Coleridge and the Reading of the *Song of Songs* [1]

Lilach Naishtat Bornstein

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES COLERIDGE'S READING OF the *Song of Songs* in its contemporary context. Coleridge moved from literal reading of the *Song*, to a complicated interpretation, mixing between literal and allegorical meanings. Liberated from rigid generic identification, Coleridge was able to identify the *Song*'s generic hybridization. The first part of the article introduces briefly the challenges in the *Song of Songs* and the genre assumptions (poem/prose, literal/allegorical, wholeness/fragmentation) that its interpreters have made, especially regarding its reading as an allegory. The second part explores Coleridge's reading of the *Song* and portrays three main tensions in his approach: between lyrical and narrative, literal and allegorical, and between whole and fragment. These will establish ground for the claim that Coleridge construed the *Song* as a flexible model and a source for the re-modelling of genres.

I

The *Song of Songs* has been likened to a door to which the key has been lost.[2] The difficulties, well known and discussed, fail to comprehend it as a whole. The fluidity of its borders between segments of world and text, and of concrete and metaphoric meaning, defeats any possibility of a solid interpretation. Even the number of characters and their identities are not clear: Is the dancing Shulamit the girl who seeks her beloved in the slumbering city? Who is it who celebrates her love in the royal chambers? Is the groom a king, a shepherd, or a relative? Commentators who tackle this difficulty do so along two main paths. In one, they place some of the events and epithets outside the boundaries of the real, e.g. as a dream or a metaphor.[3] The second and more radical path addresses this difficulty by bifurcating the principals, e.g., splitting the male voice into two characters: the "king" and the "shepherd".[4]

Hence it is no wonder that Coleridge was mesmerized by the *Song*. His interest in this poem derives both from his attraction to the dynamic of biblical poetry and to the constant tension in his work and thought between poetry and prose, fragmentation and organic whole, and the literal and the allegorical.

[1] I am deeply grateful to James Engell for his invaluable advice while writing this text. I would also like to thank Graham Davidson for his various comments. This article was written during my stay as visiting scholar in the Comparative Literature Department at Harvard University.

[2] Saadia Gaon, *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Ruth and Qoheleth with Targum Jonathan* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Makhon Shalom le-Shivte Yeshurun, 1990).

[3] Allegorical interpretation of the *Song* date back to the destruction of the Second Temple, continue with the extracanonical Book of Ezra (first century CE) and the Mishnaic, Tannaic, and Amoraic literature, and extends to all Midrashic collections in our possession.

[4] In this matter, see Franz Rosenzweig, *The star of redemption* (Madison, Wisconsin: the University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 231-232 . Hanael Mack argues similarly in his study on the psyche of Esther in Ahasueros' home. Although she is there, her heart and imagination are elsewhere and with another man. Mack, *And she too told herself* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2018).

The roots of Coleridge's interest in the *Song* of *Songs* go back to his father's scholarship. In his dissertation (1768) John Coleridge produced a literal-erotic interpretation of the *Song* focusing on imagery in the beloved's account, that, he says, excels in originality and elegance:

> Not one of the Grecian poets has spoken so feelingly, so eloquently or so elegantly as the emperor Solomon of his mistress or bride, in images perfectly original and new. *Thy hair*, says he, *is a flock of goats that appear from mount Gilead*; where we may see her light-yellow tresses wantoning by the wind around her neck. *Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep, that are ever shorn, which come up from the washing*; by which similitude their exact equality, evenness and whiteness, are justly represented. *Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armory; whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men*; that is, straight and tall, adorned with golden chains and the richest jewels of the east. *Thy two breasts are like two young roes, that are twins, which feed among the lilies*; that exquisite elegance and propriety of which similitude need not to be pointed out and cannot be excelled.[5]

Coleridge *père* is less interested in the realization of the *Song* as a plot that needs to be resolved in the world than in its realization as speech, typical of a poem. While he construes the *Song* literally as a drama, he does not supply a solid interpretation of the characters. He presents the woman character as a mistress *or* a bride. His interpretation focuses on the lingual metaphoria of the work and stresses its performative dimension.

