

How Song of Songs Became a Divine Love Song

Jonathan Kaplan

The University of Texas at Austin, USA
jonathan.kaplan@austin.utexas.edu



Aren M. Wilson-Wright

Universität Zürich, Switzerland
aren.wilson-wright@uzh.ch

Abstract

The origin of the interpretation of Song of Songs as a description of God's relationship with God's beloved community has been a persistent question in the work's history of interpretation. Earlier scholarship has provided a number of possible solutions to this problem, none of them conclusive. This article offers another possible answer: the language and imagery of the Northwest Semitic combat myth in Song 8:6-7, which identifies love with YHWH as the victorious divine warrior, triggers the work's interpretation as a divine love song. This argument receives support from some of the earliest allusions to Song of Songs in Revelation, which interpret Song of Songs in the context of apocalyptic discourse that likewise draws heavily on the combat myth.

Keywords

Song of Songs – combat myth – Revelation – history of interpretation

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Introduction

The origin of the interpretation of Song of Songs as a description of God's relationship with his beloved community, either Israel or the church, has been a persistent question in the study of this short biblical work and its history of interpretation.¹ Earlier scholarship has proposed various answers to this question.² For instance, some scholars, such as André LaCocque, Ellen F. Davis, Edmée Kingsmill and to some degree Phyllis Trible, Gerson Cohen, and David Stern, view such an interpretation as inherent to the composition of the work.³ They broadly argue that Song of Songs was originally composed in conversation with the emerging canon of ancient Israelite literature in order to critique other statements of both human-human and divine-human love in the canon. They do not, however, adequately deal with attested examples of allegorical composition in ancient Israel, all of which mark this mode of literary production in some way. Song of Songs, in contrast, does not signal another way to interpret it as anything other than a depiction of human love.⁴ In a

1 In several places throughout this article, gendered pronouns have been employed to refer to YHWH, Michael, an archangel, and other divine beings for accuracy regarding the historical sources discussed herein.

2 For a discussion of this topic, see J. Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 3-4.

3 P. Trible, "A Love Story Gone Awry" and "Love's Lyrics Redeemed," *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 72-143, 144-65; G.D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 3-17; E.F. Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically," in P.S. Hawkins and L. Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 172-84, 342-44; idem, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); A. LaCocque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998); idem, "I Am Black and Beautiful," in Hawkins and Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love*, pp. 162-71, 341-42; D. Stern, "Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs in a Comparative Context," in N.B. Dohrmann and D. Stern (eds.), *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 87-107, 263-72; E. Kingsmill, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4 As J.C. Exum (*Song of Songs, A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005], pp. 76-77) points out, if Song of Songs were written as a divine love song, it would be the singular unmarked allegory in extant ancient Israelite literature. The attempts to locate this agenda at the level of authorial intent reminds us, however, not to foreclose the possibility that Song of Songs was composed as a divine love song employing the form of secular love poetry. Origen already advanced a similar argument in the third century CE. See the introduction to his commentary on Song of Songs in Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (trans. R.P. Lawson; ACW, 26; New York: Newman, 1957), p. 21. The question of whether an allegorical meaning of Song of Songs is inherent to its composition has recently been re-

second approach, scholars such as Othmar Keel, Dominique Barthélemy, Ephraim Urbach, Marvin Pope, and Daniel Boyarin locate the development of this mode of interpretation in socio-political transformations in Second Temple period Judean society.⁵ Tying the emergence of such a mode of interpretation to certain seminal events in the history of the Second Temple period does not account for the possibility that multiple historical events and personages could have played a role in the development of this mode of interpreting Song of Songs. Proponents of a third approach, such as Chana Bloch, view the canonization of Song of Songs as the seminal factor in generating this interpretive mode.⁶ The evidence for the inclusion of Song of Songs in a fixed scriptural canon in ancient Israel comes from texts relatively late in the Second Temple period or in the earliest works of rabbinic literature. These works suggest that such a mode of interpretation existed prior to the fixation of the canon and give us little indication of what factors led to the development of the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song. While these earlier approaches to the development of the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song

visited in A. Schellenberg and L. Schwienhosrt-Schönberger (eds.), *Interpreting the Song of Songs – Literal or Allegorical?* (Biblical Tools and Studies, 26; Leuven: Peeters, 2016).

- 5 For instance, O. Keel places the advent of this mode of interpretation during the loss of Jewish sovereignty at the end of the Hasmonean dynasty in 63 BCE. See Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (trans. F.J. Gaiser; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), p. 16. Keel's position is endorsed by A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, "Nuove ricerche sulla storia del testo, le antiche versioni e l'interpretazione del *Cantico dei Cantici*," *ASE* 6 (1989), pp. 31-38 (34). D. Barthélemy, E.E. Urbach, and M. Pope trace the development of this mode of interpretation to the late first century and early second century CE and associate it with Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Rabbi Akiva. See Barthélemy, "Comment le Cantique des cantiques est-il devenu canonique?," in A. Caquot, S. Légasse, and M. Tardieu (eds.), *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor* (Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker, 1985), pp. 21-22; Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 7C; New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 92; Urbach, "Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Exposition of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 30 (1960), pp. 148-70. See also D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 107.
- 6 C. Bloch, "Translating Eros," in Hawkins and Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love*, pp. 152; see also A. Bloch and C. Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 28. Others have argued, in contrast, that this interpretive mode most likely originated at an earlier stage of history, when Song of Songs was considered an authoritative text, rather than during the period in which it was included into a fixed list of canonical texts. On this point see R.S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 19; Exum, *Song of Songs*, pp. 71-72; M.V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 250; and J. Barton, "The Canonicity of the Song of Songs," in A.C. Hagedorn (ed.), *Perspectives on the Song of Songs [Perspektiven der Hoheliedauslegung]* (BZAW, 346; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), p. 2.

