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Returning the King and the Women to the Beginning of the Song of Songs

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The male lover portrayed in Song 1:2–4 was once ubiquitously considered to be a king. Recent interpreters, however, have understood the word "king" to be either a hypocorism (a nickname of affection) or an epithet for a "bridegroom." Earlier interpretation also recognized a group of women in the opening scene, but this too is disappearing today. To address these exclusions, I present a close analysis of the grammar and offer an alternative perspective to what is identified as *enallage* (a substitution of one grammatical form for another) but which also inadvertently suppresses the women's presence. Next, I investigate how the Song's "king" became denuded of his royal meaning, including through a reliance on some dubious interpretations of Akkadian poetry. I also explore literary themes in the Hebrew Bible—women's celebratory praise and a hitherto undiscovered case of subtle soundplay called "hidden paronomasia"—to show why the Song's "king" should be understood as a royal personage. Finally, by comparing this scene in the Song to the Sumerian love poem *Dumuzi-Inanna G*, I show how the Song opens with a prominent ancient Near Eastern motif of love literature—the entrance or bringing of the royal consort into the palace, lauded by a group of rejoicing women.

The inaugural verses of the Song of Songs appear to portray the male lover as a king. Even if we set aside the Solomonic nature of the inscription in the first verse, we still read in verse 4, "the king has brought me into his chambers." On the face of it, it seems that the subject here is a royal person, the "king" (המלך), in the most natural sense of the word. Hence, since the very beginning of the Song's interpretive history, this person designated as "king" was treated as such. This royal perspective, however, stands in contrast to the recent tendency to undermine the natural, noble

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designation of the man in these verses and to consider the word מלך to be either a hypocorism (a nickname that shows affection or closeness) or merely an epithet for a bridegroom.

It is not easy to explain this shift in interpretation. But I have found at least one explicit reason, given by Bendt Alster (see below)—that of "democratizing" any *perceived* royalty in a Sumerian persona by challenging such royal perceptions. Could this be the case in the Song also? I am reminded of Cheryl Exum's statement that, if the Song were specifically about King Solomon, as many have thought (and incidentally, Exum thinks he is not the main character), then readers in general would be less likely to identify so readily with its protagonists as has been done throughout the centuries.[1]

So, could interpreters be actively denuding the Song of its perceived royalty in order to democratize it? Making the Song accessible to a wider audience is one thing; stripping the royal titles of their plain meaning without warrant is quite another. While the argument that any "king" in Song 1:2–4 is specifically Solomon is a distinct issue, the assertion that the Song of Songs, as a song about a royal king, would alienate readers is not compelling. Readers have already been identifying with the royal aspects of the Song for more than a millennium and have at the same time been captivated by its emphasis on the mutual love of its protagonists (irrespective of whether the reader might go on to allegorize the love imagery). Only in modern times has the Song lost its royal character. Even someone like Sebastian Castellio, who, in the sixteenth century radically attempted to eroticize the Song at a time when no one else read it this way, maintained that the Song was a love poem of the king (Solomon, in this case) to one of his concubines.[2]

Another element in the opening verses of the Song—and perhaps a more important one—that seems also to be disappearing from interpretations is that of a group of women. While the earliest writers are notoriously taciturn when it comes to commenting on characterization and usually proceed swiftly to allegorical interpretation, even an avid allegorizer such as Origen provides some comment on the literal dimension of the Song. He notes early in his commentary that the female (whom he views as a bride addressing her bridegroom) speaks to her beloved but then, as Origen puts it, "some change occurs between the characters" (*Comm. Song* 1.4).[3] Origen goes on to provide a clue to the object of the bride's speech, remarking in his commentary that she has "associated with herself the many maidens" with whom she is following after the bridegroom (*Comm. Song* 1.4).

In Jewish commentary, Rashbam similarly says that, while at times the bride

[1] J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 8.

[2] Sébastien Castellion, *Les livres de Salomon: Proverbes, Ecclésiaste, Cantique des cantiques (1555)*, ed. Nicole Geunier and Max Engammare (Geneva: Droz, 2008).

[3] For the translation, see Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, ACW 26 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1952).

is speaking as if to her beloved, "at other times she relates to her [female] friends."[4] Given such earlier interpretations, what explains the recent tendency to eliminate these women? This is difficult to say, but the net effect of the exclusion is to effectively "brick up" these womanly voices from singing their song, much as the infamous cardinal and archbishop Gabriele Paleotti is said to have done in Bologna.[5] In this article I attempt to put these women back into prominence in the scene.[6]

First, I will demonstrate how the scene can be read at grammatical face value without recourse to acknowledging an instance of the rhetorical technique known as *enallage*. In this way, I will show how analysis of the speech supports the presence of a group of women in the scene and how an enallage-based reading unwittingly dispenses with the involvement of this female group and its interaction with the two lovers. Next, I will argue that, in the Song's opening verses, the man is portrayed as a king, not just as any bridegroom or male lover, and that he and his consort are in the company of a group of women. I will address alternative interpretations of the word המלך ("the king") and then argue that in verse 4 it indeed refers to a royal personage and is not merely an epithet. Finally, I will examine verses 2–4 in a wider context, comparing these verses to a Sumerian love song, *Dumuzi-Inanna G*, in order to show how the opening of the Song contains an ancient Near Eastern motif of a royal entrance—of the beloved entering into the royal house for the first time.

I. There Are Young Women Present

In recent decades, interpreters have challenged the presence of an all-female group in the Song's opening scene. This is understandable, to an extent. In 1:3, for instance, there occurs the only explicit reference to a female collective in the first four verses. Here, despite the mention of עלמות ("young women"), the absence of the definite article leaves room for generalization. The female protagonist could simply be lauding the man's universal adoration by young women. Marvin Pope therefore remarked that the suggestion of someone being present other than the primary couple was a fanciful assumption.[7] Roland Murphy went further, removing the necessity of the man's physical presence and leaving open the possibility that the woman's address was a mere soliloquy.[8]

The opening verses of the Song are characterized by some puzzling switches in the form of address. Unexpected shifts in number, person, and gender occur in

[4] Yaakov Thompson, *The Commentary of Samuel ben Meir on the Song of Songs* [Hebrew and English] (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1988), 227.

[5] I allude to 1580s Bologna, when Paleotti is said to have walled up a convent's windows to stop its nuns from being seen and their singing from escaping into the public.

[6] I do not include verses 5–6 in this discussion since there is some question whether these verses belong to the preceding or succeeding verses.

[7] Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 297.

