

Is God Present in the Song of Songs?

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Many commentators on the Song of Songs find no reference to God nor the sound of God's voice in the Song.¹ It is understandable that against the background of pagan fertility cults, when the very air was charged with the divinization of sex, the divine presence/voice would have to be muted in the context of sexuality. Nonetheless, I am convinced that God is clearly present in the Song—and he is not silent!

The Echo of God's Name

A veiled but clear and striking allusion to God appears in the thrice-repeated adjuration spoken by Shulamit: "I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until she pleases" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). In the first two occurrences of this refrain, Shulamit asks the women to bind themselves by the oath *bišəbā'ôt 'ô be'ayəlôt haśśādeh* ("by the gazelles or by the does of the field"). Scholars have widely recognized the play on words between this phrase and the names for God: *bē'lōhē šəbā'ôt* ("by Elohe Shabaoth, the God of hosts") and *bē'el šadday* ("by El Shaddai, the Mighty God").² The inspired poet has substituted similar-sounding names of animals (symbolic of love)³ for the customary divine names used in oaths. Contrary to those who see this as a "secularization" of the Song, I find this a strong

¹ See, e.g., the recent commentary by J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 64, 70.

² See, e.g., Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation, and Commentary* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 28; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 133; Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), 152.

³ For discussion of the love symbolism of these animals in the Song, other biblical wisdom literature, and in the ANE parallels, see, e.g., George M. Schwab, *The Song of Songs' Cautionary Message Concerning Human Love* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 43, 47–48.

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affirmation of God's presence in the Song. Though his name is muted, to be sure, as a safeguard against any attempts to divinize sex after the order of the fertility-cults, it is actually heard even more distinctly through the animals of love that echo the divine appellations. The poet surely would not have even included the oath formula that regularly throughout Scripture employs the divine name ("I adjure you by . . . [divine name] . . . if you do not . . .")⁴ if he did not intend to allude intertextually to the divine presence behind the Song. And he would certainly have not used verbal echoes of the divine names if he were seeking to remove any reference to God in the Song. By substituting similar-sounding names of animals symbolizing love for the divine name and then incorporating these into a divine oath formula, the refrain succeeds in inextricably linking Love (personified in the oath) with the divine presence without thereby divinizing sex.⁵

George M Schwab has accurately captured the use of circumlocutions for the divine name in this verse:

In the Bible, there is no case where one swears by zoological specimens. . . . The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem—and the author desires the reader—to swear by God not to stir up love until it pleases. . . . The girl wants the young women to take an oath by the gazelle and doe. These terms serve as circumlocutions for God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts. But they are also used as symbols throughout the Song for sexual endowment, appeal, comeliness, and fervor. The words, then, exist with three referents: animals in a symbolic forest, the divine warrior God Almighty and his Hosts, and ardent affection. . . . Thus the terms combine the concept of God with the concept of love and its power. The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem to swear by sexuality and God—and these two concepts are fused into a single image. The Song should then be read as if love were conceived as a divine attribute of God. . . . Love is not simply a matter of feelings, social contracts, or trysts in the wood.⁶

The Voice of God

Let us move from the dominant recurring refrain of the Song to its twin apexes. There is wide scholarly agreement that the two high points of Canticles are 4:16–5:1 and 8:5–7. One is the structural/symmetrical center of the Song; the other is the thematic peak. Landy refers to these passages as "the two central foci: the centre and the conclusion."⁷ Ernst Wendland calls them the "middle

⁴ See, e.g., Gen 24:3; cf. Gen 14:22–23; Josh 9:19; Judg 21:7; 1 Sam 24:21; 28:10; 2 Sam 19:7; 1 Kgs 1:30; 2:8, 23, 42; 2 Chron 36:13; Neh 13:25; Isa 48:1; 65:16; Jer 12:16; Zeph 1:5.

⁵ Note that the ancient versions recognized the link with God in this verse. The LXX translates "by the powers and forces of the field," and the Targum, "by the Lord of Hosts and by the Strength of the land of Israel."

⁶ Schwab, 43, 47–48.

⁷ Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 51.