are suggestive of when and how this interpretive mode emerged, we offer another option. As we argue in what follows, Song of Songs makes use of the Northwest Semitic combat myth when it identifies love with YHWH as the victorious divine warrior in Song 8:6-7. We contend that the evocation of the combat myth in this work may have led later readers to interpret it as a divine love song. While this approach will not help us locate firmly *when* Song of Songs was first understood as a divine love song (a focus of earlier proposals), it may help us understand *how* ancient readers came to interpret the work as an expression of divine-human love. As we will discuss in the second half of this paper, our proposal about what may have triggered the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song receives support from the presence of the earliest clearly discernable interpretations of the work in allusions to and echoes of the work in Revelation. Like Song of Songs, Revelation is a book saturated with imagery and language from the combat myth, drawn from the Hebrew Bible (including Song of Songs) and other sources.⁷ Thus, the author of Revelation recognized Song 8:6-7 as a comparable version of the Northwest Semitic combat myth and drew upon the work in shaping its apocalyptic discourse.

Song of Songs and the Northwest Semitic Combat Myth

The term “Northwest Semitic combat myth” refers to a set of genetically related myths that describe a confrontation between a warrior god and some combination of the Sea god, his serpentine allies, and Death.⁸ As the name suggests, reflexes of this myth appear primarily in Northwest Semitic languages – the language family that includes Hebrew, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Phoenician – or in literatures that were heavily influenced by Northwest Semitic traditions, such as Revelation.⁹ Examples of the Northwest Semitic combat myth include

7 For a survey of the various combat myth traditions and their connection to Revelation (particularly Revelation 12), see D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC, 52B; Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 667-74.

8 F.M. Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1973], p. 149) refers to these different traditions as “alloforms” of one another.

9 A.M. Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All: Song of Songs 8:6b–7a as a Reflex of the Northwest Semitic Combat Myth,” *JBL* 134 (2015), pp. 333-45. For an overview of the Northwest Semitic languages and the diagnostic features of this family see J. Huehnergard, “Remarks on the Classification of the Northwest Semitic Languages,” in J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (eds.), *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Leiden 21-24 August 1989* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 282-93; N. Pat-El and A.M. Wilson-Wright, “The Features of Canaanite: A Reevaluation,” *ZDMG* 166 (2016), pp. 41-55.

the Ba'al Cycle, Ps. 74:12-17, and Revelation 12. In the Ba'al Cycle, the storm god Ba'al battles the Sea god (*ym*) and then Death (*mt*) for kingship of the gods (KTU 1.2.4.1-31; 1.6.6.16-35). Allusions within this text also refer to a battle between Ba'al and Lītan, a serpentine figure (KTU 1.5.1.1-2).¹⁰ Psalm 74:12-14, on the other hand, describes how YHWH divided Sea (ים), and crushed the heads of the dragons (תנינים), and Leviathan (לויתן) during the primeval era, while Revelation 12 depicts a battle between the angel Michael and a seven-headed dragon (δράκων μέγας πυρρός ἔχων κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ).¹¹

Stories of combat between a warrior deity and his aquatic enemies occur frequently in the world's myths.¹² The proliferation of such stories can make it difficult to separate reflexes of the Northwest Semitic combat myth from other ancient Near Eastern traditions, especially given the prevalence of cultural contact in the ancient world. However, the identification of inherited formulae, phrases that appear in two or more genetically related languages and contain predominantly cognate words, makes it possible to distinguish reflexes of the Northwest Semitic combat myth.¹³ In this way, philology can help establish connections between different traditions that are separated by a long time period and are not directly dependent on each other literarily (e.g., the Ba'al Cycle

10 For the history of scholarship on these passages see M.S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle 1: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1-1.2* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 316-61; M.S. Smith and W.T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle 11: Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary of KTU / CAT 1.3-1.4* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 250-56.

11 For the seven-headed dragon in Revelation 12 as a reflex of the combat myth, see A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), p. 77; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 667-74; and B.K. Blount, *Revelation, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp. 229, 243-44, 258. D. Scoggins Ballentine (*The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015]) provides the most recent systematic treatment of these myths. Unlike Wilson-Wright, however, she also includes Akkadian myths like Enuma Eliš in her discussion of the combat myth. As Wilson-Wright ("Love Conquers All," p. 336 n. 11) points out, such myths may ultimately be related to the Northwest Semitic combat myth as part of a Proto-Semitic combat myth tradition. They describe a conflict between a storm god and the Sea, but they differ from the Northwest Semitic combat myth in omitting the battle with death. Notably, P. Prigent (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* [trans. W. Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], pp. 366-400) does not discuss the combat myth in any detail in his discussion of Revelation 12. See also the recent, but limited discussion in A. Satake, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (KEK, 16; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 278-87.

12 For examples of "combat between god of light and dragon of ocean," see S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, rev. and enl. edn, 1966), motif A162.

