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HEBREW POETRY AND THE TEXT OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will deal with Hebrew poetry and textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. More specifically, it will look at the examples from the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (Preliminary and Interim Report) with regard to the Song of Songs/Solomon and examine the results in light of Hebrew poetic principles. Textual criticism has its own rules, and cannot be bound to any ideas of poetics in order to determine the best attested text. But often support from poetics can be had once a text-critical decision is taken, and even in the process of trying to understand what earlier hearers and readers understood a particularly difficult text to be saying is often aided by our understanding of Hebrew poetry. Since Hebrew poetry is largely defined by parallel lines, this feature is naturally the most prominent in this study. There is much more to Hebrew poetics, however, and such things as terseness, elaboration, imagery, inclusio, and even chiasm need to be taken into account at times in order to make sense of the text. Since the HOTTP will be used throughout, it will not be often cited explicitly, but can be taken to be the direct or indirect source of the suggestions presented unless stated otherwise. Not all examples will be treated since not all will have demonstrable poetic significance (e.g. 4.12, where the options "fountain/garden" are equally arguable poetically), some are text-critical differences which are later neutralized in translation (e.g. 1.7, where "veiled/vagabond," which though different enough on the surface, in the end refer to the same thing--a prostitute), and some are simply too complex for such an overview (e.g. 7.9, 2, which contains several interrelated problems in one verse). It should be noted that though for reasons of brevity and simplicity the HOTTP will define the parameters of the text-critical discussion in this section, there are other text-critical issues it does not cover, as well as some further dimensions to a few of the problems it does discuss. It remains to be seen to what degree an understanding of Hebrew poetry and its implementation in analysis could help shed light on these cases.¹

¹ The RSV will be used as a basis for scripture quotation throughout, but the author has taken translational liberties in order to make certain points. The HOTTP translation has also been used at times in the text-critical examples.

EXAMPLES FROM THE SONG OF SONGS / SOLOMON

- 1.4 **MT** **"rightly do they love you"**
 Conjecture "more than songs your caresses"

Context: 1.2-4 O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!
 For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant,
 your name is oil poured out; therefore **the maidens love you**.
 Draw me after you, let us make haste.
 The king has brought me into his chambers.
 We will exult and rejoice over you;
 we will extol your love more than wine;
 rightly do **they love you**.

This first case is interesting in that understanding the MT as well as the conjecture both involve an understanding of Hebrew poetics. The conjecture is (understandably) more straightforward. If "extol your love more than wine" is to have a further parallel than already exists in the previous "We will exult and rejoice in you," then "more than songs your caresses" makes a nice chiastic parallel line, reusing the verb "extol" from the first line to complete the meaning. Not just vowels must be changed in the MT text, however, but a *vaw* must become a *yod* and another *yod* must change position in order to achieve this parallel structure. On the other hand if the MT as we have it is taken as it is, the parallel line can still be seen, but at more of a distance. The end of verse three is "therefore the maidens love you," which would be nicely paralleled and intensified by "rightly do they [the maidens] love you." This is supported by the parallel comparison of love and wine just prior to this proposed parallel, itself intensified by "extol." Here as elsewhere poetry does not determine text criticism, but if the text is a poetic one, we would expect text-critical analysis to reveal a poetical text of some kind (though perhaps not the most obvious kind).

- 1.5 **MT** **"of Solomon"**
 Conjecture "of Shalma"

Context: 1.5 I am **dark** but **comely**, O daughters of Jerusalem,
 like the **tents of Kedar**, like the **curtains of Solomon**.

Here the question is whether sense can be made of using "of Solomon" to modify "curtains" rather than conjecturing "of Shalma" (presumed to be a place name by JB and NEB). A non-literal adjectival force ("Solomonic") befitting a poetic text can be understood for the phrase in question. This would turn it into a synonym for "majestic, regal" rather than let it stand as a literal statement about the ownership of the curtains or repointing to read "Shalma." This reading, while disregarding a more direct parallel structure (where Shalma and Kedar are both places/people of dark tents), has the advantage of uncovering a more complex parallel structure: dark..like the tents of Kedar...comely...like the curtains of Solomon. This would play off the rustic dark tents of Kedar against the royal purple/crimson curtains of Solomon.

