

## THE ENIGMATIC GENRE AND STRUCTURE OF THE SONG OF SONGS, PART 3

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THE TWO PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS IN THIS SERIES surveyed various approaches to the literary structure of the Song of Songs.<sup>1</sup> Having been alerted to the pitfalls of past misadventures and heartened by the promises of contemporary literary approaches, the way is now clear to reconsider the enigma of this labyrinth from a fresh perspective. The purpose of this article is to examine afresh two features that provide a roadmap to the literary structure of the Song, namely, its poetic refrains and its parallel panels.

### THE REFRAIN IN HEBREW POETRY AND THE SONG OF SONGS

Scholars have shown interest in the refrain in Hebrew poetry throughout the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies that have focused on the so-called refrain-poems in Psalms have made a sig-

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon H. Johnston, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (January–March 2009): 36–52; and idem, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (April–June 2009): 163–80.

<sup>2</sup> For example M. Z. Segal, "The Refrain in Biblical Poetry," *Tarbiz* 6 (1935): 125–44, 433–51 [Hebrew]; K. Fullerton, "The Original Form of the Refrain in Isaiah 2:6–21," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 38 (1919): 64–67; David Noel Freedman, "The Refrain in David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan," in *Ex Orbe Religionum: Studia Geo Widengren Oblata*, ed. Class J. Bleeker et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 115–26; and John Goldingay, "Repetition and Variation in the Psalms," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 68 (1977–1978): 146–51.

nificant advance in understanding.<sup>3</sup> Becoming more sensitive to refrains in Hebrew poetry in general places one in a better position to consider their important role in the Song.

#### DYNAMICS OF THE REFRAIN IN HEBREW POETRY

*Nature of the refrain.* Preminger's definition of the refrain is generally deemed the classic one: "A line, lines, or part of a line repeated verbatim at intervals throughout a poem, usually at regular intervals, and most often at the end of a stanza."<sup>4</sup> Adapting Preminger's definition to account for the unique nature of Hebrew poetry, van der Lugt writes, "I define a refrain as follows: a repetition of an unbroken series of words, roughly in the same sequence and encompassing at least a colon, with a framing function on the level of the macrostructure of a poem."<sup>5</sup>

*Function of refrains.* Literary studies universally agree that the refrain plays an important role as a structuring device that determines the framework of poems in which it occurs. Watson notes that ancient Near Eastern and biblical Hebrew poets used refrains to segment poems.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on refrain-psalms, Raabe notes, "The refrains mark the stanza divisions of these poems."<sup>7</sup>

*Length of refrains.* Refrains may vary in length from one to five cola, encompassing from as little as one-half a verseline to as

<sup>3</sup> Pieter van der Lugt, *Strofische structuren in de Bijbels-Hebreeuwse poëzie* (Kampen: Kok, 1980); idem, "The Form and Function of the Refrains in Job 28," in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, ed. W. van der Meer and J. C. de Moor, JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 265–93; idem, *Rhetorical Criticism and the Poetry of the Book of Job*, Oudtestamentische Studiën (Leiden: Brill, 1995); idem, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: With Special Reference to the First Book of the Psalter*, Oudtestamentische Studiën (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Paul Raabe, *Psalms Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains*, JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

Van der Lugt identifies the following refrains in the Book of Psalms: (1) 8:2a, 10; (2) 24:7–8, 9–10; (3) 38:4a, 8b; (4) 39:6c, 12c; (5) 42:6, 12, 43:5; (6) 46:8, 12; (7) 49:13, 21; (8) 56:4–5, 10c–12; (9) 57:6, 12; (10) 59:7, 15 + 10, 18; (11) 62:2–3, 6–7; (12) 67:4, 6; (13) 80:4, 8, 15a, 20; (14) 84:2b, 13a + 6a, 13b; (15) 87:4c, 6b; (16) 88:9a, 19a; (17) 99:5, 9; (18) 103:1a+2a, 22c; (19) 104:1a, 35c; (20) 107:6, 13, 19, 28 + 8, 15, 21, 31; (21) 114:3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 11; (22) 116:4a, 13b–14, 17b–18; (23) 118:1, 14b, 21b, 29; (24) 126:1a, 4a; (25) 132:1a, 9, 11a, 16; (26) 140:2, 5; (27) 145:13d, 17b; (28) 148:1a, 7a + 5a, 13a (*Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, 496–500).

<sup>4</sup> Alex Preminger, "Refrain," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1018.

<sup>5</sup> van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, 490.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984; reprint, Continuum International, 2005), 264–66.

<sup>7</sup> Raabe, *Psalms Structures*, 169–71.

much as one or two full verselines. While opening refrains often consist of a half verse, closing refrains typically encompass one or sometimes two verselines. The refrains in most psalms are uniform in length; however, in some psalms the refrains may vary in length because of the presence of increasing or decreasing types of incremental parallelism.

*Forms of refrains.* There are four basic forms of refrains.<sup>8</sup> The *fixed* refrain features verbatim repetition. The *variant* refrain displays some variation in spelling or wording. The *incremental* refrain features expansion with additional words or lines, or contraction by omission of words or lines. The so-called *nonsense* refrain has no real meaning, but serves a purely structural purpose by providing a clear set of structural markers.