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climax” and “final peak” of the Song respectively,⁸ and amasses a persuasive display of literary evidence to support the choice of these passages as the Song’s twin summits.⁹

Many scholars recognize that Song 4:16–5:1 comes at the very center of the symmetrical literary structure of the Song. I concur with those commentators who also conclude that it is probably the Voice of God himself that resounds in the climactic last line of this central apex to the Song, giving his divine benediction upon the marriage and its consummation: “Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!” (5:1e). Many suggest that it is the groom extending an invitation to the guests to join in the wedding banquet. But this is improbable since the two terms “friends” (*rē’îm*) and “lovers” (*dôdîm*) used in 5:1e are the terms used elsewhere in the Song for the *couple*,¹⁰ not for the companions/guests. If the terms in 5:1e refer *to* the couple, they could not be spoken *by* either bride or groom. The “omniscient” narrator/poet at this high point in the Song seems to have a ring of divine authority and power—to be able to bestow a blessing and approbation upon the consummation of the marriage of the bride and groom. I find it most likely that the Voice of 5:1e is that of Yahweh himself, adding his divine blessing to the marriage, as he did at the first Garden wedding in Eden. In the wedding service, only he has the ultimate authority to pronounce them husband and wife. On the wedding night, only he is the unseen Guest able to express approbation of their uniting into one-flesh.¹¹

God’s voice is the central, and yes, the omniscient Voice. His authoritative voice here at the climax to the Song returns us to Eden, to another divine approbation upon the sexual union he already had proclaimed “very good” in the beginning. By speaking here at the focal point of the Song, and speaking to both lovers, he underscores that sexual fulfillment is in the center of the divine will for *both* partners.

The Covenant Name of God: Yahweh

The *echo* of God’s names resonates in the dominant recurring refrain of the Song (2:7; 3:5; cf. 8:4), and the actual *voice* of God resounds from the Song’s

⁸ Ernst R. Wendland, “Seeking a Path Through a Forest of Symbols: A Figurative and Structural Survey of the Song of Songs,” *JOTT* 7/2 (1995): 41.

⁹ Wendland, 41–46.

¹⁰ Cant 5:16; 1:13–14, 16; 2:3, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17; 4:10, 10, 16; 5:2, 4, 5, 6, 6, 8, 9 (4x), 10, 16; 6:1, 1, 2, 3; 7:10 (ET 9), 11 (ET 10), 12 (ET 11), 13 (ET 12), 14 (ET 13); 8:5, 14.

¹¹ Here I concur with Joseph C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex: The Biblical Guide to Married Love* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 86: “The poet seems to say this is the voice of God Himself. Only the Lord could pronounce such an affirmation. He, of course, was the most intimate observer of all. Their love came from Him (Song 8:7). Thus, the Lord pronounces His full approval on everything that has taken place. He encourages them to drink deeply of the gift of sexual love.” So also S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976), 25: “In the final analysis this must be the voice of the Creator, the greatest Poet, the most intimate wedding guest of all, the one, indeed, who prepared this lovely couple for the night of his design.”

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central summit (5:1). But when one moves to Canticles' thematic climax and conclusion, the great paean to love (8:6), the actual *name* of Yahweh makes its single explicit appearance in the book, and his flaming theophanic presence encapsulates the entire message of the Song. Song 8:6 reads:

For love is as strong as death,
Ardent love as relentless/intense as Sheol;
Its flames [*rēšāpeyhā*] are flames of fire [*rišpēy ʿēš*]—
The very flame of Yah(weh) [*šalhebetyā*].¹²

Wendland demonstrates that “A host of Hebrew literary devices converge here [Cant 8:6] to mark this as the main peak of the entire message. . . . In this verse we have the fullest, most sustained attempt to describe (or is it evoke?) the supreme subject of the Song, namely ‘love.’”¹³ He also incisively points out that the Hebrew word selected by the inspired poet to occupy the “ultimate, climactic position”¹⁴ of this verse—and thus of the final peak of the Song—is *šalhebetyā* (“the flame of Yah[weh]”).

Some have suggested that this Hebrew word be excised from the text as a gloss,¹⁵ but there is no manuscript evidence for such emendation, and the word fits the context precisely. Murphy provides a sound assessment of the situation: “Some commentators have questioned the integrity of the text, but without substantial support from the ancient versions. Although the colon is short, with only four syllables, one need not conclude that the construction is a gloss.”¹⁶

The word *šalhebetyā* is a compound term, composed of the noun *šalhebet* (“flame”) and the suffix *-yā*. While the Ben Asher text of the MT does not separate this compound term, the Ben Naphtali tradition (as well as many manuscripts and editors [BHK]) divides the term into two words, *šalhebet-yāh*.¹⁷ The probable 3 + 2 rhythm of the poetry here may lend support to this separation of

¹² My discussion below will give the evidence for this translation.