[8] Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 127.

verse 2, where the speaker opens with ישקני ("let *him* kiss me") in the third-person jussive form but in the second half of the verse abruptly switches to second-person singular … דדיך … כי ("because … *your* love …"). There is also an unexpected switch from third person (v. 4b) to second person (v. 4c); and a switch in subject, from "we" (v. 4d) to "they" (v. 4e). Apart from interpreters' various emendations and explanations to mitigate or eliminate these incongruities,[9] others have suggested the switching in forms of address can be attributed to the literary technique of enallage, basically a substitution of one tense, number, case, gender or person for another.[10] An unexpected shift in pronouns, a "you" to a "him" while one person is addressing another, would be one kind of enallage, but the technique could also involve a deliberate, improper use of grammatical form without the need for including the correct grammatical form.[11]

The enallage interpretation unintentionally dispenses with proper characterization of the scene in Song 1:2–4, especially the involvement of a group of women who are conversing with the female protagonist. Enallage, at the very least, suppresses their interaction and also weakens the case for the lover being a king. The progenitor of reading enallage in Song 1:2–4 appears to be Gillis Gerleman.[12] Both he and Michael Fox suggest that the technique of enallage has a precedent in the Egyptian love songs although Fox notes that a specific "we-they" enallage is unattested.[13] While enallage is attested in the poetry of the Hebrew Bible,[14] its likelihood

[9] For examples of emendations, see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 297. Although Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch suggest that the switching occurs because a person can be respectfully addressed in the third-person form if the person is of a higher social standing (e.g., Gen 44:7, 1 Sam 26:19), the subsequent address switches back to "you," and the alleged jussive of respect does not reappear in her speech, meaning that the woman is clearly on familiar terms with the king (*The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Random House, 1995], 158).

[10] Marc Zvi Brettler, "Enallage in the Bible," TheTorah.com (2018), https://www.thetorah.com/article/enallage-in-the-bible; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 287; see also Bernard Dupriez, *A Dictionary of Literary Devices: Gradus, A–Z*, trans. Albert W. Halsall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 154.

[11] Mark Forsyth highlights several cases of this kind of enallage in English: " 'We was robbed.' 'Mistah Kurtz—he dead.' 'Thunderbirds are go.' All of these stick in our minds because they're just wrong—wrong enough to be right" ("Rhetorical Reasons That Slogans Stick," *New York Times*, 13 November 2014).

[12] Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth; Das Hohelied*, BKAT 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 94–95.

[13] E.g., stanzas 2 and 4 of the "Song of Seven" in Papyrus Chester Beatty I, C 1,1–C5,2, where the girl shifts from third to second person to address her absent lover; see Michael V. Fox, "Scholia to Canticles (I 4b, II 4, I 4bα, IV 3, V 8, VI 12)," *VT* 33 (1983): 199–206. Among others who follow Gerleman are Pope, *Song of Songs*, 297, 303; Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 127; and Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 89 n. 14.

[14] Deut 32:15; Isa 1:29; Jer 22:24; Mic 7:19; Pss 23:1–3, 4–5, 6; 145:3, 4, 8, 10, 14, 15, 17; see C. Levias, "Enallage in the Bible," *AJSL* 50 (1934): 104–8.

specifically in Song 1:2–4 diminishes when one considers setting and characterization from a wider literary perspective.

As a starting point, I will analyze Song 1:4 of the MT and consider a possible logical sequence of speech in order to ascertain that the context can indeed be read with the perspective that the primary couple are in the presence of a group of women who also contribute to the conversation. Incidentally, my own research finds that Song 1:2–4 is not a poem independent from the rest of the Song (as Marcia Falk, for example, reads it) but is linked to later verses such as 3:6–11 and 6:4–10.[15] Returning to Song 1:4 then, without assuming any enallage, I will take the pronouns at face value and determine the changes of characterization, addressor, and addressee in the strophe.

Ref.			**Speaker**	**Addressee**
1:4a	Draw me after you, let us run!	משכני אחריך נרוצה	Woman	Man
1:4b	The king has brought me (in)to his chambers![16]	הביאני המלך חדריו	Woman	Ladies
1:4c	We will exult and rejoice in you!	נגילה ונשמחה בך	Ladies	Woman
1:4d	We will extol (lit., "remember") your love more than wine![17]	נזכירה דדיך מיין	Ladies	Man
1:4e	Rightly, they love you!	מישרים אהבוך :	Woman	Man

1. Verse 4 begins with the woman speaking to the man. This must be the case since this is a single speaker using the first-person singular possessive

[15] Gavin Fernandes, "The Narrative of the Song of Songs" (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2020; revised version forthcoming). Even Marcia Falk herself, however, takes the speaker as the "heroine," as has been traditionally done (*Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs*, BLS 4 [Sheffield: Almond, 1982], 13, 108–9).

[16] See also section II below concerning the meaning of *ḥădārîm* in Song 1:4.

[17] The Septuagint, however, makes the woman the addressee since it has ἀγαπήσομεν μαστούς σου ὑπὲρ οἶνον ("we will love your breasts more than wine"). The difference arises from whether the word דד should be read and translated as *dad* ("breast," e.g., Prov 5:19; Ezek 23:3, 8, 21) or as *dōd* with a defective spelling of the word דוֹד (more precisely its plural form דדים ["love-making"] as in Prov 7:18, Ezek 16:8, 23:17; cf. the nondefective spelling in Sir 40:20 Ms. B X recto). The LXX translator took דדיך not as *dōdêkā* but as *dadayik* (1:2, 4); in Song 4:10, *dadayik* was chosen while the MT takes *dōdayik*; and in 7:13 [12], דדי was read as *daday* rather than *dōday.* It could tentatively be argued that the LXX translator has been influenced in part by verses such as Song 8:1 and 7:9 [8], where kissing and breasts are mentioned together to take דד as "breast" although the Song clearly uses שד for this instead (1:13; 4:5; 7:4 [3], 8 [7]; 9 [8]; 8:1, 8, 10).

ending (משכני). She addresses a male using the second-person masculine singular ending (אחריךָ).