*Intervals between refrains.* Three interval patterns are used. In the *chorus* the refrain appears at the end of each successive line throughout the poem. In the *burden* the refrain recurs at a regular interval and in a consistent position in the poem. In the *repetend* the refrain recurs at irregular or unpredictable intervals.

*Location of refrains.* Refrains occur in a variety of locations. As its name suggests, the *closing* refrain appears at the end of a poetic section. In some cases it occurs in the next-to-last colon or line. The *opening* refrain occurs at the beginning of a poetic section. In a few cases the “beginning” is to be taken in a wider sense. The *middle* refrain occurs in the middle of a stanza and is integrated into the content of the stanza itself.

*Patterns of refrains.* Stanzas and refrains occur in several patterns in the psalms. The *closing* pattern consists of a series of closing refrains (e.g., stanza+refrain, stanza+refrain). The *opening* pattern, on the other hand, features a series of opening refrains (e.g., refrain+stanza, refrain+stanza). The *inclusio* pattern frames the poem as a whole or a major section of the poem (e.g., refrain+stanza+refrain). The *inverted* pattern combines closing and opening refrains in the middle of the poem (e.g., stanza+refrain, refrain+stanza).

*Poems with multiple sets of refrains.* Most refrain-poems contain only one set of repeated refrains, but some have multiple sets of different refrains (e.g., Pss. 24, 42–43, 59, 107, 148). Some feature *double refrains*, that is, two different sets of refrains that occur in immediate succession, typically occurring at the conclusion of a section to provide strong closure (Pss. 24:7+8, 9+10; 59:7–8+9,

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<sup>8</sup> Preminger, “Refrain,” 1018–19; van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, 500; Raabe, *Psalms Structures*, 166–67; Goldingay, “Repetition and Variation in the Psalmist,” 146; and Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 154, 295.

15–16+17; 107:6–9, 13–16, 19–22, 28–32). Others feature *major* and *minor refrains*. In Psalm 42–43 the major refrains are repeated verbatim three times and appear at the conclusion of successive poetic sections (42:6, 12; 43:5); each of the two sets of minor refrains is repeated twice but with greater variation, and they appear within the body of the stanzas (minor refrain A: 42:4, 11; minor refrain B: 42:10; 43:2).

#### DYNAMICS OF THE POETIC REFRAIN IN THE SONG

Several recent studies draw attention to the refrains in the Song of Songs.<sup>9</sup> Yet they fail to discern the full significance of the refrains in the macrostructure of the Song, since none is based on recent studies of the dynamics of the refrain in Hebrew poetry. The following pages identify individual sets of refrains in the Song and then consider their role in its structure.

*Romance refrain (2:6; 8:3)*. The maiden's celebration of sexual liaison occurs twice as a fixed refrain: "His left hand is under my head, his right hand embraces me!" (2:6; 8:3).<sup>10</sup> Apart from subtle poetic variation from  $\text{רָאָהְ לִי}$  (2:6) to  $\text{רָאָהְ}$  (8:3), the repetition is verbatim and the sense is identical. As the two are virtually identical, movement from one to the other does not suggest any rhetorical development over the course of the Song. Thus they carry a purely structural function in the architecture of the Song as a whole. Yet

<sup>9</sup> D. Phillip Roberts, *Let Me See Your Form: Seeking Poetic Structure in the Song of Songs*, Studies in Judaism (New York: University Press of America, 2007); M. Timothea Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle*, Europäische Hochschulschriften (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 36–41, 132–35, 148–49, 174–77, 258–61; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 209–14; John Bradley White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978), 148–53.

See also Denis Buzy, "Le Composition litteraire du Cantique des Cantiques," *Revue Biblique* 49 (1940): 169–94; idem, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Letouzey, 1949), 20–21; Joseph Angénieux, "Structure du Cantique des Cantiques en chants encadrés par des refrains alternants," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 41 (1965): 96–142; idem, "Les Trois Portraits du Cantique des Cantiques," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 42 (1966): 582–96; idem, "Le Cantique des Cantiques en huit chants à refrains alternants," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 44 (1968): 87–140; Oswald Loretz, *Das althebräische Liebeslied: Untersuchungen zur Stichometrie und Redaktionsgeschichte des Hohenliedes und des 45 Psalms* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1971), 60–69; J. Cheryl Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973): 47–79; Roland Murphy, "Unity of the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 436–37; idem, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 64–67, 76–80; and Abraham Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems: Poetry and Symbolism* (Rome: Pontificio Istitut Biblico, 1988), 65–66.

<sup>10</sup> All translations of Song of Songs are those of the author.

both appear as the first of two refrains in immediate succession (2:6–7; 8:3–4), which function as double refrains to close individual cantos (1:2–2:7; 7:12–8:4).

