

Love Conquers All: Song of Songs 8:6b–7a as a Reflex of the Northwest Semitic Combat Myth

AREN M. WILSON-WRIGHT

wilsonwright@utexas.edu

Waggener 14a, 2210 Speedway C3400, Austin, TX 78712

Scholars have often noted YHWH's apparent absence from the Song of Songs. At best, he appears under the name Yah in the difficult and morphologically frozen term שלהבתיה in Song 8:6. In this article, I go beyond שלהבתיה to suggest that love plays the role of YHWH in the Song. Using Calvert Watkins's work on inherited formulae, I argue that Song 8:6b–7a draws on the Northwest Semitic combat myth to identify love with YHWH, the victorious divine warrior. As part of this argument, I identify three inherited formulae in the Hebrew Bible, the Baal Cycle, and later Christian and Jewish literature: "Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, the twisting serpent," "rebuke Sea," and "strong as Death." Within the Song, the phrase "strong as Death" connects this passage with the Baal Cycle, while the references to מים רבים and נהרות evoke scenes of mythic combat from the rest of the Hebrew Bible. This interpretation, I argue, also has mythic resonances in the adjuration refrain in Song 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4 and the phrase "sick with love" in Song 2:5 and 5:8.

כי־עזה כמות אהבה קשה כשאול קנאה
רשפיה רשפי אש שלהבתיה
מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות את־האהבה

For love is as strong as Death, jealousy harsh as Sheol.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of Yah.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can rivers drown it.¹ (Song 8:6b–7a)

This article had its genesis in a doctoral seminar on Song of Songs taught by Dr. Jonathan Kaplan. I would like to thank the members of the seminar for their comments on this paper. In particular, I would like to thank M. L. Case, Geoffrey D. McElroy, Thomas Sowards, Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley, and Jonathan Kaplan. I would also like to thank the two anonymous *JBL* reviewers for their comments and critiques. Any remaining errors are my own.

¹All translations from Hebrew and Ugaritic are my own.

The Song of Songs does not explicitly refer to the God of Israel under the name YHWH or any other epithet. The noun *שלהבתיה* in Song 8:6 may contain a shortened form of the Tetragrammaton, but scholars debate the interpretation of this difficult term.² In this article, I go beyond *שלהבתיה* to suggest that YHWH is present in the Song in the form of love. Drawing on Calvert Watkins's work on inherited formulae, I argue that Song 8:6b–7a utilizes language and imagery from the Northwest Semitic combat myth to identify love with YHWH as the victorious divine warrior. As part of this argument, I identify three inherited formulae in the Hebrew Bible, the Baal Cycle, and later Christian and Jewish literature: “Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, the twisting serpent,” “rebuke Sea,” and “strong as Death.” Within the Song, the phrase “strong as Death” connects this passage with the Baal Cycle, while the references to *מים רבים* and *נהרות* evoke scenes of mythic combat from the rest of the Hebrew Bible. By way of conclusion, I demonstrate the importance of this reading for interpreting the adjuration refrain in Song 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4 and the phrase “sick with love” in Song 2:5 and 5:8.

I. THE NORTHWEST SEMITIC COMBAT MYTH

As many commentators have noted, Song 8:6b–7a employs a rich array of cosmic language to highlight the power of love (*אהבה*). In these verses, love is set against death (*מות*), Sheol (*שאול*), mighty waters (*מים רבים*), and rivers (*נהרות*), and likened to fire (*רשפי אש*) and flame (*שלהבתיה*). Most commentators, however, downplay the mythic significance of these verses, preferring to treat them as a theological or philosophical statement about the nature of love. Othmar Keel, for example, claims that “the statement about love being as strong as death cannot have a mythical sense in the context of the Song, but to a large degree it owes its strength and intensity to the several myths about the struggle between the powers of life or love and those of death.” Meanwhile, J. Cheryl Exum calls these verses “a succinct credo on the subject of love.”³ Yet all of these terms and concepts are part of a cross-cultural tradition of combat myths, as will be shown now.

Many of the myths from the ancient Near East focus on divine combat. In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk defeats Tī'āmat (the Deep) and her serpentine allies; in the

²David R. Blumenthal, “Where God Is Not: The Book of Esther and Song of Songs,” *Judaism* 44 (1995): 81–82.

³Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 276. See also idem, *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes*, SBS 114–115 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1984), 119; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 249. See further Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 196–98; and Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 673.