13 For more on inherited formulae, see C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 9-10.

and Revelation). The different versions of the Northwest Semitic combat myth are linked by the use of inherited formulae that can be reconstructed for Proto-Northwest Semitic, the hypothetical ancestor of all of the Northwest Semitic languages.¹⁴ The phrase “Leviathan the fleeing serpent ... Leviathan the twisting serpent” (Proto-Northwest Semitic **lawiy(a)tanu baṭnu barīḫu lawiy(a)tanu baṭnu ʿaḡallātānu*), for example, constitutes an inherited formula, shared by the Baʿal Cycle (KTU 1.5.1.1-2) and Isa. 27:1. Môt (Death) uses it in the Baʿal Cycle to describe one of Baʿal’s former enemies, and the speaker in Isa. 27:1 employs it as a description of YHWH’s eschatological foe. These two texts differ only in the use of *bṭn* versus שׁנח for “serpent.” In addition to linking known examples of the Northwest Semitic combat myth, inherited formulae also permit the identification of previously unrecognized versions of this myth.

Building from this theoretical basis, Aren M. Wilson-Wright has recently argued that Song 8:6-7 represents a reflex of the Northwest Semitic combat myth. He bases this argument on the appearance of the inherited Northwest Semitic formula “strong as Death” (Proto-Northwest Semitic **ʿazzu ka-mawti*; with the variant “Death is strong” [**ʿazzu mawtu*]) in verse six, which also occurs in the Baʿal Cycle (KTU 1.6.6.17, 19, 20), as well as a Ugaritic letter (KTU 2.10.11-13), and a Hebrew personal name (e.g., 1 Chron. 8:36 among others). In the Baʿal Cycle, this formula signals the relative parity of Baʿal and Môt as warriors: as the two combatants struggle for dominance, the narrator repeats the refrain, “Môt is strong; Baʿal is strong” (*mt ʿz bʿl ʿz*).¹⁵ Applying this logic to verse 6, the phrase “Love is as strong as death,” equates Love with the divine warrior YHWH, who is Death’s primary opponent. Love thus assumes both the syntactic and structural position of the divine warrior. Such an equation receives further support from Isa. 25:8, where YHWH as divine warrior “swallows Death forever” (בלע המות לנצח) during the eschatological era.¹⁶

As Wilson-Wright notes, many of the other words and phrases in Song 8:6-7 – קנאה – אש, רשפי, רבים, מים, שלהבתיה, and נהרות – appear in descriptions of

14 See Wilson-Wright (“Love Conquers All,” pp. 335-36) for a list of the different inherited formulae that link the different versions of the Northwest Semitic combat myth.

15 Unless noted, all translations are our own. Pope (*Song of Songs*, pp. 668-69) was the first to connect this passage to Song 8:6; O. Loretz has extended upon and reinforced Pope’s observation in two essays: “Nachklänge des ugaritischen Baal-Mythos in Hld 8,6-7,” *Studi Storico Religiosi* 5 (1981), pp. 197-201 and “Ägyptisierende, mesopotamisierende und ugarit-sierende Interpretationen der Götter Môt und Eros in Canticum 8,6-7: ‘Die Liebe ist so stark wie Môt’” *UF* 36 (2004), pp. 235-82. Loretz argues that the connection between Song of Songs and the Ugaritic material has important implications for the interpretation of Song of Songs: “Sie enthalten auch den Schlüssel für die textologischen Rätsel des Liedes” (“Nachklänge,” p. 198). See also Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” pp. 338-39;

16 Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” p. 339.

mythic combat elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible or are semantically or etymologically related to terms found in these texts.¹⁷ Psalm 29:7 and Isa. 30:30 both describe YHWH wielding the lightning bolt – characterized as either *להבות אש* (“flames of fire”) or *להב אש אוכלה* (“a devouring flame of fire”) – as a weapon against his enemies. The word *להב* used in both verses is cognate with the term *שלהבתיה* used in Song 8:6. The collocation of many waters and rivers also appears in descriptions of mythic combat. In Hab. 3:2-15, YHWH fights against Sea and rivers (v. 8) and tramples many waters with his horses (v. 15). Within Song of Songs, this mythic language serves to further identify Love with the victorious divine warrior. The bicolon “Love is as strong as Death // Jealousy as harsh as Sheol,” for example, identifies love with *קנאה* – one of YHWH’s more violent attributes – through poetic parallelism.¹⁸ Love also wields the divine warrior’s lightning bolts as a weapon – “its flashes are flashes of fire, Yah’s flame”¹⁹ – and because of this it can withstand the onslaught of “many waters” and “rivers,” two terms applied to YHWH’s cosmic enemies.²⁰

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH is described using language and imagery from the Northwest Semitic combat myth in the context of communal or personal redemption. It is this connection between redemption and the combat myth that we argue ultimately facilitated the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song.²¹ In the archaic poem of Exodus 15, the depiction of the Reed Sea crossing contains combat myth imagery: “By the tempest of your fury the waters were heaped up. They stood like a pile of flowing water. The depths congealed in the heart of the sea” (v. 8). Here, YHWH turns his wrath from Pharaoh and his chariot forces to the surging waves of the Reed Sea, an earthly understudy for his cosmic foe. His subsequent victory over the Reed

17 Ibid., pp. 339-43.

18 Ibid., pp. 339-40.

19 Wilson-Wright (ibid., pp. 340-41) argues for this translation of *שלהבתיה* on the basis of the Ben Naphtali vocalization tradition of the Masoretic text, Ibn Ezra, and Targum Canticles, all of which treat *שלהבתיה* as a construct chain featuring Yah as the nomen rectum.