2. Then there is a sudden shift from addressing the second person (you) in 1:4a to the third person (the king) in 1:4b. This grammatical switch is typically explained as enallage.[18] With enallage there is no need of a third party apart from the lead couple. The addressee in this case would be the man. There is, however, a better option that fits in even better with the verses that follow: a change of addressee from the man in 1:4a to the group of women in 1:4b who are also in the presence of the couple. The identity of those being addressed can be properly discerned only in retrospect, after one has read the succeeding verses. The proposed interaction is explained in the points that follow.
3. In 1:4c, the word נגילה ("we will rejoice") is a grammatically plural form, which could indicate more than one speaker. If one assumes for a moment that the speakers are a group of women alongside the female protagonist, then they are, in theory, addressing either the beloved woman or the man who is called "king" here. That the leading woman might be addressed is denoted by the second-person feminine singular ending in בָּךְ, as long as there is no pausal change here.[19] The female group would then be responding to her preceding statement—namely, to her excitement at being brought to the king's house. In this case, they are exulting in and sharing her joy. The other possibility is that they are addressing the man, rejoicing in his love.[20] Either way, one could, in theory, go back to 1:4b and understand the addressee to be the female companions of the woman.
4. The group of women, perhaps including the leading female, then praise the man in 1:4d using the second-person masculine singular ending (דדיךָ). It is his love that causes the lead woman to be brought to his house.

[18] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 303.

[19] The word בָּךְ could, of course, suggest the presence of a pausal change in form (where the second-person masculine singular בְּךָ retracts in pause to resemble the second-person feminine singular). If such were the case, the addressee would be the man. I note, however, that the form is here accented by *zaqef qaton* while in Song 4:7 and 7:1, the same word בָּךְ occurs with *sof passuq* and *athnaḥ*, respectively—two accents that more regularly create pausal changes than *zaqef qaton*. In both of the other cases, בָּךְ is clearly referring to the woman. In theory, therefore, the addressee in verse 4c can be the woman. On the other hand, a similar word, לָךְ (second-person feminine singular) in 7:13 [12] and in 7:14 does appear to be a pausal form (in the latter, the word would normally be לְךָ (second-person masculine singular) since the woman is the speaker in all of 7:11–14). The presence of an accent, a pause, need not indicate a change in form. On the difficulties of deciphering pausal forms, see Paul Sanders, "Pausal Forms and the Delimitation of Cola in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in *Unit Delimitation in Biblical Hebrew and Northwest Semitic Literature*, ed. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Josef M. Oesch, Pericope 4 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 264–78, here 266.

[20] See the previous footnote. Further, the *bet* could be the *bet causa*, denoting the instrument of the act of bringing the woman to the chambers, namely, the man.

5. Finally, in 1:4e, the leading woman closes this sequence of interchanges by addressing a person using the second-person masculine singular ending. Here, her purpose is to pass on her observation of her female companions' love for the man and to endorse both their feelings and the man's character. The word מישרים can mean "unwaveringly,"[21] and it seems to me to be strengthening, via repetition, the exact sentiment in 1:3 אהבוך על־כן עלמות ("therefore young *women* love you"). The "they" in 1:4e can only refer back to the עלמות, which would be elliptical in the repetition.

על־כן עלמות אהבוך	Therefore, women love you.
מישרים [עלמות] אהבוך	Straightly (= unwaveringly), they [women] love you.

The repetition serves to emphasize the woman's observations, as an outsider who is now being brought into an inner circle in which the man is renowned for his magnanimity and loved by these women mentioned in both verses 3 and 4.[22] Hence, it is possible that the female protagonist may also be speaking to them in 1:2a "may *he* kiss me" and switching to the man "for *your* love" in 1:2b. In any case, these women are in the presence of the leading couple; they are not just conjured up from some remote part of the city—from the female protagonist's imagination or recollections, nor just from hearsay.

It can be seen from the discussion above that there is a rapid interchange of personalities speaking. This was recognized early in interpretive history. Despite Origen's allegorizing tendency, he considered the Song something of a "drama"—by which he meant not a stage performance but what today would be termed "narrative." Origen writes:

[21] The phrase מישרים אהבוך in 1:4e is variously interpreted. The Vulgate has "the upright love you"; the LXX has "righteousness loves you"; and the Syriac, "and more than the upright your love." For Robert Gordis, מישרים is a wine because of its use in 7:10 [9] and Prov. 23:31 (*The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, rev. and augmented ed. [New York: Ktav, 1974], 78–79). The word in these two instances, however, is used either as an adjective or as an adverb, e.g., "straight," "smoothly." The usual meaning elsewhere is either "uprightness" or a meaning that corresponds to straightness or evenness, that is, without deviation, as in Isa 26:7, where it is used to reinforce ישר ("upright, level, straight"). The interpretation of the word in Song 1 on the lines of "unwaveringly," "steadfastly," and the like, is reasonable given the following verb אהבוך (third-person plural + second-person masculine singular suffix) is best translated "they love you."

[22] Pope doubts that a female would suggest to her lover that other girls "love" him and so questions the presence of other females (*Song of Songs*, 302). The specific kind of "love" is unclear, but the word אהב elsewhere in the Bible is often unequal and so here, it could be the "loyalty-love" associated with unequal treaty language, which itself borrows from familial relationships. So, in this case, it could be referring to the אהב ("love") that courtiers or servants would show to their king or master, e.g., Exod 21:5; Deut 7:9; 1 Sam 18:22; possibly Jer 8:1–2.

> this little book which has the semblance of a marriage-song is written in dramatic form. And we defined a drama as something in which certain characters are introduced who speak; and from time to time some of them arrive upon the scene, while others go or come, so that the whole action consists in interchange between the characters. This book, therefore, will be like that all through; and, reading it along those lines, we shall get from it according to our powers a simple record of events. (*Comm. Song* 1.1)

Apart from this interchange of characters, it can also be seen, more specifically, that Song 1:1–4 is able to support a reading in which a female group is both present and also contributes to the speech *in addition to* the leading woman. The female group rejoices that the man has brought the female protagonist to his home. The Song goes on to mention both men and women in the background of the leading couple (see, e.g., Song 2:2–3). This is a literary motif that exists throughout the Hebrew Bible, but notably in the context of significant celebrations. Psalm 45:14–15 will be mentioned later. Among other texts, one can cite Ps 68:12–13 [11–12], where women announce the good news in response to the defeat of foreign kings (by the Israelite males). In Ps 78:63, one finds the converse, negative picture of female virgins/young women—who do not here but usually do sing praises (ובתולתיו לא הוללו) at civil ceremonies—mentioned in conjunction with the (war-slain?) young men. In 2 Sam 6, the return of ark is celebrated by both David and the people (vv. 5, 15; cf. v. 1), and also females (vv. 20, 22); incidentally, when David distributes festive comestibles, both men and women are mentioned (v. 19). Celebratory praise for the defeat of the Egyptians involves not just Moses and the people in general (Exod 15:1), but the women are given special mention (vv. 20–21). In 2 Chr 35:25, both singing men and women (השרים והשרות) lament the death (and celebrate the life) of Josiah. A final example is the mention of Obed's birth (Ruth 4:13), which separates the praise of Boaz and Ruth by the male elders at the city gate (vv. 11–12)[23] from the "mirrored" song of praise for Naomi and Ruth by the village women (vv. 14–15). Clearly, this motif, with its literary reciprocity of both men and women celebrating a joyous occasion makes us think twice before disempowering or getting rid of women from the equally joyous scene (cf. נגילה ונשמחה in Song 1:4c) at the king's chambers. We should be wary of preventing women's voices from being heard in celebratory praise. Before I discuss more precisely what is being depicted in this opening scene (by comparing it with some similar Sumerian poems), I now turn to why the word "king" accorded to the man is indeed a royal title.

