berlin agrees, “While the form functions as a superlative, the trace of God’s name still adheres to it.”⁴⁴ By using the *hapax legomenon* *שלהבתיה*, the author of the Song only makes an homage to the Lord, the creator of love.

IV. DIVINE DISTANCE INFORMING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

Divine distance in the Song is consistent with the Hebrew Bible’s portrayal of God and sex. As Frymer-Kensky explains, “The biblical God does not model sex, is not the patron of sexual behavior, and is not even recorded as the guarantor of potency. . . . Sexuality was desacralized and kept as far away from the cult as possible.”⁴⁵ This disassociation of God and sex is reflected in Deut 23:16–17 which forbade sacred prostitution and the wages of prostitution from entering the temple. The Old Testament law code contains several laws concerning sexuality, but they concern one individual sinning against another (e.g., Num 5:11–31; Exod 22:15–16; Deut 22:20–30). The desacralization of sex continues in the New Testament with the asexual birth of the Son of God. Oswalt explains:

The New Testament, quite unlike the myths that would celebrate God’s impregnating a virgin and getting a hero from her womb, is at great pains to avoid all those connotations. The Son is not God’s child, some semidivine hero like Achilles, He is God himself in human flesh, produced not through a tryst between a virile god and a particularly desirable woman, but by the divine Spirit’s overshadowing of a particularly virtuous maid.

eleventh century,” Andrew W. Litke, “The Targum of Song of Songs,” in *Targums and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Alan J. Avery-Peck, Ancient Literature for New Testament Studies 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 168. In either case, Targum Canticles is late, perhaps as late as Rashi and Ibn Ezra who also adopted this reading.

⁴¹ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, 173–74; Michael A. Fishbane, ed., *Song of Songs*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 209.

⁴² Gordis notes that the use of “the Divine name . . . to express the superlative . . . has many analogies in Biblical Hebrew,” Gordis, *The Song of Songs*, 26.

⁴³ Longman’s “‘god-awful’ flame,” however, sounds sacrilegious, Longman, *Song of Songs*, 212–13; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 254. Berlin makes the same point presented here, “I, too, prefer to have it both ways—‘a Supreme flame’—not because I cannot decide between the alternatives, but because I think this double entendre is intended,” Berlin, *Song of Songs*, 173–75.

⁴⁴ Berlin, *Song of Songs*, 174.

⁴⁵ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible,” *Semeia* 45 (1989): 89.

Israel's neighbors believed sexuality was a means to connect with the divine and gain favor. Through the "sacred marriage" (*hieros gamos*) ritual, the man [king] would unite with the woman [priestess] and procure the deity's blessing and agricultural prosperity.⁴⁶ The ancient myths were not simple stories but extensions of their cultic worship. As Gaster explains, "Myth is cosubstantial with Ritual. They are not—as is often supposed—*two* things artificially or schematically brought into relationship with each other."⁴⁷ Jacobson agrees and explains,

Here faint overtones of awe and wonder at the miracle of conception are possibly present in such description of the ritual of the sacred marriage between god and goddess as: "That the life of all lands be received in charge . . . do they at year's end, the day of the rite, set up a bed for Mylady" and, describing the actual sexual congress in that rite and its magic effect throughout nature, "With the exalted rising of the king's loins rose at the same time the flax, rose at the same time the barley, did the desert fill as with delicious gardens."⁴⁸

The ancient pagans saw in sex an opportunity to manipulate creation for their benefit. Sex became a religious act and a way of connecting with the divine. Divine absence in the Song of Songs presents a starkly different perspective on sexuality and spirituality.

While modern authors may not connect sexuality with agricultural prosperity, with noble intentions they infuse sex with illegitimate transcendent meaning. Davis seeks to "show that the sexual and the religious understandings of the Song are mutually informative."⁴⁹ She claims sexual ecstasy can "help us imagine what it might mean to love God truly."⁵⁰ Just as the man desires the pleasures of the garden of the woman, so also does humanity desire the pleasures of the garden of God (Garden of Eden).⁵¹ Davis seeks a measure of disassociation from the *hieros gamos* of the fertility cults by noting that they possess "a pronounced difference in tone from the

⁴⁶ Fox, *Song of Songs*, 240; Richard A. Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1971), 2–3. For examples of myths, see Dumuzi and Inanna "Prayer for Water and Bread" and "Prosperity in the Palace" in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 642–43. Kramer provides a possible Sumerian origin to the sacred marriage rite, Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969), 49–66. See also Gaster's analysis of the Baal myth and its connection to ritual in Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1977), 24–26; 122–29.

