THE SHIR LOVE OF TORAH:
FIGURING TORAH THROUGH THE EROS OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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INTRODUCTION

Scanning through the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs (hereafter, "the Song"), the vast number and variety of interpretive construals is soon apparent. The main interpretation in both Jewish and Christian circles over the last two millennia has been one or another kind of allegory.[1] At least in Christian circles, historically, the significant payoff of a mystically freighted allegorical interpretation has been pastoral in nature.[2] This line of interpretation, however, has been abandoned in the scholarly community in favor of a "literal" reading of the Song, an exegetical and hermeneutical shift that prioritizes a secular-sexual construal over a religious-spiritual one. Nonetheless, a "literal" interpretation is in itself no less subjective than

[1] Broadly, Jewish allegorical interpretation has largely taken the lovers in the Song to be God (male) and Israel (female) and the back and forth between them the historical engagement of God with Israel; see e.g. Michael A. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 15; or for the interpretive history of the Song in Judaism more generally, idem., *Song of Songs, Shir Ha-Shirim: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (The JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 245-304.

On the Christian side, the allegory takes the form of Christ's union with the individual believer, or else the intimate consummation of history in the eschatological union of Christ (Bridegroom) and the Church (his Bride). On this last anagogical aspect of allegory see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 89-114; but more generally, Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Westminster: Newman, 1957), pp.10-16 of the introduction.

[2] In other words, it "gave theologians and preachers a way to speak about the yearning restlessness of the human heart, spiritual dry spells, the challenges of faith, and the fickleness of the human experience. It offered them a way to speak about those moments of ecstatic love, the gifts of God, and the bliss and joy of the life of faith" (Allison Zbicz Michael, "The Love Makes the Lovers in the Song of Songs" [*Lutheran Forum*, Summer 2012], 15). This pastoral payoff also obtains in Jewish tradition, especially given their often dispossessed and persecuted existence; see e.g. Laura S. Lieber, *A Vocabulary of Desire: The Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue* (Brill Reference Library of Judaism, Vol.40; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 80-90.

any spiritual interpretation, on observation surely indebted to postmodern criticism. The hope for moving forward, as I hope to show, lies in leveraging the language of eros.

Roland Murphy has suggested that "there is an affinity between wisdom and eros in the wisdom literature: the quest for wisdom is a quest for the beloved…. It is precisely the link between *eros* and *wisdom* that opens the Song of Songs to another level of understanding."[3] I would like to pursue this suggested line of inquiry, but instead of wisdom as the companion of *eros*, I offer the companion of *torah*. Regarding the Song, then, the quest for the beloved is the quest for *torah*. I suggest, then, that it is precisely this link between *eros* and *torah* that opens up the Song to another register of meaning. Further, I suggest that a comparable dynamic is at play extensively in Ps 119 and one of its literary companions, Ps 19B, for it is these texts especially that give us extended discourse on the dialectic of one's pursuit and delight in *torah*. More specifically, and leaning against the dominant scholarly impulse, I propose a reading of the Song in which the beloved and their attributes can be read as a figure for *torah*, broadly conceived, through linguistic correspondences with Pss 19B and 119. Furthermore, I will identify various lines of historical precedent and theoretical grounding *for* such a reading, as well as some areas of reading and biblical engagement that might benefit *from* such a reading. I make no attempt, to my dismay, to be comprehensive either in scope or depth.

I. Theoretical Considerations for a Figural Reading

a. Analogy of the tonal chord

A figural reading allows the Song to resonate on multiple registers at the same time. We might think of it on the analogy of a tonal chord. In a chord, three (or more) notes or tones sound

[3] Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Second edition; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 106-7; italics added.

simultaneously to produce a single chord, whether major or minor, harmonious or dissonant. Each note remains itself in a chord but nonetheless participates in creating something more than itself. In the experience of hearing a chord, each of the single tones which comprise a chord may be distinguished, one may be recognized as more dominant given the context, but the *experience* remains as that of hearing a chord, not individual tones.

Placing a figural reading on the analogy of a single chord within a broader context of the biblical book and the biblical canon extends the analogy of the single chord to the register of composition, i.e. chords in concert, and to opuses which are composed of movements. The composition in our case is the Song of Songs where various chords are struck and resound in various registers.[4] The Song as a composition would then function as a movement within the opus of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the canon within which various chords and themes sound. These themes, made up of various notes and chords, are given expression in the compositions or movements of the opus, but often in variations. A reading of the Song, then, that understands the beloved and/or their attributes as a figure for *torah* is a reading that puts that theme, *torah*, in a different register and in variation. As a result, this theme-in-variation highlights the desirous nature of *torah* through the register of the erotic and sensuous.

b. Distinction between allegory and figure

A *figuration*, however, needs to be distinguished from an *allegory*. Erich Auerbach formulated the classic, yet still helpful, description of *figura*: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection

[4] Some of the registers we might think of as (more recent Western) **secular-sexual readings** (see, e.g. a brief sketch and [problematic] critique of such readings by Hector Patmore, "'On the Plain and Literal Sense': On Contemporary Assumptions about the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol.56, Fasc.2 [April 2006], pp.239-50), **canonical-rhetorical readings** (as proposed e.g. by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979], 573-9; and in amore explicitly theological-canonical register see idem., *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 188-195; and Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 144-65), and **allegorical readings** (whether historical or spiritual, as is the case with traditional Jewish and Christian readings, respectively).

between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves the first or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time," but, "are both contained within the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act."[5] Richard Hays, from the realm of New Testament studies, helpfully suggests another way we might put this, which is to say that "figural reading is a form of intertextual interpretation that focuses on an intertextuality of *reception* rather than of *production*."[6] Complementary to Hays, Michael Fishbane suggests that an allegorical reading, in contrast to figural reading, understands the text to have been intended to be read that way, as meaning something other than was at first "on the face of the text," as it were.[7] It leaves behind any historical referent or possible historical or social setting and abstracts the "spiritual meaning" from the newly dissolved text.[8] *Figura* and *allegoria* are no doubt related phenomena, but they are not the same thing.

c. Who figures whom/what?

My proposal here suggests a possible figural construal of the Song as distinguished from "literal" or "allegorical." But, then, the question becomes: *Who figures whom?* First, the *lover* (whether the man or the woman) can be read as figuring anyone who finds themselves within a religious textual tradition that uses the Song of Songs in its liturgical or devotional settings, that is, anyone

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[5] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 73. For an earlier formulation of this description of *figura*, and for a brief history of the development of the term, see Auerbach's "Figura" in idem, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Theory and History of Literature, Vol.9; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; previously Meridian, 1959; originally Istanbul, 1944), 53.

[6] Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology in the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 2; emphasis original.

[7] Cf. Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, 271: "Allegory is never self-evident but presupposes an art of concealment whereby an author uses a series of literary figures to hide something else." In short, "one must read the text's words with something else in mind," namely, a corresponding interpretive or "thematic template."

