Longacre, Robert E. 2010. "An ancient love poem: the Book of Canticles." In Kenneth A. McElhanon and Ger Reesink, A Mosaic of languages and cultures: studies celebrating the career of Karl J. Franklin, 191-200. SIL e-Books, 19. [Dallas]: SIL International. http://www.sil.org/silepubs/abstract.asp?id=52526

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An Ancient Love Poem: the Book of Canticles

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ABSTRACT

Rejecting the allegorical interpretation of this book in favor of a view that this is a song of human love in a theistic context, the article goes on to consider two background problems: (1) Are there two or three main participants, and settles on two, King Solomon and the Shulammite. (2) Is the book one unified poem or a collection of love lyrics? In settling on the first alternative, recognition is given to the overall chiastic structure of the book in which the passage 4:16–5:1—the lyrical depiction of the consummation of the marriage—is the key to the chiasm. Dialogue and dramatic features are then noted with the endearing terms of address and Hebrew pronouns (masculine versus feminine forms of 'you'). Providing the main clues as to speaker and addressee identification, these features also provide clues to the progress of the drama, e.g., the use of the term 'my bride' in and around the depiction of the consummation of the marriage. Lyric features, that often run riot, are noted. Special attention is given to the embedded hortatory discourse in the last chapter of the book—a hortatory appeal in which the bride passionately implores of Solomon an exclusive commitment which he can not make in view of his other wives and concubines!

1 Introduction

The Biblical book of Canticles, variously called the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon, has been subjected to two broad lines of interpretation:

(1) A mystical and allegorical interpretation according to which Israel's God Yahweh is the lover and Israel is the beloved (Rabbinic exegesis), or, in Christian exegesis, Christ and His Church, or simply Christ and the believer. Thus, St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century preached some 150 sermons from the Canticles but never completed the series before his death.
(2) An interpretation of the book as a song of human love in a theistic

context. This piece of discourse analysis follows the second line of interpretation, but does not entirely disregard the first (see the conclusion).

Since the poem is dramatic in form, interpreters have differed as to whether it is intended to portray two dramatis personae or three. According to the latter view, the poem presents a love triangle in which King Solomon and a peasant lover vie for the affections of a country girl identified simply as the "Shulammite." According to the two-participant view, which is held by most commentators, there are but two main participants, Solomon and the Shulammite, but the poem is cast into a pastoral setting (cf. some English Renaissance poetry)[1] To this latter view I adhere in that I think that the positing of a third participant creates more problems than it solves.

A third and very crucial problem has to do with whether the book is meant to be a unified composition or whether it is simply a collection of love lyrics. Scholarly opinion leans towards the latter with the proviso that the collection is carefully edited and has a unity even as a collection. I am arguing in this paper that the poem has a progress of sorts which is akin to narration without being a narrative poem as such. I believe that quasi-narrative progress evidences its unity.

The poem is an excellent example of Biblical Hebrew lyric poetry—one could almost say a "Biblical Hebrew pastoral"—with a dramatic overlay—without being a drama in the sense of being written to be acted. Clearly, however, this composition is predominantly a lyric poem whatever its dramatic and narrative overtones. But in making these various claims it is appropriate to examine the texture of the various parts of the poem.

2 Dramatic features

Examples clearly occur of dialogue paragraphs, such as the Question-Answer pair in 1:7-11. The Shulammite asks where her pastoral king lover pastures his flock and where he rests at noon, and receives the answer that she need only follow the footsteps of the flock and feed her kids besides the shepherds' tents. Her lover further extends his answer by complimenting the woman on her beauty and suggesting that he will give her "earrings of gold with studs of silver." A similar question and answer pair is found in 5:9-17 where the woman's friends ask her, "What is your beloved more than other lovers, most beautiful of women...?" and are answered by her passionate lyric outburst concerning the physical charms of her lover. Most of the exchanges are not so direct in terms of adjacency pairs (i.e., question + answer, proposal + response, and remark + evaluation), but often involve a remark by one participant

[1] It is helpful to quote Webster's unabridged dictionary regarding Renaissance poetry at this point: "a literary work (as a poem or play) dealing with the life of shepherds or rural life generally in a usually artificial manner and frequently archaic style, typically drawing a conventionalized contrast between the innocence and serenity of the simple life and the misery and corruption of the city and especially court life..."