20 Ibid., pp. 342-43.

21 Non-Israelite reflexes of the Northwest Semitic combat myth do not necessarily share this emphasis on personal and communal redemption. The Ugaritic reflexes of the Northwest Semitic combat myth, and the Ba’al Cycle in particular, focus exclusively on the divine realm: Ba’al confronts and eventually defeats his cosmic enemies Yam (Sea) and Môt (Death) with the help of Anat, Athtart, and Kôthar-wa-Ĥasis. Yet the significance of Ba’al’s victories for everyday life are left unspoken (of course the significance of this event could have been obvious to contemporary readers or auditors of this myth and its versions). This is also the case for certain biblical reflexes of the Northwest Semitic combat myth. Isaiah 27:1 describes YHWH’s triumph over “Leviathan the twisting serpent, Leviathan, the fleeing serpent” and “the dragon that is in the sea” using an inherited formula, but does not describe the implications of this victory for Israel.

Sea leads directly to the redemption of his chosen people: “In your faithfulness you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them in your strength to your holy dwelling” (v. 13). Psalm 77:17-20 expands on the terse vignette of Exod. 15:8 to provide an extended description of YHWH’s battle with the Reed Sea:

The waters saw you, O God; the waters saw you and writhed. Indeed, the depths trembled. The clouds poured out water; the heavens gave their voice; your arrows flew about. The sound of your thunder was in the whirlwind; lightning bolts illuminated the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your road was in the water and your path in the mighty waters, but your footsteps were not seen.

In these verses, YHWH subdues the Reed Sea through combat, which allows his people to cross to safety.

Combat myth imagery also figures in descriptions of personal redemption in the Hebrew Bible. In Ps. 18:2-4 (= 2 Sam. 22:2-4), David – the imagined speaker of the poem – depicts YHWH as a warrior whose triumph over hostile forces elicits faithfulness: “I love you, O YHWH, my strength. YHWH is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my god, the mountain where I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation. I call upon praiseworthy YHWH and I am delivered from my enemies.” The speaker then goes on to describe these enemies as YHWH’s cosmic foes, Death and Sea, whom he defeats in spectacular fashion. YHWH appears in a thunderstorm, rebukes the sea, and draws the speaker “out of mighty waters” (מַמִּים רַבִּים; Ps. 18:17).²²

The equation of Love with קנאה – traditionally translated “jealousy” – in Song 8:6 provides another link between Song of Songs and YHWH’s commitment to his faithful. This word appears 43 times in the Hebrew Bible, often in contexts of divine anger or jealousy. But, in certain post-exilic works, such as Second and Third Isaiah, קנאה refers to YHWH’s zealous, and often martial, efforts to defend and comfort his beloved community. Isaiah 42:10-13, for example, constitutes an oracle of encouragement, urging the exiles to return to Judah. At the end of the oracle, the anonymous prophet implies that YHWH will accompany the exiles on the road back to Judah and shield them from harm: “YHWH goes forth like a warrior, like a man of war he stirs up his קנאה. He shouts, he cries out, he prevails over his enemies” (v. 13). In Isa. 59, on the other hand, קנאה forms part of YHWH’s arsenal as he confronts Judah’s

²² This phrase often has mythic connotations in the Hebrew Bible according to Wilson-Wright, “Love Conquers All,” pp. 342-43.

enemies: “he clothes himself in righteousness like a coat of mail, and a helmet of salvation is on his head. He clothes himself in garments of vengeance, and he wraps קנאה about himself as a mantle” (v. 17). Thus equipped, he brings “wrath to his adversaries and recompense to his enemies” (v. 18), but ultimately, “he will come to Zion as a redeemer” (v. 20). In some cases, YHWH’s קנאה assumes an almost independent role in securing deliverance for Judah. In 2 Kgs 19:31 (= Isa. 37:32), for example, YHWH’s קנאה ensures that “a remnant will go forth from Jerusalem and a group of survivors from Mount Zion” following Sennacherib’s attack. The operant phrase in this passage is: “The קנאה of YHWH of hosts will do this.”²³

Song of Songs 8:6-7 contains a dense network of language and imagery from the Northwest Semitic combat myth, which underscores the power of love. In the rest of the Hebrew Bible, combat myth imagery often highlights YHWH’s fidelity to his beloved community. He battles against hostile forces, both cosmic and mundane, and his commitment to triumph over these enemies elicits devotion from his beloved community. Given this common use of combat myth imagery in the Hebrew Bible, we argue that the presence of such imagery in Song 8:6-7 provided a motivation for interpreting the entirety of Song of Songs as a divine-human love song. Interestingly, however, love – and not the male beloved – originally played the role of YHWH in this refraction of the Northwest Semitic combat myth. We suggest therefore that YHWH was later identified with the male beloved due to the ambiguity of the statement “Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death” (Song 8:6). Although most modern commentators treat the phrase “love is as strong as death” as a philosophical or theological statement on love in general, this phrase could just as easily refer to the male beloved’s love for his partner, especially since it follows a request addressed to him.²⁴ In the first half of verse 6, the female beloved asks her partner to demonstrate his love by setting her as seal on his heart and arm. Then, in the second half of verse 6 and the beginning of verse 7, the male’s love is described using words and formulae usually reserved for YHWH as the divine warrior. Song of Songs 8:6-7 thus implicitly identifies YHWH and the male beloved through the mediation of a third term: love. The male’s love, like love in general, takes on aspects of the divine. In this way, verses 6-7 serves as a catalyst for the later identification of YHWH and the male