[23] Although it must be noted that verse 11 does include כל־העם ("all the people") along with the mention of elders.

II. The Man Is a King

Responding to Objections That the "King" Is Royal

In the inaugural unit of the Song of Songs, the male lover is described as המלך (ὁ βασιλεύς in Greek), the standard words for "the king," namely, a royal sovereign. For Fox, however, the word "king" in verse 4 is not the usual designator of royalty but merely an epithet of affection. For Fox, "the lovers are called kings, princes and queens because of the way love makes them feel about each other and about themselves."[24] Fox sees a resemblance to hypocorisms that appear in the Egyptian love songs, such as "my prince" and "prince of my heart."[25] Fox does not actually explain the presence of the definite article in המלך. The definiteness of the noun, occurring as it does at the very beginning of the Song, without any indication of a figure of speech, more naturally invites the reader to take "king" at face value and diminishes any certainty of the word being a hypocorism. Moreover, if these words are not being spoken in a private setting to the lover alone but rather in the presence of a group of women (as argued here), this further diminishes the possibility of המלך being a hypocorism.

Wilfred Watson and Shalom Paul have attempted to read the word "king" as a generalized endearment by connecting it with an alleged practice in the Babylonian love poetry of occasionally designating any male lover as *šarru*, the Akkadian word for "king."[26] Paul especially cites two specific examples from the Akkadian tablet *KAR* 158 in this regard as well as citing the remarks of two eminent Assyriologists, Jeremy Black and Bendt Alster. On investigating these sources in order to ascertain the credibility of Paul's claim, I discovered that *KAR* 158 is essentially a catalog of Sumerian and Akkadian incipits, that is, song titles.[27] The incipits of the two songs relevant to our discussion, namely, nos. 28 and 50 (col. 7 of the tablet), appear under the category of *irâtu* love songs and can be translated respectively as

[24] Fox, "Scholia to Canticles," 203.

[25] Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 98.

[26] Wilfred G. E. Watson, "Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to the Song of Songs," in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer*, ed. Jon Davies, Graham Harvey, and Wilfred G. E. Watson, JSOTSup 195 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 253–71, here 256–57; Shalom M. Paul, "The 'Plural of Ecstasy' in Mesopotamian and Babylonian Love Poetry," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 585–98, here 595–96.

[27] The content of only one title is known. See Nathan Wasserman, *Akkadian Love Literature of the Third and Second Millennium BCE*, Leipziger altorientalistische Studien 4 (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2016), 110, 195–234.

"he descends into the garden, the king who cuts the cedar" and "Joyfully, consummate, king!"[28] It is important to note that the contents of these specific songs are not extant, and so one must examine the proof provided in order to conclude that the word "king" in these songs' titles pertains to a nonroyal beloved.

Those who appeal to Black's writings to support a theory that "king" must be an epithet of love need to be far more cautious. While Black does call *šarru* "an epithet of the male beloved," he specifically does so in relation to a poem of Dumuzi (the royal consort of Inanna).[29] Black is most likely using the word *epithet* here in the sense of royal "title." Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, for example, mentions an "epithet" of "the king" in relation to "an anonymous royal figure."[30] The fact that Black himself adduces as proof for his assertion (along with the aforementioned nos. 28 and 50 of the *irâtu* list) a third example from elsewhere in the tablet that includes the phrase *šarri tanittukka* ("my king in your glory") with the royal title for a god, indicates that Black is thinking along the lines of an accorded royal designation.[31] This, of course, is not how Shalom Paul uses the word *king*; he uses it in the sense of a common hypocorism or nickname.

Those who appeal to Alster might have more success since his beliefs are more transparent and he states plainly that "although a king's name is mentioned in some love songs, his name may stand for any lover."[32] Comments from Alster himself suggest that at least one of his motivations was to "divest [some of] the songs of [their] cultic setting"[33] and normalize any royal terminology to show the characters as ordinary people. For several years he was intent on challenging the viewpoint that the Sumerian songs are *all* religious rather than some being secular in character.[34] This seems a sound academic enterprise. Yet, when one explores the initial processes in his earlier cited paper, of how he determines when a "king" should not be a (royal) king, one finds that his decisions are rather arbitrary. When he analyzes a love song (*Ni 2461*) with the name of a king, Susin, Alster summarily decides,

[28] No. 28 has the Sumerian *lugal*, the equivalent of the Akkadian *šarru*. The word *irâtu* is the plural of *irtu* ("breast"). See Brigitte Groneberg, "Searching for Akkadian Lyrics: From Old Babylonian to the 'Liederkatalog' *KAR* 158," *JCS* 55 (2003): 55–74, here 66–68.

[29] Jeremy A. Black, "Babylonian Ballads: A New Genre," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 25–34, here 33 n. 19. Inanna is the Sumerian goddess of love and war, the "Queen of Heaven," and Dumuzi is her shepherd-turned-royal-consort. Dumuzi also appears in various instances as a king in his own right.

[30] Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, *In the Garden of the Gods: Models of Kingship from the Sumerians to the Seleucids* (London: Routledge), 101 n. 143.

[31] Black, "Babylonian Ballads, 33 n. 19; cf. *CAD* 17.2, s.v. "*šarru*" §1.m.2′.

[32] Bendt Alster, "Marriage and Love in the Sumerian Love Songs: With Some Notes on the Manchester Tammuz," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell, and David B. Weisberg (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 15–27, here 16.

[33] Alster, "Marriage and Love," 17 (brackets mine).

[34] Alster, "Marriage and Love," 16 n. 12.; cf. Alster, *Sumerian Love Songs*, 127.

> In spite of the explicit mention of the name of king Susin … the situation described here can *hardly* have anything to do with a real marriage of that king at all. On the contrary, *it rather seems* that this song could be uttered by any anonymous girl, and addressed to any man whom she loves.[35]

Alster later expands this thinking about kings more generally, making the name of Inanna possibly stand for any girl.[36] In the final analysis, and regardless of his motivations, Alster evidently still provides no firm proof for his assertions—at least none that I have found—that the royal epithets pertain to ordinary individuals.