Baal Cycle, Baal challenges Yamm (Sea) and Môt (Death) for the kingship of the gods; and in several passages in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH battles a variety of aqueous foes, including Yām (Sea), Tēhôm (the Deep), and Leviathan.⁴ Traditionally, scholars have explained the similarities between these myths in terms of narrative typology and cultural contact. The Enuma Elish, the Baal Cycle, and the passages from the Hebrew Bible are all versions of a single “combat myth” archetype.⁵ In the first act, the divine warrior—usually a storm god—confronts and defeats the turbulent powers of the Sea and/or its serpentine allies using a lightning bolt. His victory allows him to claim kingship over the gods in the second act and, as an encore, create the world using the body of the slain Sea. The cast of characters may change, but the plot remains the same. The dispersal of this motif is the result of cultural contact: the combat myth originated in either the Levant or Mesopotamia and spread to other societies through trade, conquest, and migration.⁶

This line of reasoning for the dispersal of the combat myth is difficult to apply to the Song of Songs because its historical context is poorly understood. True, Song 8:6b–7a shares typological similarities with many versions of the combat myth—water, fire, and death all make an appearance—but typological similarities alone prove insufficient for demonstrating concrete connections between two myths since divine combat is a common motif in the world’s narratives.⁷ The similarities may be accidental. Likewise, the possibility of cultural contact or literary influence of an earlier myth on Song 8:6b–7a proves hard to substantiate because Song of Songs in general, and ch. 8 in particular, is short on historical detail that would permit the identification of relevant source material. Even if the Song of Songs did contain a sufficient level of historical detail, it is unlikely that a source myth could

⁴Other examples from the ancient world include the Akkadian Anzu myth, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the Hittite Illuyankas myth, the Egyptian Repulsing of the Dragon, and Revelation 12.

⁵Beginning with Hermann Gunkel, some scholars have referred to the “combat myth” as *Chaoskampf* and have identified the divine warrior’s opponents with the forces of chaos. I prefer the term “combat myth,” since the modern term “chaos” does not have a direct equivalent in the languages of the ancient Near East.

⁶Hermann Gunkel, for example, argued that the references to divine combat in the Hebrew Bible were an adaptation of Enuma Elish (*Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr., Biblical Resource Series [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 78–111; German original, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895], 114–17). Thorkild Jacobsen, by contrast, suggested that the combat myth originated in a West Semitic environment where the ocean was more culturally relevant (“The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat,” *JAOS* 88 [1968]: 104–8). John Day traces this quest for origins in *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament*, UCOP 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 10–13.

⁷For myths of “combat between god of light and dragon of ocean,” see Stith 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*, rev. and enl. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), motif A162.

be found. Each surviving version of the combat myth represents a single link in an ongoing process of oral and literary transmission. Hundreds of miles and hundreds of retellings separate even the most closely related versions. As a result, it is often impossible to determine the direct influence of one myth upon another.

The comparative method from historical linguistics offers another way to demonstrate a concrete relationship between classes of myth that relies on an analogy between language and myth. Just as genetically related languages share cognate words—words originating from a common ancestor, like English “foot” and German “Fuß”—genetically related myths share cognate formulae.⁸ As Calvert Watkins has shown in his study of Indo-European poetics, certain formulae can persist unchanged for millennia even as languages split and diversify, leaving their traces in related languages. He attributes this longevity to a combination of enduring cultural saliency—formulae, for Watkins, convey important themes—and mutability. Because of this mutability, inherited formulae need not contain exact cognates or preserve the same word order. Lexical replacement and syntactic alteration can occur as long as semantic equivalence is preserved.⁹

Before turning to Song 8:6b–7a, I will apply Watkins’s insights to the Northwest Semitic languages, the subset of the Semitic family including Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ugaritic.¹⁰ I will demonstrate the existence of a specifically Northwest Semitic combat myth defined by three inherited formulae preserved in the Ugaritic material, the Hebrew Bible, and Christian and Jewish literature such as the NT and Midrash Rabbah.¹¹ These formulae are “Leviathan, the twisting serpent, the fleeing serpent,” “rebuke Sea,” and “strong as Death.” The presence of other inherited formulae in the Hebrew Bible increases the chances that the phrase “strong as death” in the Song is an inherited formula.

⁸Calvert Watkins cites Greek *kleos aphthiton* and Sanskrit *ākṣiti śrávaḥ*, both meaning “imperishable fame,” as examples of an inherited Indo-European formula (*How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 13).

⁹Ibid., 9–10.

¹⁰For the linguistic subgrouping of these languages within Semitic and the features that distinguish them, see John Huehnergard, “Remarks on the Classification of the Northwest Semitic Languages,” in *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Leiden 21–24 August 1989*, ed. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 282–93.