followed by, in effect, a counter-remark which does not directly speak to the point raised by the former, as in 1:12-15, where the woman describes her lover as " a sachet of myrrh lodging between her breasts," and he counters this remark by simply saying, "You are lovely, my darling." Occasionally, a remark is followed by its evaluation, as in 2:1-2, where the woman compares herself to certain wildflowers of the region, and the man evaluates this by upgrading the description: "As a lily among thorns so is my darling among the maidens." In these and other ways I analyze the dialogues according to the apparatus of dialogue found in Longacre (1996:123-151).

Speaker identification *in* the dialogue passages depends mainly on the identification of the addressee. Thus the object suffix *-cha* signifies a male addressee and in this poem usually implies a female speaker. Similarly, the suffix *-ch* signifies a female addressee and in this poem usually implies a male speaker. With indication of third person plural subjects, the presence of the background chorus is indicated, i.e., the friends or the "daughters of Jerusalem," whatever the addressee. In 5:1, where the addressees are plural—"friends" and "lovers"—we presumably hear the voice of the well-wishing friends to the couple in the marriage chamber as they consummate their marriage: "Eat. 0 friends. Drink and get satiated, O lovers." Formulas of quotation which identify the speaker are rare but occur on occasion. Thus, in 5:2 the woman reports, "The voice of my beloved; he's knocking," followed by his words, "Open to me…."

The endearing terms used by one to the other or by one in speaking of the other are of interest in following the quasi-narrative progress noticeable within the text but also serve a further function of participant identification. The man, Solomon, addresses the Shulammite by a variety of terms: *ra<eyatiy* 'my darling', *vapatiy* 'my beautiful one', *yonatiy* 'my dove', *tammatiy* 'my perfect one', and more rarely, *dodiy* 'my beloved/lover'. In the passage which represents the consummation of the marriage, he addresses her as *kalla* 'bride', *ahotiy kalla* 'my sister and bride' (Canticles, JPS Bible and Pope 1977:148), and *ahotiy ra<eyatiy* 'my sister, my darling'. Here the special terms of address are part of the identification of the passage as depicting a wedding night. The groom's referring to his wife as "sister" is apparently not unusual in both Arabic and Hebrew. The woman, the Shulammite, addresses the man quite regularly as *dodiy* 'lover, beloved' with two exceptions: *dodiy ke<iy* 'my beloved, my friend' and once by his name Solomon in 8:12. The use of the proper name in the latter passage rather than a term of endearment may possibly mirror a certain exasperation with her royal lover at this point of the poem.

3 Lyrical structure and other features

In the lyric passages of the poem verbless clauses dominate with # marking. If necessary, there is a missing copula (i.e., a form of the verb 'be'). Participles also figure in these passages, while the finite forms of the verb, the so-called perfect *qtl* and imperfect *yqtl* are less common. These features add up to the typical structure

of exposition/description in Biblical Hebrew; over such features there is an overlay of figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, and the like, which are the stuff of which lyrics are made. In the extended lyric section of 5:10-17 the woman describes her lover, where most of the clauses are verbless, but with eight participles occurring as well. A similar passage is 7:2-8, where the man praises the woman in a sequence of verbless clauses but with perfects q*tl*'s in the first and next to the last clauses. Three participles occur in this passage. In contrast to these, the beautiful "spring" lyric in 2:11-13 is a chain of clauses with perfects q*tl*'s—perhaps presenting spring as a *fait accompli*! The exotic symbolism of the poem runs riot in the sections where the two participants are describing each other, in the portraiture of the wedding night, and in the final section—the note of frustration with which the poem ends. For translation of this poem qua poem I cite with great appreciation its translation into English by Marcia Falk (1993).