Reading of the *Song* within various mixes of genres, especially as a combination of allegorical and literal meanings, long predates the eighteenth century. Origen read the *Song* as combining several genres, such as drama and marriage song, and emphasized its allegorical nature. Another poetic combination of the literal and the allegorical in the *Song* is suggested by Bernard de Clairvaux, who celebrated the spiritual union of the Bride and her Bridegroom. John Milton, too, construed the *Song* as a divine pastoral drama and, as Eric Gray claims, "clearly understands the *Song* literally, as a poem of erotic love, as well as allegorically."[6]

The challenges the *Song of Songs* poses to its readers are of three related kinds. In the fictional world, the reader strives to understand the unfolding of events in the *Song* and to identify the speakers. From the compositional standpoint, readers struggle to identify the parts and the organizing principle of the *Song* as a whole. In the perspectivist sphere, readers labouring to pin down their relationship with the narrator and the characters. These three mechanisms[7] may converge into a question that emerges from the

[5] John Coleridge, *Miscellaneous Dissertations, Arising from the XVIIth and XVIIIth Chapters of the Book of Judges* (Ottery St. Mary, Devon, 1768), 6–7. Coleridge quotes here Johnson Hawkesworth and Warton Bathurst, *The Adventurer*, 57 (May 22, 1753), 341.

[6] Erik Gray, "Come Be My Love: The *Song of Songs*, Paradise Lost, and the Tradition of the Invitation Poem," *PMLA* 128: 2 (2013) 381.

[7] These mechanisms are based on Meir Sternberg's literary communicative theory. See Meir Sternberg, "Factives and Perspectives: Making Sense of Presupposition as Exemplary Inference," *Poetics Today,* 22.1 (2001); Tamar Yacobi, "Interart Narrative: (Un)Reliability and Ekphrasis," *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 711–49.

contradictory features of multiple genres: is the *Song* a lyric or epic narrative or a drama? Is it a composite of many short songs or is it one long song? Is it a fragmentary open anthology or a structured architectural whole? Is it an adaptation of many sources or an original creation? Is it documentary (autobiographical, confessional) or fictional? Idyllic or pastoral? A wedding song or a bacchanalic love song? A secular erotic poem or a religious allegory? Only some interpreters of the *Song* take up the question of its genre explicitly (proposing it as, for example, a collection of love songs, wedding songs, liturgical songs, or an idyllic song).[8] All of them, however, rely on genre assumptions, mostly implicit. Thus, the genre inquiry that I present below illuminates an aspect that is usually repressed in research about this work.[9]

Broadly speaking, I detect three kinds of references to the question of genre in the *Song*: one typically found in traditional interpretation, another favored by interpreters who compare the *Song of Songs* with poetry from proximate cultures, and the third characteristic of modern commentary.

In the traditional Jewish interpretation, no attempt is made to set the *Song* within a unifying framework even at the sentence level, let alone to classify it by genre. However, allegorical interpretations have been proposed in both Jewish and Christian sources, using the *Song* to define their respective communities.[10] The Aramaic Targum (ca. 650 CE) was the first full-fledged treatment of the *Song of Songs* as allegory. This approach was adopted by Medieval Jewish commentators such as Saadia b. Joseph Gaon, Rashi, Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), and Abraham ibn Ezra.[11] These scholars used the allegorical interpretation not only to surmount perceived religious and moral hurdles in the *Song* but also to construe the work without the platform of a holistic pattern.[12]

The second group of interpreters takes a more explicit stand on the genre question.[13] Their readings compare the *Song of Songs* with extra-Biblical parallels,

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[8] M. H. Pope, *Song of Song s: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 34–37; Yair Zakovich, *The Song of Song s: A Reader* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 6–9, 17–18.