¹¹I choose to focus on the Northwest Semitic languages to the exclusion of Akkadian because they are closely related linguistically. Ultimately, the Northwest Semitic combat myth and Akkadian myths like the Enuma Elish and Anzu may originate from a Proto-Semitic combat myth dating perhaps to the fourth millennium BCE. Cultural contact between Mesopotamia and the Levant and between speakers of Akkadian and West Semitic languages complicates the recovery of this mythic complex. Although a reconstruction of the Proto-Semitic combat myth is beyond the scope of this paper, Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic versions of the combat myth do share at least one inherited formula. In the Enuma Elish, Hab 3:15, and later Jewish literature, the victorious divine warrior tramples the Sea. Both the Enuma Elish and Jewish literature use the verb *kbs* (“to trample”), which does not occur in Biblical Hebrew or Ugaritic with this meaning.

The Hebrew Bible preserves several inherited Northwest Semitic formulae related to the Northwest Semitic combat myth. The phrase “Leviathan, the fleeing serpent ... Leviathan, the twisting serpent” (*liwyātān nāhāš bāriah ... liwyātān nāhāš ʿāqallātōn*) found in Isa 27:1, for example, offers a close parallel to the phrase “Litan the fleeing serpent ... the twisting serpent” (*ltn bṭn brḥ ... bṭn ʿqltn*) in the Baal Cycle *KTU* 1.5.1.1–2. The only difference between the two phrases is the alternation of *bṭn* and *nāhāš*, both meaning “snake.” Most likely, the Hebrew formula has undergone lexical replacement. *Bešen*, the expected reflex of Proto-Semitic **baṭn*- (“snake”) does not occur in Hebrew due perhaps to taboo avoidance, which suggests that the original formula was **lawiy(a)tanu baṭnu barihu baṭnu ʿaqallātānu*.¹² Both the Ugaritic and Hebrew reflexes of this formula appear in the context of divine combat. In Isa 27:1, YHWH’s victory over Leviathan is projected into the eschatological era, while in the Baal Cycle, Môt includes Litan in a list of enemies that Baal has defeated.

Another inherited Northwest Semitic formula describes the storm god’s use of effective language against Sea. In Nah 1:4, YHWH “rebukes Sea so that it dries up” (*gôʿer bayyām wayyabšēhū*). Other descriptions of YHWH’s mastery over the Sea employ a nominal form of the root *gʿr*. In Isa 50:2, YHWH declares, “by my rebuke I dry up Sea, I make the rivers a desert” (*bəgaʿārātī ʾaḥārīb yām ʾāšīm nāhārôt midbār*), and in 2 Sam 22:16 and Ps 18:16 the poet asserts that “the channels of Sea were seen, the foundations of the world were laid bare at YHWH’s rebuke [*bəgaʿarat yhwḥ*], at the blast of the breath of his nostrils.”¹³ In the Baal Cycle *KTU* 1.2.4.28–29, ʿAthartu aids Baal in his fight against Yamm using incantations: “By name ʿAthartu rebuked [Yamm], ‘Dry up [Yamm], O Mighty Baal! Dry up [Yamm] O Rider on the clouds!’” (*bšm tgʿrm ʿtrt bṭ ʾāliyn bʿ[] bṭ l rkb ʿrpt*).¹⁴ All of these examples reflect the inherited Northwest Semitic formula **gaʿara yamma* (“he rebuked the Sea”), which could appear in collocation with the verb *yabiṭa* (“to dry up”).¹⁵

¹²The names of dangerous animals are often subject to lexical replacement or taboo deformation. The English word “bear,” for example, comes from the Germanic word for brown, not Proto-Indo-European **ṛkto-*. See Calvert Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 72. Within Semitic, ʾaryēh and ʾārī, two of the Hebrew words for “lion,” come from Proto-Semitic **ʾary-* (“wild animal”) and provide a further example of lexical replacement. See Joshua Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns*, HSS 52 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 74.

¹³Mark and Luke alter this tradition slightly when they depict Jesus rebuking both the storm and the sea (Mark 4:39, Luke 8:24).

¹⁴Yamm is mentioned two lines earlier and is therefore the implicit object of these imperatives.

¹⁵Theodore Lewis drew attention to these verbal parallels in his study of *KTU* 1.2.4.28, but he did not treat them as reflexes of an inherited Northwest Semitic formula (“ʿAthartu’s Incantations and the Use of Divine Names as Weapons,” *JNES* 70 [2011]: 212).

The final inherited formula, **azzu mawtu* (“Death is strong”) with the variant **azzu ka-mawti* (“strong like Death”), highlights the power of Death. In Baal’s second confrontation with Môt, the recurring refrain “Môt is strong, Baal is strong” (*mt ʿz bʿl ʿz*) (KTU 1.6.6.17, 19, 20) indicates the parity of the two combatants. The comparative aspect of this phrase is implicit. A similar phrase appears in a Ugaritic letter describing the effects of a plague (KTU 2.10.11–13), in which the sender laments that “the hand of god is exceedingly strong here, like Death” (*yd . ilm . p . kmtm ʿz . mid*).¹⁶ As this letter shows, the formula “strong like Death” was not limited to descriptions of mythic combat but had achieved proverbial status. The Hebrew personal name *ʿazmāwet* (“Death is strong”), attested in 2 Sam 23:31, Ezra 2:24, Neh 7:28, 1 Chr 8:36, 9:42, 11:33, 12:3, and 27:5, represents a further refraction of the formula—the transformation of an inherited formula into a personal name.¹⁷ The formula “Death is strong” was well suited to this transformation, since Northwest Semitic personal names often consist of pithy “theological” statements describing the attributes of a divinity. Strength is one of Death’s distinguishing characteristics. He is a pugnacious deity who can be overcome only by an equally strong opponent.¹⁸