The narrative structure of certain parts of the poem emerges locally in paragraphs which are characterized by sequence. Thus, 3:1-4 is a narrative sequence paragraph in which the woman recounts either her awakening in the night to seek her lover or her dreaming that she did so. This passage has a series of perfects *qtl's* for its backbone (basic feature). This would be highly unlikely in Biblical Hebrew narrative prose where a consecutive form of the verb *wyyqtl* figures very regularly as the special narrative tense, and sequences of narrative perfects are more rare. It is interesting to note, however, that narratives with perfects as backbones are occasionally found in the poetry of the Psalms and are characteristic of narrative in modern Hebrew. A similar such sequence of perfect forms is found in 5:1 followed by a long narrative sequence paragraph in 5:2-7 complicated, however, by an embedded dialogue in the first two verses. Still other sequence paragraphs occur which are not narrative. Some of the latter employ an imperfect *yqtl* backbone which is either jussive or cohortative, thus making them hortatory in thrust. This is clear in 7:10-12 which begins with an imperative, then shifts to imperfect forms *yqtl*'s that are either cohortative or promissory. In 8:1-3 a contrary-to-fact sequence paragraph with an imperfect backbone begins with the words, "Oh that you were as my brother...[then I would do so and so]."

Although command forms occur and determine paragraphs here and there which can properly be called hortatory, neither a hortatory template nor a hortatory backbone[2] occurs until the didactic peak of the discourse in 8:6-12; this is discussed in the final section of the paper. Thus, commands such as 1:4 "Take me away with you, let's hurry," and 1:7 "Tell me where you make your flocks to rest at noon," with its answering: "Go forth after the footsteps of the flock and feed your kids beside the shepherds tents," and 2:13 "Arise come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me"—all belong to the category of tryst-making, probably to be loosely paraphrased as "Let's go somewhere/do

[2]The hortatory template is a set of notions on which many hortatory text are built: (1) the authority of the person giving the exhortation; (2) the situation out of which the exhortation arises; (3) the hortatory forms themselves—commands, suggestions, petitions; and (4) the motivation, i.e., warnings, promises, need. The command elements in (3) form the 'backbone' and irreducible minimum of a hortatory discourse. Prayers are a very similar structure where petition is found rather than command.

something together" as is also the recurring motif which is first found in 2:10, "Turn, be like the gazelle or young stag on the mountains." Consider also the ardor expressed in 6:5 "Turn away your eyes from me, for they have overcome me." Note also the bride's addressing the north and south winds in 4:16 as discussed below—addressing inanimate objects with command forms is a rhetorical feature called *apostrophe* and is certainly a feature of lyric poetry rather than of sober discourse. Best wishes from well-meaning friends in 5:1 also employ command forms. In all these examples we don't find serious calls to behavioral change as are found in true hortatory discourse. The one serious imperative with a call to Solomon for a behavioral change, i.e., to commitment, is found in 8:6 to be discussed below. Here a hortatory discourse is apparently intended. A somewhat puzzling imperative is found in 2:15: "Catch us the foxes, those little foxes that ruin the vineyards, for our vineyards are in bloom." Is this a literal call to extirpate foxes from the vineyards, or is a metaphorical call to remove obstacles from the developing relationship? The latter is plausible in view of the symbolic use of vineyard twice in the poem.

4 The quasi-narrative progress

Much of my argument for the unity and narrative progress of the poem hinges on the centrality of what I call Act 5, the Wedding 3:6-5:1. And within this, section 4:8-5-1 appears to be especially pivotal. As G. Lloyd Carr (1984:53, fin) points out, these verses are "almost the exact center of the hook," with 52 verses preceding this passage and 55 verses following it. Furthermore, in this passage, and only in this passage, is the woman called 'my bride' (six times) by the man. She is presented as a locked garden in 4:12-15 (virgo intacta) into which her lover on invitation comes, while the friends outside the bridal chamber cheer them on. The centrality of this passage, with the woman pictured as coming as a virgin to her marriage bed, leads me to interpret all scenes of previous love-making as incomplete and to interpret the asseverative refrain in 2:7 and 3:5 (and even its later repetition in 8:4 in a contrafactual paragraph) accordingly. Thus, we may call the representation of the wedding and the wedding night the action peak of the narration. To this we can add 8:5-10 as the didactic peak of the book—thus adding a further feature found in many narratives. Having made these claims, however, it is only honest to admit that the sequentiality of the scenes preceding and following the peaks is somewhat weak.