¹³ Wendland, 43–44. The literary devices include, among other things: “strict parallelism (the first two lines); syntactic placement (the utterance—final key terms, ‘love’ and ‘ardor’); imagery (simile and metaphor); symbolism (death and fire); paradox (the compelling power of death [destructive] v. love [creative]; condensation (esp. the last line); an even rhythmic pattern (3 + 3 + 3) with variation (the last word/demi-line [?]); alliteration (the repeated [*s*] of lines 2–3) with possible onomatopoeia (imaging the hi-ss-ing of a fire); and an apocopated mention of the divine name (*-ya*) in ultimate, climactic position” (ibid.).

Schwab states a conclusion similar to Wendland’s: “What is expressed in Cant 8:6–7 can serve as a lens to bring into focus the whole Song of Songs’ conception of love” (61).

¹⁴ Wendland, 44.

¹⁵ E.g., Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible, vol. 7C (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 670 (who lists various suggested emendations).

¹⁶ Murphy, 192.

¹⁷ See Michael V. Fox, *Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1985), 170.

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yāh as an independent word.¹⁸ Whether separated or not, commentators are generally agreed that the *-yā* (or *yāh*) connected with *šalhebet* is the Hebrew for “Yah,” the shortened form of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH (Yahweh). The pointing of the MT clearly suggests this conclusion. This fits the pattern of other words which have the apocopated suffix *-yā*, “Yah(weh).” The apocopated form of Yahweh, Yah, often has the *mappîq* dot in the final *he* esp., when appearing by itself (e.g. Ps 118:5) or joined by a *maqēf* (e.g., Ps 117:2), but not necessarily when it is part of a longer word. See, for example, Jer 2:31, *ma’pēlyā* (“the darkness of Yah[weh]”), and many names with the theophoric ending (e.g., *yēdāyā* [Jedaiah, 2 Sam 12:25]; *yēkonyā* [Jeconiah, 1 Chr 3:16]; *hizqîyā* [Hezekiah, 2 Kgs 18:1]; etc.). The LXX apparently took *-yā* as a third person feminine singular pronominal suffix, but there is no good reason to abandon the MT pointing in favor of the LXX reading esp., since the Aramaic Targums apparently understood it along the lines of the MT, as referring to the divine name.

Yah(weh) As an Indication of the Superlative?

Although it is generally conceded that the name of Yah(weh) appears in this passage, many insist that this is simply another instance of the Hebrew idiom for expressing the superlative, i.e., “A most vehement flame.”¹⁹ This is a theoretical possibility, although valid examples of using a divine name to express the superlative in the Hebrew Bible are not nearly as common as has been claimed,²⁰ and any instance of the covenant name *yāh* (or the full Tetragrammaton YHWH) ever being used as a superlative has been questioned. So, e.g., the statement of A. M. Harman: “Many modern discussions assume that ‘flames of Yah’ is yet another instance of the divine name being used as a superlative. It is true that *’elohim* may be used in this way but not the covenant name *yah* which occurs here (similarly the use of *yahweh* in Gen. 35:5 and 1 Sam. 26:12 need not be

¹⁸ See Raymond Tournay’s note in *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. André Robert and Raymond J. Tournay (Paris: Gabalada, 1963), 453; idem, “Les Chariots D’Aminadab (Cant. vi 12): Israël, Peuple Théophile,” *VT* 9 (1959): 307; cf. Murphy, 192.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Duane Garrett, “Song of Songs,” in Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23B (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 255, who argues that the term “should not be taken as an actual reference to the name of God. The ending here has virtually lost all theological significance, and it simply functions adjectivally for ‘mighty’ or the like.” Cf. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 213; and Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 26, n. 90; and various modern versions (RSV, NRSV, KJV, NKJV, NIV [although the margin reads “like the very flame of the Lord”], etc.).