II. THE NORTHWEST SEMITIC COMBAT MYTH IN SONG OF SONGS

Song 8:6b uses the inherited Northwest Semitic formula עזה כמות as well in order to qualify the power of love.¹⁹ At first glance, it is unclear whether death in

¹⁶Dennis Pardee prefers to treat *k* as the subordinating conjunction *kī* since *ʿz* does not agree in gender with *yd*. As a result, he translates this sentence as “the hand of god is here for Death is exceedingly strong (here)” (“As Strong as Death,” in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good [Guilford, CT: Four Quarters, 1987], 68). Doing so, however, confuses cause and effect. The power of Death does not explain the presence of plague in the land, but rather qualifies the strength of the plague. Furthermore, *yd* can be construed as masculine in Ugaritic (KTU 23:33–35), as Pardee admits. See also Pope, *Song of Songs*, 668.

¹⁷Jeffery H. Tigay regards this name as “a plausibly pagan theophoric name” and compares it to Song 8:6 (*You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, HSS 31 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986], 66–67 n. 12).

¹⁸Inherited Northwest Semitic formulae persist even beyond the biblical period, appearing in later Jewish literature. In their interpretations of Job 26:12, b. B. Bat. 75a, Tanḥ., Ḥuqqat I, and Num. Rab. 18:1 all refer to a recalcitrant figure known as the “Prince of the Sea” (*šar šel yām*). This title parallels *zbl ym* (“Prince Sea”), a common epithet of Yamm in the Baal Cycle. Irving Jacobs provides a detailed overview of these lexical parallels (“Elements of Near Eastern Mythology in Rabbinic Aggadah,” *JJS* 28 [1977]: 2–3). Michael Fishbane also treats these passages in his work on rabbinic mythmaking (*Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 118).

¹⁹The date of Song 8:6b–7a is unimportant for my argument because the Northwest Semitic combat myth survived and evolved well into the Common Era. As shown in n. 18, inherited formulae persist in later Christian and Jewish material, dated to the first century CE and beyond,

this verse refers to a deity or an abstract concept. Several other passages in the Hebrew Bible, however, portray מוֹת as an active force in the world and draw on inherited Northwest Semitic material to describe the conflict between YHWH and Death. According to Isa 25:8, YHWH “will swallow Death forever” (בלע המוֹת) (לִנְצַח) during the eschatological era.²⁰ This verse inverts the events of the Baal Cycle, in which Môt swallows Baal whole, and foreshadows YHWH’s ultimate victory over Death.²¹ In Isa 28:14–18, the rulers of Jerusalem are said to make a covenant with death, and here death must refer to a deity. Deities, after all, were natural covenant partners in the religious practice of ancient Israel; abstract concepts were not. מוֹת also appears in the Israelite onomasticon, suggesting his continuing status as a deity at the level of personal piety.²² In addition to עִימוֹת, two other Israelite personal names contain the element מוֹת: אחימוֹת (“Brother of Death” or “My Brother is Death”; 1 Chr 6:10) and ירימוֹת (“May Death See!” 1 Chr 24:30, 25:4, 27:19, 2 Chr 11:18, 31:13).²³ Taken together, these diverse pieces of evidence suggest that Song 8:6b does refer to a mythic battle between love and Death reminiscent of the Baal Cycle.

The second half of Song 8:6b shares its grammatical structure with the first: a predicate adjective precedes both a comparative clause and the subject. The purpose of this clause, however, is not to pit Sheol against jealousy but to equate love with jealousy (קנאה), one of YHWH’s more ferocious attributes, through strict parallelism. Unlike Môt, Sheol never spars with the divine warrior directly in either the Hebrew Bible or the Baal Cycle. It does, however, occur in parallel to death seven times in the Hebrew Bible as part of a stereotyped pairing (2 Sam 22:6; Isa 28:15, 18; 38:18; Hos 13:14; Hab 2:5; Psa 6:5; 18:5). Likewise, עַז and קשתה appear in parallel in Gen 49:7, leaving love and jealousy as parallel terms in Song 8:6b.