The introductory passage 1:1-4 is simply an ardent expression of the woman of her attraction to the man. The first extensive dialogue, getting acquainted, is given in 1:5-11, followed by a more intimate extended dialogue in 1:12-2:7. This ends up with the couple in a rural, but royal, banqueting house, where the woman cries out, "Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am sick of love" (2:6) followed by "His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me". This is followed by the first occurrence of the refrain in the form of an asseveration oath, "I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem by the gazelles and by the does of the field, that you do not arouse, do not awaken love

until it pleases [to do it]." These words might be a call to recognize the seriousness of her aroused state ('Hey, don't get into this unless you really mean it!') or simply a call 'Don't interrupt us now!' (so translated in Today's English Version). But our interpretation of the narrative progress of the poem probably precludes the latter. This is followed by another dialogue 2:8-17, reported by the woman, in which he comes to see her and takes her with him to enjoy a landscape bursting with spring. This is followed by a monologue (3:1-4) by the woman in which she reports getting up by night to look for her lover, finding him, and bringing him to her home. This recountal, which may be a dream sequence, ends again (3:5) with the asseverative refrain noticed above. Now all is set for the representation of the marriage and its consummation.

The account of the royal nuptials begins with a description (3:6-11) of King Solomon's palanquin coming up from the desert surrounded by his bodyguard. This description ends (3:11) with "Come out, you daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon wearing the crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced." Notice that this passage represents Solomon as getting married—and to whom would he marry except to the woman featured in the poem?

Chapter 4 is largely concerned with Solomon's praise of his love's physical beauty: eyes, hair, teeth, lips, temples, neck, and breasts (4:1-5), ending with the words, "Until the day break and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of incense. All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you." But they are not yet settling in for the night; Solomon calls on her to journey to the region of Lebanon and Sirion together with him. So the scene of the lovemaking is varied, and, as we have mentioned before, for the first time in 4:8 the term "bride" is used. In the following passage (4:9-15), Solomon's praise of his bride's physical beauty resumes. In 4:12-15 the bride is compared to an enclosed garden (the most straightforward interpretation is that the bride is still a virgin at this stage) with the same image extended in the next sentence: "a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain." In 4:13-14 is a list of the trees, shrubs, flowers, and spices that are found in the garden, culminating in 4:15, "You are a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing down from Lebanon [presumably a symbol of coolness and freshness]." The extravaganza of plants, trees, and their aromatic products many of which are from distant countries—clearly runs beyond the plausible boundaries of a garden in Palestine. We deal here with an extended figure of speech, "a fantasy garden" as John Snaith (1993:68) characterizes it. The bride does not answer the man directly but rather calls on the winds to carry the fragrance out and attract her lover to come into the enclosed garden (4:16):

"Awake, north wind, come south wind,
Blow upon my garden.
Let its fragrance spread,
Let my lover come into his garden,
And eat its pleasant fruits."

In 5:1 the lover speaks out:

"I have come into my garden, my sister, bride,
I have gathered my myrrh with my spices.
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey.
I have drunk my wine and my milk."

At this point the friends of the couple add their good wishes:

"Eat. 0 friends; drink and get satiated, 0 lovers."

Carr (1984:127) points out that these two verses, 4:16 and 5:1, "form the exact middle of the Hebrew text" with 111 lines of text preceding them and 111 lines of text following them. Thus, the invitation of the bride to the bridegroom and his acceptance of the invitation—the consummation of the marriage—form the inner heart of the whole composition!

After this, three more episodes follow. The first is possibly a dream sequence in which the lover comes and calls for her by night, but on her tardy and slow getting up to meet him, goes away, and she comes out to seek him, gets treated a bit roughly by the night watchmen, and finally, when challenged by her friends as to what is so special about her lover, launches into a long passage praising him and affirming again the integrity of their relationship (5:2-6:3).