23 The same phrase occurs in Isa. 9:7, which describes the preservation and exultation of Israel.

24 See, for example, Keel, *The Song of Songs*, p. 276; idem, *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes*, (SBS, 114-115; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1984), p. 119; Exum, *Song of Songs*, p. 249; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, pp. 196-98; and Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 673.

beloved. Targum Canticles, for example, makes this identification explicit when it renders *כמה אהבה* as: “for strong as death is the love of your divinity” (*ארום תקיפא כמותא אהבת אלהותך*).²⁵

The appearance of combat myth imagery in Song 8:6-7 also helps explain why some of the earliest extant interpretations of Song of Songs occur in the apocalyptic text, Revelation, as we discuss more fully in the next section. This work, like Song of Songs itself, is replete with combat myth imagery and utilizes this motif to characterize God or his champion as a warrior whose triumph over hostile forces elicits love and devotion from the faithful. Furthermore, the allusions to Song of Songs occur primarily in passages with a heavy concentration of combat myth imagery. In Revelation 12, which echoes Song 8:6 as we contend in the next section, Michael and his angels battle against “a great red dragon with seven heads” (*δράκων μέγας πυρρός ἔχων κεφαλάς ἑπτὰ*), who threatens to devour the celestial woman symbolizing God’s beloved community. This chapter draws on several mythic motifs from the ancient world, including the story of Leto and Python, the myth of Isis and Typhon, and the Northwest Semitic combat myth.²⁶

Given the composite nature of the traditions used in Revelation 12, how can we be sure that this chapter appropriates the Northwest Semitic combat myth? As mentioned above, the presence of an inherited Northwest Semitic formulae proves decisive. The reference to the seven-headed dragon in Rev. 12:3 finds a close parallel in the Ba’al Cycle, where Môt states that Ba’al “annihilated the twisting serpent, the potentate with seven heads” (*btñ . ṣqltn . [] šlyt . d . šbʿt . rāšm*; KTU 1.5.1:3).²⁷ Taken together, Rev. 12:3 and KTU 1.5.1:3 suggest the existence of an inherited Northwest Semitic formula (**batnu dū sibʿati raʿasīma*) used to describe the enemy of the warrior god and his champions as a terrifying monster.²⁸ Notably, reflexes of this formula are absent from Song 8:6-7 as

25 Targum Canticles expands Song of Songs into an extended divine-human love song, with YHWH playing the role of the male beloved, so the “love of your divinity” here refers to both YHWH and the male beloved.

26 Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, pp. 57-67; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 667-74; Satake, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, pp. 279-80; Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth*, p. 139; O. Böcher, *Die Johannesapokalypse* (Erträge der Forschung, 41; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 68-76.

27 In KTU 1.3.5:41-42, the warrior goddess Anat claims to have defeated the potentate with seven heads herself.

28 It is difficult to detect inherited formulae in unrelated languages due to the absence of cognate words. Still, *ἔχων κεφαλάς ἑπτὰ* is the semantic equivalent of Ugaritic *d šbʿt rāšm* and most likely goes back to a Semitic antecedent similar to the Ugaritic phrase. Furthermore, *d šbʿt rāšm* occurs in parallel to *btñ* (“snake, serpent”), which corresponds closely to Greek *δράκων*.

well as the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Psalm 74:13-14 depicts YHWH breaking “the heads of the dragons” (ראשי תנינים) and crushing “the heads of Leviathan” (ראשי לויתן), but does not specify how many heads these foes had. It would be quite a coincidence for Revelation to furnish the dragon with seven heads if the author of this passage only knew Psalm 74. Revelation 21:1 provides a second possible link between Revelation and the Ugaritic version of combat myth, which is absent from Song 8:6-7. Describing the new heaven and the new earth, the narrator observes, “the sea was no more” (ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι). This cryptic statement most likely reflects the destruction of the hostile sea god in other versions of the combat myth, an event that finds full expression in the Ba’al Cycle (KTU 1.2.4:11-31), but is only hinted at in Song of Songs.²⁹ In sum, Revelation draws on combat myth traditions that are absent from both Song of Songs and the Hebrew Bible, which shows that this work did not simply inherit combat myth imagery from Song 8:6-7, but drew on independent combat myth traditions and recognized Song 8:6-7 as a comparable version of the Northwest Semitic combat myth. In the next section, we will examine more fully the ways in which Revelation echoes language from Song of Songs and thus interpreted the work as the love story of a divine warrior-redeemer and his beloved community. The interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song in Revelation (with a particular concentration in Revelation 12), one of the earliest interpretations of Song of Songs, supports our argument that the evocation of the combat myth in Song of Songs likely triggered the emergence of its interpretation as a divine love song.