The noun קנאה, usually translated “jealousy,” occurs forty-three times in the Hebrew Bible. Twenty-one times it is associated with YHWH, often in the context

well after 4QCant^a (4Q106), the earliest manuscripts of Song of Songs from Qumran, which dates to the end of the first century BCE (Emanuel Tov, “Canticles,” in *Qumran Cave 4.XI: Psalms to Chronicles*, ed. E. Ulrich et al., DJD XVI (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 195; idem, “Three Manuscripts [Abbreviated Texts?] of Canticles from Qumran Cave 4,” *JJS* 46 [1995]: 88).

²⁰ As noted above, the Isaiah Apocalypse already shares the inherited Northwest Semitic formula “Leviathan, the fleeing serpent ... the twisting serpent” with the Baal Cycle. This parallel increases the probability that Isa 25:8 also draws on inherited material.

²¹ I am tempted to classify *DN *billa^a mawt-* (“Death swallowed DN” or “DN swallowed Death”) as what Watkins calls a reciprocal formula, a formula in which the subject and object can switch depending on the desired meaning. As an example of a reciprocal formula, Watkins cites the Indo-European formula “hero slays [*g^hhen-] serpent” and “serpent slays [*g^hhen-] hero” (*How to Kill a Dragon*, 325). For a refraction of the formula *DN *billa^a mawt-* in an early Christian context, see 1 Cor 15:54, where Paul quotes Isa 25:8 and Hos 13:14 to show that believers, both living and dead, will experience bodily transformation at the eschaton.

²² Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods*, 66–67.

²³ It is interesting that many of the Israelite names containing *māwet* occur in Persian-period sources, since some scholars date the Song of Songs to the Persian period.

of divine anger or combat.²⁴ In the redemptive vision of Isa 42:13, “YHWH goes forth like a warrior, like a man of war he stirs up his קנאה. He shouts and prevails against his enemies,” while in Zeph 1:18, “neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of YHWH’s wrath. The whole earth will be consumed in the fire of his jealousy [באש קנאתו].” Elsewhere קנאה refers to the jealousy provoked by an adulterous wife or rival suitor (e.g., Num 5). These two usages are integrally related, since many prophetic texts portray YHWH as the jealous husband of adulterous Israel (e.g., Hos 2).²⁵ The pairing of love and jealousy also recalls biblical law: YHWH is a jealous (קנא) god (Exod 20:5, 34:14, Deut 4:24, 5:9, 6:15) whose love the Israelites are supposed to reciprocate (Exod 20:6, Deut 5:10, 6:4–5). Failure to do so tempts YHWH’s wrath. Thus, the reciprocal parallelism between love and jealousy in Song 8:6b identifies love with YHWH in his role as divine warrior and fierce defender of his commitments.

Love, like YHWH’s jealousy, runs hot: “Its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of Yah” (רשפיה רשפי אש שלהבתיה; Song 8:6b). This phrase likens the power of love to the divine warrior’s lightning bolts and the fiery force of his jealousy. W. F. Albright and Marvin Pope treat רשפיה רשפי אש as a reference to Reshep, the West Semitic god of plague and war, which would provide an additional reference to the divine realm in an already dense constellation of cosmic language.²⁶ But I disagree with their assessment for three reasons. First, the Jewish Aramaic cognate of רשפי, *rišpā*, simply means “flame,” which fits the earlier reference to קנאה better than a sudden invocation of Reshep. Second, the vocalization of the verse does not support a reference to Reshep: רשפי comes from earlier **rišp-*, while the divine name Reshep comes from earlier **rašp-*. They are separate nouns from the same root.²⁷ Third, a reference to Reshep does not make sense in the context of the verse. “Its Resheps are Resheps of fire” is a non sequitur. Instead, this colon highlights love’s fiery qualities leading up to the equation of love’s power with שלהבתיה, which I translate as “Yah’s flame.”

The final word of v. 6, שלהבתיה, is a well-known interpretational crux. It could be the plural of שלהבת with a third feminine singular possessive suffix, an intensive form of שלהבת (“flame”) utilizing the divine name, or a construct phrase meaning “Yah’s flame.”²⁸ I argue that a construct phrase makes the most sense and serves to

²⁴In a few cases, קנאה refers to zeal for YHWH as in 2 Kgs 10:16, Pss 69:10, 119:139.

²⁵On the connection of these texts, see Gershon Cohen, “The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality,” in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures, 1960–1966*, ed. L. Finkelstein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 5–8; and David M. Carr, “Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretations,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 238–39.

²⁶W. F. Albright, “Archaic Survivals in the Text of Canticles,” in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday, 20 August 1962*, ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 7; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 670.

²⁷Compare Amorite *rašap* and Ugaritic *rašpu* for the earlier vocalization of the divine name.