[9] A recent thoroughgoing study that deviates from this rule is Tamar Kadari, "A *Song* and Its Interpretation: A New Look at Rabbinical Exegesis of the *Song* of Solomon" (in Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 2016, 28, 27-54. See also Gordon H. Johnston, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the *Song of Songs*" *Bibliotheca sacra* (2009): 163-80; Lilach Naishtat Bornstein, "The Romantic Fragment as a Key to a New Reading of *Shir ha-Shirim," Hebrew Studies* (2020), 61, 201–232; Lilach Naishtat Bornstein, *The Song of Songs and the Poetics of the Romantic Fragment* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling Press, 2019).

[10] Ilana Pardes, "The Rise of Allegory: From Rabbi Akiva to Origen," *The Song of Songs: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 22-58.

[11] Johnston 2009, 164-166.

[12] See Tamar Ḳadari, "'Friends Hearken to Your Voice': Rabbinic Interpretations of the *Song of Songs*." *Approaches to Literary Readings of Ancient Jewish Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 181–209; Isaac Heinemann, *The Ways of the Aggada* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1954), 101–177, mainly 137–157.

[13] The *Song* has been compared with Sumerian, Ugaritic, and Hellenistic poems, vestiges of Jewish folk culture, songs from contemporaneous Arab cultures such as Syrian, Palestinian, and Bedouin, and many, many others. See, for example, J. G. Wetzstein, "Die syrische Dreschtafel," *Zeitschrift fur Ethnologie* 5 (1873), 270–301; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Song s and Ecclesiastes* (T. & T. Clark, 1891); Karl Budde, *Das Hohelied erklart in Karl Marti's kurzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament,* XVII (1898), 56–77; Théophile J. Meek, "Canticles and the Tammuz Cult," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 39 (1922-23): 1–14; Théophile J. Meek, "The *Song of Songs* and the Fertility Cult," in *The Song of Songs A Symposium,* ed. Wilfred H. Schoff (Philadelphia Commercial Museum, 1924), 48–79; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Song s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

Jewish and other, ancient and recent. Interpretations tracing to medieval Christianity, for example, read the *Song* against the background of courtly love literature.[14] The weakness of this comparative approach, like that of the Jewish traditional readings, lies in its particularistic interpretation of segments of the *Song* and the lack of a hypothesis that would explain the work as a whole.

Confronting the rejection of unifying frameworks in rabbinical commentaries and comparative interpretations that probe parts of the *Song*, modern research offers a third option. In recent decades, scholars of the *Song of Songs* have been focusing on the poetics of the work, its structuring principles, and the connection among its sections.[15] Here, too, however, explicit discussion of the genre context of the *Song of Songs* is generally absent.[16] In the next section I will focus on the readings of the *Song* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially on the axis from the literal to the allegoric, to describe Coleridge's reading in its context.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, Christian and Jewish alike, tended to interpret the *Song of Songs* literally, as a drama centering on a romantic triangle (the beloved, the king, and a shepherd). They did not, however, overlook the allegorical meaning of the work; some interpreters explained its literal meaning as a platform on which an allegorical understanding should be built. Allegorical readings of the *Song* were combined with the quintessential reading of the Bible as literature,[17] and it was even argued that the literary history of the eighteenth century may be seen as mirroring, in microcosm, the literary history of *Song of Songs* translations. [18]

Another kind of interpretation is suggested by translators of the *Song* in the eighteenth, among them Percy's (1764), Goethe's (1775), and Herder's (1778) translations. Goethe was well versed in Bible, but (like Herder, Percy and Coleridge) his knowledge of Hebrew language remains dubious. From the Biblical canon he chose to translate only the *Song*. Goethe, like Lessing and Mendelssohn, stressed the disconnection in the *Song*. He used the term "fragment" in relation to the *Song*, which he described as "a series of lovely pearls strung on one thread […fragments of] epic disconnectedness resolves

[14] Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

[15] For example, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Zali Gurevitch, *The Sound of Love: On Erotic Language in the Song of Songs* (in Hebrew. Tel Aviv: Babel, 2013); Ilana Pardes, *The Song of Songs: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[16] Such contexts may elucidate the type of world that exists in the *Song* (realistic, fantastic), its segmentation (pairs of parallel hemistiches, stanzas, and repeated refrains), the connection among its segments (a collection of different songs, one song divided into chapters), its unifying principle (quasi-reality, aesthetic-rhetorical), the narrator's standing (part of the world of the *Song* or external to it, reliable or not), and more. Even linguistic problems, of which the *Song* has plenty (unique words and forms, mingling of languages), may gain from the genre distinction (high or low register, mixed or integral).