⁴⁷ Theodor Herzl Gaster, "Myth and Story," *Numen* 1 (December 1954): 187.

⁴⁸ Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran, Harvard Semitic Series 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 95.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 233.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 233. See also Ellen F. Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Fordham University Press, 2006), 172–84, <https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823225712.003.0013>.

⁵¹ Walsh, Davis, and Melton explore this connection between the Garden of Eden and the garden of the woman, Carey Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 209–10; Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically"; Brittany N. Melton, *Where Is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, volume 73 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018), 122–26.

Song.”⁵² Nevertheless, she opens a door for theological speculation concerning how “the experience of healthy sexual desire can help us imagine what it might mean to love God truly.”⁵³

Biblical theological warrant for connecting the sexual and spiritual presumably comes from the marriage metaphor between God/Israel (Exod 34:11–16; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:16–17; Isa 54; 57; Jer 2—3; 13:20–27; Ezek 16; 23; and Hos 1—3) and Jesus/Church (1 Cor. 6:12–20; 11:2; 2 Cor. 11:1–6; Eph 5:21–33; and the bride in Revelation 19—22). A sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) that potentially highlights consummation appears most prominently in Hosea 2:20–23[H: 22–25]. In 2:19–20[H: 21–22], the Lord betroths (אָרַשׁ) Israel to himself, repeating the word three times. The betrothal language ends with the climactic statement, “And you will know the Lord.” To “know” can be a euphemism for the sexual act (Gen 4:1; 24:16; 1 Kgs 1:4). Landy, for example, understands it in this way, “Knowledge is a frequent euphemism for sex in the Hebrew Bible, and this connotation is evident here in the context of romance.”⁵⁴ Considering the divine distance in the Song, more likely, to know the Lord refers to a personal relationship which results in obedience.⁵⁵ “Knowing the Lord” recalls the Exodus which fits the broader context of Hosea 2:14–15 (H: 16–17).⁵⁶ Pharaoh did “not know the Lord” (Exod 5:2). The Lord then made himself known to Pharaoh, subjecting Pharaoh to the divine will. In a similar way, Hosea exhorts his readers to know the Lord, subjecting their wills to the Lord (Hos 4:1; 8:1–2).⁵⁷

Similarly, Paul does not validate a *hieros gamos* relationship between Christ and the church. He uses an *asexual* bride metaphor to describe his desired purity of the church (2 Cor 11:2). This same metaphor is used in Revelation (19:7–9; 21:2, 9–10; 22:17). The bride is the *eternal* bride of Christ. Just like Paul, the metaphor corresponds to the purity of the church.

The “church as wife” metaphor is asexual as well. Paul uses it to teach unity with Christ. First Corinthians 6:12–20, while discussing sex, does not concern union between Christ and the church, it concerns union of a man who claims to be part of the body of Christ with a prostitute. Paul’s “union with Christ” theology (i.e., Eph 5:21–33) provides the theological basis for his rebuke to the immoral Corinthians.

Ephesians 5:21–33 is often appealed to as providing exegetical warrant for reading Jesus into the Song of Songs. Mitchel, for example, claims that “Eph 5:21–33 is the closest biblical parallel to the Song and also is the passage that sheds the most light on the proper hermeneutical

⁵² Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 252. For another example, note the pains Gledhill takes to disassociate the Lord from the erotic, Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994), 32–33.

⁵³ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 233. See also Davis, “Reading the Song Iconographically.”

⁵⁴ Francis Landy, *Hosea*, 2d ed., Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 43.

⁵⁵ Childs notes, “To know God is not a mystical experience or merely an inter-personal relationship. Nor is it a feeling of spirituality. Rather, the knowledge of God is defined throughout as obedience to his will which has a content,” Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 51. See also Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 223.

⁵⁶ Dearman agrees, “This prediction of *knowing YHWH* can be compared with the one of the revelations of the divine name to Moses in Exod. 6:2–7,” John Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 128.