²⁸The Vulgate and the Peshitta do not offer much help in deciding between the different options. The Vulgate treats שלהבתיה as a second *nomen rectum* in construct with רשפי—which is grammatically impossible in Hebrew—and translates *lampades eius lampades ignis atque*

further identify love with the divine warrior. The other two interpretations prove difficult on linguistic grounds and receive little help from the versions, as I will show below.

The LXX reads *φλόγες αὐτῆς* (“its flames”) here, which reflects Hebrew *šālhābōtēhā but lacks a predicate with which to form a second clause. This absence poses a general problem for the suffix theory and has led some commentators to restore additional material at the end of v. 6 in parallel with *רשפיה רשפי אש*, but there is no evidence for doing so.²⁹ Therefore, it is unlikely that *שלהבתיה* represents the plural of *שלהבת* with a third feminine singular possessive suffix.

As vocalized in the Ben Asher tradition, *שלהבתיה* shares its morphological form with *מאפליה* (“deep shadow”) in Jer 2:31. This similarity has led some scholars to suggest that *שלהבתיה* and *מאפליה* are intensive forms that originally contained the divine name *יה* but were later revocalized.³⁰ Such an explanation proves unnecessary for *שלהבתיה*. The connection with YHWH was never lost, as the following evidence shows, and even if it were, the “intensive theory” assumes that *שלהבתיה* originally contained *יה*.

The divine reading receives support from the Ben Naphtali vocalization of the MT, Ibn Ezra, and the Targum of Canticles. The Ben Naphtali tradition points to *שלהבתיה* as two separate words, *שלהבת יה*. Ibn Ezra follows a similar tradition by translating *שלהבתיה* as “God’s flame,” while the Targum turns this verse into an extended discourse on the relationship between God, Israel, and the nations:

For strong as death is the love of your divinity, and powerful as Gehinnom is the jealousy which the peoples harbor toward us. The enmity which they nurture toward us is like the coals of the fires of Gehinnom [גומרין דאישתא דגיהנם] which YHWH created on the second day of the creation of the world to burn therewith the devotees of foreign worship.

At first glance, it is difficult to determine what became of the word *שלהבתיה* in this highly expansionistic rendering. A closer inspection, however, suggests that the Targum based its interpretation on a *Vorlage* containing *שלהבת יה* (“flame of Yah”). YHWH creates the “coals of the fires of Gehinnom,” so in that sense they are “Yah’s fires.”

The phrase *שלהבת יה* (“flame of Yah”) does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. But several verses depict YHWH brandishing lightning bolts as part of his theophany in the storm cloud. In Ps 29:7, “YHWH’s voice [i.e., thunder] flashes forth flames of fire [להבות אש],” while in Isa 30:30 YHWH “causes the majesty of his voice to be heard and the descent of his arm to be seen in raging fury and a

flammarum, “its lamps are lamps of fire and also flames.” The Peshitta interprets *שלהבתיה* as a misspelling for the related noun *šalhebitā* (“flame”).

²⁹ Pope summarizes the different restorations that have been proposed (*Song of Songs*, 670).

³⁰ Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth. Das Hohelied*, BKAT 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 216–17, followed by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 213. See also Blumenthal, “Where God Is Not,” 81.

flame of devouring fire [להב אש אוכלה] with a cloudburst, a rainstorm, and hailstones.³¹ The word for flame used in these verses, להב, is etymologically related to שלהבת.³² Thus, Song 8:6b equates the flashes of love with YHWH's lightning bolt. Not only does love take on Death, one of YHWH's enemies; it also wields YHWH's signature weapon.

In Song 8:7a, additional forces arise to challenge love but prove unfit for the task. "Many waters cannot quench love," the female lover declares, "neither can the rivers drown it." The phrase "many waters" is hard to interpret. In his study of the phrase, Herbert G. May recognized the multivalent meanings of מים רבים but did not provide criteria for distinguishing cosmic and common usage. In the end, he concedes that the reference to מים רבים in Song 8:7 "perhaps too temptingly suggests the storm-God who was in conflict with the waters."³³ There is evidence, however, that מים רבים in this verse does refer to the cosmic waters that YHWH must master.

The phrase מים רבים ("many waters") occurs twenty-eight times in the Hebrew Bible and describes a variety of aquatic phenomena, ranging from the mundane to the mythic.³⁴ On the mundane level, מים רבים can refer to everyday water features like the pools of Gibeon (Jer 41:12) and the watercourses around Jerusalem (2 Chr 33:4). It can also refer to the ocean (Isa 23:3), the Euphrates (Jer 51:13), the Nile (Ezek 32:13), and the abundant waters suitable for irrigation (Ezek 17:5, 8). On the mythic level, מים רבים appears in descriptions of the divine warrior's theophany and battle against aqueous foes. In 2 Sam 22 and Ps 18, for example, the poet praises YHWH for coming to his aid in the guise of the divine warrior and identifies his human enemies with the divine warrior's aquatic foes: "The channels of Sea were seen, the foundations of the world were laid bare at YHWH's rebuke, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils. He reached out from on high and took me and drew me from mighty waters" (vv. 15–16). Psalm 77:16–20 casts the Red Sea crossing in terms of mythic combat:

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they trembled. Indeed, the depths shook. The clouds poured water, the sky gave its voice. Indeed your arrows flew about. The sound of your thunder was in the whirlwind. Lightning lit the world. The earth trembled and shook. Your road was in the Sea and your path in the mighty waters, but your footsteps were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

³¹ See further Isa 66:15.