²⁰ I concur with Landy when he writes: “While I concede that the name of God may sometimes be used idiomatically, as a vague connotation of grandeur, the instances most commonly referred to are not always convincing [sic] e.g. Nineveh was a very great city before God (Jonah 3.3); it is the concern of God for the great city that is the point of the parable” (Landy, 315, n. 114). Landy then points to other passages (Ps 36:7 and Ps 80:11) that he argues are not superlatives but indicate the “divine domicile.”

explained as a superlative).”²¹ Carey Walsh states categorically, “While the generic term for god does function as a semantic device for superlatives, this [Song 8:6] verse would be the sole case where the proper name of Yahweh does. And it would be a surprising use, really. Considerable care [was] taken around the divine name in the Bible, illustrated by the Third Commandment, which prohibited the wrongful use of the divine name (Exod 20:7). . . . The reverence toward the divine name makes it unlikely that it was used as a mere stylistic device in the Song.”²²

šalhebetyâ as “the Flame of Yahweh”

A number of crucial considerations have led me to the conclusion that I share with dozens of commentaries and translations²³—that the expression *šalhebetyâ* in this context moves beyond the superlative to describe “the very flame of Yahweh.” I summarize the evidence under seven points.

First, the *šap’el* or causative verbal root of *šalhebet* (common in Aramaic/Syriac), suggesting the meaning “causing to flame,” supports the conclusion that the construct relationship here is best interpreted as a subjective genitive, with Yah(weh) the cause or source of the flame.²⁴ As Christian Ginsburg notes, “this predicate does not state the flames of love are ‘most vehement,’ but affirms that they emanate from the Eternal . . . [Yāh] is the genitive of cause or origin.”²⁵

Second, the single occurrence of a precise terminological parallel to *šalhebetyâ* in the Hebrew Bible—*ma’pēlyâ* (“darkness of Yah” [Jer 2:31]), also (like *šalhebetyâ*) a compound term with apocopated suffix *-ya*—most probably should not be taken as an example of a superlative usage, but rather be seen as referring to darkness originated by Yahweh. The only other occurrence of *ma’pēl* “darkness” in the Hebrew Bible (but without the *-yâ* suffix) is in Josh 24:7, where Yahweh reminds his people that “He put darkness [*ma’âpēl*] between you and the Egyptians” at the time of the Exodus by the Red Sea. After briefly describing the drowning of the Egyptians, the verse concludes: “And your eyes saw what I [Yahweh] did in Egypt. Then you dwelt in the wilderness a long time.” The passage in Jer 2:31, by utilizing a term used only once more in

²¹ A. M. Harman, “Modern Discussion on the Song of Songs,” *RTR* 37 (1978): 71. See the discussion of this point below.

²² Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 205.

²³ For a full bibliographical listing, see my forthcoming monograph, *Flame of Yahweh: A Theology of Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, forthcoming).

²⁴ See Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: Three Volumes in One*, trans. M. G. Easton, vol. 6 of Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, repr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 3:147.

²⁵ Christian David Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth [Commonly Called Ecclesiastes]: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (1857 and 1861; repr.; New York: Ktav, 1970), 188.

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the Hebrew Bible, appears to be an intertextual echo of the Joshua passage: it is also set against an Exodus backdrop (cf. Jer 2:2, 6, 18), and the single v. 31 has the same terms/motifs of Josh 24:7: *midbar* (“wilderness”), *ma’âpêl* (“darkness”), and “Israel/my people.” Both passages allude to the incident recorded in Exod 14:19–20, where God himself was the pillar of darkness to the Egyptians and a pillar of light to Israel. The Joshua passage captures this divine causation of the darkness by explicitly stating, “your eyes saw what I, Yahweh, did in Egypt.” The compressed Jeremiah allusion likewise captures the divine connotations to the darkness by adding the suffix *-yâ* to the word *ma’âpêl* (“darkness”). The resulting compound term *ma’pēlyā* is not just the superlative “deep darkness,” but in actuality “darkness of Yah,” a darkness originating with and caused by Yahweh.²⁶