Song of Songs in Revelation

Analyzing the interpretation of Song of Songs in Second Temple period literature before the advent of lemmatized interpretations of the work in tannaitic literature and the commentaries of Hippolytus and Origen in the third century CE is a difficult endeavor. Such research involves exploring the ways in which later texts interpret and evoke earlier texts without explicitly citing them. Locating verifiable allusions to and echoes of Song of Songs in this earlier literature is methodologically challenging and is complicated by Song of Songs’s own use of metaphors and images from a broader storehouse of ancient Near

29 M.S. Smith (*The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [Dearborn, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2002], p. 91) goes further and suggests that Revelation 21 can be read as a précis of the Ba’al Cycle. Both texts refer to the defeat of the Sea (KTU 1.2.4:1-31 / Rev. 21:1), the building of a palace for the victorious divine warrior (KTU 1.4.5:35-6.38 / Rev. 21:2), and the destruction of death (KTU 1.6.6:16-35 / Rev. 21:4).

Eastern poetic traditions. In a recent article that builds on earlier published research, Jonathan Kaplan argues that the earliest verifiable allusions to and echoes of Song of Songs appear in the late first-century CE apocalypses, 4 Ezra and Revelation.³⁰ These works thus represent the earliest interpretations of Song of Songs as depicting divine-human love. Both works share a common identification of the male character of Song of Songs with the agent of divine redemption and look towards a final eschatological victory of God and his beloved community. Revelation also shares with Song 8:6-7 a common appeal to the Northwest Semitic combat myth as we argued earlier.

Identifying echoes and allusions begins with the recognition of shared language between two works.³¹ Since the identification of echoes and allusions implies the diachronic literary dependence of a later work on an earlier work, a firm connection between the two works must be based on more than common literary motifs and inherited formulae. The location of distinctive or unique phrasing between two works supports the contention of an allusive relationship between the later and earlier works. As we will see in the discussion of Rev. 1:13 below, the location of one secure point of connection between Revelation and Song of Songs establishes a link between the two works that can support the further identification of allusions to and echoes of Song of Songs in Revelation. This point is particularly salient in cases such as Revelation because Revelation often alludes to several earlier works in the same verse or passage, which can obscure the identification of an allusion to or echo of Song of Songs. Revelation has long been noted as a work which evokes a wide range of earlier ancient Israelite and Jewish literature (e.g., Leviticus, Zechariah, and Daniel) as well as themes and myths from Greek literature (e.g., the Python-Leto-Apollo myth). The allusive character of a work is an important feature that supports the identification of other allusions and echoes. As Yitzhak Berger argues, “[T]he presence of allusions to multiple texts will render an additional suggested relationship that much more persuasive—particularly where the various relationships might be seen to share a common purpose.”³² Revelation’s propensity to evoke earlier sources thus can be seen as a support for the identification of Song of Songs as a source text.

30 J. Kaplan, “The Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” *HUCA* 81 (2010/2013), pp. 43-66. On allusions to Song of Songs in 4 Ezra, see also M.E. Stone, “The Interpretation of Song of Songs in 4 Ezra,” *JSJ* 38 (2007), pp. 226-33.

31 See Kaplan, “Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” p. 50 for a series of tests to employ for identifying allusions and echoes and differentiating between the two modes of reference.

32 Y. Berger, “Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25,” *JBL* 128 (2009), pp. 253-72 (255).

Once potential allusions and echoes to a work are identified in a later work, the next step entails the analysis of their interpretive import, which enables their classification as either allusions or echoes. As we contend in what follows, the majority of appeals to Song of Songs in Revelation to describe both a divine figure and Israel should be properly understood as echoes of the work rather than clear allusions. An echo differs from an allusion in that the echo of language from Song of Songs lacks interpretive significance for our understanding of the alluding text, in this case Revelation.³³ As Kaplan and Benjamin Sommer have each argued, following the work of Israeli literary theorist Ziva Ben-Porat, the identification of an allusion, by definition, forces the reader to modify the interpretation of the more recent text because of his or her understanding of how the more recent text employs the earlier text.³⁴ In other words, an allusion is a reference to the earlier text that has interpretive import for our understanding of the text in which the allusion appears. In the case of Revelation, most of its appeals to Song of Songs are meant only to evoke the text as one of many earlier works whose use supports Revelation's claim to be an authoritative vision. The identification of echoes of Song of Songs in Revelation does not, however, transform our understanding of what a given passage in Revelation intends as it would if the author were alluding to Song of Songs.

The evocation of Song of Songs appears throughout Revelation. Kaplan, building on the work of earlier scholars, argues that allusions to or echoes of Song of Songs appear in Rev. 1:13 (Song 1:2), 3:20 (Song 5:2), 12:1 (Song 6:10), 12:11, 15-16 (Song 8:6-7), and 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17 (Song 4:8-12; 5:1; 7:12).³⁵ The author of Revelation begins the work by employing Song of Songs in order to augment his description of the exalted Jesus (1:13). This verse is part of a longer section of Revelation 1 in which the exalted Jesus is described in detail (1:12-16). As numerous scholars have noted, the imagery in this section is drawn from Daniel 7 and 10 as well as Zech. 4:1-14.³⁶ One particularly enigmatic phrase in this description is the location around which the golden sash is wrapped (1:13). In

33 B.D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 15-17.

34 See Kaplan, "Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," p. 48; Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, pp. 15-17; Z. Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL* 1 (1976), pp. 105-128 (107-116).

35 Kaplan, "Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," pp. 57-65.

36 W.J. Harrington, *Revelation* (SP, 16; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993), pp. 50-53; D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC, 52A; Waco: Thomas Nelson, 1997), pp. 93-94; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, pp. 134-40; M.G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), pp. 40-41; G.R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 88-93, 102; Satake, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, pp. 141-44; and Blount, *Revelation*, pp. 34-44.