[17] By literary study of the Bible, I mean investigating the text with the focus on its organizing aesthetic principle as defined by Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1–47.

[18] Caroline Sauter, "Writing (in) Love: Goethe's 'Buch Suleika' and the Biblical *Song of Songs*," *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 87:3 (2018) 188–-203.

itself after all into unity."[19] His definition of the *Song*'s fragmentariness as an obstacle that allows the reader to activate her or his imagination reflects the language of love, both poetic and fragmentary.[20]

Herder posed the question of the genre of the *Song*:

> Whether the book of Job is a true drama? Whether the *Song of Songs* is a true Theocritan pastoral? And to which class the odes and poems each psalm, each prophet belongs? One and all belong to none of these classes and kinds, not only because (according to the rules) none of these classes and kinds had yet been invented, but also because no Biblical scribe whatsoever wished to be a poet (in the Greek or Roman sense, let alone in that of a modern poet).[21]

Highlighting the multiplicity of genres and styles, Herder perceived the *Song* as an innocuous folk work to which genre definitions are irrelevant, a "primitive" fusion of arts of various kinds. Although he made no reference to Percy's translation (and may not have known of it), he read the *Song* as an anthology of folk songs, akin to Percy's *Reliques* (1767), Macpherson's *Ossian* poems (1760), and medieval love lyrics.[22]

II

Following his father's understanding of Hebrew Scripture, Coleridge found three levels of meaning in his reading of the Bible: literal-allegorical, literal-spiritual and literal-metaphorical. He noted the unique effect of the redundant versions of the Creation story (CN III, 4325; V 6179, 6165; M I 783), which he construed as "both symbol and history" (CN V 6127n). He identified excess information as in the repetition of a linguistic passage or a specific scene (CN III 4116, V 6723), and, contrastingly, noted the frugality of the Biblical syntax, unlike the hyperbole of the literature of the ancient East.

He also discerned those three levels of meaning in Hebrew prophecies (CN V 6182, 6718), identified duality in Biblical poetry, especially in Psalms (CN III 3754), and claimed that Biblical poetry deviates from the literal but cannot be read in an exclusively metaphorical way, because it is predicated on unity that accommodates multiplicity (CN IV 5433, V 5727).[23]

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[19] Paul Haupt, *Biblische Liebeslieder: Das sogenannte Hohelied Salomos unter steter Berücksichtigung der Übersetzungen Geothes und Herders im Versmasse der Urschrift, verdeutscht und erklärt* (J.C. Hinrichs, 1907) vii; Elinor Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 66, 319, n11.

[20] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurter Ausgabe [1887] III, 1, pp. 140–41 (quoted in Sauter 2018, 196).

[21] Johann Gottfried Herder, "Lieder der Liebe: die ältesten und schönsten aus Morgenlande, Nebst vier und vierzig alten Minneliedern", *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 8. (Leipzig: Weygand, 1778), p. 6.

[22] Herder's admiration of the *Song* stands in contrast to his contemporaries, who regarded the ancient Hebrew poetry as "barbaric" and replete with jarring guttural sounds. See John Baildam, *Paradisal Love: Johann Gottfried Herder and the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 82–83, and David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 70–71.

[22] Robert T. Clark, "Herder, Percy, and the *Song of Songs*." *PMLA* 61:4 (1946) 1095-1096, 1087.

[23] For further discussion, see Jeffrey Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 54, 69, 179, *inter alia*.