Third, the *immediate context* of the term *šalhebetyâ* in Song 8:6 seems to clearly go beyond the superlative meaning of “most vehement flame” or “lightning.” Mark Elliot points out that “Either this is a poor choice of metaphor, or it is claiming a supernatural quality for love. We are at this moment hearing something about the divine aspect of Love.”²⁷ As Landy writes, “To interpret ‘salhebetya’ as chance lightning does not do justice to it in the context of the Song as a whole or of this verse, with its confrontation of eternal forces.” Landy also points out (citing Lys) that since lightning was considered as divine fire, interpreting as “divine fire of the divine” would be tautologous. He notes further that *šalhebet* does appear twice more in the Hebrew Bible (both without the prefixed divine name): Job 15:30 and Ezek 21:3 [ET 20:47], where it could refer either to lightning or a forest fire.²⁸

The “eternal forces” of love, death, ardent love, and Sheol in this passage call for reference to another “eternal force”—i.e., Yahweh—not just common lightning-bolts. In fact, it has been pointed out that this passage is an implicit contrast (I might add even polemic) between Yahweh and the other prominent Canaanite/Ugaritic “deities” over whom he shines supreme: Death (*māwet*), Sheol (*šē’ôl*), Blazes (*rešep*), and Many Waters = primeval chaos (*mayim rabbîm*).²⁹

Fourth and fifth, the *structural position* of the term *šalhebetyâ* in the passage, and the *heightened literary artistry* that accompanies it here, points beyond a mere superlative usage. As Wendland states, these points, “the clipped and

²⁶ For this point I am indebted to one of my Andrews University Theological Seminary students who wrote a paper in my seminar on the Song of Songs: Ronaldo D. Marsollier, “Cant 8:6–7: Love as a Divine Gift: The Crown and Climax of the Song of Songs” (paper presented for the class OTST668 Psalms/Wisdom Literature: Song of Songs, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich., Winter 1999).

²⁷ Mark W. Elliot, “Ethics and Aesthetics in the Song of Songs,” *TB* 45 (1994): 147.

²⁸ Landy, 127, 316, n. 118.

²⁹ See Wendland, 44; cf. John G. Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 121–122.

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suffixed reference to ‘Yahweh’, while it could be a mere idiomatic substitute for the superlative (i.e., the ‘hottest/brightest’ flame), in this structural position [the “ultimate, climactic position” of this verse] . . . and in conjunction with so much stylistic embellishment, definitely seems to signify something more [i.e., the flame of God].”³⁰ Landy shows how the structural placement of *šalhebetýâ* in the phrase *reššāpěhā rišpě ʿēš šalhebetýâ* (“its flames are flames of fire—the very flame of Yahweh”) gives this word the role of resolving the suspense built up earlier in the credo: “Rhythmically the phrase is characterized by compression: from ‘*reššāpayhā*’ to ‘*rišpě*’ to the monosyllable ‘*ʿēš*’. . . In fact, the double stress ‘*rišpě ʿēš*’ can only be followed by a pause, a moment of suspense, resolved in the long climactic apposition: ‘*šalhebetýâ*.’”³¹

Sixth, the larger canonical context points to Yahweh’s presence here in Song 8:6, for “fire betrays God’s presence throughout the Bible; substanceless, and shapeless, it is his element, the nearest approach to his image.”³² The presence of God in theophany is connected with flames of fire in numerous places in Scripture. See, e.g., already in Gen 3:24 (the use of the verb *škn* to describe the “placement” of the cherubim with “the flame of the whirling sword” may allude to the Shekinah presence in their midst; the “smoking oven” and “burning torch” that passed between the pieces of the covenant sacrifices in Gen 15 clearly represented the divine presence (Gen 15:17); God appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:2); and the pillar of fire definitely symbolized Yahweh’s presence (Exod 13:21; 40:38; Num 9:15).

So in the Song, love “is portrayed here as an amorous phlogiston, an unappeasable holocaust, Yahweh’s fire. Coming into love is like coming into God’s presence. . . .”³³ The closest and most crucial connection between fire and God’s presence is with regard to the sanctuary in Israel’s midst. Landy does not fail to grasp this connection with the sanctuary, and the application to love as the flame of God:

For in Israel, in the dialectics of king and kingdom, the flame of God is constantly alight only on the altar at its center; it communicates between heaven and earth. . . . In the sanctuary, the union and differentiation of lovers is a collective process; there, symbolically, the wealth of the kingdom is reduced to ashes, merged with the divine flame, and renewed. God, the source of life, is indwelling in the land, and guarantees its continuance. The shine is thus the matrix, an inner confine, and the hearth, the generative flame. There the king and the Beloved participate in the creative current that infuses the lovers at the centre of their world.³⁴

³⁰ Wendland, 44.