*Adjuration refrain* (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). This refrain occurs four times. In the first two instances it is a fixed refrain with verbatim repetition: “I urge you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it pleases!” (2:7; 3:5). In its third appearance it features considerable variation: “I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem: If you find my lover, what should you tell him? That I am love-sick!” (5:8). Its last appearance is as an incremental refrain with poetic variation: “I urge you, O maidens of Jerusalem: Do not arouse or awaken love until it pleases!” (8:4). The first two repetitions are verbatim and the last is nearly identical, while the third differs considerably.<sup>11</sup> The recurrent sequence of the first and second with terminal deviation in the third creates poetic closure when the fourth returns to the original pattern, albeit in shortened form: A-A-B-A'.<sup>12</sup> In each case the adjuration serves as a closing refrain. The two verbatim refrains (2:7; 3:5) and the shortened refrain (8:4) each function as major structural markers, since each occurs at the end of a canto (1:2–2:7; 3:1–5; 7:12–8:4). In each case it brings the rhetorical development of the canto to a literary climax by providing fulfillment of the maiden’s desire. Each of these three sections opens with desire (1:2–4; 3:1; 7:12–14) and closes with fulfillment (2:6–7; 3:4–5; 8:3–4). On the other hand the third refrain (5:8), which features the most variation on the pattern, serves as a minor structure marker, since it appears at the end of a poem (5:2–8) but in the middle of a canto (5:2–6:3), where it provides the transition between two poetic sections (5:2–8 and 5:9–6:3).<sup>13</sup> Thus it is integral to the rhetorical development of 5:2–6:3.

*Mutual possession refrain* (2:16; 6:3; 7:11). The third set of major refrains features considerable poetic variety. The first two occurrences are virtually identical, except for reversal of the two ele-

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<sup>11</sup> For example the particle  $\text{אם}$  (“if”) appears thrice in refrains 1–3a, while the particle  $\text{מה}$  (“what?”) appears thrice in refrains 3b and 4. Both appear in refrain 3, providing the transition between refrains 1 and 2, where it appears a total of two times, and refrain 4, where it appears twice by itself.

<sup>12</sup> For discussion of how poetic closure is reinforced by terminal deviation see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1987), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle*, 36–41, 133–34.

ments in the first colon: “My beloved is mine and I am his; he grazes among the lilies” (2:16); “I am my beloved’s and he is mine; he grazes among the lilies” (6:3). The reversal of the two elements in the first cola is a matter of stereotypical poetic variation and probably does not convey any kind of rhetorical development over the course of the Song. The third features incremental contraction by deleting the second part of the first colon, and dramatic variation of the second colon: “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me” (7:11). The two elements in the first colon were already reversed in 2:16 and 6:3; so the poetic variation in 7:11 occurs in the second colon, where the previously repeated phrase, “he grazes among the lilies,” is replaced by “his desire is for me.” As is typical of bicolon refrains in the Psalms, each of the three uses of this refrain exhibits considerable poetic variation in contrast to longer refrains that are typically fixed and show less variation. In any case each refrain closes a major literary section (2:8–17; 5:2–6:3; 6:4–7:10). The first (2:17) appears with the gazelle theme (2:17) to form a double closing refrain (2:16–17), while the other two are single closing refrains (6:3; 7:11).

*Gazelle refrain (2:17; 4:6; 8:14).* The most poetic refrain pictures the nocturnal liaison of the two lovers as a gazelle at play on perfumed mountains throughout the night.<sup>14</sup> The repetitions feature variation vis-à-vis incremental contraction over the course of development. In the first and second case the first colon is repeated

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<sup>14</sup> Each refrain features the image of a lush mountain covered with scented flora: “mountains of spice” (2:17); “mountain of myrrh . . . hill of frankincense” (4:6); “mountains of perfume” (8:14). Traditionally, בְּתָרִים in 2:17 is rendered, “mountains of Bether” (ASV, KJV, NASB, NIV margin) or “rugged mountain/hills” (RSV, NIV). This diversity reflects the uncertainty in the lexicons, since בְּתָרִים may be derived from “gorge,” or from the place name “Bether” in Judah (Josh. 15:59; 1 Chron. 6:44) (David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993], 2:144, 291).

The standard lexicons suggest “cleft mountains” (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1955], 144), and “ravine” (Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 1:167). This is consistent with the Septuagint, which has ὄρη κοιλωμάτων (“mountain with ravines”). However, the Vulgate, Aquila, and Symmachus took it as the place name Bether. Theodotion reads θυμιάματων (“incense,” which reflects בְּעִמִּים, “perfume”) perhaps a harmonization with Song 8:14. In what is generally regarded as the most exhaustive—if not the authoritative—discussion of flora in the Old Testament, Immanuel Löw connected בְּתָרִים in 2:17 with the Greek μασάβαθρον, an Indian spice plant imported to Judah, noting that בְּתָרִים is phonologically equivalent to βάθρον (*Die Flora der Juden* [Vienna: R. Löwit, 1924–1934], 2:117–18). His approach is adopted in the recent Jewish translation, “hills of spice” (NJPS). In the light of its parallelism with 4:6 and 8:14, which refer to scented hills, Löw’s suggestion is appealing.

verbatim, but the second displays variation: “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, hasten, my beloved! Be like a gazelle or stag on the mountains of spice!” (2:17); “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go up to the mountain of myrrh, the hill of frankincense!” (4:6). The third instance omits the opening colon from the first refrain, but repeats the second colon almost verbatim: “Hurry, my beloved! Be like a gazelle or stag on the mountains of perfume!” (8:14). In the first and final instances the maiden invites her beloved for an evening of love; in the middle case the groom expresses his desire to enjoy the delights of his bride throughout the wedding night. The first and final refrains, which are most similar, each close a poetic section (2:8–17; 8:5–14). The middle refrain, which displays the most variation, appears as the next-to-last verseline in a stanza (4:1–7) within a larger poetic section (4:1–5:1).