Coleridge disputed Herder's perspective and eschewed Eichorn's perception of the *Song of Songs* as an anthology (CN IV 4913, V 559).[24] "Doubtless, the Hebrews had poetry, intentional poetry," he claimed (M II 1051–1052). His understanding is that Biblical poetry acquires its flexible genres as a deliberate device with conscious and sophisticated intention, and not as a consequence of unawareness. Coleridge's proposed genre for the *Song* is more complex than Herder's:

> Solomon's *Song*. There was a time when I thought scorn of this charming Idyll, this prototype of whatever is most beautiful & affecting in Theocritus… & (as far as the few precious fragments allow to conjecture) in Sappho, having a spiritual sense—in being more than epithalamium on Solomon's Marriage with a princess of Egypt. But the more extensive my acquaintance has become with the Persian poets, and the more attentive I have studied verse by verse the song itself, and sought (either) to discover a plan & purpose in the *whole*, or to reduce it to a series of distinct eclogues or Idylls – the more disposed I find myself to adopt the contrary judgment. – The analogous passage in several of the prophets, especially Isaiah Ch. V. – and the fact that the Jewish church before the birth of Christ interpreted it spiritually, and the rabbinical comments which if not themselves of so high antiquity are evidently transcripts or echoes of their Teachers before or contemporary with Christ, are in existence & (for we cannot suppose them to have borrowed a hated faith from the hated Christians) demonstrates what indeed Paul's writing seem to me already to prove, that a spiritual conception of the Messiah, and of his communion with the soul, was entertained by some at least of Doctors between the return from the captivity & the birth of our Lord—in fact, the lovely Allegory of Cupid and Psyche shews that the idea was spread among the gentiles
>
> (CN V 6486, Oct. 1830)

Coleridge's perception is unusual in the wide diversity of texts that underscore his reading of the poem: from Biblical love song (Isaiah 5, the *Song* of the Vineyard) on to Greek song (Sappho), Hellenistic (Theocritus) and Persian song (Ferdowsi), up to the Jewish Sages of the *Mishna*, the *Tosefta*, and the *Talmud*, the commentary of the Church Fathers, and a tale from Roman mythology (Cupid and Psyche).[25] He emphasizes the tension between perceiving it as a multitude of separate parts and seeing it as a unity, wanting "to discover a plan & purpose in the *whole*, or to reduce it to a series of distinct eclogues or Idylls" (ibid). Like the ballad, the idyll was low in the hierarchy of

[24] Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung ins Alte Testament* (Leipzig: Weidmanns, 1787) iii, 88.

[25] Comparing the *Song of Songs* to Theocritus and Ferdowsi was common practice at the time. See Eichhorn *Einleitung ins Alte Testament,* 536–7; Clark "Herder, Percy, and the *Song of Songs*," 1090.

genres, which romantics such as August Schlegel, Coleridge and Wordsworth upgraded.[26]

Coleridge negates both the literal and the allegoric as a sole reading that "torture[s] the innocent text by the same processes, as the theologians have the text of the bible, especially Solomon's *Song* s & the Psalms" (CN III 3934, Jun.-Jul. 1810). Thus, he construes the *Song* both literally and allegorically,[27] and read it as a rare Biblical example of the love-poetry genre.[28]

A major feature of Romanticism is the renovation of genres. Genres cross boundaries and re-shapes traditional forms into flexible, hybrid genres. Epic and lyric, pastoral, ballad and ode, novel and romance, drama and autobiography were transformed, mixed, and recreated as "anti-genres" or "non-genre."[29] Under the influence of Longinus and contemporaneous German critics, Coleridge switched to a psychological-processive view of poetry.[30] At the same time, he saw Biblical poetry as a paragon and used it to fine-tune his theories about the nature of poetry and language, nature and imagination, allegory and symbol (M IV 1097).