[8] On this point see Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), xxxviii-xlii.

who is located (at least) within a Jewish or Christian religious tradition.[9] Second, to slightly alter the question in line with what I am proposing: *Who figures what?* By this question I designate the direction of the figural reading, namely that the character of the *beloved* (again, be it the man or the woman), and at other times *their attributes*, can be read as figuring *torah*.

d. Describing "eros"

The Song may not obviously or necessarily be of an explicit, secular-sexual content or nature. For saying that such a reading of the Song is the obvious, plain and literal reading is only to say that "'it is obvious *to me*,' because our social-location and individual context will affect how we understand a word or collection of words."[10] While this is true, it is also the case that a key argument against a secular-sexual plain sense is that there is no surviving secular Israelite poetry at all, that is, assuming the Song is a single literary work by a single author. This assumption, and the attendant argument from silence,[11] is undercut by the high probability of the Song's nature as a collection of multiple poems (or songs) that have to do—more or less implicitly/explicitly—with love and desire, both abstract and concrete.

If the Song is not "obviously" sexually explicit, it is at least sexually *suggestive*,[12] and therefore sensual/ous and erotic.[13] Erotica "tend[s] to describe the emotions and internal worlds

[9] On the invitation to *anyone* see Exum, *Song of Songs*, 7-9.
[10] Patmore, "'On the Plain and Literal Sense,'" 248.
[11] Ibid.: "It cannot simply be assumed that secular Israelite poetry *did* exist in antiquity but its preservation was not deemed necessary or desirable by the literary classes, who instead chose to preserve those texts that served their own ideological and religious purposes." Conversely, see Exum, *Song of Songs*, 48: "Even the title of the Song, "the Best of Songs," tantalizingly implies that other Hebrew love songs may have existed."
[12] Contra Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 41. Conversely, Exum (*Song of Songs*, 19) helpfully observes that "[w]ords and images are never simply denotative, and in poetry they are excessively connotative. Much of the power of metaphoric language, and the source of our pleasure in it, derives from its plurisignificance, from its ability to be suggestive of multiple meanings. Poetic metaphor cannot be reduced to prose paraphrase."
[13] Robert Jenson (*Song of Songs* [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 1) makes the distinction that the Song is not pornographic in this regard.

of at least one" of the characters.[14] The erotic thus engages the reader's/readers' empathy, linking him or her with the characterized participant. Additionally, the erotic revels in the time it takes to build desire and longing, not rushing to a tidy conclusion. Furthermore, while the explicitly sexual is presentative in that it leaves nothing to the imagination, the erotic is suggestive in that it leaves almost everything to the imagination, conveying the mystery while also concealing it.[15] It is in these ways that the Song suggests the erotic. The metaphors[16] and possible euphemisms and innuendos[17] make suggestions to the imagination. These rhetorical devices build longing and desire (it is unclear whether the lovers in the Song consummate their longing desire[18]), and explore internal thoughts, feelings, monologues, dreams, etc. of the characters. The erotic nature of the Song, then, may be taken up into another register as I suggested above.

II. Genre, Poetics, and Method

No matter how the superscription is construed, *that* the Song is associated with Solomon already places it within the sphere of other Solominic "wisdom" texts like Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, a sphere that butts up against non-Solominic wisdom books like Job, as well as Sirach and Baruch in the Greek-Jewish text tradition.[19] Of course, "this does not constitute *proof* of the book's

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[14] Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, 42-3. Walsh develops these characteristics of the erotic vis-à-vis the pornographic.

[15] Cf. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 20: "On the one hand the descriptions are intimate, suggestive and even explicit. On the other, the metaphors function as much to hide the body as to display it."

[16] On this point see especially Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, 17-22.

[17] E.g. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 10-11: "In the Song sexual union is represented through the indirection of language, through innuendo, double entendre, and metaphor…. Double entendre gives the impression of gratification taking place even as it is longed for."

[18] See Exum, *Song of Songs*, 11-3, 42-5: "the poetic rhythm of the Song, ever forward and then returning, reflects the repetitive pattern of seeking and finding in which the lovers engage, which is the basic pattern of sexual love: longing – satisfaction – renewed longing—and so on."

[19] Cf. e.g. Childs, *Introduction*, 573-6; Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 106; and more recently Edmee Kingsmill, SLG, "The Song of Songs: A Wisdom Book" in in John Jarick ed., *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (LHBOTS 618; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 310-35; and briefly in idem, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (Oxford Theological

wisdom character," though, on the other hand, "it does indicate that the Canticle was read as a work in the Solomonic (wisdom) tradition."[20]

A "literary tour de force,"[21] the length of Ps 119, as Jon Levenson notes, is part of its *affective* intent.[22] In fact, the affective language in Ps 119 (loving, keeping, listening to *torah* with all of one's heart) is the only link to any Deuteronomic tradition in the psalm according to Freedman and Welch.[23] One of the things that makes the psalm unique is the shocking paucity of historical referents.[24] At the very least, then, *torah* as *written* Torah can hardly be its only referent. Including but not limited to Torah, *torah*'s seven synonyms "אמרה, 'word, promise'; דבר, word'; חק, 'statute, law'; מצות, 'commandment'; מִשְׁפָּט, 'law, ordinance'; עדת, 'testimony'; פקד, 'precept'"[25] create around it[26] a subtle yet dynamic semantic matrix,[27] thus opening *torah* to *non*-concrete referents beyond written Torah. By extension, this is also true for Ps 19B, which shares five of the eight terms attested in 119: *tôraṯ*, *ʿēḏûṯ*, *piqqûḏê*, *miṣwaṯ*, and *mišpĕṭê* (תורה, עדות, פדודי, מצות, מִשְׁפָּטִי).

Monographs: Oxford and New York: Oxford Press, 2009), 46-9. The rest of Kingsmill's book demonstrates convincingly how tightly the Song is intertwined with the wisdom texts of the Bible.

[20] Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 106.

[21] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (revised edition; WBC 21; Nashville: Tomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 180. Similarly and insightfully, Sean Burt says ("'Your Torah Is My Delight': Repetition and the Poetics of Immanence in Psalm 119" in *JBL* vol.137, no.3 [Fall 2018], 694): "If a reader seeks to learn torah, the psalm's only instruction is: read on. The sheer length of the text provides the occasion for the ineluctable push forward."

[22] Jon D. Levenson, "The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism," in Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 566: "…merely knowing the theology [in summarized form] is not equivalent to being in the state of mind that comes from reading [Ps 119] in a deliberate and reflective fashion, such as that which the medieval Catholics called *lectio divina*."

[23] David Noel Freedman and Andrew Welch, "Conclusion: The Theology of Psalm 119" in idem, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Edited by William H. Propp; Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 6. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 90.

[24] Ibid, 89: "…Psalm 119 omits any human intermediation in the giving of *tora*. *Tora* is Yahweh's alone, primeval (*me'olam*, v. 52) and eternal (*le'olam*, vv. 89, 144, 152, 160). Moses, Sinai, and covenant all have disappeared." This point is elaborated further on pp.90-2.

[25] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 258.

[26] "Around it" because *torah* "remains a first among equals, so to speak" (Burt, "'Your Torah Is My Delight'," 693).

[27] Burt (ibid) calls this "playful synonymy."