LXX Dan. 10:5, the likely primary source of the sash imagery, the sash is located on the Son of Man's "waist" or "loins" (τὴν ὀσφύην). In contrast, Revelation describes the sash as girded πρὸς τοῖς μαστοῖς ("around the breasts"). Jesse Rainbow argues that the source of this enigmatic phrase, not found in the descriptions of Daniel 10 or of the High Priest's garments in Exodus (see 28:4; 29:5; and 39:29), is LXX Song 1:2.³⁷ There the translator renders the consonantal text טַיִת, which the MT vocalizes as אִיִּת ("your love[-making]," as μαστοί σου ("your breasts"). While such a translation is more plausible in the other instances in which the phrase appears and the male beloved is describing the female protagonist's anatomy (twice in Song 4:10), it seems like a misinterpretation of MT Song 1:2 in this case. The writer of Revelation picks up on this oddity, as Rainbow rightly contends, and employs it in his description of the exalted Jesus. As Rainbow notes in his discussion of the significance of the evocation of Song 1:2 in Rev. 1:13, it signals for the reader "that Jesus is the male love of the Song of Songs."³⁸ For the purposes of our discussion here, the identification of unique language from Song of Songs in Revelation in this instance establishes a firm connection between the two texts that supports the identification of other allusions to and echoes of Song of Songs in Revelation.

The writer of Revelation employs Song of Songs later in the description of the cosmological woman who personifies the beloved community (12:1). The beloved community is also referred to as the bride of the Lamb throughout Revelation (19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), which is an echo of the appellation of the female protagonist as "bride" in Song of Songs (4:8-12; 5:1). More directly germane to the focus of this essay, Rev. 12:11, in the midst of the grand apocalyptic vision of this chapter, contains language rooted in Song 8:6-7: "for love is as strong as death ... Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."³⁹ Similarly, Rev. 12:11 juxtaposes love and death in its broader apocalyptic vision: "And they overcame him [i.e., the dragon] through the blood of the Lamb and through the word of their testimony, and they loved not their life unto death."⁴⁰

37 J. Rainbow, "Male μαστοί in Revelation 1.13," *JSNT* 30 (2007), pp. 249-53. For a fuller discussion of and evaluation of Rainbow's proposal, see Kaplan, "Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," pp. 58-60.

38 Rainbow, "Male μαστοί," p. 252.

39 See Kaplan, "Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," p. 63. As has been noted by J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 38; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 192-93; see also J. Winandy, "Le Cantique des cantiques et le Nouveau Testament," *RB* 71 (1964), pp. 161-90 (186-88); and A.-M. Dubarle, "La femme couronnée d'étoiles, Ap., 12", in *Mélanges à A. Robert* (Paris: Mélanges Bibliques, 1957), p. 518, as cited in Ford.

40 The connection of Song of Songs to martyrdom is not unique to Revelation in antiquity and is also found prominently in the famous interpretation of Song 1:3 associated with

Here Revelation embeds its interpretation of Song of Songs in the context of an apocalyptic description of combat between the angel Michael as a divine warrior figure and the forces of the primordial serpent.

Perhaps the only clear allusion to Song of Songs in Revelation is the allusion to Song 5:2 in Rev. 3:20, identified earlier by André Feuillet following Robert Henry Charles and subsequently noted by a significant number of scholars.⁴¹ In Revelation, Jesus “stand[s],” like the male beloved of Song of Songs 5, outside the “door” “knocking.” While the fact that Revelation is a Greek text and Song of Songs is in Hebrew should militate against drawing direct linguistic connections between the two texts, a comparison of Rev. 3:20 and LXX Song 5:2, however, highlights the lines of connection between the two texts.⁴²

TABLE A comparison of LXX Song 5:2 and Rev. 3:20

Song 5:2	Rev. 3:20
<p><u>Φωνή</u> ἀδελφίδου μου, <u>κρούει ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν.</u> <u>Ἄνοιξόν</u> μου, ἀδελφή μοι ...</p>	<p>Ἴδου ἔστηκα <u>ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν</u> καὶ <u>κρούω</u> ἐάν τις ἀκούσῃ <u>τῆς φωνῆς</u> μου καὶ <u>ἀνοιξῇ τὴν θύραν,</u></p>
<p>The <u>sound</u> of my brother <u>knocking upon the door.</u> <u>Open</u> to me my sister ...</p>	<p>Behold, I stand <u>at the door</u> and <u>knock</u>; if anyone hears my <u>voice</u> and <u>opens the door</u> ...</p>

The major difference between Revelation and Song of Songs here is that in Song of Songs, the female protagonist responds to her beloved’s rapping on the

Rabbi Akiba in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’eI, Shirta 3. For a more recent discussion of this passage, see Kaplan, *My Perfect One*, pp. 26-28.

41 A. Feuillet, “Le Cantique des cantiques et l’Apocalypse,” *RSR* 49 (1961), pp. 321-53 (324-34). R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (1CC; New York: Scribner, 1920), pp. 100-101. See also M. Cambe, “L’influence du Cantique des cantiques sur le Nouveau Testament,” *RThom* 62 (1962), pp. 5-26 (5-9); Winandy, “Le Cantique des cantiques et le Nouveau Testament,” pp. 173-77; Harrington, *Revelation*, p. 74; Kaplan, “Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” pp. 60-61; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, pp. 218-19; and Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 212.

