

Language Notes

with Charles M Durante



The Song of Songs—A Critique Part Three

When all the false leads are eliminated, the true interpretation is the simplest. It was doubtless the plain sense of the Song which the Jews before Rabbi Akiba recognized but which the allegorical tide swamped. The Song is a collection of love songs that do not have the least intent of symbolizing divine love, nor have they derived from pagan religious celebration. While loosely connected in tradition with Solomon (one of the poems, 3:6-11, in which Solomon is central, may be an epithalamium composed for one or more of his famous marriages), the poems are not the work of a single poet, much less a dramatist. The Song teaches no lesson and tells no story. It extols human love in courtship and marriage by letting the lovers speak for themselves. Theodore of Mopsuestia (360-429 CE) was apparently the first to call the Song secular, and his view was declared heretical. A few Jewish medievalists regarded it as a song written by Solomon for his favourite wife. Sebastien Castellion (1546) had to leave Geneva because, as Calvin said, 'He considers that the Song is a lascivious and obscene poem.' Luis de Leon (1567) fell into the hands of the Inquisition for similar effrontery.

A special form of the lyrical hypothesis was advanced by a theologian called K. Budde (1893). He saw the Song as a disordered cycle of songs for Jewish weddings in which the groom was 'king' and the bride 'maiden' for a week, the girl danced for her lover on the eve of the wedding, and detailed erotic praises of the male and female bodies were offered (called wasfs in Arabic. Here is part of a 'wasfs' from the Song: 'Your rounded thighs are like jewels/the work of a master hand./Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine./Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies./Your two breasts are like two fawns/twins of a gazelle. (7: 1-3). Now that the allegorical interpretation is in decline among Roman Catholics and virtually extinct among Jews and Protestants, some interpreters have attempted a didactic redirection of the Song, emphasizing the purity and propriety of married love and the religious character of marriage. Since the Song is in the Christian canon, it is not amiss to see it in total context. But such reinterpretation sometimes arises from an uneasiness about the Song's frankness and is clouded by an apologetic attitude. It is likely also to dismiss the ancient

social setting in the desire for immediately applicable truth. The prude's discomfort and the censor's fear must not efface the simple delight of the Song in the sexuality of human beings. 'Love is stronger than death' (8:6), and stronger than the reticence and embarrassment of interpreters. Sex in the Song. In reading the Song we must be careful not to impose Victorian notions of sexuality, nor any notion about what many presume is a negative attitude toward sexuality in Judaism or Christianity. The Song may seem odd as a biblical book, yet when viewed in the broader context of the ancient Near East, especially Egyptian literature, it is quite normal. In terms of style, the 'wasfs' in the Song are quite similar to poems written in the period of the Egyptian New Kingdom. Like the Song, the Egyptian 'wasfs' refer to the female lover as 'sister.' Like all but one of the 'wasfs' in the Song, the Egyptian authors describe the body from top to bottom, focusing on the same body parts mentioned in the biblical book. In case the reader is confused, 'wasfs' are elaborate descriptions of features of the lover's body. The Song depicts premarital sex positively; this attitude differs

dramatically from what is found in the rest of the Bible. But the Bible is a highly complex book, reflecting the outlook of different groups, so such a difference is not surprising. It certainly does not justify reading the book allegorically. Ambiguity. The ambiguity of the Song is one of the features that make it so remarkable. Poetry is ambiguous, but the Song seems to revel in this quality. Most of the book's ambiguity is sexual in nature. For example, In Chapter 5 we have the following sequence: 'I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! My beloved is knocking. 'Open to me, my sister, my love.....' The passage turns on the ambiguity of whether the woman's 'house' is really her dwelling, or her body. Is the male lover standing outside trying to get inside or is he next to her, trying to enter her? In what sense is he knocking? Verses 4-5 read 'My beloved put his hand to the latch/and my heart was thrilled within me'. In these verses are the 'hand' and the 'latch' euphemisms for genitalia? When the woman describes herself as clean and naked, is she saying that the man should go away because she is already half asleep, or is she teasing him to come nearer? Representing the body as a house is a frequent metaphor in many cultures; this allows the poet of this unit to introduce numerous double meanings.

Such sexual ambiguities fit the Song. For example, the vineyard in the Song is an image that often alludes to the woman's ripe and sweet sexuality. Most likely the symbol plays on the visual similarity between the cluster of dark grapes and the pubic tangle. Thus the woman can say, 'My

mother's sons made me guard the vineyard/my own vineyard I did not guard (1:6). This means that her brothers tried to keep her chaste by making her work in the fields but she fooled them. While guarding the literal vineyard, she was free with her figurative one! Another case when vineyard is used symbolically is 1: 13-14, where the woman says of her male lover, 'My beloved to me is a spray of henna blossoms/in the vineyard of Engedi'. Engedi housed the ancient Judean perfume industry not a wine vineyard. The vineyard is not meant literally: the verse is really a veiled reference to the woman enjoying the man's body. Another example of ambiguity is found in 1:9, 'I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots.' The comparison hardly sounds complimentary until we realise that the writer has more than the surface meaning in mind. Egyptian horses were considered the best and the stallions, not the mares, were used to draw the chariots. The preposition linked to the chariots is more accurately translated as 'among.' These factors underscore the girl's attractiveness. A mare loosed among the royal stallions would create intense excitement. This is the ultimate in sex appeal! One of the joys of literature is its inexhaustibility-interpretation can be pursued endlessly. The Song of Songs has been and will continue to be examined, commented on and interpreted and no one version of its meaning will ever become definitive. I have tried to give the reader some idea of its content and flavour. I hope I have succeeded in stirring the reader's interest sufficiently to make him/her want to read the Song for themselves.

First hair collection launched by Mayfair on Main



Pic: Johnny Bugeja

Mayfair on Main has launched its very first hair collection for the Autumn/Winter 2020 season focusing on the "transitional and colourful season". The salon has produced four looks which pays homage to the forest and is inspired by the warm tones of leaves and bark to the cooler tones of frosting berries – the first of its kind in Gibraltar. With names such as "Rusted Cinnamon", "Frozen Berry", "Auburn Oak" and "Chestnut Blush", the looks depict the

transition from one season to the next. Artistic director, Nathan Aron, explained that this collection is "a vision into the future on the hair styles" when it comes to cut, shapes and colours. Clients can select a look and a stylist can create a "bespoke" look based on their needs, Pauline Olivera, the salon's creative director said. "We are very lucky to be able to set up a trend here in Gibraltar and show people what they can wear in different seasons," Mr Aron said.

"As a brand, we are not just about hair but about fashion and beauty also," salon owner, Sarah Carreras added. "It is important that we get involved and we are the trendsetters, so we create these looks to inspire the public and inspire the industry." These looks will not just be published in Gibraltar, but also in various hair publications in the UK. Stylists at Mayfair on Main are already working on their next collection, while also working on an artistic collection.

CHESTERTONS
Gibraltar

OCEAN VILLAGE Thinking of renting?

We have a wonderful selection of rental properties available in Ocean Village

1 bed starting from £1,550 pcm
2 bed from £1,700 pcm
3 bed from £2,350 pcm
Luxury penthouse £7,000 pcm

If you would like to view any of the above or go on our mailing list then please simply:

call +350 200 40041
email: jacky.carreras-dyer@chestertons.gi
or come into 30 Ocean Village Promenade