The act of Assyriologists arbitrarily rendering the royal title of "king" in *KAR* 158 as a hypocorism goes back at least to Stephen Langdon in 1924, who summarily writes that the word "king" in this text "is employed in the sense of lover."[37] While Langdon himself had earlier produced a scholarly work on the Tammuz-Ishtar cult (1914), he apparently found himself opposing the views of Erich Ebeling (1917) and George A. Barton (1920)—and later Theophile J. Meek (1924)—in terms of *KAR* 158.[38] These had determined that the songs listed in *KAR* 158 were *necessarily* religious and connected with the cult. Perhaps this is why Langdon adopts his reductionist approach to the word "king" in these particular *irâtu* songs, reducing it to mean any lover. Whatever his motivations, Langdon's opinion that *irâtu* refers to "secular love-songs" is revealed by Meek,[39] who takes the opposite, polarized view, that they are all cultic.

Since Langdon's and Meek's time, more clarity has been obtained concerning the term *irâtu*. As Martti Nissinen has more recently noted, it "is used as a generic title for love songs,"[40] and this has been shown also from cognate languages.[41] It could possibly extend to the cultic as well as to the court. Brigitte Groneberg, who

[35] Bendt Alster, "Sumerian Love Songs," *RA* 79 (1985): 127–59, here 135 (emphasis mine).

[36] Alster, "Marriage and Love," 16–17, esp. nn. 13–14.

[37] Stephen H. Langdon, "Babylonian and Hebrew Musical Terms," *JRAS* 53 (1921): 169–91, here 189 n. 2.

[38] Stephen H. Langdon, *Tammuz and Ishtar: A Monograph upon Babylonian Religion and Theology, Containing Extensive Extracts from the Tammuz Liturgies and All of the Arbela Oracles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1914); Erich Ebeling, "Aus den Keilschrifttexten aus Assur religiösen Inhalts," *MDOG* 48 (1917): 22–50; George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1920); Theophile J. Meek, "Babylonian Parallels to the Song of Songs," *JBL* 43 (1924): 245–52, https://doi.org/10.2307/3259259.

[39] Meek, "Babylon Parallels," 246.

[40] Martti H. Nissinen, "Akkadian Love Poetry and the Song of Songs: A Case of Cultural Interaction," in *Zwischen Zion und Zaphon: Studien im Gedenken an den Theologen Oswald Loretz*, ed. Ludger Hiepel and Marie-Theres Wacker, AOAT 438 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016), 145–70, here 150.

[41] Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard provide an instance of the word *l'irth* in the Ugaritic Baal cycle where a "love song" is performed concerning Baal (*The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 2: *Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3–1.4*, VTSup 114 [Leiden: Brill, 2009], 216–19).

studies the *irâtu* songs in depth, initially appears to adopt a so-called Langdonian approach to *KAR* 158, writing, "Twice a king is evoked, probably to be understood as a model of a king."[42] But she then changes tune, for in the same article she concludes,

> The mention of the king sets some of these songs in a more official context as does the incipit naming Nanāya.… It is very difficult to determine the scenic setting of these songs by their opening lines alone. Whether the *irātu*-songs are meant to be used in a secular or in a cultic setting or if some of them are cultic and others belong to court-poetry remains unanswered.[43]

It seems one cannot presume that every song in *KAR* 158 is exclusively secular or, for that matter, nonroyal, even if the majority might be so. Neither can one presume that the word "king" is a general form of endearment. If anything, the phrase "the king who cuts the cedar" in incipit no. 28 of the *irâtu* songs, points to the "king" here being a royal person. Nathan Wasserman compares this incipit to a Babylonian one: "It is the king of the land! How sweet the cedar!" and comments, "The semantic connection of a king and cedar trees goes beyond love-related literature."[44] One has to conclude, therefore, that the assertion of Watson and Paul that המלך in Song 1:4 is an epithet of endearment that parallels a practice in Mesopotamian songs is an edifice that has been constructed on less than steady ground.

In addition to seeing "king" as an epithet of endearment, it has also been read as an epithet for a bridegroom.[45] Interpreters often cite the account of J. G. Wetzstein that describes, in some detail, the Syrian custom of calling the bride and groom a "king" and "queen."[46] Several scholars have used Wetzstein's observations to attribute such an epithet to the Hebrew המלך. Chief among these, if not the earliest, is Karl Budde, whose view of the Song gained the approval of many German academics of his day.[47] For Budde, this is not a king, in the standard, royal sense but a kingly person, one who is treated as royalty because of the particular custom of treating bridegrooms as such. Budde, acting on his reading of Wetzstein,

[42] Groneberg, "Searching for Akkadian Lyrics," 68.

[43] Groneberg, "Searching for Akkadian Lyrics," 69.

[44] Wasserman, *Akkadian Love Literature*, 230 and n. 465.

[45] See, e.g., Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 18; Duane A. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, WBC 23B (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 1–265, here 128, 130 (House wrote the commentary on Lamentations).

[46] Johann G. Wetzstein, "Die syrische Dreschtafel," *Zeitschrift für Ethnolo*gie 5 (1873): 270–302, here 288; see also Franz Delitzsch, "Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes," in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes,* vol. 6, trans. Matthew G. Easton (1877, repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 165.

[47] See Karl Budde, "Das Hohelied," in *Die Fünf Megillot: Das Hohelied, das Buch Ruth, Die Klagelieder, der Prediger, das Buch Esther*, ed. Karl Budde, Alfred Bertholet, and G. Wildeboer, KHC 17 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Mohr, 1898), ix–xxiv, 1–48; Karl Budde, "The Song of Solomon," *New World* 3 (1894): 56–77.

dispensed not only with the king but simultaneously with Solomon as well, thereby severing the link between the Song's inscription and "the king" in verse 4. On reading Wetzstein's work closely, however, I discovered that the avid orientalist actually stops short of calling "the king" in the Song a common bridegroom. Franz Delitzsch, who appended Wetzstein's descriptions of the Syrian wedding to his own commentary on the Song, indicates no connection to the alleged Syrian custom in this regard but is himself very clear in interpreting "the king" as a royal personage.[48] Delitzsch calls Wetzstein's observations "aphoristic elucidations" that "serve to throw light on the Song." In other words, they were never meant to be read as carte-blanche parallels, with a one-to-one correspondence in every case. Wetzstein's emphasis on the Syrian wedding customs has therefore been demonstrably overstated in respect to the Song's "king" by Budde and others.