In the ensuing episode (6:4-7:11), the man begins the dialogue by praising again her beauty, then goes on to say that although there are sixty queens, eighty concubines, and virgins without number, his doe, his perfect one, is unique, and when the queens and concubines saw her, they said, "Who is this, coming forth like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, pure as the sun, majestic as a battle host [New International Version: 'stars in procession']." Be all this as it may, possibly the mention of the numerous other women in Solomon's life, foreshadows the hopeless longing of this his latest love for a full commitment to her. The woman (presumably the speaker in 6:11 and 12) counters with the remark that she had gone down to see the new growth of the valley when Solomon swept by in his chariot and bore her off, leaving the friends crying out "Come back, come back, O Shulammite, come back, come back that we may gaze on you," to which Solomon retorts, "Why will you gaze on the Shulammite as the dance of Mahanaim?" [whatever that may have meant].

From here on the dialogue consists of another stretch of extravagant praise of the woman by Solomon (with mention of previously unmentioned parts—the thighs, the navel, and the belly) ending with the words in 7:7, where he compares her stature to a palm tree and her breasts to clusters of grapes, followed by his expression of intent, "Let me climb the palm tree, let me take hold of its fruit." When he compares her palate to the best wine, the woman chimes in, "Let it be as wine going straight to my beloved, flowing gently over lips and teeth." Again she finds solace in affirming their relationship in 7:10 "I am my beloved's and his desire is towards me."

Finally, in the exchange in 7:12-8:4 the royal lover and his bride address each other obliquely as he invites her to go again with him to the countryside, to lodge there, to get up early and see the buds and the blooms, with the assurance,

"There will I give you my love" [7:13]. Never answering his invitation directly, the woman answers with the contra-factual sequence paragraph already mentioned above, saying, in effect, how she wished that he were like her brother—to whom she had easy access at all times. She would find him in the street, kiss him, bring him into her mother's house, and they would embrace each other until she would cry out again the asseverative formula charging the daughters of Jerusalem "to not arouse, not awaken love, until it desires" [8:4].

Now all is in place for the Shulammite's final monologue [8:5-12], which is the didactic peak of the book. As such, it breaks the smooth sequence of the rising-falling action summarized in, e. g., the Freytag Pyramid. So important is this point that I reproduce here both the Freytag Pyramid (diagram 1) and its modification by the introduction of a didactic peak (diagram 2) as suggested in a previous article (Longacre 2006).