³² Both להב and שלהבת contain the root *lhb*, related to Arabic *lahiba* ("to blaze") and Ethiopic *lahaba* ("to burn"). The *ša-* prefix שלהבת is most likely the prefix of the causative stem found occasionally in Aramaic and ultimately borrowed from Akkadian.

³³ Herbert G. May, "Some Cosmic Connotations of *Mayim Rabbim*, 'Many Waters,'" *JBL* 74 (1955): 18.

³⁴ Northwest Semitic parallels to *mayim rabbim* are lacking. In *KTU* 1.3.3.39, 'Anat brags about "finishing off River, the great god" (*lkt.nhr.il.rbm*), which could be an elliptical reference to *mym rbm*, the Ugaritic cognate of *mayim rabbim*. This verse makes sense as it is, however.

Here, YHWH facilitates Israel's deliverance by fighting the Red Sea and forcing it to part.

By itself מים רבים has both mythic and mundane connotations. But the collocation of “many waters” and “rivers” (נהרים/נהרות) is restricted to the context of divine combat and control over aqueous forces. In Hab 3:2–15, for example, מים רבים appears in an extended theophany scene in which YHWH rages against the rivers (נהרים) and the Sea (ים) (3:8) and tramples the mighty waters with his horses (3:15).³⁵ Likewise, in Ps 93, the clamor of “rivers” and “mighty waters” imagined as personal forces serves as a foil to the glory of the enthroned Lord: “The rivers have lifted up, O YHWH, the rivers have lifted up their voice, the rivers their roaring. More majestic than the sound of mighty waters, more majestic than the breakers of Sea, majestic on high is YHWH” (Ps 93:3–4). In Ezek 31:15, YHWH uses the Deep (תהום), mighty waters, and rivers to shutter Tyre in Sheol: “On the day it went down to Sheol, with a heavy heart I closed the Deep over it and I withheld its rivers and the mighty waters were restrained.” As in the Priestly creation account, YHWH exercises control over the subterranean waters as if he had subdued them earlier. Most likely, the collocation of “many waters” and “rivers” in Song 8:7 evokes images of divine combat as well.

Through the use of an inherited Northwest Semitic formula and mythic language, Song 8:6b–7a identifies love with the victorious divine warrior. Like YHWH and Baal, love tangles with Death and Sea and proves an equal match for both opponents. Like Baal in *KTU* 1.6.6.17, 19, 20, “love is as strong as Death,” and, like YHWH, love confronts both many waters (מים רבים) and rivers (נהרות). Love uses fiery projectiles (רשפיה רשפי אש), including YHWH's own thunderbolt (שלהבתיה), to overcome its enemies and is identified with YHWH's jealousy (קנאה) through poetic parallelism.³⁶

III. MYTHIC RESONANCES

Song of Songs contains the densest concentration of love language of any book of the Hebrew Bible. The root אהב occurs eighteen times in 117 verses, and the word “love” (אהבה) itself occurs ten times. Because of this, the identification of love with the divine warrior in Song 8:6b–7a reverberates throughout the final version

³⁵The word נהר usually takes the feminine plural marker ות- in Hebrew and most other Semitic languages. For this reason, W. F. Albright treats נהרים here as singular with an enclitic *mem* (“The Psalm of Habakkuk,” in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy: Presented to Professor Theodore H. Robinson by the Society for Old Testament Study on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, August 9th, 1946*, ed. H. H. Rowley [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950], 15 note y).

³⁶In light of this identification, it is significant that the earliest identifiable allusions to the Song occur in Revelation and 4 Ezra, both of which draw heavily on combat-myth imagery to describe the eschaton. See Jonathan Kaplan, “The Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,” *HUCA* 81 (2010): 54–65.

of Song of Songs as a whole.³⁷ As Exum recognizes, “The affirmation that love is as strong as death in vv. 6–7 is the climax of the poem and its *raison d’être*.”³⁸ It provides an orienting simile that affects other sections of the Song. In particular, it nuances the adjuration refrain “Do not awaken or stir up love until it pleases” (אִם־תַּעֲרִירוּ וְאִם־תַּעֲרֹרוּ אֶת־הָאֱהָבָה עַד שֶׁתַּחַפֵּן) in Song 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4 and the phrase “love sick” (חֹלֵת אֱהָבָה) in Song 2:5 and 5:8 by affirming the supreme power of love.