Like the Song's poetics of desire, Ps 119's poetics of delight[28] does not offer the reader of the psalm a definition of *torah*,[29] and so is "playful rather than pedagogical, ludic rather than lucid."[30] The immanent dynamic of the psalm is such that it "is a poem of torah whose torah is the poem itself."[31] This immanence is not present in the same way in Ps 19B which addresses YHWH in the third person, as opposed to the predominant second person address of Ps 119.

Though Torah psalms and Wisdom psalms are largely seen to be related, a brief survey of recent literature on wisdom psalms only proves the point that they are not identical.[32] The "wisdom" character of the psalm is evidenced, in part, by its use of "riches" (הון, v14), a term particularly characteristic of wisdom literature.[33] Additionally, Ps 119 opens with a blessing (אַשְׁרֵי, *ʾašrê*, vv1-2); it employs several "better"/ "more"/ "as much as" sayings (cf. e.g. vv14, 72, 99-100, 103); it displays an alphabetic-acrostic structure; it contrasts "two ways and also the two types (just and wicked);" it is preoccupied with retribution; and it displays numerous expressions

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[28] On the poetics of delight, see the article by Burt, "'Your Torah is My Delight,'" 688: "Rather than sober-minded instruction, this poem approaches the topic with playfulness and spontaneity—or, in the text's own terms, with 'delight' (שעשושים)."

[29] Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, HAT 1/15 (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), as quoted in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 259: "There is no definition [of *torah*] in 119, because it is about the experience of reality that can be described only obliquely in conceptual terms."

[30] Burt, "'Your Torah Is My Delight'," 696.

[31] Ibid, 688.

[32] R. N. Whybray, "The Wisdom Psalms" in eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 152-160. Whybray, considering wisdom psalms specifically, nonetheless addresses the wisdom features of Ps 1, a psalm not addressed in prayer to God, but which "sets out, in the manner of a teacher of wisdom, the respective fates of the righteous and the wicked, characterizing the righteous as the person who delights in, and meditates upon, the law, or 'teaching' (*tora*) of Yahweh, a term which for this writer has a wider connotation than the Law of Moses" (155). See also Susan Gillingham, "The Wisdom Tradition and the Psalms" in John Jarick ed., *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (LHBOTS 618; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 303 n.88: "In my view the Torah Psalms, 1 and 19B and 119, are not to be included in this list [of Wisdom Psalms]: some of their concerns overlap with wisdom, but they suggest a different genre, just as the teaching about the keeping [of] the law in Deuteronomy is different from seeking wisdom in Proverbs."

[33] Avi Hurvitz, "Wisdom Vocabulary in the Hebrew Psalter: A Contribution to the Study of 'Wisdom Psalms'" (*Vetus Testamentum* 38, no.1, 1988), 46: "The occurrence of *hon* in Pss. cxii and cxix…is only one of numerous linguistic elements characteristic specifically of Wisdom literature. Indeed, these two psalms exhibit a thorough familiarity with Wisdom phraseology and use it extensively, thus conforming to the requirements of our criterion of 'accumulation,'" (46) which "we define as…a large proportion of elements classified as 'distinctive Wisdom phraseology'" in a given text, in this case a psalm or number of psalms (44).

of "the fear of the LORD," albeit in the second person (i.e. "fear of you").[34] Any one of these, by itself would not constitute a substantial connection with wisdom literature; however, the fact is that together they create a cluster that lends itself in connection with wisdom.

Moreover, Ps 119 shares with Prov 8 a vocabulary list of some twelve terms indicating not only a literary relation to wisdom literature as a torah-psalm.[35] This shared and similarly used vocabulary also "gives *torah* [in Ps 119] virtually the status of a divine hypostasis, like wisdom (*hokmah*) in Proverbs 8."[36] Both *torah* and *hokmah* are YHWH's creations, but they can also be invoked as subjects in their own right and as objects of devotion. From this it is understandable how the language of desire and delight, the language of *eros*, can be transferred by the psalmist from God to *torah*.[37] Psalm 119 is more specifically, then, a "torah psalm," seen as a subset of "wisdom psalms" that developed within Israelite wisdom literature and is related in this way to Pss 1 and 19B.[38] The wisdom character of Ps 19B is more concentrated than 119. Within just a few verses, Ps 19B exhibits at least two, if not three, ostensive wisdom locutions: "…making wise the simple," מַחְכִּימַת פֶּתִי, v8;[39] "the fear of YHWH…," יִרְאַת יְהוָה, v10;[40] and it displays a "better"/ "more" saying, v11.

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[34] For this list and more see Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 103.

[35] For a helpful discussion on the dynamic interrelation of between *torah* and *hokmah* in Psalms, see Hermann Spieckermann, "What is the Place of Wisdom and Torah in the Psalter?" in Scott C. Jones and Christine Roy Yoder, eds., *"When the Morning Stars Sang:" Essays in Honor of Choon Leong Seow on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 500; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), especially 310-3 for Ps 119's focus on *torah* over *wisdom*.

[36] Freedman and Welch, "Conclusion: The Theology of Psalm 119," 89. The vocabulary shared by these two texts is given in idem, 89 n.1.

[37] This transference was brought to my attention by Professor Marc Brettler via email. See Hossfeld and Zenger (*Psalms 3*, 260) who highlight the *relational* aspect of this point: "…many of the verbs in Psalm 119 that express the relationship of the praying person *to Torah* were used in other and earlier biblical texts to describe the relationship of Israel or the Israelites *to God*;" emphasis original.

[38] Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 181.

[39] Cf. Ps 107:43; Prov 3:7; et al.

[40] Cf. Pss 34:12; 111:10; Prov 1:7; 2:5; et al.

An essay of this length is necessarily limited in its scope. Thus, I will be limiting myself to a small number of select passages from the Song in order to flesh out what textual possibilities exist for reading the Song figurally in light of Pss 19B and 119. The corollary to this limitation is the select portions of Ps 119, especially since this single psalm is longer than the whole Song (!). Additionally, my analysis is synchronic rather than diachronic, even though there would no doubt be added depth and nuance from a diachronic study. Another time, perhaps.