2.5	MT	"sustain me" (plural imperative)
	Conjecture	"he sustained me"

Context: 2.4-5 He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love.

Sustain me with raisins, **refresh me** with apples;
for I am sick with love.

The easier reading would be the conjectured agreement with the verb tense of the preceding verse ("he brought me in..."). But poetically, as well as text-critically, one could defend the MT. An aside to the chorus parallel to what we have in 2.7, 3.5, and elsewhere would be a slightly unusual but perfectly poetical way to understand this text. The close parallel ("refresh me") in the verse supports this reading further. In fact it actually makes a certain kind of sense addressed to the chorus, since it is a proposed solution to a problem (love-sickness) brought about by the man, and thus appealing to him directly for help is less likely than to others at this point. One is reminded of famous fainting scenes in literature and the arts ("Catch me, I think I'm going to faint!" --addressed to no one in particular). That the plural imperative is also masculine is no more a problem here than in 2.7, 3.5 and many other places in the Hebrew Bible. In fact the feminine plural in general is reserved for cases where no man could possibly be included.

2.7, 3.5, 8.4	MT	"love"
	V (Translational adjustment)	"the loved (woman)"

Context: 2.7; 3.5; 8.4 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
 by the gazelles or the hinds of the field,
 that you stir not up nor awaken **love**
 until it please.

Depending on one's interpretation, this case could well be neutralized in many translations. That is to say, if "love" is taken as a poetical way of referring to the beloved, it comes out the same as the translational adjustment "the loved (woman)/beloved". It is important to note, however, that the use of "love" in this way, or its use in a more general or ambiguous manner would be something we would expect of poetry. This would be terse but rich imagery, since either of the parties, both, or their passion, or all of the above could be referenced with this one word.

3.1,2 MT **"and I did not find him"**
 LXX "and I did not find him, I called him, but he did not answer me"

Context: 3.1,2; 5.6 Upon my bed by night
 I sought him whom my soul loves;
 I sought him, **but found him not**
 [I called him, but he gave no answer]
 I will rise and go about the city,
 in the streets and in the squares
 I will seek him whom my soul loves
 I sought him, **but found him not**
 [I called him, but he gave no answer]

Poetically the argument could go either way, since terseness favors the MT and elaborative parallelism favors the LXX. Text-critically, however, there can be no doubt that the LXX is assimilating to 5.6.²

² Interestingly, the RSV follows the LXX in verse 1 with a note, but the MT in verse 2 without a note.

3.10	MT	"with love by the daughters of Jerusalem"
	Conjecture	"with ebony. Daughters of Jerusalem..."

Context: 3.9-11 King Solomon made himself a palanquin

from the wood of Lebanon

He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple;

it was lovingly wrought within by the **daughters of Jerusalem**.

Go forth, O **daughters of Zion**, and behold King Solomon,

with the crown with which his mother crowned him

on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

Here the NJB has taken "daughters of Jerusalem" as belonging to the next verse, substituting it for that verse's "daughters of Zion" (not found in the LXX) and correcting "love" to "ebony". NEB keeps the repetition, but puts it all in the next verse and translates the remaining word of 3.10 as "leather." The argument text-critically (made by NJB in its notes) is that this kind of repetition of daughters of Jerusalem/Zion may represent a gloss which eventually got into the text.³ Poetic repetition is also possible, however, and the fact that the parallels occur in different verses and in different levels of the discourse makes the juxtaposition all the more striking. Grammatically the first case is backgrounded, part of a prepositional phrase modifying a part of an object foregrounded in the preceding section (Solomon's carriage). The second is foregrounded, the subject of imperative verbs, while the parallel to the carriage ("with the crown") is backgrounded in another prepositional phrase. That the first phrase's key term is the more straightforward "Jerusalem" and the second is the less common, more poetic "Zion" is further evidence that poetic conventions are being followed. More to the point, however, is that the repetition of these "daughters" may well have been used to tie the different sections of text together, thus serving a discourse as well as a poetic function.⁴

³ This is a simplified explanation of JB/NJB's adaptation of the textual apparatus in BHS.