In attempting to show that "king" can refer to a "bridegroom," scholars of the Song also often cite the rabbinic midrash, Pirqe R. El. §16, which states that "a bridegroom resembles a king." This argument is tenuous; the rabbis are merely pointing out one resemblance. If anything, the early rabbis read the word in its most natural sense of "monarch." As evidenced in Song of Songs Rabbah concerning the Song's early verses, one finds commentators such as R. Yoḥanan and R. Abun using illustrations of an earthly king in their haggadic explanations of God's amorous relationship with Israel.[49]

To conclude these initial considerations, the upshot is that the phrase "the king" in Song 1:4 cannot be read as an epithet of affection or for a groom without serious reservation. In truth, the perspective that "the king" in 1:4 must be an epithet is only one possible—and I would add, unwarranted—interpretation. Next, I will show that the motif is more likely that of a king, a royal personage.

Why the Man in Song 1:2–4 Is a (Royal) King

"As is the king, so are the subjects" goes the proverb. Similarly, in the opening scene one might expect there to be exhibited, within the various "subjects" attending these verses, evidence that would support the identification of the man as a royal personage.

That this is a regal scene is accentuated by the fact that the motif presented here is that of a king relocating his beloved from her domain to his own house, in this case specified by "his *ḥădārîm*" (חדריו) in 1:4. A חדר is not necessarily a room per se (as in contemporary Hebrew usage) but the word often conveys a sense of

[48] Delitzsch, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," 23–24, 35–36, 128–29.

[49] See, e.g., "let him kiss me" in Song Rab. 1.2.3 and "draw me" in 1.4.1; see Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yokhanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," *HTR* 73 (1980): 567–95, esp. 577.

the inner sanctum of privacy—what Pope calls an *interiora domus*.[50] The meaning of חדר should not be restricted to "bedroom" or "bridal chamber," as some do. The plural form denotes a collective of several rooms. In 1:4, חדרים therefore relates to the house of the king but would, of course, include the anticipated privacy of the bedroom with its intimacy. Here, however, the imagery further appears to be drawing a specific connection between the Song's royal lover and Solomon. Compare especially the narratives of Solomon bringing his Egyptian bride up to Jerusalem: 1 Kgs 3:1 states that "Solomon made a marriage alliance (חתן) with Pharaoh king of Egypt and he took [לקח] the daughter of Pharaoh and brought her [ויביאה *hiphil*] to the City of David." Solomon's involvement in bringing an Egyptian wife to Jerusalem is prominent also in 2 Chr 8:11 (cf. 1 Kgs 9:24), where Solomon is said to have "brought up [עלה] the daughter of Pharaoh from the city of David to the house which he had built for her."[51] In the Song, the word בוא in the *hiphil* is used twice to describe the lover bringing his beloved to his house (1:4, 2:4). The verb עלה (3:6) appears later, together with the noun form of חתן (3:11), in a scene describing a wedding. Even if there are only a few linguistic connections to establish any clear intertextual relationship between the Solomonic passages in Kings and Chronicles, on the one hand, and the Song, on the other, what is undeniable is the sustained emphasis in all three texts on a bride's relocation by a king to his own house. It is only in these three biblical texts that more than a little space is given to this particular theme/motif, and this is reason enough to inquire whether "the king" should be identified as Solomon.

Another clue to the "king" being royal is the mention of עלמות ("young women") in 1:3. Why (according to the logic of those like Fox) should women "love" this bridegroom at his wedding if he was a mere commoner? Why should they make his love (for them?) greater than wine (1:4d)? What makes this man so special? Whether the group of עלמות are themselves royalty is not the most important issue since עלמות are frequently mentioned at royal processions for both king and God (e.g., Ps 68:25–26, where they praise the divine enthronement). However, the mention of עלמות in Song 1:2–4 anticipates a later scene—that of 6:8—where, together with a definite number of queens and concubines, they are עלמות *without number* who admire the leading woman. This female of wonder must herself, it seems, be elevated somehow (as if being borne aloft); she is described as הנשקפה ("the one looking down," 6:10) on them.[52] My research on the Song has led me to the

[50] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 303.

[51] John Van Seters says the word העלה (*heʿĕlāh*) should probably be amended to העליון (*hāʿelyôn*) in order to read "he brought up" to follow the *ἀνήγαγεν* of the OG in which Solomon is the subject of the action ("Israel and Egypt in the Age of Solomon," in *Walls of the Prince: Egyptian Interactions with Southwest Asia in Antiquity; Essays in Honour of John S. Holladay, Jr.*, ed. Timothy P. Harrison and Edward B. Banning, CHANE 77 [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 199–211, here 201).

[52] The verb שקף relates to the vantage point of an observer looking down, or out and over something. See *HALOT*, s.v. שקף.

conclusion that this first scene (1:2–4) is the foremost in a progression of scenes, including Song 3:6–11 and 6:4–10, that present the related and overlapping imagery of a spouse being brought into the royal house for the first time—I argue, being borne on a palanquin. I am not suggesting that Song 1:2–4 *necessarily* depicts a wedding ceremony, but I certainly regard it as a step toward the Song's later scenes, all of which cumulatively present a complete picture—including a wedding procession (3:6–11) and then what appears to be sexual consummation via a locked-garden metaphor (4:12–5:1).[53] These themes in the Song are also reminiscent of Ps 45:14–15, in which women are excitedly accompanying the royal bride to the king's house. In all the aforementioned texts, the reference is to a specific group of young women in the presence of a royal gathering.

The paronomasia in the early verses of the Song also offers a further latent royal clue. Paronomasia is a poetic technique, a kind of soundplay that evokes connections for the reader on phonological and semantic levels.[54] Several cases of explicit paronomasia in these verses have been highlighted by others, centered on the letters *šin* and *mem*, including משכני (*moškēnî*, "draw me"), נשמחה (*niśmĕḥāh*, "we will rejoice"), מישרים (*mêšārîm*, "rightly"), מנשיקות (*minnəšîqôt,* "kisses"), and שמן תורק (*šemen tûraq*, "oil poured out").[55] Patrick Hunt argues that, in addition to the explicit paronomasia, others might be "concealed on the surface, suggested only to the listener who contemplates or meditates reflectively on the lyrics."[56] Hunt terms these instances "subtle" or "concealed" paronomasia. Following Hunt's lead, I initially asked myself, Could the *šin* and *mem* sounds be subtly reflecting the name of Solomon in this opening scene? Having already activated in the reader's mind the name *šəlōmō* (שלמה, 1:1) and then presenting the *šin* and *mem* sounds, on the one hand, and the word *šəmekā* ("your name") in 1:3, on the other, does the verse tease the reader that the name of the king to whom the woman speaks is none other than Solomon?[57] Because of the absence of the *lamed* among the *šin-mem* sound group, I have now tentatively dismissed this idea, although it must be emphasized

[53] I argue for a way to read the Song as a lyrical poem with a coherent narrative (but not a stage drama) without resorting to the earlier method of dramatists to add to the Song for the sake of coherence.