III. Overview of Historical Precedents for a Torah-Figural Interpretation

Before going too much further, it is necessary to outline two significant trajectories, not unrelated either to each other or to our basic thesis. These are the emergence of Jewish piyyutim inspired by the Song, and part of the Jewish mystical tradition that centers on and indeed stems from the suggestive language of the Song. These trajectories are precedents for the kind of figural reading suggested herein.

a. Jewish Piyyut

Piyyutim, from Greek *poiein*, constitute a genre of liturgical poetry that emerged within Judaism at least as early as fourth century CE, continued into the Middle Ages, and largely preceded the rise and blossoming of Christian liturgical poetry and hymnody.[41] Into the sixth century, the piyyutim began to resemble something like cantatas "in that they adorned the weekly service" but were both symphonically complex and structurally diverse.[42] Despite this and other

[41] Lieber, *A Vocabulary of Desire*, 8-13. There does not appear to be convincing evidence of influence between Jewish and Christian liturgical hymnody and piyyutim, but the contemporaneity "suggests some kind of common source" (10). And, "the earliest surviving Christian liturgical hymn based on the Song was not written until the ninth century, and the genre did not flourish in the Christian tradition until the twelfth century…as part of a larger revival of interest in the Song in the Latin West" (19).
[42] Ibid., 12-13.

differences between Jewish and Christian liturgical poetry, they are similar in that, while they exalt poetic discourse as the mode of prayer and devotion and as a rhetorical binding of liturgist and congregation and God, many of them "collapse various boundaries between past and present, heaven and earth, Scripture and life, inviting listeners in a deep and complicated way to relive and to personally experience an array of events and emotions from their respective traditions."[43] Part of this collapse, at least in the piyyutim, is "the rich theological potential of ambiguity" inherent in poetic discourse together with the "deeply intertextual" nature of the poetry.[44] And so piyyut lands in "the orbit of midrash" and aggadah though they are by no means identical.[45]

Laura Lieber deftly describes the basic piyyutic structure: "the opening words of each verse of the Song (either all 117 verses, or a significant portion thereof), in linear order, are quoted at the beginning (or, on occasion, at the end) of each line of verse. In effect, then, the biblical Song becomes the framework for the architecture for a new poetic creation."[46] Thus, piyyutim in design and function are something like improvisational jazz riffs in the structure of a cantata-like musical arrangement.[47] Most piyyutim are rather long and complex, and so nearly all "piyyutim can, at least to some extent, be analyzed as poetry, exegesis, intertextual *tours de force* (in Hebrew, *melitzah*), constructive theology, and liturgical drama; these qualities are inherent in the genre."[48] A Song piyyut, then, "extends and even rewrites the Song rather than explicating it."[49] For example, an anonymous piyyut (*Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim*) from fifth century Galilee,

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[43] Ibid., 13.
[44] Ibid., 5 and 7, respectively.
[45] Ibid., 7; see also pp.34-9 for an extended discussion of the similarities and differences between piyyut and midrash and Targum.
[46] Ibid., 15
[47] See ibid., 94, where Lieber asserts that Song of Songs piyyutim "are hardly poeticized midrash or Targum. These poems do not interpret the Song so much as they embroider its margins. The poets riff freely on its language and make it their own. The Song becomes raw material for new poetic creativity."
[48] Ibid., 97.
[49] Ibid., 96.

in the second line reads: "*Let Him kiss me from the kisses*—of (His) mouth / with two kisses: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah."[50] This *payyetanim* does not beat around the expository bush. Immediacy is the name of the game, bringing together two temporally distant Torah in the presence of liturgist and congregation removed by both time and place from either one, really. "God's kisses are His Torah; revelation is an intimate experience of love."[51] Thus, piyyutim exist as "works of constructive theology," the *payyetanim* writing "themselves and their communities into the biblical texts they rewrite."[52]

We must remember that piyyut is *liturgical*, that is, its function is *prayer*. Both prayer and the Song "speak the language of desire," and so Song piyyutim amplify the most evocative elements of both the text of the Song and the phenomenon of prayer.[53] Prayer reaches back as it brings to speech mercies, tragedies, and triumphs made possible by God, and reaches forward as the longing of God's consummate presence is also brought to expression. And so Song piyyutim "reach simultaneously back into the past and out into the present (and future), and in doing so, they collapse the space between 'then' and 'now,' as history is transformed into lived experience…and the prominent use of various first-person voices invites listeners to experience the poem from the poet's perspectives," both human and divine![54]

b. Jewish mysticism

If there is anything biblical interpreters in both Jewish and Christian mystical traditions have in common, it is their (inter)dependence on interest in the erotic language of the Song as a mystical mine *par excellence*, for indeed that is implied in the very name of the text: "The Song *Par*

[50] Ibid., 117.
[51] Ibid., 53.
[52] Ibid., 96.
[53] Ibid., 20-2.
[54] Ibid., 66-7.

Excellence."[55] According to Elliot Wolfson, the anthropomorphic divine wisdom of a few early rabbinic midrashim on the Song "anticipates the kabbalistic orientation that developed more fully and systematically"[56] in the Jewish Middle Ages. Three stands of this orientation are the historical-allegorical (which is also deeply apocalyptic and messianic),[57] the philosophical or intellectual, and the mystical or ecstatic, pointing correspondingly to the people of Israel, the mind (as an entity), and the "emotional" faculties (longing, desire, etc.).

For Ibn Ezra (who bequeathed to the allegorical school a philosophical flavor), Maimonides (philosophic and ecstatic/prophetic), and others, the language of the erotic was practically the only way to account adequately for the longing of the soul for union with YHWH.[58] Historical-allegorical sense is often considered the *peshat*, or the philological, plain sense, and it identifies the yearning desire of the Song with exile, "which in its deepest symbolic sense alludes to the separation of the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine, the unification of which characterizes redemption."[59] Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, on the other hand, reads the kisses of Song 1:2, in a layered way, as (the lower glory) *Shekinah*'s desire to ascend to (the higher glory) *Tif'eret*, and conversely as the (male) mystic longing for delightful conjunction with the divine glory.[60] Indeed, it is "the kiss of *Shekinah* [that] symbolizes the conjunction of the soul in the source of life and the consequent over flow of the holy spirit."[61]

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[55] "Among the many intimate bonds between Jewish and Christian mystical traditions none is more important than the fact that both found in the Song of Songs the mystical text par excellence. For Jews and Christians, the Song was not some excuse for the surreptitious use of forbidden themes, but was the authorized model that guided their personal appropriation of the divine-human encounter." (Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Language*, edited by Steven T. Katz [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 217, quoted in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, and Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2005], 333)
[56] Wolfson, *Language, Eros, and Being*, 335.
[57] Cf. ibid., 360.
[58] Ibid., 346-7.
[59] Ibid., 354.
[60] Ibid., 349.
[61] Ibid., 350.

Significant for our purposes are the allegorical interpretations which, traced back to Rabbi Akiva et al, delineate an identity between the Song and Torah as uttered matrimonially at Sinai and recapitulated by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple which was filled by the *Shekinah*.[62] As the canonical holy of holies,[63] "the Song is the inner sanctum wherein lies the measure of holiness that marks the parameters of sacred space in the textual topography."[64] A further identification shapes up between the Song and Torah and the revelation of the divine name,[65] and so *torah*, broadly construed, becomes the veritable (if textual) presence of the *Shekinah*, the primary embodiment of ecstatic desire of ascetic mystics. With regard to the *Zohar* more specifically, its interpretation of the Song "embraces an erotic mysticism that affirms the ideal of ascetic eschatology, an ideal that is proleptically realized by kabbalists in their pietistic fraternities principally through communal study of the secrets of Torah."[66]

IV. Figuring Torah through the Eros of the Song[67]

Psalm 119:1-2	**Song 6:9**
אַשְׁרֵי **תְמִימֵי**־דָ֑רֶךְ הַֽהֹלְכִ֖ים בְּתוֹרַ֣ת יְהוָֽה אַשְׁרֵ֥י נֹצְרֵ֗י עֵדֹתָ֥יו בְּכָל־לֵ֥ב יִדְרְשֻֽׁהוּ׃	אַחַ֣ת הִ֭יא יוֹנָתִ֣י **תַמָּתִ֑י** אַחַ֥ת הִ֝יא לְאִמָּ֗הּ בָּרָ֥ה הִ֑יא לִֽיוֹלַדְתָּ֥הּ רָ֝אֽוּהָ בָנ֗וֹת וַיְאַשְּׁרֽוּהָ מְלָכ֥וֹת וּפִֽילַגְשִׁ֑ים וַיְהַלְלֽוּהָ
Blessed is the one whose way is **blameless**, / Whose walking is in the *torah* of YHWH.‖ Blessed is the one who observes His testimonies, / With all the heart he seeks them out.	Unique is she, my dove, **my perfect one**, / Unique is she to her mother, / **Pure** is she to the one who bore her.‖ The maidens saw her and they blessed her, / Queens and concubines, and they praised her.