⁴ I owe this particular discourse insight to Ernest Wendland, who graciously read the paper and improved it greatly by his comments.

4.1	MT	"from Mount Gilead"
6.5	MT	"from Gilead"

Context: 4.1b; 6.5b Your hair is like a flock of goats
moving down from **(Mount) Gilead**

In this case, the RSV has assimilated 4.1 to 6.5⁵, and the NEB has assimilated 6.5 to 4.1. These cases have to do with poetry in that we are reminded that variation, however minor, is as important a part of poetry as is repetition of various kinds. Assimilation is therefore not only unsound text-critically, but should be resisted on poetic grounds as well. Of course, this case would often be neutralized in translation, but even there it serves as a reminder that stylistic variation is very much a part of the original text and should be considered in translation.

4.5	MT	"that feed among the lilies"
	Conjecture	[]

Context: 4.5 Your two breasts are like two **fawns**, twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the **lilies**.

The NEB seemingly does not tolerate the poetic elaboration at this point (or considers it a gloss based on 2.16) and so misses one of the most beautiful descriptions of the human (female) form in the Hebrew Bible (the REB restores it however). Many commentators see the brown fawns/white lilies color contrast here as referring to the darker color of the nipples of the breasts against the lighter background of the torso. Even in 2.16 ("he pastures his flock among the lilies) the NEB seems to have missed a good deal of the imagery, as it drops "pastures his flocks" in favor of "delights in." If "flocks" are a reference to the dark hair of the man, and the lilies again are the breasts of the woman (cf. 4.1, 6.3,5), we have a vivid image of her cradling his head in her bosom.

⁵ It is possible also that the RSV has actually assimilated 6.5 to 4.1 along with NEB, if RSV's "slopes" represents implicitly "Mount" in its translation.

4.10 MT "love"
LXX, V (Misunderstanding of linguistic data) "breasts"

Context: 4.10 How sweet is your **love**, my sister, my bride!
how much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

Again the NEB has chosen not to follow the MT, and here the MT has as good a foundation if attention is given to Hebrew poetic structure.⁶ The intensification in the verse's second line "your love is even better than wine" usually would require an equally or more general parallel. Something as specific a "breasts," while not impossible, would violate the normal rules of general-to-specific (and not the other way around) in Hebrew poetry.⁷

4.13 MT "shoots"
Conjecture "your two cheeks"

Context: 4.12-13 A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
Your **shoots** are an orchard of pomegranates
with all the choicest fruits, henna with nard,

A literal term in the middle of a imagistic section is not impossible, but would have the effect of making "cheeks" the basis of comparison for all the figures which follow, which seems to be rather overdoing it. The broader, all-inclusive image "shoots," on the other hand, leaves open more possibilities, both physical and emotional, and also fits in nicely with the imagery of the garden in verse twelve.

⁶Actually NEB does not follow the LXX and Vulgate either, which translate "breasts" in both cases. It is only a matter of pointing, and though the harder reading text-critically would be "breasts", the HOTTP committee apparently thought the rare poetic form of "love" has been mistaken for the common word for "breasts" by the ancient translators.

⁷ D.J.A. Clines ("The Parallelism of Greater Precision") tries to bring a greater degree of precision to Kugel's "A, and what's more B" paradigm of parallelism. Clines points out that the relationship is most often one of specification, so that the formula in the majority of cases should be "A, namely B." He admits at the same time that the possibilities for the relationship between the two lines are so varied that the general formula should perhaps be even more general than Kugel's - "A is related to B."