[54] Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII–XVI," *VT* 34 (1984): 454–61.

[55] Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon's Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs*, AIL 1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 72–73; Gary Rendsburg and Ian Young, "שֶׁמֶן תּוּרַק šemen turaq (Song 1:3)," in *Le-ma'an Ziony: Essays in Honor of Ziony Zevit*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn and Gary A. Rendsburg (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 383–96.

[56] Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, StBibLit 96 (New York: Lang, 2008), 68. Segert had earlier brought up the possibility of concealed paronomasia ("Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative," 454–61).

[57] See also the comments in Exum (*Song of Songs*, 94), following Budde: "Through synesthesia, fragrance is attributed to the man's name, probably the sound of his name when spoken (Budde)." See Budde, "Das Hohelied," 2.

that Solomon seems to appear in the Song elsewhere, subtly, and much more than we have hitherto recognized. [58] If Hunt's principles about concealed paronomasia are still sound, there may be a much more convincing pointer to the man being a royal personage than even Solomon's (tenuously assumed) name, one I will now unpack.

Hunt explains the difference between concealed paronomasia and the more conventional type with which most Hebrew scholars will be familiar.

> For normal paronomasia … there must be euphony in alliterative consonants … and a semantic connection implied between the words even if by antithesis. For subtle paronomasia, the words used may bridge across a synonym not used but tying together both one word employed in homophony and another word employed in synonymy.[59]

Hunt further elucidates how this less-familiar type of paronomasia works: "Two nearly adjacent words in a unit have a third word suggested. The word suggested [but not used] should be a synonym of the one and a rough homophone of the other."[60] Not all will be convinced by every one of the fifteen cases that Hunt puts forward for concealed paronomasia in the Song.[61] Yet, regardless of the validity of every example, if Hunt is right on the whole and if such paronomasia is indeed legitimate, there may be another case of this phenomenon in 1:3 in the phrase שמן תורק שמך ("your name is oil poured out"). In this case, the concealed (unspoken) idea is משח ("anoint"), which contains a soundplay on the word שמך and—following Hunt's principles—I notice that it could also be a synonym of שמן תורק ("oil poured out").[62] If the concealed paronomasia around the word "anoint" points to the individual being an anointed one, then he could very well be a king since the act of anointing with oil, the שמן המשחה, was reserved for priests and kings, not commoners.[63] There are, of course, many supportive texts that attest this practice but consider, for now, that the royal Ps 45:2, 7–8 contains the very elements—a king whose lips are anointed with grace, who is anointed with the oil of joy, and whose

[58] I provide cases of these "Solomonic phenomena" in a forthcoming article: Gavin Fernandes, "Seeing the Subtleties of Solomon in the Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs in Sense, Sound and Space*, ed. Gavin Fernandes, Stefan Fischer, and Annette Potgieter (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, forthcoming).

[59] Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs*, 69.

[60] Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs*, 69. The bracketed text is Hunt's, not mine.

[61] Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs*, 72–80; cf. Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative," 454–61.

[62] Such a case of paronomasia would confirm the traditional meaning of "oil poured out," but Rendsburg's and Young's rendering of תורק as "crushed" would not contradict any paronomasia pointing to "anointing oil." For a discussion of various meanings, see Rendsburg and Young, "שֶׁמֶן תּוּרַק šemen turaq (Song 1:3)," 383–96.

[63] Klaus Seybold, "מָשַׁח *māšaḥ*," *TDOT* 9:43–54.

clothes exude the perfumes of aromatic oils—that are found in Song 1:2–4.[64] The special man of the Song whose very name conjures up the imagery of anointing does, more and more, appear to be a king.

Having made my first two major points, about the presence of a royal man and a group of women, I will now cement them by turning to a particular Sumerian poem that resembles the opening of the Song in a remarkable way, showing that 1:2–4 is the entrance of the beloved into the royal house.

III. A Royal Entrance Motif in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

In form and content, Song 1:2–4 looks like a particular Sumerian *balbale* of Inanna titled *Dumuzi-Inanna G*.[65] Both texts exhibit a rapid switching of address. Anne Kilmer has suggested that the "bal" in *balbale* means "turn," "rotate," or "change" and that the term was used for "multi-modal" songs in specific sections of the compositions.[66] It has also been suggested as a designation for the alternating (or rotating) dialogue between the speakers. This, however, is by no means certain.[67]

In the *Dumuzi-Inanna G balbale*, Inanna, with other young women, welcomes her beloved to her home for the first time, praising him as king and expressing their joy upon his arrival at her house. The *balbale* opens with the man spoken of in the third person. While the identity of the speaker(s) is not made explicit, the words used are similar to another *balbale*, *Dumuzi-Inanna E*, in which Inanna speaks of her beloved in the third person, praising him as "a sprouting lettuce."[68] It would not be a stretch, therefore, to attribute the first two lines of *Dumuzi-Inanna G* to Inanna, addressing them either to Dumuzi in the third person or to others in her company.

[64] Incidentally, I find a striking correlation between Ps 45 and the Song (discussed in my paper "The Connection between Psalm 45 and the Song of Songs," presented at Faculty of Divinity Seminar, University of Cambridge, January 2021).

[65] The word *balbale* itself is a rubric often used for Sumerian love poetry (Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998], 25). For the text of *Dumuzi-Inanna G*, see Yitschak Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature: Critical Edition of the Dumuzi-Inanna Songs*, BISNEL (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1998), 177–84.

[66] Anne D. Kilmer, "Musical Practice in Nippur," in *Nippur at the Centennial: Papers Read at the 35e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Philadelphia, 1988*, ed. Maria deJong Ellis, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14 (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1992), 101–12, esp. 104; Anne D. Kilmer, "Musik. A. In Mesopotamien," in *RlA* 8:463–82, esp. 470.

[67] See, e.g., Magnus Widell, "Who's Who in 'A balbale to Bau for Šu-Suen' (Šu-Suen A)," *JNES* 70 (2011): 289–302 esp. 298. The problem is the existence of *balbale*s that might be monologues: for example, whether *Šusin A* is a monologue or dialogue is disputed (see Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 346).