[62] Ibid., 336.
[63] Ibid., 359.
[64] Ibid., 335.
[65] Ibid., 361.
[66] Ibid., 371.
[67] In what follows I have used Calibri typeface for the Hebrew text so that boldfaced words might more easily be seen. In addition to this I have used colored font and highlighting in an attempt to bring out the linguistic, conceptual, and thematic correspondences I am drawing together in each section.

The psalmist opens Ps 119 with a declaration of *blessedness* (אַשְׁרֵי) upon "those who are *blameless* of way (תְמִימֵי־דָרֶךְ), who walk in the *torah* of YHWH (בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה) … who observe his *testimonies* (עֵדֹתָיו), [and] who seek him with their whole heart" (vv1-2). In Song 6:9, the man declares that his dove is alone, unique, his *perfect* one (תַּמָּתִי) his *only* one (אַחַת הִיא). His beloved is *unique* (אַחַת) to her mother, too, *pure* (בָּרָה) to the one who bore her. Moreover, the girls see her and *call her blessed* (וַיְאַשְּׁרוּהָ), and even queens and concubines praise her (וַיְהַלְלוּהָ). Granted, the clearest reading of these two declarations together, the Song in light of the Psalm, would be that the woman is one of those called blessed by the psalmist, corresponding of course to the girls, queens, and concubines who call her blessed. Closer still to a figural construal, the regal to the lowly react appropriately to the one whose *way* is blameless, who *is* blameless, perfect, unique. *This* is an apt description of those who walk in YHWH's *instruction* (תורה) and *testimonies* (עדות), and who search out YHWH with their whole heart (בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרְשׁוּהוּ). With this opening example, a *torah*-figural reading is off to the races, the theme of which is taken up in the next example.

Psalm 119:32, 35, 47-48	**Song 1:4**
דֶּרֶךְ־**מִצְוֹתֶיךָ** אָרוּץ כִּי תַרְחִיב לִבִּי... הַדְרִיכֵנִי בִּנְתִיב **מִצְוֹתֶיךָ** כִּי־בוֹ חָפָצְתִּי... וְאֶשְׁתַּעֲשַׁע בְּ**מִצְוֹתֶיךָ** אֲשֶׁר אָהָבְתִּי וְאֶשָּׂא־כַפַּי אֶל־**מִצְוֹתֶיךָ** אֲשֶׁר אָהָבְתִּי וְאָשִׂיחָה **בְחֻקֶּיךָ**	מָשְׁכֵנִי אַחֲרֶיךָ נָּרוּצָה הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בָּךְ **נַזְכִּירָה דֹדֶיךָ** מִיַּיִן מֵישָׁרִים אֲהֵבוּךָ
The way of **your commandments** I run, / For it enlarges my heart… Make me journey in the path of **your commandments**, / For in it I take pleasure… I delight in **your commandments**, Which I love; / I lift my hands to **your commandments**, Which I love, / And I shall meditate on **your precepts**.	Draw me after you! Let's run!‖ (The king brought me to his chamber.) / Let's be glad and rejoice in you, / Let us mention **your lovings** more than wine; / Rightly do they love you.
Psalm 19:9a	
פִּקּוּדֵי יְהוָה יְשָׁרִים מְשַׂמְּחֵי־לֵב	The precepts of YHWH are upright, /

	Rejoicing the heart.

Here the psalmist declares (v32) that he *runs* (אָרֻוץ) in the way of YHWH's *commandments* (מִצְוֹתֶיךָ) because *by* them YHWH enlarges his *heart*, an idiom for deepening understanding.[68] The psalmist later (v35) asks YHWH to *lead* him in the path of his commandments precisely because the psalmist *takes pleasure in it* (כִּי־בוֹ חָפָצְתִּי). Furthermore, the psalmist (v47) says that he finds *delight* in (וְאֶשְׁתַּעֲשַׁע בְּ-) and lifts up his hands either to swear by or else to praise[69] the commandments of YHWH because he *loves* them (אֲשֶׁר אָהָבְתִּי x2). The psalmist in Ps 19:9 says that YHWH's *precepts* (פִּקּוּדֵי יְהוָה) are just, upright, or straight (i.e. not crooked), and that they *rejoice* the *heart* (מְשַׂמְּחֵי־לֵב).

Missing from these verses, however, is the comparative aspect present in Song 1:4 where the (choral?) group, presumably of women,[70] express that *they will rejoice and be glad in you* (נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בָּךְ), that is the man, and *proclaim your lovings* (נזכירה דדיך) more than they would extol wine. Rather simply, the Song figures *torah* insofar as one is able to understand the man's "lovings" as also the "commandments" or "precepts" of YHWH. These are YHWH's caresses, and they are to be extoled as such because they rejoice the heart. Additionally, the commandments are the way by which the faithful are led by YHWH, in which they delight and in which they run, drawn after YHWH presumably to experience more of YHWH's praiseworthy lovings, the caresses of *torah* for these are indeed more intoxicating than wine.[71] This coheres with the suggestiveness of the beginning of Song 1:4, "Draw me after you, let us run!" (מָשְׁכֵנִי

[68] Cf. 1 Kgs 5:9; Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 3 (90-150)* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016), 493. It can also mean the unfettering of the psalmist's heart from fear and distress of external trouble, cf. Pss 25:17; 31:8-9; 118:5; Isa 60:5; so Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 255 and 269.
[69] *HALOT*, נשא, Qal 3.
[70] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 95; Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 16.
[71] Cf. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 94.

אַחֲרֶיךָ נָּרוּצָה) where they would be *running* to a place where these loving caresses can be intoxicatingly exchanged (cf. הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו).