⁵⁷ As Childs explains, to know the Lord means to obey his law, “Isaiah speaks of a disobedient people dying for lack of knowledge (5.13), and Hosea describes the consequences of the failure of knowledge as lawlessness (4.1). The latter condemns a people who have broken the covenant, transgressed the Law, and yet cry, ‘My God, we, Israel, know thee’ (8.2),” Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 51.

approach to the Song.”⁵⁸ Ephesians 5:22–33, however, says nothing about sex. Mitchell makes a false analogy by connecting the marriage instruction of Eph 5 with the sexual instruction of the Song.⁵⁹

Others believe Ephesians 5:22–33 recalls the *hieros gamos*. For example, Lincoln explains that Christ “is seen as the bridegroom whose concern is for his bride’s glory and purity (v 27) and whose relation to his Church can be depicted as a spiritual marriage union (vv 31, 32).”⁶⁰ Later, Lincoln equates the exhortation in Ephesians 5 to the *hieros gamos* of the Greek religions, “Although Greek religion could link marriage between gods and human sexual union, the use of ‘sacred marriage’ imagery as an archetype in paraenesis about human marriage appears to be the distinctive contribution of Ephesians.”⁶¹ Sampley believes Ephesians builds off of “the hieros gamos of YHWH and Israel” as “grounded in Ezek. 16, Song of Songs and Ps. 45.”⁶² Batey, however, agrees, “To see in this Old Testament quotation a reference to either the *ἱερός γάμος* of the mystery religions . . . is an unnecessary intrusion into the purpose for which this quotation was employed.”⁶³ Instead, as Batey also argues, Paul’s purpose in quoting Gen 2:24 was unity, “The ‘one flesh’ concept in the first century was a symbol of unity intelligible to both Jew and Greek and was employed to express religious and philosophical meanings.”⁶⁴ Batey’s comment is also supported by Paul’s use of “mystery” in Ephesians which repeatedly refers to union with Christ.⁶⁵ Similarly, Köstenberger claims, “Paul envisions Christ and his church as one person, inextricably united in this world, just like husband and wife (cf. Gen 2:24).”⁶⁶ As evidence, Köstenberger references “Acts 9:4 where Christ asks him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?’ To persecute the church is to persecute her Lord.”⁶⁷ Thus, Paul’s purpose of quoting Gen 2:24 in Eph 5 concerns the implications of a “one flesh” union which is unity, not the cause of the unity—sexual intercourse. This fits the focus of Genesis 2:24 as well as the absence of sex in Eph 5:22–33. Furthermore, it takes the divine distance in the Song seriously. Reading sexual intercourse into the marriage metaphor in Ephesians 5:22–33 presses the metaphor beyond what the author intended.

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 58.

⁵⁹ Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 58–62.

⁶⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 388–89. Arnold makes a similar claim, “The main point of commonality that Paul is stressing here is the bond of union between husband and wife that prefigures the closeness and intimacy that would characterize the church’s relationship to Christ under the new covenant,” Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 397.

⁶¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 391.

⁶² J. Paul Sampley, “*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*”: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 16 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 160.

⁶³ Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, 31. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body, ‘One Flesh,’” *Trinity Journal* 12, no. 1 (1991): 90–91.

⁶⁴ Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, 32.

⁶⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 53, 136; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 776–78; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 389; Arnold, *Ephesians*, 397.

⁶⁶ Köstenberger, “The Mystery of Christ and the Church,” 91.

⁶⁷ Köstenberger, “The Mystery of Christ and the Church,” 91 n. 43.

VI. CONCLUSION

Divine distance in the Song of Songs should caution interpreters from not only allegorizing the Song but also creating types/analogies/applications between God/Israel and Jesus/church. The Song of Songs is religious literature as evidenced by the veiled references to the Lord. In Song 2:7 and 3:5, one would expect the Lord's name to appear because Israel was commanded to take oaths in the name of the Lord. Instead, the woman put the daughters of Jerusalem under oath by "gazelles and does of the field" which veil the name of the Lord. The intertextual correspondence between Song 5:1 and Gen 2:16 also argues that the Song is religious literature. Just as the Lord urged the man to eat of the trees of the garden in Gen 2:16, so also does the unnamed speaker of Song 5:1 urge the lovers to eat and be intoxicated with love. Finally, the historical, contextual, and etymological evidence argues that *שלהבת* means "an almighty flame" and is only an homage to the Lord, not an explicit identification. Attempts to analogize the Song's sexuality and make it something transcendent creates points of correspondence which the author of the Song sought to avoid. More likely, the Song teaches readers a biblical theology of sexuality—a theme which needs further study.