4.13 MT "henna with nard"
 Conjecture []

Context: 13-14 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
 with all the choicest fruits, henna with **nard**,
nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
 with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh with aloes,
 with all chief spices--

The mention of nard (a fragrant spice) at the end of this verse nicely weaves together with its mention in the next line. That repetition is doubtless the reason for NEB's dropping it (but cf. REB, which puts it back!). The forms of the word are dissimilar (singular/plural), however, so scribal sight/sound errors are unlikely. As to repetition as such, 4.8's "Come with me from Lebanon..." gives us a good example of repetition/variation possibilities in this kind of poetry.

4.15 MT "gardens"
 Conjecture "my garden"

Context: 4.12-5.1a A **garden** locked is my sister, my bride,
 a **garden** locked, a **fountain** sealed.
 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
 with all the choicest fruits, henna with nard.
 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
 with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh with aloes,
 with all chief spices--
 a garden **fountain**, a well of living water,
 and flowing streams from Lebanon.
 Awake, O north wind, and come O south wind!
 Blow upon my garden, let its fragrance be wafted abroad
 Let my beloved come to his **garden**,
 and eat of its choicest fruits.
 I have entered my **garden**...

NEB here has given verses 15 and 16 to the woman ("Bride"), leaving the mention of a fountain in verse 12 without the elaboration it receives in verses 15 and 16 if they are on the lips of the man, as is the

case in other versions. Understanding "gardens" adjectivally modifying "fountain" in verse 15, however, allows for a neat two-part poetic structure to the section in 12-15. First verse 12 mentions both garden and fountain, in that order. Then verses 13-14 describe the garden, and verse 15 describes the fountain. Finally, verses 4.16-5.1 close with "garden" once again, forming a chiastic structure of the key words "garden-fountain-fountain-garden" and providing a neatly structured closing to this section of poetic discourse.⁸

5.6	MT	"when he spoke"
	Conjecture	"when he escaped"

Context: 5.4-6 **My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.**

I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone.

My soul failed me when he spoke.

I sought him, but found him not,

I called him, but he gave no answer.

The case here is simply repointing (changing the vowels) of the MT, and an easier, more logical reading would result. If the MT is taken to be the reading, however, the line in 6 would be a distant chiastic parallel to verse four:

4	6b
"When my love put his hand to the latch, my heart was thrilled within me"	"My soul failed me when he spoke"

Once again this chiasm could be a significant discourse feature (cf. previous example and 3.10), marking off the subsection of verses 4-6 within the larger unit of 2-8. Of the modern versions, the GNB alone has noted this structure and reproduced it in its format.⁹

⁸ Once again I owe the discourse insight to Ernest Wendland.

⁹ On the other hand, GNB unnecessarily restructures the line into "How I wanted to hear his voice." The use of a past tense is correct, but it should be understood as "My soul had failed me."

5.11 MT "black as a raven"
 Conjecture []

Context: 5.11-15 His head is the finest **gold**;
 his locks are wavy, **black** as a raven
 His eyes are like doves beside springs of water
 bathed in milk, fitly set
 His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.
 His lips are lilies, distilling myrrh.
 His arms are rounded **gold**, set with jewels.
 His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.

His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of **gold**.