Song 3:1-3	Psalm 119:55, 62, 81-82
עַל־מִשְׁכָּבִי בַּלֵּילוֹת בִּקַּשְׁתִּי אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי בִּקַּשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מְצָאתִיו אָקוּמָה נָּא וַאֲסוֹבְבָה בָעִיר בַּשְׁוָקִים וּבָרְחֹבוֹת אֲבַקְשָׁה אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי בִּקַּשְׁתִּיו וְלֹא מְצָאתִיו מְצָאוּנִי **הַשֹּׁמְרִים** הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי רְאִיתֶם	זָכַרְתִּי בַלַּיְלָה שִׁמְךָ יְהוָה **וָאֶשְׁמְרָה** תּוֹרָתֶךָ.... חֲצוֹת־לַיְלָה אָקוּם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ עַל מִשְׁפְּטֵי צִדְקֶךָ... כָּלְתָה לִתְשׁוּעָתְךָ נַפְשִׁי לִדְבָרְךָ יִחָלְתִּי כָּלוּ עֵינַי לְאִמְרָתֶךָ לֵאמֹר מָתַי תְּנַחֲמֵנִי
Upon my bed in the nights / I seek for the one whom my soul loves / I sought him, but did not find him.‖ I must rise and make the rounds of the city, / In the streets and in the squares. / I seek there the one whom my soul loves; / I sought him, but did not find him.‖ Found me did **the guards** who go ‘round the city; / “The one whom my soul loves, y’all seen ‘im?”	I remember in the night your name, YHWH, / **I guard** your *torah*… In the middle of the night I rise to thank you,/ According to your righteous judgments… Languishes for your deliverance does my soul/ For your word am I expectant. // Languish do my eyes for your utterance, / [They] say, “When will you comfort me?”

Admittedly, the lament and complaint quality of Ps 119:81-82 is absent from vv.55 and 62, but something resembling it is present in Song 3:1-3.[72] However, the *midnight* (בַּלַּיְלָה, and חֲצוֹת־לַיְלָה) activities of Ps 119:55, 62 are a corollary to the *midnight* (בַּלֵּילוֹת) stirrings of the woman in Song 3:1-3. The psalmist and the woman stir in the night *remembering* (זָכַרְתִּי) and *seeking* (בִּקַּשְׁתִּי) their beloved, the one observing the YHWH’s *instruction* (תּוֹרָתֶךָ) and the other unable to find her *beloved* (אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי). The psalmist *rises* (אָקוּם) to thank YHWH because the ordinances of YHWH are righteous and just, the woman *rises* (אָקוּמָה) to search the city for her beloved because

[72] See also Song 5:2-9, especially vv.2a, “I slept, but my heart stirred;” 6c-e, “my soul left when he spoke. I searched for him but did not find him; called to him, but he did not answer;” 7, “…the sentinels found me, beat me, wounded me, took away my covering…;” 8, “I adjure you daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him that I am faint/sick with love;” and 9, where the daughters respond with a question, “what is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among woman? What is your beloved more than another beloved that you thus adjure us?” These verses/segments would have corollaries in Ps 119:81-82ff. where the psalmist’s *soul languishes* and his *eyes fail* in watching and waiting for YHWH’s *salvation*, *word*, and *promise*, and who asks when he will finally be comforted and delivered from his enemies. Cf. also Ps 119:147-149, “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I put my hope in your words. My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may meditate on your promise. In your steadfast love hear my voice; O Lord, in your justice preserve my life” (NRSV).

she has still not found him. The inability of the woman to find her beloved is matched by the psalmist's *languishing soul* (כָּלְתָה...נַפְשִׁי) and *failing eyes* (כָּלוּ עֵינַי) as he watches and waits for YHWH's *delivering utterance* (לִתְשׁוּעָתֶךָ || לְדִבָרֶךָ, and לְאִמְרָתֶךָ), which leads to the psalmist's question: "When will you comfort me?" This question corresponds to the question the woman poses to the sentinels: "The one my soul loves, have you seen him?"

These questions are linked conceptually. Both are inquiring of their beloved as to *when* they will arrive (an inquiry for closeness or intimacy as implied by the verb נחם) and *where* they may be found (as implied from the question: If you've seen him, *then tell me where he is*? Cf. Song 1:7; 5:8). Both are seeking relief from their ailment, the affliction caused by the absence of the beloved. For the psalmist, YHWH is absent, but so is the deliverance promised. The psalmist languishes awaiting the fulfillment of that promise. For the woman, the one whom she wholeheartedly loves is absent but so are his lovings, and so she is lovesick (cf. Song 5:8). She languishes awaiting the fulfillment of the *utterances* of the one she loves (cf. Ps 119:123; Song 5:6) and she stirs in the night in order to seek out, to find, and to keep these words carefully, asking along the way when these *promises* will be arriving to bring relief to her longing heart, and where the *promise* of her beloved may be found, relieving her tired eyes and heart from their sleepless pursuit.[73]

Song 8:11-12	**Psalm 119:72**
בֶּרֶם הָיָה לִשְׁלֹמֹה בְּבַעַל הָמוֹן נָתַן אֶת־הַכֶּרֶם לַנֹּטְרִים אִישׁ יָבִא בִּפְרִיוֹ אֶלֶף כָּסֶף כַּרְמִי שֶׁלִּי לְפָנָי הָאֶלֶף לְךָ שְׁלֹמֹה וּמָאתַיִם לְנֹטְרִים אֶת־פִּרְיוֹ	טוֹב־לִי תוֹרַת־פִּיךָ מֵאַלְפֵי זָהָב וָכָסֶף
A vineyard, had Shlomoh, at Baal Hamon. / He gave the vineyard to keepers; / Each would bring for its fruit a thousand silver pieces.|| My vineyard, which is mine, is before me, /	"Good" to me is the *torah* of your mouth; / [it is] better than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

[73] See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, and Being*, 355.

	"You can keep your thousand, Shlomoh![74] / And two hundred for the keepers of the fruit."

The phrase *thousands of (gold and) silver pieces* links these passages. It is the price set for the fruit produced by the *vineyard* in Song 8:11-12, and it is the foil for *torah*, the *instruction* (תורה) of YHWH in Ps 119:72. The man (presumably) speaks of his vineyard before him (double entendre for the woman, his beloved)[75] directly to Solomon, who has contracted tenant farmers to keep the vineyards. In effect, he tells Solomon he can keep his vineyards and the thousand pieces of silver each makes. The tenants, too, can keep their (not so measly![76]) two-hundred pieces. He has his very own vineyard before him, and "she" belongs to no other. The psalmist expresses much the same sentiment. Of course, the psalmist does not own YHWH's instruction because it is YHWH's: it comes from *his mouth* (תְּוֹרַת־פִּיךָ) and no one else's. But, the fact that the psalmist thinks they are better (perhaps more desirable, but also, perhaps, more profitable) than thousands of pieces of gold and silver suggests the superior and even superlative quality of the instruction before him. Likewise, the man expresses the superior and superlative quality of his vineyard. This vineyard is more valuable, more desirable, even more profitable than all the vineyards of Solomon, and he's not about to sell out now. The "vineyard," the woman, figures *torah*. It is far superior to the other "vineyards" available.[77] It is also more valuable, more desirable, and more profitable than the fruit of other "vineyards" because its source of life is no vine, nor even any man: it is from the very mouth of YHWH (תְּוֹרַת־פִּיךָ).

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[74] Cf. 1 Kings 11:3. "The thousand" (הָאֶלֶף) here is ambiguous, meaning perhaps Solomon's thousand-count harem, if "my own vineyard" is to be taken as female beloved; so Exum, *Song of Songs*, 261.