The turning point in Coleridge's approach to the *Song of Songs* happened around 1827. The change is evidenced in his annotations to Manuel de Lacunza's *The Coming of the Messiah in Majesty and Glory*.[31] Lacunza was a Jesuit priest from Chile who exiled himself and lived as a recluse in Spain and Italy. In his three-volume work (1790), he presented a commentary on Biblical prophecy that he published under the nom de plume Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra; it was translated from Spanish into English in 1827.

Referring to Lacunza's ostensibly anachronistic claim, Coleridge confesses to a revolutionary personal watershed in reading the Bible:

> I tried for a while the plan of *negative* falsehood, concealing my doubts & my *no* doubts, but a dearth and a dryness came upon my spirit—difficulties, objections, scruples started up in every page almost of the scriptures, even the most unsuspected—all of which vanished, or sunk into insignificance, as soon as I liberated my mind from the thralldom of fear and again read my bible in a breezy open air and sun shine of my nature. I no longer walked as through a Jungle, with wicked whispers of unbelief hunting me. With freedom came love, and with love and freedom came faith. (M III 466, 415-416. Apr-Dec 1827)

[26] I thank Graham Davidson for this addition. See in Anna Anisimova, "Genesis and Development of Idyll Genre Theory in Germany in the First Half of the 18th Century," *Nauchnyy Dialog* 2 (2017) 100-114.

[27] See in John Beer, "The Languages of Kubla Khan." In *Coleridge's Imagination*, edited by R. Gravil, L. Newlyn, and N. Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 282-3.

[28] David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) 27.

[29] See James Engell, *Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 152-160; Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982) 174-8; Ralph Cohen, *Genre Theory and Historical Change* (University of Virginia Press, 2017) 243-250.

[30] James Engell argues that Coleridge based the study of poetry "not only on poetic grammar and logic, but also on knowledge of the faculties of the mind […] such as reason, understanding, the will, fancy, and imagination." Engell, *Forming the Critical Mind,* 159; Cohen, *Genre Theory*, pp. 246–248.

[31] Manuel de Lacunza, *The Coming of the Messiah in Majesty and Glory* (LB Seeley, 1827 [1810]).

Coleridge describes here his pivot from rigid, "dry" interpretation of the Bible to a creative, liberated, "breezy" reading, a tendency that may have liberated him from rigid generic identification to mixed genre invention.

Elinor Shaffer's pioneering work (1975), relating briefly to the genre that underlies Coleridge's interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, claims that the *Song*, together with the Book of Job, served as a model for an extraordinary range of genres including idyll, fragment, wedding song, Pastorale, epithalamium, and allegory.[32] Within this cornucopia, I wish to explore three generic tensions, through which Coleridge reads the *Song of Songs*: lyric and epic, literal and allegory, whole and fragment.

The first tension that made the *Song of Songs* attractive to Coleridge is its mixed characteristic between poetry and prose, lyric and epic. For Robert Lowth (1753), the Hebrew word *mizmor* (psalm) denotes a song that is metered in the manner of a pruned and shaped branch (Heb. *zemora*, twig). Prose, in contrast—*sheluha* in Hebrew (cantilever)—is free to grow without restraints, like a wild tree. The Accadian origin of "song" (*zamaru*) stresses the performative quality of the genre: the sung text can be either epic or lyric.[33] If so, a provocative question comes to mind: Does the writing in the *Song of Songs*, the epitome of poetry, rest on a template of prose? In many of its translations, the text of the *Song* is structured in the form of a classical poem: short lines of rhymed verse arranged in stanzas or songs, sometimes not following the original order and accompanied with titles (adopted from the Vulgate).[34] The Hebrew origin, however, is presented in a prose organization. Like the Biblical narrative, it is divided into chapters and verses.[35]

Coleridge sees no clear buffer between poetry and prose, and, like Lowth, interprets both as equally poetic (BL II 55, 60, 64, 74, 76, 79–80n, LL I 217). His fascination with the combination of poetry and prose in the *Song of Songs* corresponds to his aspiration to write in broad genres, which clashed with his fragmentary tendency and his practice of invoking mostly narrow genres.