*Admiration refrain* (1:15; 4:1; 6:4). Yet another set of refrains is the man’s thrice-repeated declaration of the maiden’s beauty. In each case the main terms of the first colon are repeated verbatim: “[You are] beautiful, my darling!” (יְפֵהָ רַעֲיָהּ; 1:15a; 4:1a; 6:4a). While the first and second cases feature the fixed refrain, “Oh, you are beautiful, my darling!” (יְפֵהָ רַעֲיָהּ הֵן; 1:15a; 4:1a), the third is a variant refrain, “You are beautiful, my darling!” (יְפֵהָ אַתְּ רַעֲיָהּ; 6:4a). The entire first refrain is repeated verbatim in the first half of the second refrain (“You are beautiful, my darling! You are beautiful! Your eyes are doves!”; 1:15; 4:1a). Yet the second refrain expands the first with additional words in the second colon: “Your eyes are doves *behind your veil!*” (4:1a). The third refrain features both poetic variation and even more dramatic incremental expansion: “You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah; as lovely as Jerusalem, as awe-inspiring as bannered armies!” (6:4). In each case the man’s repeated declaration functions as an opening refrain. In two instances it opens a major poetic section (4:1–5:1; 6:4–7:11), but in the other case it opens an individual poem (1:15–17). Thus the poetic variation in its form throughout the Song is mirrored by similar variation in its structural function in the Song.

*Query refrain* (3:6; 6:10; 8:5). Three sections (3:6–11; 6:10–12; 8:5–14) open with a query repeated verbatim: “Who is this?” (מִי זֶה; 3:6a; 6:10a; 8:5a). The first and third repetitions, however, feature incremental expansion, which also features verbatim repetition: “Who is this coming up from the wilderness?” (3:6ab; 8:5ab). Since the full question spans the entire verseline, the following colon in each case should probably be viewed as part of the opening refrain as well. The two cola that follow, however, feature dramatic variation in content and length: “like a column of smoke, a fragrant bil-

low of myrrh and frankincense, every kind of fragrant powder of the merchant?” (3:6b); “leaning on her beloved?” (8:5b). In contrast to the longer closing refrains in the Song, which typically are external from the preceding section (e.g., 2:6–7 is formally external to 1:2–2:5), the opening refrain in 3:6 is internally integrated into what follows, since the opening question is answered in 3:7–11.

On the other hand it is difficult to see how the opening refrain in 8:5ab is thematically integrated in any manner to 8:5c–14. So unlike its counterpart in 3:6ab, the opening refrain in 8:5ab stands external to the following material. While the former introduces the rhetorical development of the theme of the wedding procession throughout 3:6–11, the latter serves a purely structural role, that is, it signals the opening of a new poetic unit. Since 8:5a represents verbatim repetition of 3:6a, the second opening refrain echoing the first; the second thus creates a memory of the first. Not recognizing that 8:5ab has a purely structural function, many critical scholars classify 8:5ab as a “fragment” of a longer poem, the rest of which was somehow lost. More likely, since 8:5a features verbatim repetition of 3:6a, which functioned as an opening refrain, the sole role of this seemingly otherwise meaningless colon is to signal the opening of the final poetic section in the Song. Since 8:5ab fails to convey any significant meaning and its only clear function is as an opening refrain, perhaps 8:5ab may be classified as a nonsense refrain. Yet while 8:5ab makes no sense whatsoever since it fails to convey cognitive meaning, 3:6a conveys cognitive meaning but does not provide any meaningful significance since it is little more than a one-liner. The most significant thing that 8:5ab reveals is that the major structural markers in the Song are self-consciously composed. The Song intentionally signals its breaks.

#### THE DOUBLE REFRAINS IN THE SONG: EXTERNAL FRAME

In four places in the Song a double refrain composed of two individual refrains occurs in immediate succession (2:6–7, 16–17; 8:3–4, 13–14). In each case the double refrains occur at the end of major sections (1:2–2:7; 2:8–17; 7:12–8:4; 8:5–14). This creates strong poetic closure. In two cases the double refrains feature repetition of identical individual refrains: an embrace refrain (2:6; 8:3) followed by an adjuration refrain (2:7; 8:4). The two sets of double refrains feature verbatim repetition and poetic variation: the third consists of the mutual possession refrain (2:16) followed by the perfumed-mountains refrain (2:17), while the fourth consists of the maiden’s voice repetend (8:13) followed by the perfumed-mountains refrain (8:14). The symmetry between these four sets of double refrain sections is all the more striking when one notes that the first two sets

open the Song and the last two sets close the Song. Thus the first two and last two sets of double refrain poetic sections create an external *inclusio* (1:2–2:17; 7:12–8:14) that frames the interior poetic sections, which have single refrains only (3:1–7:11). The literary fabric of the double-refrain sequence is displayed below:

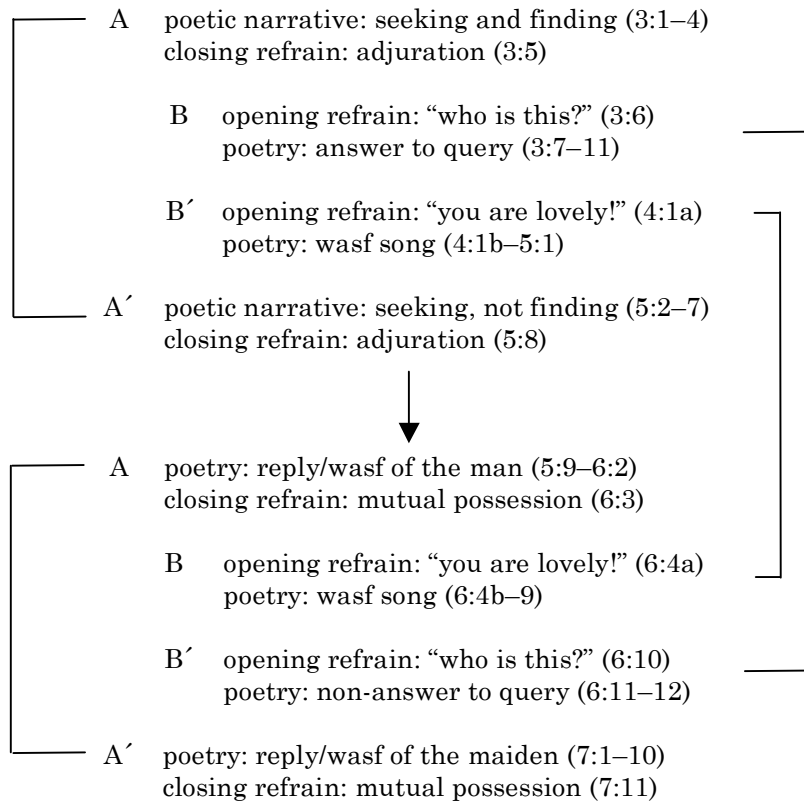


Interestingly the four poetic sections closed by the double refrains consist of eight (1:2–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–11, 12–14, 15–17; 2:1–3, 4–5), four (2:8–9, 10–13, 14, 15), two (7:12–14; 8:1–2) and four (8:5, 6–7, 8–10, 11–12) individual poems. This mirrors one of the symmetrical patterns found in refrain poems in the Psalms whose structure is composed of a combination of full stanza, half-stanza, and quarter-stanza. In light of the fact that refrain poems elsewhere tend to be symmetrical—whether perfectly or incrementally—it might be more than coincidental that the poetic sections that end with double refrains in the Song are incrementally symmetrical in terms of the number of individual poems.

#### THE SINGLE REFRAINS IN THE SONG: INTERNAL FRAMES

In the interior of the Song four recurrent sets of individual refrains occur. Two are closing refrains: (1) adjuration to daughters: “I urge you, O daughters of Jerusalem!” (3:5; 5:8); and (2) mutual possession: “I am my beloved’s” (6:3; 7:11). Two are opening refrains: (1) the query, “who is this?” (3:6; 6:10); and (2) admiration of the maiden, “you are beautiful, my darling!” (4:1; 6:4). Each individual set of closing refrains frames one occurrence of each of the two opening refrains. The two adjuration refrains (3:5; 5:8) frame one query (3:6) and one admiration (4:1) refrain. Similarly the two mu-

tual possession refrains (6:3; 7:11) frame the other admiration (6:4) and query (6:10) refrains. The two sets of opening refrains appear in inverse order: query refrain (3:6), admiration refrain (4:1), admiration refrain (6:4), query refrain (6:10). These four sets of repeated individual refrains weave an intricate literary tapestry that is displayed below.



As this chart shows, the four sets of refrains are arranged in two parallel cycles (3:1–5:8; 5:9–7:11). These two cycles are tightly integrated, since 5:2–8 is directly tied to 5:9–6:3. While 5:8 closes with an adjuration by the maiden to the daughters of Jerusalem, 5:9 opens with a question posed in response by the daughters to the maiden. This rhetorical relationship between 5:2–8 and 5:9–6:3 has long been recognized by scholars to such a degree that 5:2–6:3 is typically viewed as a single poetic section. Nevertheless there are compelling reasons to view 5:2–8 as a discrete poetic unit that consists of a poetic narrative in 5:2–7 (parallel to 3:1–4) and the clos-

ing adjuration refrain in 5:8 (parallel to 3:5).<sup>15</sup>

Also of interest is the fact that the contents of the individual poetic units in the corresponding elements within the interior of the Song are parallel. Thus the poetic narrative of the maiden seeking and finding her beloved (3:1–4) finds its mirror (reverse) image in the poetic narrative of her seeking but not finding him (5:2–8). Her descriptive song (*wasf*) of him in reply to the women’s opening query (5:9–6:2) parallels his descriptive song (*wasf*) of her in reply to the woman’s opening query (7:1–10). The opening lines of the groom’s praise of his bride’s beauty (4:1–5:1) are echoed by the king’s praise of the beauty of his favorite (6:4–9). The long question+answer poem (3:6–11), introduced by the query, “Who is this?” (3:6), is echoed by the short question+nonanswer poem (6:10–12) which is introduced by the query, “Who is this?” (6:10).<sup>16</sup> The correspondences between these and other parallel panels in the Song are discussed below.