[75] See e.g., Song 1:6; 2:15; 4:12-16; cf. also Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 78-9; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260.

[76] Thanks to Professor Marc Brettler for pointing this out to me.

[77] Cf. the agricultural imagery used of Wisdom in Prov 3:18, עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתֹמְכֶיהָ מְאֻשָּׁר: NRSV, "She [Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and those who hold her fast are called happy." See also Ps 1:3, וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל־פַּלְגֵי מָיִם אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעִתּוֹ וְעָלֵהוּ לֹא־יִבּוֹל וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה יַצְלִיחַ: author's translation, "They [who delight in *torat YHWH*, etc. …בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה חֶפְצוֹ, v2] are like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in season, and its leaves do not wither, and all it does prospers."

Psalm 119:103, 127, 131	**Song 2:3; 5:11a, 16a**
מַה־נִּמְלְצוּ לֶחְכִּי אִמְרָתֶךָ מִדְּבַשׁ לְפִי... עַל־כֵּן אָהַבְתִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ מִזָּהָב וּמִפָּז... פִּי־פָעַרְתִּי וָאֶשְׁאָפָה כִּי לְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ יָאָבְתִּי	כְּתַפּוּחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וְיָשַׁבְתִּי וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי... רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז... חִכּוֹ מַמְתַקִּים וְכֻלּוֹ מַחֲמַדִּים
How smooth to my palate are your words, / More than honey to my mouth… Indeed! I love your commandments, / More than gold, even refined gold!... I am open-mouthed and I pant, / For it is your commandments I love.	Like an apricot tree among the trees of the forest, / So is my beloved amidst the boys.‖ In its/his shade I took pleasure, and (in it) I dwell, / And its/his fruit is sweet to my palate… His head is the finest gold… His palate is the sweetest, / And all of him is the most pleasurable.
Psalm 19:11	
הַנֶּחֱמָדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפַּז רָב וּמְתוּקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צוּפִים	They are pleasurable more than gold, even much refined gold / And sweeter even than honey, / Even dripping honey of the comb

The sweeping superlatives in these verses are striking: *better* than the *finest* gold, the *most* sweet, the *most* desirable. Also striking is the fact that these same superlatives are used of both *torah* and the beloved. Song 5:16 immediately follows the only *wasf* about the male, where parts of his body are singled out for descriptive praise.[78] Thus, the second half of the colon, "all of him is the *most desirable* (מַחֲמַדִּים)," functions as a phrase both cumulative and culminative: his body parts have been rolled into one, כֻּלּוֹ, *his entirety*.[79] One of the items the woman enumerates in this totality is his head (the highest point on the body), which is itself the *finest gold* (כֶּתֶם פָּז), the very language used by the psalmist in Ps 19:11 to speak of the entirety of YHWH's *torah* (though of course the nearest antecedent is *YHWH's judgments*, מִשְׁפְּטֵי־יְהוָה) which is *to be desired more than gold, even the finest gold* (הַנֶּחֱמָדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפַּז רָב). Indeed, the psalmist in 119:127 declares

[78] A *wasf* might also be called an *apostrophe*, "an indirect form of discourse in which the male and female lovers speak about (typically in praise of) their beloved" (Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 20).
[79] Cf. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 209.

emphatically (עַל־כֵּן) that his *love* (אָהַבְתִּי) for the *commandments* (מִצְוֹתֶיךָ) of YHWH is greater than that for gold of any kind, let alone *refined gold* (מִזָּהָב וּמִפָּז).[80]

The psalmist in 19:11 continues by comparing the pleasurableness of the entirety of *torah* with honey. Honey is itself pleasurably sweet, but *torah* is sweeter still (וּמְתוּקִים). In 119:103 the psalmist recapitulates this superlative: the *words* of the Lord are *smooth to my palate*, *sweeter* than honey *to my mouth* (מַה־נִּמְלְצוּ לֶחְכִּי אִמְרָתֶךָ מִדְּבַשׁ לְפִי). According the woman in Song 5:16a, her beloved's *palate* is the *sweetest* (Has she tried others? Has the psalmist?), and in part because she has tasted such sweetness, he is altogether desirable. The longing is literally palpable. The psalmist in 119:131 is open-mouthed and panting (פִּי־פָעַרְתִּי וָאֶשְׁאָפָה) because he longingly desires the commandments of YHWH, an image as suggestive as that in Song 2:3. There the beloved is essentially described as a man among boys, as superlative as a (delicious) apricot tree among forest-trees, the fruit of which/whom the woman passionately *enjoys* (חָמַדְתִּי) under the shade (also ambiguous as to *whose* shade: his shade or the tree's?). The *fruit* of this beloved, this delicious apricot tree among forest-trees (presumably of a non-fruit-bearing kind), is *also sweet to the palate* (וּפִרְיוֹ מָתוֹק לְחִכִּי). For the figure, then, *torah* is entirely desirable, and next to (a) honey, whose nature it is to be sweet and delicious, *torah* is more so. It is *sweeter* than honey to the palate. And, as the woman sits in its shade, her mouth is open, longing for the sweetness of *torah* to grace her tongue.

V. A Universal Party of Three and an All-Praying "I"?

The Song's "third-party," e.g. the daughters of Jerusalem, is a difficult feature to deal with. We are confronted primarily with the question of their role in a text that is (more or less) dominated

[80] Cf. the discussion above regarding the desirability of the YHWH's *torah* more than silver and gold.

either by dreamlike monologue or by dialogue between two lovers. Cheryl Exum proposes that the daughters of Jerusalem function to draw the reader of the Song further into the text. They open up the text to those outside the dialogical relationship of the man and the woman. This is accomplished, in part, by the poet's presentation of the lovers "as aware of and in conversation with an audience" (i.e. the daughters/women of Jerusalem), and this presentation "makes the relationship between the lovers less private, less closed (and the Song less voyeuristic), and thus facilitates the reader's entry into the lovers' seemingly private world of erotic intimacy."[81] In the end, "the women's presence is always a reminder that what seems to be a closed dialogue between two perpetually desiring lovers is addressed to us, for our pleasure and possibly for our enlightenment," indeed as an invitation to participate in being or becoming lovers.[82]

The third-party of the Song contributes to a figural reading as Exum has suggested but shifts into another register. The invitation to the reader remains: become lovers. What shifts is the *object* of love. Thus, the invitation shifts with it: become lovers of *torah*. Exum helpfully suggests further that the lovers in the Song are universal in representation. That is, "the Song's lovers are archetypal lovers" whose "love is timeless."[83] Thus, the reader is not only invited to become a lover *through* the lovers' awareness of a conversational audience. They are also invited to read the love between the lovers presented in the Song as archetypal, a *figure* of their own love for the beloved *torah*. This shifts the register yet again. The reader shifts from the level of third-party observer to the level of lover. The reader becomes the speaking persona who addresses and describes the beloved in the second and third person.

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[81] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 7.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid, 8.