The mythic imagery of Song 8:6b–7a motivates and informs the adjuration refrain on both a linguistic and a thematic level. On the linguistic level, the root עור occurs primarily in military contexts, where it refers to the muster of armies for battle (e.g., Isa 13:17, 45:13, Jer 6:22, Joel 4:9, Zech 9:13) and the prowess of individual warriors (e.g., 2 Sam 23:18, Hab 3:9; see also Isa 42:13 above). It can also occur in contexts of divine combat, most likely as an extension of its mundane usage, and thus furnishes another point of contact between love and YHWH as the divine warrior. In Isa 51:9–10, for example, the prophet entreats YHWH to awake (עור) and recapitulate his past victories over Rahab, the dragon, Sea, and the waters of the great Deep. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, עור takes Leviathan as its direct object, providing another link to the Northwest Semitic combat myth. In Job 3:8, Job invokes “those who are ready to rouse Leviathan” (הַעֲתִידִים עֲרֹר לִיָּתָן) to curse the day of his birth, while in Job 41:2 YHWH counters that “no one is so fierce that he stirs it [Leviathan] up [לְאֵ־אֲבוֹר כִּי יַעֲרֹנֶנּוּ]. Who could stand before it?” According to Job, Leviathan, like YHWH, must be roused for battle. But once roused it can only be confronted by the divine warrior. In the Song, love proves similarly implacable. Because love battles cosmic forces in Song 8:6b–7a, human agency has little hope of controlling it. It is no accident, then, that the final adjuration in Song 8:4 closely precedes Song 8:6b–7a.

The phrase “love sick” (חֹלֵת אֱהָבָה) in Song 2:5 and 5:8 also takes on new meaning in light of the mythic context of Song 8:6b–7a. If, as Song 8:6b–7a suggests, love is a warrior, then it fights on the battlefield of the human heart and mind. Naturally, this experience proves both draining and exhilarating for those in its grip and can, if left unchecked, lead to bodily harm.³⁹ I suggest, therefore, that the root metaphor in these verses is both martial and medical; the woman is not “lovesick” but rather “lovestruck.” She has sustained a “wound” in the course of romance and must recuperate.⁴⁰ This interpretation correlates well with the military imagery applied to the woman throughout the Song (4:4; 6:4, 10) and is borne out by

³⁷ I leave open the question of whether Song of Songs is an anthology of separate poems or a unified composition.

³⁸ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 245.

³⁹ Another area of study that deserves further inquiry is the issue of love, as identified with the divine warrior, becoming too violent and militaristic. Unfortunately, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴⁰ In this regard, love in Song 2:5 and 5:8 resembles Eros/Cupid from Greco-Roman myth.

linguistic evidence.⁴¹ Although the root חלה typically refers to what modern individuals would call disease, it can designate any bodily infirmity, including wounds sustained in battle (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:34, 2 Kgs 8:29, 2 Chr 35:23).⁴² Furthermore, the LXX translates חולה אהבה as τετραωμένη ἀγάπης (“wounded by love”). Most likely, the potential dangers of love invoked in 2:5 motivate the first adjuration two verses later.

At the same time, love, like YHWH, invigorates its adherents. If, as I have argued, Song 8:6b–7a identifies love with the divine warrior, then to be in love is to be empowered by the divine spirit. In the mythic realm of Song 8:6b–7a, love takes on Death, many waters, and rivers using the power of the thunderstorm. This confrontation is couched in the language of the Northwest Semitic combat myth and invokes the inherited formula “as strong as Death.” In the rest of the Song, love lends strength to the lovers—particularly the woman—in their pursuit of each other. The woman wanders the street alone at night in search of her lover (3:2–4, 5:6–7), endures abuse at the hands of the guards (5:7), and dwells, even if metaphorically, with lions and leopards (4:8).⁴³ All of this is possible because the Song identifies love with the most powerful force in the Israelite imagination—YHWH, the divine warrior.

⁴¹For this imagery, see Carol Meyers, “Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs,” *HAR* 10 (1986): 215.

⁴²The *niphal* participle of חלה also modifies מכה (“wound”) in Jer 10:19, 14:17, 30:12, and Nah 3:19.

⁴³The Deuteronomistic History may offer several parallels to the Song in this regard. In the Deuteronomistic History, the spirit of YHWH (רוח ייְהוָה) impels warriors, kings, and prophets to perform superhuman feats, often in a military context. In Judg 14:6, for example, Samson tears apart a young lion under the influence of YHWH’s spirit (see further Judg 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 14:19, 15:14, 1 Sam 10:6, 16:13).