#### PARALLEL PANELS IN THE SONG

In addition to repeated refrains the Song also features several sets of parallel panels.<sup>17</sup> The most obvious are the two parallel episodes

<sup>15</sup> The parallels between 3:1–5 and 5:2–8 suggest that the latter is a self-contained episode. Furthermore critical commentaries generally suggest the rhetorical relation between the two is somewhat artificial. The introductory question in 5:9 functions as a literary foil to provide the maiden the opportunity to describe her beloved in 5:10–16. The question-and-answer sequence in 6:1–3 leaves interpreters absolutely baffled to explain why the maiden could be so befuddled as to the whereabouts of her lover in 5:8 that she must enlist the Jerusalemites to help her find him—only for her to inform them when they ask where to look for him that he has gone down to the garden in 6:1–2!

<sup>16</sup> The relationship between 6:10–11 and 6:12 is baffling. The poem opens with the question, “Who is this who looks down from above?” (בִּי־אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם הַזֶּה, 6:10). The maiden responds with a putative answer (vv. 11–12). Noting that she had “gone down” to the garden (v. 11), she confesses that she lost all bearing of her identity: “I do not recognize myself” (v. 12; “I did not know myself,” NEB). Yet the precise meaning of verse 12 is far from certain. English versions render this variously. “Or ever I was aware, my soul made me like the chariots of Ammi-nadib” (KJV), “Before I knew it, my soul made me like the chariots of Ammi-nadib” (AV), “Before I knew . . . my desire hurled me on the chariots of my people, as their prince” (JB), “Before I knew it, my desire set me mid the chariots of Ammi-nadib” (JPSV), “I did not know myself, she made me feel more than a prince reigning over the myriads of his people” (NEB), “Before I knew it, my heart had made me the blessed one of my kins-women” (NAB), “Before I was aware, my soul set me over the chariots of my noble people” (NASB), “Before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people” (NIV).

<sup>17</sup> See Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, *Analecta Biblica* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1971), 77–78, 149–59, 185; H. van Dyke Parunak, “Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure,” *Biblica* 62 (1981): 153–68; John Harvey, “The Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Scandinavian Journal of*

recounting the maiden's nocturnal quest to find her lover in 3:1–5 and 5:2–8. Other parallels include the praises of the maiden's beauty in 4:1b–2+3b and 6:5b–7; the invitations for a romantic rendezvous in the countryside in 2:10–13 and 7:12–14; and the two maiden-in-the-vineyard poems in 1:5–6 and 8:11–12.<sup>18</sup>

PARALLEL PANELS, SET NO. 1 (2:10–13 AND 7:12–14)

The first set of clear parallel panels occurs in 2:8–17 and 7:12–8:4. Each poetic section is composed of three individual poems that are arranged in identical sequence: (1) invitation for a romantic rendezvous in the countryside (2:8–13; 7:12–14); (2) song of desire (2:14–15; 8:1–2); and (3) a double closing refrain (2:16–17; 8:3–4). The parallels between the invitations for a romantic rendezvous are particularly striking (2:10–13; 7:12–14). Each opens with one lover inviting the other on a romantic journey: “come away!” (לְכִי־לֵךְ; 2:10a), “come away!” (לֵךְ; 7:12a). The ostensible motive for the trek to the country was to see the beautiful flora, brought out by repetition of the verb רָאָה (“to see”; 2:12; 7:13). Both share floral vocabulary: “vines” and “blossom” (2:13; 7:13). Both speeches feature the root נָצַח in the noun פְּנִינִים (“the flowers”; 2:11) and the verb “they [=blossoms] have opened” (נִפְתְּחוּ; 7:13). And both poems feature the rather unusual expression, “they [=flora] waft forth fragrance” (רִיחַ נִתְּנָה; 2:13; 7:14). The parallels between the two are quite clear:

Arise, my darling, come away (לְכִי־לֵךְ);  
 for winter has passed,  
 and the rainy season has departed.  
 The flowers are seen (רָאָה) in the land;  
 the time of singing has come,  
 the voice of the dove is heard in our land.  
 The fig tree puts forth its figs,

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*the Old Testament* 20 (2006): 237–58; Stefan C. Matzal, “The Structure of Ezra iv–vi,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 566–69; Anthony Abela, “The Redactional Structuring within the Abrahamic Narrative in Genesis,” in *Veterum Exempla: Essays in Honour of Mgr. Prof. Emeritus Joseph Lupi*, ed. Joseph Lupi and Vincent Borg (Malta: University of Malta, 1991), 35–82; Gordon J. Wenham and J. G. McConville, “Drafting Techniques in Some Deuteronomic Laws,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980): 248–52; Gordon J. Wenham, “The Coherence of the Flood Narrative,” *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 341; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1319–25; and Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 6–8.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon H. Johnston, “The Enigmatic Literary Structure of the Song of Songs” (paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nashville, 2001); Richard Davidson, “The Literary Structure of the Song of Songs *Redivivus*,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14 (2003): 44–65; and idem, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 596–600.

