

I The Song of Songs, by Solomon.

שיר השירים אשר לשלמה: א

Peshat

SUPERSCRPTION (1:1)

1:1. *The Song of Songs* The phrase *shir ha-shirim* is constructed like other superlatives in Scripture: “holy of holies” (*kodesh ha-kodashim*); “vanity of vanities” (*havel havalim*; Eccles. 1:2); and “King of kings” (*melekh malkhayya*; Ezra 7:12). As such, it denotes an element distinctive among its kind—i.e., this Song is the best “of all songs” (Immanuel). On this basis, the Song has been deemed exceptional since rabbinic antiquity (“the most praiseworthy of songs, the most exalted of songs, the most superior of songs”; SongsR 1.1.11). Building on this evaluation, Rashbam called it “the most praiseworthy of all (*she-be-khol*) the songs.”⁴ Rabbi Tamakh adds the element of function, suggesting that the composition is named Song of Songs “because it is the most superlative of these songs—whose purpose was to arouse the passions of lover and beloved for one another.”

At the same time, the phrase can indicate a song compilation. Rabbi Tobiah b. Eliezer put it thus: “Why... the plural? Because [the Song] is composed of many songs, both early and late” (Leqah Tov; similarly Malbim). As such, our Song is a lyric anthology deriving from various periods.

In Scripture, the term *shir* can denote both a “Song of Ascents” (Psalms 120–34) and the victory recitation of Deborah (Judg. 5:12), just as the variant word *shirah* can designate both a victory hymn (Exod. 15:1) and a chant celebrating the discovery of water in the desert (Num. 21:17–18).⁵ More pertinent is that Isaiah sings a “song of my beloved for his vineyard” (*shirat dodi le-karmo*; Isa. 5:1–7).⁶ In contrast, “bawdy songs” (*shir 'agavim*)⁷ are erotic ditties sung by one “who has a sweet voice and plays skillfully” (Ezek. 33:32).⁸

by Solomon Attributed to (*'asher li-*) Solomon. The superscription may thereby indicate that this song was the best of all the known songs of Solomon, which reportedly numbered

1,005 (1 Kings 5:12).⁹ Possibly this reference, and the subsequent remark that Solomon spoke about the cedars of Lebanon and of animals and birds (v. 13)—metaphorical topics found abundantly in the Song—inspired our superscription. Likewise, authorship was often announced at the head of a biblical book or psalm. For example, the words “The proverbs of Solomon” precedes the book of Proverbs (1:1), and “Of [or: concerning] Solomon” precedes Psalm 72 (72:1).

Alternatively, “concerning Solomon” (Transl.). The attribution formula uses the relative pronoun *'asher* (of, concerning) for stylistic emphasis, as against the use of *she-* elsewhere in the Song. But this variant provides no clue to the ascription’s meaning.¹⁰ Others have proposed that the superscription indicates that whereas Solomon sang these songs, he did not actually compose them all (Netziv).¹¹ The old rabbinic comment that the work was “copied” by King Hezekiah and his circle is indeterminate in this regard (B. B.B. 15a).¹² Solomon’s authorial role is unspecified.

Stylistics. The superscription is marked by strong alliteration: *shir ha-shirim 'asher li-Shlomoh*. This feature accounts for the use of *'asher* here instead of *le-*, which serves the same function in Psalms (see Ibn Ezra on Ps. 20:1 and 100:1).

Derash

1:1. *The Song of Songs* As expressed in the title (*The Song of Songs*), this composition’s quality is deemed exemplary: “the most praiseworthy (*meshubah*)” or “most exalted (*mesulsal*) of songs” (SongsR 1.1.11)¹³—being in style and content like finely sifted grain (*solet*). Rabbi Akiva raised his esteem for the Song’s quality to another level when he said that it was the “most holy” of the works in the Writings, and that “all the ages (*kol ha-olam*) are not equal to (*ke-da'i*) the day when the Song of Songs was given to Israel” (M. Yad. 3:5). For

it is unique: at once Israel's love song "for Solomon" (*li-Shlomoh*)—a rabbinic name for God as the master of "peace" (*shalom*) (B. Shevu. 35b)¹⁴—and a song of God's love for Israel (SongsR, *ibid.*). The Song is a veritable duet of covenant love.

Indeed, "if the Song of Songs had not been given in the Torah (Scripture), it would have been sufficient (*ke-da'i*) to guide the world!" (AgS; cf. SongsZ).¹⁵ That is, the principle of love (God for the world, and the world for God) would have generated spiritual and moral norms sufficient to regulate existence. In its present manifestation, the Song reveals the heartbeat of love that animates the world and Torah. Creation and freedom are the gifts of love; and just laws and human dignity are their social expressions. Law seeks to regulate love; love keeps law sacred.

Remez

1:1. *The Song of Songs* The Song's varied poetic figures offer the possibility of expressing the spiritual longing of the soul in all its complexity. This process requires a great multitude of songs—some to orient present desires, others to reclaim past experiences, and still others to express yearning and hope. The seeker is guided by such models.

The phrase also conveys the incompleteness of any articulation, and the need to formulate it with diverse (and intersecting) images (Al-Fawwāl).¹⁶ Religious language strives to find the most proper or guiding expression, through images drawn from worldly things. The images of the Song serve as prisms to help the adept

recall spiritual heights, cultivate their inner eye, and induce new imaginative possibilities.

by Solomon Solomon (*Shelomoh*) is a model for the human quest for spiritual integration (*sheleimut*). Reading the testimony of a celebrated seeker cultivates the heart for love of God (Sforno), while arousing a deeper inwardness (of soul) within one's embodied being (Malbim).

Sod

1:1. *The Song of Songs* This Song is the song of all songs, embracing the totality of existence—each element in its particular voice, and all together in manifold concord. As such, this Song is the veritable "principle of all the Torah" (*kelala de-khol 'oraita*; Z. 2:143b-144a). In spiritual terms, this principle is the God-given charge of life that not only drives each organic and natural element toward self-realization or enhancement, but also drives human consciousness to an awareness of the divine dimension that informs all Being (ZH 62b). The opening verse is thus a call to realize that each worldly song (or expression of life) is linked to all other songs (of existence), and that their totality expresses the supernal harmony of the divine whole (Kook)¹⁷—*Shelomoh*-Solomon symbolizing the inherent *shalom* of All (AhavD 9b). It is both a spiritual declaration and a contemplative ideal.¹⁸ And so, if each song (or particularity of existence) is holy, the Song of all songs (or the panoply of Being) is the holy of holies. Attention to this infinite chorus consecrates the earth as a shrine of divine immanence.