³¹ Landy, 129.

³² *Ibid.*, 127.

³³ Schwab, 63.

³⁴ Landy, 127.

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Landy is on the right track in connecting the flame of Yahweh with the divine flame on the altar of the sanctuary, but he has not gone far enough. He needs to go “further up and further in” (to use C. S. Lewis’ phrase)³⁵—further up to the heavenly sanctuary, and further in to the inner sanctum.

As a seventh and final point, I call attention to specific intertextual linkages with Song 8:6—even closer intertextuality than alluded to by Landy. In the divine theophanies related to the sanctuary, there is fire, flames of fire, not just at the altar, but also, and especially, in the very throne room of Yahweh. In the earthly sanctuary the pillar of fire hovered over the “Tent of the Testimony” (Num 9:15; Exod 40:38). The blazing glory of God filled the tent at its inauguration (Exod 40:34), and the Shekinah dwelt between the cherubim in the holy of holies (Exod 25:22; 1 Sam 4:4; 6:2; Pss 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16). In the heavenly temple the seraphim “burning ones” surrounded the throne (Isa 6:2), antiphonally singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and the whole temple was filled with smoke (Isa 6:4); there on the holy mountain of God the anointed cherub walked in the midst of “stones of fire” (Ezek 28:14, 16).

But beyond all this general intertextual background, there is one (and only one of which I am aware) OT passage that equals Song 8:6 with as much concentrated reference to flames/fire, and this passage describes the very throne of Yahweh, the Ancient of Days. Daniel 7:9–10, the intertextual twin of Song 8:6, overflows with fiery flames! In immediate succession, three times flames/fire are mentioned, matching (in Aramaic) almost precisely the three-fold (in Hebrew) mention of fiery flames in Song 8:6. (1) Dan 7:9—“His [the Ancient of Days’] throne was a fiery flame” (= the *reššāpêhā* [“its flames”] of Song 8:6); (2) Dan 7:9—“Its wheels a burning fire” (= the *rišpê’ēš* [“flames of fire”] of Song 8:6); and (3) Dan 7:10—“A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him” (= the *šalhebetyâ* [“flame of Yah(weh)”] in Song 8:6). These texts appear to be intertextually related, with Dan 7:10 as a parallel description of “the flame of Yahweh.” In canonical perspective, the “flame of Yah” in Song 8:6 is none other than the fiery stream that comes forth from the enthroned Yahweh himself. The Song’s Flame of Yahweh thus brings us into the heavenly Holy of Holies!

Objections Rebutted

In light of the multi-dimensional evidence supporting the acceptance of *šalhebetyâ* as an integral part of the text and constituting an explicit mention of Yahweh, the various arguments against this position fall to the ground. Landy cogently summarizes the main points of opposition and diffuses them by going to the root causes for such resistance to the presence of the divine Name in this passage. To those who wish to emend the text, he chides: “the postulation of glosses seems to me questionable, since it is uncomfortably like an excuse for eliminating anything inconvenient. Numerous and ungainly are the emendations

³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: MacMillan, 1956), 161–177.

proposed for ‘*šalhebetŷ*.’” To those who do textual surgery as well as to those who attenuate the divine name into hyperbole, he cuts to their unstated (and perhaps unconscious) motivation: “misguided prurience.” To those who argue that this would be Yahweh’s sole entry in the book and therefore it cannot refer to Him, he replies that this “is no argument . . . it is equally as valid to say that its uniqueness reinforces its solemnity.” To those who maintain that sexuality is inconsistent with sanctity, he both reminds and reprimands: “References and comparisons to divinity are found in the love-literature of all ages . . . It is a remarkable irony that just those commentators who populate the Song with concealed deities refuse to recognise his presence there when he comes to the surface!”³⁶

Significance and Implications

Landy has rightly assessed the importance of *šalhebetŷ* in the wisdom credo of Song 8:6–7 and of the entire book. He states it dramatically: “‘*šalhebetŷ*’ ‘the flame of God’ is the apex of the credo, and of the Song.”³⁷ LaCocque concurs: “‘a flame of Yah[weh].’ . . . The whole of the Canticle is encapsulated in this phrase.”³⁸ And Wendland summarizes the profound implication from this phrase: “YHWH is the Source not only of love in all its power and passion, but also of the paired, male-female (= marriage) relationship in which love is most completely and intimately experienced.”³⁹