[68] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 166–67.

This is much like the Song's indirect speech, "Let him kiss me" before a switch to second person "your love is better than wine.…"

In the *balbale*, immediately after the woman's speaking about her lover in the third person, a group of females interject and directly address the male lover. Yitschak Sefati suggests that they may be priestesses associated with Inanna whom they call "mother."[69] Ten lines of joyous exultation for the lover follow from them. There is a striking similarity with the exclamatory praise for the lead characters in Song 1:4c and 1:4d by those I consider to be the עלמות. I have earlier suggested two possibilities: that the women in 1:4c could be addressing the woman, rejoicing with her, but also that they could be addressing the man, rejoicing in his love. If the latter is the case, this would match the *balbale* perfectly. The line may also reflect the sentiments of Ps 118:24 נגילה ונשׂמחה בו ("we will rejoice and be glad in him").

Finally, the third strophe (lines 13–16) of the *balbale* reverts back to the woman, who ratifies their sentiments. This ratification is much like the affirmation "rightly do they love you" in Song 1:4e.

Lines		**Speaker**	**Addressee**
1–2	The sprouting one, he … *with* his natural mother, the brother of beautiful eyes, he [takes] *counsel with* his father.	Single Female?	Women?
3–4	You are our brother, [you are] our brother, [You are] our brother (in charge) of the palace gate,	Women	Man
	[lines 5–11 omitted]		
12	Our mother speaks to you favorable *words*.		
13–16	Your coming hither—is life [indeed],[70] your entering the house—is abundance, lying at (your) side—is my utmost joy. My sweet, let us delight ourselves on the couch.	Single Female	Man

There are differences between the two texts, the most striking being that, in the Song, the lead roles of houseowner and entrant are reversed, with the king bringing the woman to his house. Nevertheless, in style and form, there are in both poems a sudden interjection of speech and apparent shifts in speakers and addressees. The speech of the female group appears midway in each case, with a closing affirmation of the leading female. The males in both texts never speak but are spoken to, signifying their presence.

Furthermore, when comparing *Dumuzi-Inanna G* with Song 1:2–4, one finds

[69] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 181.

[70] The word *indeed* is not provided by Sefati but is in the translation that was produced for the University of Oxford's Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature project under the supervision of Jeremy Black, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section4/tr40807.htm.

the theme of joy to be palpable in both texts, especially on the lips of the group of women. Yet another *balbale* with similar themes has the friends of the bride roundly exclaiming "let us be happy for them!"[71] Both the Song and the *balbale* contain exponents of joy based on one lead character entering into the house of the royal personage. This element of joy within an all-female group is another significant theme that recurs later in the Song (3:6–11 and 6:4–10). From a literary perspective, the rapid switching in the opening scene contributes to the tenor of excitement from the speech of the lead female speaker, to the female group, and to the scene as a whole.

In the final line above, there is an invitation to consummate love on "the couch." This is similar to a line from another *balbale* of Inanna, *Šusin B*: "Bridegroom, let me run after you to the couch."[72] Both lines are strikingly similar to Song 1:4, "Draw me after you, let us run!" Where to? To the "couch," itself similar to ערשנו רעננה ("our couch is green," Song 1:16), perhaps in this case, the verdant, scented marriage bed that was common in Sumerian royal weddings.[73] The primary themes of these Sumerian texts relate to the bringing of the royal groom into the house for sexual consummation. Similar themes occur in an Akkadian poem (Tablet BM 47507) analyzed in Wasserman's work.[74] Sefati observes, "The entry into the bride's house was the first formal act of marriage, after which came the union of the couple."[75] As noted earlier, in the Song, the roles are reversed with a female consort being brought into the house of the king (1:4). In any case, this bringing of the royal consort into the palace is a common enough literary motif that crops up in a number of these ancient Near Eastern poems.[76] Gwendolyn Leick describes them as "the product of royal ideology" because they either identify Dumuzi as the king who figures as Innana's groom (e.g., *Dumuzi-Inanna G*) or because they are royal hymns of the Sumerian king's sexual union with Inanna (e.g., *Šusin B*).[77] These texts are clearly courtly love poetry; it is therefore difficult to eliminate the "royal" from "royal ideology." Irrespective of whether the Song is written within the confines of the Israelite royal court (as tradition has it), specific sections within it have an air of "royal indispensableness," an impression of royalty that is difficult to dismiss.

[71] Line 41 in *Dumuzi-Inanna C* in Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once …: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 18; cf. Sefati, *Love Songs*, 137.

[72] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 354.

[73] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 41–42.

[74] Wasserman, *Akkadian Love Literature*, 110–14.

[75] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 101–2.

[76] Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature*, 101–4.

[77] Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 111, 124.

IV. Conclusions

All the aforementioned factors lead to the conclusion that the Song's first scene is that of the female protagonist being brought to the king's חדרים, the royal house, with a group of women rejoicing at her arrival.

Attributing the sudden shifts in address and gender to enallage at best suppresses the presence and interaction of the women with the lead couple and at worst dispenses with them entirely. The collective "we" in 1:4c and 1:4d, spoken to the female and male protagonists, respectively, indicates the presence of characters besides the couple—arguably the young women (עלמות) of 1:3. It seems that the female protagonist's speech has been crafted to extol the king's love, in unison with the other women—their womanly rejoicing (a prominent biblical motif) is a direct result of her being brought to the man's house. Calling המלך an epithet for "bridegroom" or an endearment rather than the standard definite noun for a royal personage seriously undermines what the opening scene in the Song is portraying. Latent paronomasia points to this man being anointed with שמן המשחה ("anointing oil"), a practice reserved for priests and kings. In addition to the woman, the young women also rejoice and "love" the man; however, he is special to them because he is their king.

These opening verses of the Song exhibit a thematic resemblance to the Sumerian *balbale Dumuzi-Inanna G,* along with other such poems. Although I remain uncertain as to whether they were specifically constructed with these *balbale*s in mind, I feel more assured that both texts hail from a common literary culture; perhaps the Song evidences a cultural memory associated with the wider love poetry from the ancient Near East. I reject any notion that the idea of the sacred marriage cult is imported into the Song. In this regard, I agree with Nissinen's conclusions, that the Song in its present form is not a text belonging to a sacred marriage ritual.[78] If anything, what is a common motif in the ancient Near East has been intentionally tailored in the opening of the Song of Songs for the author's own purposes, at least one of which is to portray a king bringing his beloved to his house while an all-female group joyfully praises his benevolent actions.

[78] Martti Nissinen, "Song of Songs and Sacred Marriage," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 173–218, here 215.

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