Coleridge attributed a unique role to Hebrew in the shaping of epic form and he perceived epic poetry and historical writing as Greek evolutions of Hebrew lyrical poetry. He singled out Biblical Hebrew in this respect, finding poetry in almost every verse of Scripture (LL I 222). His special penchant for scriptural passages appears in dual versions of poetry and prose. Hence, the *Song of Songs* offered Coleridge a model with which he could cope with this binary contradiction by offering a genre model that combines the epic and the lyrical.

The second tension that attracted Coleridge to the *Song of Songs*, I claim, is the combination between literal and allegoric meaning. Coleridge followed

[32] Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem,* 63–66.

[33] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant,* 38.

[34] Baildam *Paradisal Love,* 169. Even a recent excellent translation of the *Song* into English is not loyal to the original prosaic form; instead, it divides the text into short lines and stanzas. Robert Alter, *Strong as Death is Love: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

[35] Exceptions to this tendency are, for example, Conrad Gottlob Anton, *Treue Uebersetzungen lateinischer, griechischer und hebraeischer Gedichte in den Versarten der Originale* (Leipzig: Crusius, 1772).

Lowth's definition of the Biblical "mystical allegory," a form in which literal meaning not only serves as a medium but also alludes to historical realities and truths that Lowth describes as the dual nature of imagery in the *Song*.[36] He rejected the plain literal reading of the *Song*, conceived the symbolic dialectical language of Scripture as a mediation between logic and sensory imagery, and saw Biblical poetry as a union of literal and allegorical meanings.[37]

Ilana Pardes claims that Goethe and Coleridge elevated symbol over mechanical allegory, thus limiting the concept of the Romantic allegory, and disregards Coleridge's interpretation of the *Song of Songs*.[38] In fact, however, as shown here, appreciation of Coleridge's interpretation grows through a dialectical reading of the *Song*.

The third tension in the *Song* that inspired Coleridge is its fragmentation and deliberate redundancy.[39] Against the background of the fragmentation and disconnectivity of the *Song*, repetition is a salient phenomenon that creates a special effect of surfeit. The *Song* abounds with repetition of proximate elements such as tone and word, parallelism and linguistic pictures, and of distant elements such as formulaic combinations, stylistic templates, characters, and even entire scenes.

Coleridge evaluates the dynamic effect created by repetition—one that leaves the reader dizzy and confused and elevates her or him from the rational decoding of a text to an ecstatic hypnotic experience.[40] Repetition (and, in its extreme manifestation, tautology) is perceived by Coleridge as a poetic device of sublime effect.

In the *Song of Songs*, Coleridge finds a mixed genre in which tautology transitions from the meaningless to the exalted, allegory becomes symbol, and symbol dissolves into allegory. The convergence of contrasts in the *Song* establishes a deceptive zone of indefiniteness and creates a sublime effect. The beauty of the work is created by the existence of multeity within unity, in which numerous different metaphors are perceived separately yet also form a whole.

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[36] Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Boston, MA: Crocker & Brewster,1753), pp. 97, 236; James Engell, *The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pp. 135–9.

[37] Coleridge claimed: "Many passages hard to be understood, which the unlearned, as well as the unstable, were in danger of wrestling and misinterpreting […] the pentateuch? The Solomon's *Song*? The prophets in general & Ezikiel in particular?" LS 180.

[38] Pardes *The Song of Songs,* 25, 249.

[39] Following Lowth, Coleridge was fascinated by the deliberate redundancy of the tautological repetition in the *Song of Deborah*. There are several references to the Song of Deborah made by Coleridge in his notebooks from 1808-1811 (CN III 3247, 4113). His main interpretation of this Song was written by July 1815 and appeared on his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Lowth noticed "the utmost elegance in the repetitions, which, not- withstanding their apparent redundancy, are conducted with the most perfect brevity" in Debora's Song. Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry*, 107-108.

[40] See in Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Spiritual Language* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1991) 85.