Here the dropping of the last line of this verse would make it fit better into the general pattern of the section (verses 10-16), which has a series of couplets (and one double couplet-verse 12) describing with metaphors and similes the physical beauty of the man from head to toe. Not only that, "black as a raven" seems to contrast with, if not entirely contradict, "gold" (=blond or red?) in the first line. This should not be pushed too far, however, in light of the following: 1) In 11-15 "gold" is used three times, of head (11), arms (14), and feet (15). 2) Of head and feet the term "gold" is not the usual *zahab* (as in 14), but *paz* "refined gold." Thus this merism/inclusio using *paz* makes the man generally "golden" from head to foot, and should not be taken to refer as directly to the hair as the line "black as a raven" would. That takes care of the supposed contradiction, and leaves only the problem of the break in the two-line couplet sequence, certainly not a valid text-critical argument in any case, and poetically justifiable in terms of the principle of unexpected variation/elaboration as a counterpoint to repetition and orderly structure¹⁰. What is more, the next verse (12) itself breaks the semantic structure with a double couplet describing the beloved's eyes.

¹⁰ Quite apart from the possibility of interacting systems and structures of repetition, tendencies toward condensation, and dynamics of intensification, many scholars (Grossberg, Fish, et.al.) have noticed a tension between the expected and the unexpected in biblical poetry. The idea is that if you utilize any feature too much, you may bore your audience, but if you are constantly introducing new features, you may lose your audience altogether. Thus parallelism is broken (or used at one level and subverted at another), intensification is interspersed with synonymy, and condensation coexists with embellishment. The resulting tension both holds the text together and makes it interesting. These insights are of course not new to those interested in poetry in general, but in some cases are just now being applied seriously to biblical texts.

5.13	MT	"towers of"
	LXX	"producing"

Context: 5.11-15 His head is the finest gold;
 his locks are wavy, black as a raven
 His eyes are like doves beside springs of water
 bathed in milk, fitly set
 His cheeks are like beds of spices, **yielding fragrance**.
 His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh.
 His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels.
 His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.
 His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold.

Text-critically the HOTTP could not decide, and poetically two opposing arguments are also possible. The first, supporting the MT, would see "towers of perfumes" as intensification of the first line's "beds of spices." The second, supporting the repointing of the Hebrew represented by the LXX, would show the couplets in 11-15 as all moving logically forward in the second line, not repeating or even intensifying. For example, in verse 13b "His lips are lilies, distilling (producing) liquid myrrh" would give a more orderly poetic parallel to 13a's "yielding fragrance." This argument in favor of the LXX seems better contextually. Here is a rare case where the consideration of context could take poetics beyond a supporting role and perhaps even help break a text-critical impasse.

6.4 MT "terrible as an army with banners"
 Conjecture []

Context: 6.4-5a,10 You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,
 comely as Jerusalem

terrible as an army with banners.

Turn away your eyes from me, for they disturb me--

...

Who is this that looks forth like the dawn
 fair as the moon, bright as the sun

terrible as an army with banners?

The section 4-10 begins (almost) and ends with this phrase. It should be understood as an inclusio, therefore, and translated with the MT in both places. The NEB, which drops it in verse 4 (REB again corrects this, cf. other cases of this above), translates the same Hebrew phrase in verse 10 as "majestic as the starry heavens," which would probably be closer to the force of this powerful image in that context ("dawn...moon...sun"). On the other hand, the army with its flags waving fits better with the mention of cities (or city-states) in verse 4. It would be better to preserve the repetition in translation if possible, but to try also to preserve the play on the sparkling heavenly hosts with an army on the move with its banners flying. Both images are striking, and should not be ignored. This could probably only be accomplished in a note, but the NIV makes a brave attempt by repeating "majestic" and the rest according to context. GNB, on the other hand, has translated contextually only with an identical note in each case stating "Hebrew unclear" (a case of inadvertently representing the inclusio by means of a note!).

7.6 (7.7) MT "in delights"
 Aquila (α') "daughter of delights"

Context: 7.6 How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, **delectable maiden!**

Text-critically, haplography apparently is the cause for "daughter of" dropping out of the MT text, as can be seen in the Hebrew orthography (*bat t...> bat...*). Poetically this is supported by the fact that "daughter of delights" (RSV "delectable maiden") stands much better in apposition with "O loved one" than does "in delights." It is possible to read the verse without (or with distant) apposition with "fair and pleasant" as "How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, how delightful," but this would be unusual grammar, even for Hebrew poetry.