If the blaze of love, ardent love, such as between a man and woman, is indeed the Flame of Yahweh, then this human love is explicitly described as originating in God, “a spark off the Holy Flame.” It is therefore, in a word, *holy* love.⁴⁰ Such a conclusion has profound significance for the whole reading of the Song of Songs—and for the quality and motivation of human sexual love. I explore this significance more fully in a forthcoming monograph,⁴¹ but I briefly state here that Song 8:6 makes explicit what was already implicit in the woman’s adjurations of her companions not to awaken love until it is ready (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). As already hinted in these verses by the play on words with the names of God, love is not ready capriciously or randomly, but according to the will of him from whom this holy love originated.

³⁶ Landy, 127, 315–316.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁸ André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on the Song of Songs* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998), 172.

³⁹ Wendland, 44.

⁴⁰ John P. Richardson writes: “whilst the *Song of Songs* is certainly a celebration and endorsement of human eroticism it is surely also in some sense a sacralization of it” (“Preaching from the *Song of Songs*: Allegory Revisited,” *ERT* 21 [1997]: 256). This is not in the cultic sense, as with the sacralization of sex in fertility cults, but “holy” as God is holy—unique, “set apart” *from* the secular and *for* relationship.

⁴¹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, chap. 14.

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Song 8:6 also makes explicit what was implicit in the divine approbation of the lovers' consummation of their marriage on their wedding night (Song 5:1e). The love between husband and wife is not just animal passion, or evolved natural attraction, but a love approved—yes, even ignited—by Yahweh himself! The love relationship within the context of marriage is not only beautiful, wholesome, and good, but holy. Lovers then will treat each other with godly self-giving because they are animated by a holy, self-giving Love.

To put it another way, if human love is the very Flame of Yahweh, then this human love at its best—as described in the Song—points beyond itself to the Lord of love. The human “spark off the Eternal Flame” reveals the character of that Divine Flame. The love relationship of male and female, made in the image of God, reflects the I-Thou love relationship inherent in the very nature of the triune God. The various characteristics and qualities of holy human love that emerge from the Song of Songs—mutuality, reciprocity, egalitarianism, wholeness, joy-of-presence, pain-of-absence, exclusivity (yet inclusiveness), permanence, intimacy, oneness, disinterestedness, wholesomeness, beauty, goodness, etc.—all reflect the divine love within the very nature of God's being. By beholding the love relationship within the Song, and within contemporary godly marriages reflecting the relationship depicted in the Song, one may catch a glimpse of the divine holy love. These marriages “preach” to us of the awesome love of God!

In the final analysis, then, the allegorical interpretation of the Song may be right in its *conclusion* that the Song reveals God's love for his people, although wrong in the *way* in which the conclusion is reached. The human love relationship between Solomon and Shulamit is not the worthless “husk” to be stripped away *allegorically* to find the kernel, the “true” meaning, the love between God and his covenant community. Rather the love relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, described in the Song, has independent meaning and value of its own to be affirmed and extolled, while at the same time this human love is given even greater significance as, according to the Song's climax (8:6), it *typologically* points beyond itself to the divine Lover. Far different from the *allegorical* approach, with its fanciful, externally-and-arbitrarily-imposed meaning alien to the plain and literal sense, the Song itself calls for a *typological* approach,⁴² which remains faithful to, and even enhances, the literal sense of the Song, by recognizing what the text itself indicates—that human love typifies the

⁴² For the distinction between allegory and typology, see the author's discussion in *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τύπος Structures*, Andrews University Dissertation Series 2 (Berrien Springs: Andrews U, 1981), 20, 81, 100–101. Since the appearance of my initial article on the theology of sexuality in the Song of Songs (Richard M. Davidson, “Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs: Return to Eden,” *AUSS* 27 [1989]: 1–19), others have (independently, it seems) pointed out the need for recognizing the typological (not allegorical) approach to the Song based upon the *šalhebet* (“Flame of Yahweh”) in Song 8:6. See esp., Wendland, 51, 53; and Murphy, 104.

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divine. Thereby human sexual love, already so highly esteemed elsewhere in Scripture, is here given its highest acclamation.

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