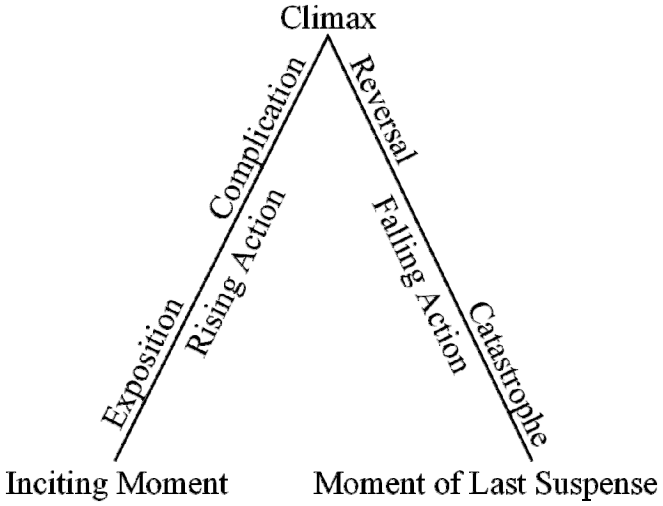

Diagram 1: The Freytag Pyramid

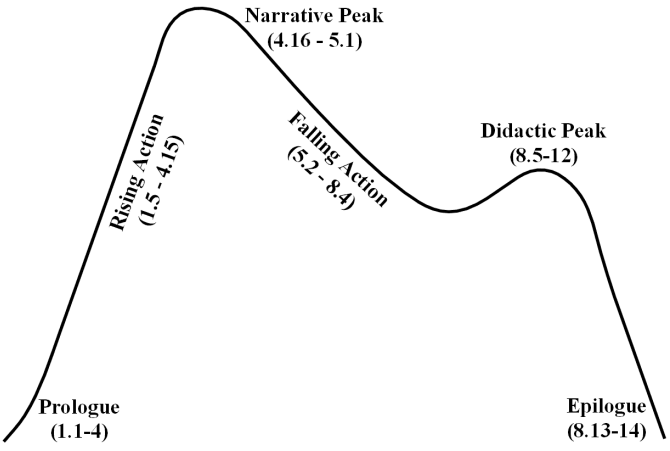

Diagram 2: The Freytag Pyramid adapted to show the profile of Canticles

The hortatory discourse itself structures as a reason paragraph with exhortation sandwiched in between motivations. But first of all, note the preceding word (8:5) from the chorus of friends, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” The two are on public display as a loving couple. Nevertheless, the words of the Shulammite which follow reflect a certain dissatisfaction on her part. First of all, she resorts to motivation for her coming plea by reminding her royal consort of some obscure incident of having aroused him “under the apple tree” where he was conceived and born (8:5). Then in 8:6-7 follows the plea itself expressed in one imperative, “Place me as a seal over your heart, as a seal over your arm.”—expressing a desire to possess him to the exclusion of other women. She attaches the reasons that love/jealousy is as strong as death and Sheol, that the flame of love is a burning fire, a mighty flame [possibly “a flame of Yahweh”]. She goes on to say, “Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away.” She even asserts that such true love is worth all that a man has, “If a man were to give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be scorned.”

Then another piece of subtle motivation follows; she speaks of her little sister which has no breasts as yet, asking what they will do for her “in the day that she is spoken for?” In an obscure passage she asserts that if her sister is a wall, they will build towers of silver on her, and if she is a door, they will enclose her in cedar. But this is just a ploy for reminding Solomon that she herself has been as a wall and her breast like towers so that he found contentment in her.

Then a note of gentle assertion (8:11-12)—perhaps a further motivation in the sense of warning: Solomon has his big vineyard down at Baal Hanlon, a vineyard let out to tenants each of whom was to bring a thousand pieces of silver. “All right, Solomon, you can have your thousands of shekels of rent money, and the two hundred for common workmen, but my vineyard is my own concern to dispose of as I please.” It is plain from 1:6 that her ‘vineyard’ refers here to her self and her beauty. Three first person singular forms reinforce the bride’s proprietorship over her own *body: my* vineyard (which is) to *me (is)* before *me.”* And it may even be that the reference to Solomon’s vineyard at Baal Ramon is a veiled reference to his harem—against which she balances herself and what she can and has given him.

Nevertheless, be all this as it may, the last two verses of the poem reflect a mutual longing for each other; he asks to hear her voice again (8:13), and she for him to come bounding to her “like a gazelle or young stag on the spice-laden mountains” (8: 14).

One final note. If, as the text indicates, Solomon marries the Shulammite, he apparently does not add her to his harem. Presumably he keeps her in her rural surrounding and comes to see her—at least for a time! Is the ‘Song of Songs’ written to celebrate the one true, and in a sense, hopeless love of Solomon’s life? This possibility can be held open, even if we reject the Solomonic authorship as such.

5 Some conclusions

Perhaps one of the abiding values of this poem is the insistence that after the physical attraction and exploring of each other's bodies has run its course, the stubborn and irrepressible desire of the heart for mutual commitment and faithfulness cannot be ignored. There ought to be enough sermonic material here to feed the mills of the moralist! Are we indirectly being told that faithfulness in a monogamous union is not simply a restriction to be obeyed but a joyful and ungrudging commitment which has its own peculiar rewards?

Finally, even as we reject the allegorical interpretation of this book and St. Bernard's 150 sermons on Canticles,[3] we can recognize in the book the presence of a powerful *symbol. A symbol* does not require minute matching of every physical feature and action with some eternal and abiding counterpart as is done in allegory. Rather, it simply affirms that human love as God has intended it finds its ultimate fulfillment in eternity where people no longer marry or are given in marriage. The reality will outrun and eclipse that which symbolizes it here. St. Paul, in Ephesians 5:22-33, develops this mystery of Christ and the Church. And St. John represents the eternal union of Christ and his Church as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" in Revelation 19:7-9. Even the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God is termed in Revelation 21:9 as "the bride, the Lamb's wife."

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[3]A contemporary allegorical exegesis of the Canticles is incorporated in the headings (from Witness Lee) in the Holy Bible Recovery Version (2003).