and the vines (הַגִּפְנִים) are in bloom (סִפְּרוּ);  
 they give forth fragrance (נִתְנוּ רִיחַ).  
 Arise, my darling, come away (וּלְכִי-לָךְ).  
 (2:10–13)

Come away (לָךְ), my beloved;  
 let us go to the fields and lodge in the villages.  
 Let us go out early to the vineyards,  
 to see (נִרְאֶה) if the vines (הַגִּפְנִי) have budded,  
 Let us see if the grape blossoms (רִפְסֻמֵּי הָרֵבִי) have opened,  
 and the pomegranates are in bloom.  
 There I will give you my love;  
 the mandrakes give forth fragrance (נִתְנוּ רִיחַ),  
 Over our doors are all kinds of choice fruits,  
 I have laid up new and old for you, my beloved.  
 (7:11–13; Heb., 7:12–14)

PARALLEL PANELS, SET NO. 2 (2:14+17 AND 8:13–14)

While the parallels between 2:10–13 and 7:12–14 are generally recognized, few studies of the structure of the Song take sufficient note of the undeniable parallels between 2:14+17 and 8:13–14. Since the first panel involves the opening and closing lines only of 2:14–17, this might be better designated a pair of associative sequences. In both cases the male suitor addresses the maiden with a poetic epithet that depicts her seeming inaccessibility, brought out by a figurative description of her dwelling place: “O my dove [who dwells] in the clefts of the rocks” (2:14a); “O you who dwell in the gardens” (8:13a). He continues with a request for the maiden to speak to him: “let me hear your voice!” (2:14b); “let me hear your voice!” (8:13b). In both cases the maiden responds with a virtually identical invitation: “Hurry, my beloved! Be like a gazelle or young stag on the mountains of perfume!” (2:17b); “Hasten, my beloved! Be like a gazelle or young stag on the mountains of spice!” (8:14).

O my dove in the clefts of the rock,  
 in the crags of the mountain,  
 Let me see your face, let me hear your voice . . .  
 Hurry, my beloved! Be like a gazelle or young stag  
 on the mountains of perfume!  
 (2:14a, 17b)

O you who dwell in the gardens,  
 My companions attend to your voice;  
 Let me hear it!

Hasten, my beloved!  
 Be like a gazelle or young stag

on the mountains of spice!  
(8:13–14)

PARALLEL PANELS, SET NO. 3 (3:1–5 AND 5:2–8)

The most widely recognized set of parallel panels is the two putative dream scenes in 3:1–5 and 5:2–8. Each develops a poetic story in which the maiden seeks her beloved in the middle of the night. Both open with the maiden in her bed and continue with her search in the city and an unexpected encounter with the night watchmen. Both feature a first-person form of  $\text{קָם}$  (“to arise”; 3:2; 5:5) and the expressions, “I sought him but did not find him” (3:1–2; 5:6); “the watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city” (3:3; 5:7). For all their similarities, some striking differences exist. The first opens with her beloved absent (3:1), but in the second he is present at her door (5:2–4). The watchmen are passive in the first (3:3), but antagonistic in the second (5:7). The most dramatic difference is how each episode concludes. In the first she succeeds in finding him, but in the second she fails in her quest. These continuities and discontinuities come to the forefront in parallel closing refrains: in both she adjures the daughters of Jerusalem, but for different reasons (3:5; 5:8). Despite the differences, the parallels between 3:1–5 and 5:2–8 are self-evident, as seen in the following columns.

She is in bed at night (3:1a).	She is in bed at night (5:2a).
He is nowhere to be found (3:1b).	He is at her door, which he asks her to open (5:3–5).
She arises from her bed to seek him (3:2a).	She arises from her bed to open for him (5:6a).
She seeks him but cannot find him (3:2b).	She seeks him but cannot find him (5:6b).
The night watchmen find her (3:3).	The night watchmen find her (5:7a).
She finds her lover and takes him home (3:4).	The night watchmen assault her and take her cloak (5:7c).
She adjures the daughters of Jerusalem (3:5).	She adjures the daughters of Jerusalem (5:8).

PARALLEL PANELS, SET NO. 4 (3:6–11 AND 5:9–16)

Another set of parallel panels occurs in the poetic depictions of Solomon’s royal palanquin (3:6–11) and the man’s handsome physique (5:9–16). Both share an identical threefold structure: (1) an

introductory question (3:6; 5:9), (2) an answer in the form of a descriptive praise (*wasf*) poem (3:7–10; 5:10–16a); and (3) a concluding address to the daughters of Jerusalem (3:11; 5:16b). The two also feature several sets of shared terms: “myrrh” (מִרְרָה; 3:6; 5:14); “gold” (זָהָב; 3:10; 5:14), “Lebanon” (לְבָנוֹן; 3:9; 5:16), “its posts/his legs” (עַמֻּדָיו; 3:10; 5:15), and “daughters” (בָּנוֹת; 3:11; 5:16). The parallels are self-evident.

*Introductory Question (3:6)*

What (מַה) is this coming up from the  
wilderness like a pillar of smoke,  
perfumed with myrrh (מִרְרָה) and frankincense  
from all the powders of the traders?