Psalms 19B and 119 both take the stance of one at prayer. Add to this the roles of YHWH and of *torah* in these psalms, and a tripartite series of relationships emerges. In a similar way that the third-wheeling presence of the daughters of Jerusalem tacitly invites the readerly third-party into the Song, so the "all-praying 'I'," [84] as it were, invites the reader of these psalms into the triangle of relationships. Thus, the psalmic pray-er/*torah*/YHWH becomes the readerly pray-er/*torah*/YHWH. This picture is complicated, however, by the presence of the "enemies" of the psalmist in 119.[85] Zenger suggests that the picture resulting from the presence of the enemies is an equilateral triangle with the psalmist, YHWH, and the enemies at the three corners and *torah* in the middle. Thus *torah* stands out as the common denominator between all three parties, fitting well with the centerpiece of the psalm: *torah*. The psalmist's relation to YHWH's *torah* is the source of his delight, while the enemies' (negative) relation to it is the source of the psalmist's turbulence. This dynamic set of relationships in Ps 119 could help us probe the turbulent dynamic at play in the Song (e.g. 5:7-8).

Bringing the foregoing observations together, while the daughters of Jerusalem act to invite the reader into the drama of the lovers' exchange, it seems apparent the enemies of Ps 119 resist this sort of extratextual, universalizing invitation. This would seem to be the case with the aggressive and apparently violent watchmen in Song 5:7. So, what is the solution? Taking a cue from Ps 119, a figural proposal suggests that the watchmen in Song 5:7 figure the enemies of the *torah*-lover/seeker throughout Ps 119. Instead of experiencing the scene of Song 5:7 as the watchmen, the reader, with the help of Ps 119, experiences the desolation through the eyes (and body) of the woman, the one who speaks in the first person, "I/me:" "the watchmen found

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[84] This is explored more fully in Karin Finsterbusch, "Yahweh's Torah and the Praying 'I' in Psalm 119" in Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter, eds., *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Supp. *JSJ* 163; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 128-32.

[85] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 257.

me…the struck *me*, they injured *me*, took *my* shawl from *me*…" This carries over into v8, which has the (battered?) woman placing the daughters of Jerusalem (notice the switch back to invitatory "third-party"?) under an oath: "if you find *my* lover, what will you tell him?? That *I* am sick with love!" Given the context, that this oath follows the beating, it is perhaps fair to say that the woman is faint *because of* her love for her beloved. Presumably, she would not have been out in the streets if not for her longing desire to find her beloved, and so would not have been beaten if not for love of *torah*.[86]

VI. Some Benefits and Implications of a Torah-Figural Reading

One of the benefits of a figural construal of the beloved and/or the beloved's attributes in the Song is simply to show that erotic and sensuously suggestive language is *not* limited to the scope of the Song. Closely related to this, a figural reading attempts to highlight literary layers and resonances present not only in the Song and Palms 19B and 119, but also the fact that such layers and the like are present in many other biblical texts. The helpfulness in the proposal is precisely in calling out and identifying *one* of the tones sounded in the chords of love and desire in the composition of the Song, a composition of various chords in concert.

The reading proposed above has potential implications for inter-religious dialogue. While traditional allegorical interpretations privilege one group or another, the strength of the figural proposal in reading the beloved (and some of his/her attributes) as a figure for *torah*, the *revelatory words of YHWH*, not as a partisan beloved. That Jews and Christians hold the books of the OT/HB in common, albeit in different arrangements and in various counts or numbers, is

[86] This conclusion is suggested by the discussion of Jewish piyyut in Lieber, *Vocabulary of Desire*, 79-90.

an opportunity to continue, or begin in some cases, conversations about how we are invited to pursue (בקשׁ) and love the revelation of YHWH in its own right and for its own sake.

The Song, then, ought to be read precisely because it exists as a text to read. More than this, it exists within a corpus of texts which have been accorded authoritative weight (whether theological, practical, or otherwise) and must, therefore, be read within those communities which recognize that authority. My proposal for reading the Song encourages us to read the *rest* of the revealed word of YHWH in a disciplined yet imaginative way. That Scripture might entice us again and again into its pages, its body as a corpus, is at once both titillating and terrifying. At the same time, the intimacy and suggestiveness of a figural reading of the Song may allow deeper and more sustained conversation between Jews and Christians because both have been about the business of tasting the sweet, intoxicating words of revelation.

VII. A Game of Flight and Seek

In closing, I engage briefly with the final verses of Ps 119 and the Song in an effort to engage a well-recognized difficulty in interpreting the Song. Psalm 119:176 reads: "I have wandered like a lost sheep! Seek out your servant, for I have not forgotten your commandments!"[87] The psalmist seems to leverage his remembrance (זכרתי being the positive counterpart of לא שכחתי)[88] of YHWH's *commandments* (מצות) to function like a homing beacon for the desired event of YHWH's deliverance.[89] The psalmist points up the fact that he *has not lost sight* (לא שכחתי) of

[87] תָּעִיתִי כְשֶׂה אֹבֵד בַּקֵּשׁ עַבְדֶּךָ כִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ לֹא שָׁכָחְתִּי.
[88] Cf. Ps 119:52, 55.
[89] And this because life and death are at stake in vv174 and 175.

torah so that YHWH might *seek* (בקש) him out. The petition is that YHWH *pursue* (בקש) this lost sheep[90] *for the sake of* YHWH's *torah* which his servant has kept (שמר) without fail.

The psalmist's desire for YHWH to seek him out for the sake of *torat YHWH* (cf. Ps 119:1) plays up one side of the suggestive ambiguity of the last verse of the Song. I understand the woman in Song 8:14 to be saying to her beloved, "Take flight!" (ברח Qal imv), a verb variously construed by scholarship.[91] Exum suggests that the ambiguous meaning of ברח "*is* the dynamic of the Song, the seeking latent in the finding and the finding latent in the seeking."[92] Thus, Song 8:14 expresses the ambiguity's ebb while Ps 119:176 expresses its flow. In other words, the psalmist implores YHWH to seek (בקש) him for the sake of his having sought *torah*, but the lover implores her beloved to flee (ברח) from her. But, even if one commands *torah* to flee, it is still never very far away (cf. Dt 30:11-14).[93]

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[90] The sense of "lostness" (תעיתי) here is not in the register of morality, but in perceiving oneself to be physically adrift in a strange or hostile environment; see BDB תָּעָה Qal 1; *DBLH* 9494 תָּעָה.

[91] Cf. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 262-3. Exum identifies precisely the ambiguity of the imperative verb ברח, *take flight*, so the question is whether the ambiguity is to be construed as double entendre (so Keel), whether the woman tells her beloved to flee *from her* or *to her*, the latter being code to her beloved in the presence of her companions. See e.g. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 200: "She invites him to 'flee' to the mountains of spice, i.e. to herself;" and Robert Alter, *Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, Daniel: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015), 54. For an extended presentation on this point and various construals of the verb in the history of interpretation, see Marvin H. Pope, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 7C; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, 2010), 697-701.

[92] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 262; emphasis added.

[93] Especially Dt 30:14, כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ; NRSV: "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it." For the "open-ended" nature of the Song, see Exum, *Song of Songs*, 11-13.

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