8.2 MT **"you/she would teach me"**
LXX (MT 3.4) "and into my mother's dwelling"

Context: 8.2; 3.4b I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother,
[into the chamber of her that conceived me]
/and she would teach me

...

I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him
into the house of my mother,
into the chamber of her that conceived me.

Text-critically the Septuagint assimilates to 3.4, but what makes it relevant for a discussion of poetry is that it can be argued that in doing so, the Septuagint fills out the parallel structure which obviously has been truncated in the process of textual transmission. Thus the twin verbs at the beginning would each have a prepositional phrase complement: "lead...into the house of my mother" and "bring...into the chamber of the one who conceived me." There is a problem with this analysis, however, starting with the allegedly parallel case in 3.4. There one verb ("brought") takes the two prepositional phrases under consideration as dual complements. Thus one could as easily expect two verbs to share the same complement, which is in fact not uncommon in Hebrew poetry (cf. 2.7/3.5/8.4, where "love/beloved" is the complement of the two negative imperatives "do not stir up/do not awaken"). This would leave the line open for the addition of the surprising element "(and) you/she would teach me." Surprising, but wholly in accord with the rules of intensification/specification, here apparently developed in a narrative mode. Thus a potential two-line verse is converted into a three-line verse, with minor specification ("lead/bring") in the second "line" (really just a verb and its recycled complement) and narrative specification/intensification in the third line.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Hebrew poetic structures do not usually play a determinative role in textual criticism. On the other hand, they help us to understand the possible meaning of the text, especially when that text is under suspicion of being textually corrupt. That is not to say that poetics should be used only to justify conservative textual decisions or rescue hopelessly obscure texts. Arguments must be weighed on both sides, and considered as part of the larger picture of interpretation as a whole. Poetic understanding can help us interpret the text given to us by text-criticism, however, and even play a supporting role in making text-critical judgments. Rarely, it can even tip the scale in close text-critical decisions. After all, if it is poetry, it should sound like it.

The HOTTP (Preliminary and Interim Report), used as a guide in this investigation, takes no explicit account of poetics in its text-critical decisions, but the team members were all Hebrew scholars who knew Hebrew poetry as well as Hebrew grammar, and at times we may have been walking in their footsteps unawares. Neither the Preliminary and Interim or Final Reports of the HOTTP have been as useful to translators as was hoped at the outset. A major reason has been the lack of explicit information about how text-critical decisions were reached on the one hand (Preliminary and Interim Report), and an overwhelming amount of technical detail difficult to weigh and understand by anyone other than an expert in the field on the other (Final Report). Perhaps more explicit attention to features such as poetics--certainly a part of the process in text-critical decisions--would make the valuable work done by the committee more accessible to the interested non-specialist, and to translators in particular.

Finally, if some of the above scattered observations about discourse structure (3.10, 4.13, 4.15, similarly 1.4, 5.6) in the Song of Songs can be brought together into a coherent statement about the style of the author(s), it is that they “weave” with images and words, with repetition serving to unite across grammatical and poetic boundaries. This perhaps gives us more confidence in confirming our text-critical judgements, but we cannot allow it to guide us in text-critical decisions (cf. 7.6). To do that would be to fall back into the trap of using pre-concieved ideas about what the text should say in order to determine what the text does say.

Abbreviations:

[]	Lacking in ancient text and/or version
BHS	<u>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</u>
GNB	<u>Good News Bible</u>
HOTTP	<u>Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, Preliminary and Interim Report</u>
JB	<u>The Jerusalem Bible</u>
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	The Masoretic Text
NEB	<u>The New English Bible</u>
NJB	<u>The New Jerusalem Bible</u>
REB	<u>The Revised English Bible</u>
RSV	<u>The Revised Standard Version</u>
V	The Vulgate