*Description of Solomon’s Palanquin (3:7–10)*

Behold! It is the palanquin of Solomon!  
Sixty (שֶׁשִׁים) heroes surround it,  
the mighty heroes of Israel.  
All of them skillfully bear a sword;  
they are battle-trained.  
Each one has his sword on his side;  
they are prepared for any night attack.  
King Solomon has made for himself a litter  
from the wood of Lebanon (לְבָנוֹן).  
Its posts (עַמֻּדָיו) he made of silver;  
its canopy he made of gold (זָהָב);  
Its riding seat he made of purple;  
its interior is inlaid with leather (love?)  
by the daughters of Jerusalem.

*Address to the Daughters (3:11)*

Come out and look at King Solomon,  
O daughters (בָּנוֹת) of Zion!

*Introductory Question (5:9)*

How (מַה) is your beloved better than any other,  
O most beautiful of women?  
How is your beloved better than any other,  
that you would adjure us so?

*Description of Her Beloved’s Physique (5:10–16a)*

My beloved is radiant and ruddy,  
distinguished among ten thousand.  
His head is the finest gold;  
his locks of hair are wavy, black as a raven.  
His eyes are doves beside springs of water,  
bathed in milk, fitly set.

His cheeks are beds of spices, yielding fragrance.  
 His lips are lilies distilling liquid myrrh (מִרְרָה).  
 his arms are rods of gold (בָּרָדָה) set with jewels.  
 His torso is ivory inlaid with sapphires.  
 His legs (עַמֻּדָיו) are alabaster (אֲשָׁפ) columns on gold bases.  
 His appearance is like the cedars of Lebanon (לְבָנוֹן);  
 his mouth is sweet; he is totally desirable.

*Address to the Daughters (5:16b)*

This is my beloved and this is my friend,  
 O daughters (בָּנוֹת) of Jerusalem!

PARALLEL PANELS, SET NO. 5 (4:1–7 AND 6:4–10)

The fifth set of parallel panels includes the two anatomical descriptive (*wasf*) songs in 4:1–7 and 6:4–10. Both open with his praise of her beauty: “you are beautiful, my darling!” (יָפֵה רַעֲיָה; 4:1a; 6:4a). Each continues with a listing of anatomical features in identical order: eyes, hair, teeth, (lips), cheeks (4:1b–2+3b; 6:5–7). The metaphorical descriptions of three of these four features of her anatomy are identical. Both poems also feature the only examples of graded numerical parallelism in the Song: “one thousand bucklers//all the shields (4:4); “sixty queens//eighty concubines//innumerable virgins” (6:8). The striking parallels between 4:1–7 and 6:4–10 are seen here.

You are beautiful, my darling (יָפֵה רַעֲיָה),  
 how very beautiful!  
 Your eyes are doves (יְיָיִם) behind your veil.  
 Your hair is like a flock of goats,  
 flowing down the slopes of Mount Gilead.  
 Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes  
 that have come up from the washing,  
 All of them bear twins, not one of them is bereaved . . . .  
 Your cheeks are like halves of pomegranates  
 behind your veil . . . .  
 One thousand bucklers hang on it,  
 all the shields of warriors . . . .  
 (4:1–7)

You are beautiful, my darling (יָפֵה . . . רַעֲיָה), as Tirzah,  
 lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as a bannered army!  
 Your eyes, turn them away from me,  
 for they overwhelm me!  
 Your hair is like a flock of goats,  
 flowing down the slopes of Gilead.  
 Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,  
 that have come up from the washing;  
 All of them bear twins, not one of them is bereaved.

Your cheeks are like halves of pomegranates  
behind your veil.  
Sixty queens, eighty concubines, innumerable virgins,  
but my dove (דָּוָה), my perfect one, is the one...!  
(6:4–10)

#### DYNAMICS OF THE PARALLEL PANELS IN THE SONG

The recurrent pattern of the parallel panels suggests that the Song unfolds in a cyclical rather than a linear manner. Rather than developing a narrative storyline from beginning to end, the Song swells over and over itself. Like a jewel of many facets, it celebrates the vibrancy of love in a way that imitates the repeated experiences that the two lovers share in their idyllic romance. Elliott has expressed this well.

The Canticle is a lyric poem. Its structure . . . is not equivalent to . . . acts in a drama or even . . . the stages in the unfolding of a story where characters and plot develop with a certain logic. Instead, the Canticle sings about the mystery of human love with the type of love typical of love itself. Love's logic requires that certain situations or motifs be continuously repeated: the absence of a loved one which motivates a search; pursuit and discovery of the loved one which results in an interlude of union; the presence of the loved one which results in joy; the contemplative gaze of the loved one which incites songs of praise and desire.<sup>19</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The Song of Songs contains two kinds of repeated features that operate on a macrostructural level, namely, several sets of repeated refrains and of parallel panels. These two literary features intricately knit together the individual poems and larger poetic units into a literary masterpiece. The poetic refrains and parallel panels suggest that the Song is not a literary drama or poetic narrative, but an artistically designed collection of love poems. Sensitivity to its literary texture should caution interpreters from forcing an artificial storyline on the book. The reader may be content to enjoy each individual love poem on its own terms, as well as the ebb and flow of the recurrent themes that resurface time and again.

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<sup>19</sup> Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle*, 261.