42 This table is adapted from Kaplan, “Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” p. 60.

door whereas in Revelation, Jesus invites those listening to respond by opening the door. While there is a broader ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean literary trope of a male lover standing outside the door of his beloved calling for her to open, as Kaplan notes, the unique linguistic connections between Revelation and Song of Songs in this verse, 1:13, and elsewhere suggest that Rev. 3:20 alludes to Song 5:2 in this instance.⁴³ The allusion to Song 5:2 in Rev. 3:20 enhances Jesus's appeal to his audience by evoking the promise of intimate embrace longed for in Song 5:2-8 and contrasting that scene with the surety of Jesus's presence.

As we noted, Revelation generally employs echoes of Song of Songs, rather than allusions to the work as is the case in Rev. 3:20. As echoes, these references to Song of Songs do not transform our understanding of the meaning of the particular passages in Revelation but rather serve to enhance the authority of Revelation through its evocation of a panoply of earlier authoritative or scriptural texts, including Zechariah, Daniel, and Leviticus as well as Song of Songs.⁴⁴ In Revelation, the male beloved is cast as the divine warrior who elicits fidelity and devotion on the part of the community/female figure because of his commitment to triumph over hostile forces and because of the promise of redemption this triumph portends. It is significant for our discussion that the earliest extant interpretations of Song of Songs appear in apocalyptic literature and predominately in those parts of Revelation that appropriate the combat myth most strongly. One may raise specific concerns about our analysis of echoes of or allusions to Song of Songs in particular passages in

43 See Kaplan, "Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," p. 61, for a fuller discussion of this issue and reference to relevant ancient Near Eastern texts. The motif of Jesus standing outside the door of a room or gate where his followers await also appears in Luke 12:35-38; Mark 13:29; and Jas 5:9. While all three of these passages and Rev. 3:20 evoke the theme of the eschatological judge enacting judgment, Rev. 3:20 alone seems to evoke the language and narrative context of Song 5:2 directly. Revelation 3:20 also evokes an epiphany motif common in Greco-Roman literature (e.g., Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo* 3). On this point see Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 260.

44 Scholars of Second Temple literature have rightly shied away from using the term "canonical" to characterize the social status of particular works during the period as there is no clear evidence of a defined "list" or "canon" of books that particular ancient communities viewed as authoritative. For an introduction to the topic, see T.H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). The growing status of Song of Songs as an authoritative work in ancient Judaism in the period before the composition of Revelation is evidenced by the presence of four copies of the work among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q106-108; 6Q6) and the inclusion of the work in the Septuagint. For a recent discussion of the copies from the Dead Sea Scrolls, see B.P. Gault, "The Fragments of *Canticles* from Qumran: Implications and Limitations for Interpretation," *RevQ* 95/24 (2010), pp. 351-71.

Revelation. If one grants our broader argument that Revelation interprets Song of Songs, however, it supports our broader contention about what may have led to the interpretation of Song of Songs as a description of divine-human love. As we argued earlier, it is the reference to the combat myth in Song 8:6-7 that likely triggers the association of Song of Songs with divine-human love and the evocation of this love poem in works that describe the inevitable victory of the divine warrior over the forces who threaten his faithful, beloved community.

Further support for our argument comes from the other late first-century CE apocalyptic work 4 Ezra, which – as Kaplan and Michael Stone, among others, have argued – contains allusions to Song of Songs.⁴⁵ While 4 Ezra does not make use of the combat myth in the same prominent way as Revelation, it does participate in a broader constellation of apocalyptic discourses of which Revelation is also a part. The fact that the earliest interpretations of Song of Songs are to be found in these two first-century Jewish apocalyptic works further supports our argument that the identification of the combat myth imagery of Song 8:6-7 led to the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine-human love song. Though our aim in this paper has not been to identify *when* this approach to interpreting Song of Songs developed, the presence of the earliest discernible interpretations of Song of Songs in these works further suggests that the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine-human love song emerged in late Second Temple period apocalyptic literature, significantly before the differentiation of Judaism and Christianity into distinct religious communities and the production of the first lemmatized interpretations of Song of Songs.

Conclusion

As we noted in the introduction to this paper, earlier approaches to the emergence of the interpretation of Song of Songs as a divine love song are suggestive of when and how this interpretive mode developed. These approaches are not, however, without their problems. We have focused in this paper, instead, on exploring the mechanisms that may have led ancient readers to come to interpret this work as an expression of divine-human love. We have argued that the presence of inherited formulae evoking the combat myth in Song 8:6-7, which identifies love with YHWH as the victorious divine warrior, helps us understand what may have led later readers to interpret Song of Songs as a

45 See M. Stone, “The Interpretation of Song of Songs in 4 Ezra” and Kaplan, “Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah.”

divine-human love song. As we have pointed out, Song of Songs is part of a broader corpus of works from antiquity, including the book of Revelation, that incorporate imagery and inherited linguistic formulae from the Northwest Semitic combat myth. We argue that the first clearly discernable allusions to and echoes of Song of Songs in Revelation further support our claim since the author of Revelation recognized Song 8:6-7 as a comparable version of the Northwest Semitic combat myth and drew upon the work in shaping its vision of God as warrior who defeats hostile forces on behalf of his beloved community.