

מִירֵשָׁה רִישׁ

THE SONG OF SONGS



A NEW ENGLISH VERSION
OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE POEM

BY LEONARD NG

The Song of Songs: A New English Version of the World's Greatest Love Poem.

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Introduction

The *Shir ha-Shirim*, or *Song of Songs*, is one of the shortest books in the Hebrew Bible, and—strangely enough—does not contain any explicitly religious content. Instead it is a long love poem, or possibly a number of short poems which were compiled and edited into a single whole at a later date. Its protagonists are a man and a woman, and religious commentators have generally interpreted the relationship between these speakers as symbolic of the relationship between God and Israel, or between Christ and his Church. Various attempts to make the poem conform to this notion have made the *Song of Songs* one of the most frequently interpreted books in the entire Bible.

It is certainly possible to read the poem in this manner, and such an interpretation did indeed help to inspire the work of such poets as St. John of the Cross. But personally I have felt that, over the years, this allegorical interpretation has tended to overshadow the literal meaning of the *Song* as a poem of erotic love. The *Song* is fundamentally a poem of love and desire, and often makes references to sexual activity; and though traditionally the woman and the man in the poem are referred to as the Bride and the Bridegroom, there is plenty to suggest that they are neither married nor living together. This is a poem which stands at the head of the grand poetic tradition of illicit love: it is a poem of nighttime rendezvous, of trysts in the countryside, of seeking and finding, of slipping away at daybreak. And indeed the poem ends on just such a note: “Run away”, says the woman to her lover, presumably before someone catches them together. There is plenty of consummation going on, but certainly no marriage. (The man does sometimes refer to the woman as “my sister, my bride”, but this is a stock trope in Egyptian love poetry, which may have influenced the *Song*. The lovers in this poem are neither incestuous nor married, either of which would have meant their living under the same roof.)

The illicit nature of the relationship, of course, has not kept the *Song* from being an extremely popular text at wedding services. But translations of the *Song* in English-language Bibles, both Christian and Jewish, have generally seemed somewhat hamstrung to me; perhaps the limitations of traditional exegesis, or of the

traditional chapter-and-verse format, have contributed in some measure to this. Whatever the cause, I wanted to make a version of the poem that would *sing*, that would appeal to me personally as a work of literature. This is the result. And if readers were to use my version of the poem at their own weddings, I would be particularly delighted.

Some notes on this translation

From a linguistic point of view, the *Song* is easily one of the most difficult books in the entire Bible, hard even for experts to come to a consensus on. It contains many words which occur in the Bible only once, as well as many obscure passages; attempts to make sense of these have given birth to a number of widely differing interpretations. (Bible translations often footnote these passages with the observation that the meaning of the Hebrew is unclear.) Different translators have had to make their choices based on the interpretation of the *Song* they most want to convey, and faced with the same difficulty I have had to do the same. More so than with many other texts, any translation of the *Song* can at best only be a re-creation, significantly affected by the sensibilities and predispositions of its translators. I would therefore be the first to admit that my version of the *Song* is inherently biased, privileging my own interpretation of the *Song* as a poem of erotic desire. This is the rendering which makes the most sense to me from a literary and aesthetic perspective, and it is the one I have chosen.

I have thought of this piece primarily as music, with themes and motifs which occur, transform and develop, and recur; a kind of concerto in seven movements for two voices and a chorus. Taken as a literary work, the *Song* can seem haphazard, random, and confusing; understood as a piece of music, it makes perfect sense. I have therefore set the movement breaks where I (and other commentators) have generally found them to be most appropriate; these do not correspond to the traditional chapter and verse divisions. (Those divisions were in fact devised by medieval Christians to make it easier to refer to various passages, and were not present at all in the original text; for those who would like such references, however,

I have provided verse numbers in red on the left-hand side of the poem.) I hope the result of those choices will be a more fluid, more coherent text.

I consulted many works in the making of this version, but the detailed commentary on the Hebrew provided by Ariel and Chana Bloch in their own version of the *Song of Songs* proved to be the most enlightening. This version is significantly indebted to them.

The Song of Songs

1.1

The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

I.

Woman:

1.2 Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth:
Your love is better than wine,
3 Your perfume sweet,
Your name like oil poured out—
That's why the women love you.
4 Draw me after you, let's run!
You've brought me into your room, my king:
Let us rejoice and exult in you,
Your lovemaking better than wine—
How right it is to want you!

5 I am dark but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem,
Like the tents of Kedar,
Like Solomon's pavilions.
6 Don't stare at my darkness;
The sun has stared enough.
My brothers fell out with me
And made me guard their vineyards;
I failed to guard my own.

7 Tell me, my soul's love,
Where you pasture your sheep,
Where you rest them at noon.
Don't leave me to stray
By the flocks of your friends!

Chorus:

8 If you don't know, loveliest of women,
Follow the tracks of the sheep;
Take your kids to graze
By the shepherds' tents.

Man:

1.9 Dearest, I have thought of you
As an Egyptian chariot's mare,
10 Your cheeks lovely between tassels,
Your neck above your necklaces.
11 For you we'll make more wreaths of gold,
More beads of silver!

Woman:

12 The king lies back
As my nard yields its fragrance.
13 My love is like a bag of myrrh
Between my breasts,
14 A cluster of henna flowers
Among the vines at En-gedi.

Man:

15 You're beautiful, my love, you're beautiful,
With your eyes like doves.

Woman:

16 You're beautiful, my love,
Beautiful;
Our bed is verdant,
17 Our housebeams cedar,
Our rafters are fir,
2.1 And I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

Man:

2 Among the young women she's a lily among thorns.

Woman:

2.3 Among the young men, my love's
 An apple tree in a wood:
 I love to sit in his shadow,
 His fruit sweet in my mouth.
4 He took me to the banquet hall,
 Raised the flag of love above me—
5 O feed me with raisin cakes,
 Refresh me with apples,
 I'm faint with desire!
6 His left arm is beneath my head,
 His right arm embraces me ...
7 By the gazelles I charge you,
 Daughters of Jerusalem:
 By the hinds of the field
 Don't rouse love, don't wake it
 Till it's ready to arise!

~~~

## II.

*Woman:*

- 2.8 I hear my love! Look, here he comes,  
Leaping over mountains,  
Bounding over hills.
- 9 It's him, my love, like a gazelle,  
A young stag.  
Now he stands behind our wall—  
He looks through the window,  
He peers through the lattice,
- 10 And he says to me:
- “Get up, my darling,  
My lovely one, come!  
11 The winter is past,  
The rains are gone,  
12 The flowers are blooming,  
The time of song has come.  
The voice of the dove is heard in our land,
- 13 The figs are budding,  
The vines are fragrant.  
Get up, my darling,  
My lovely one, come,
- 14 My dove, who hides in the clefts of the rock,  
Let me see your face,  
Let me hear your voice,  
For your voice is sweet  
And your face is beautiful.”
- 15 Catch the foxes for us,  
The little foxes that ruin vineyards—  
For our vineyard is in flower!
- 16 My beloved is mine  
And I am his;  
He grazes among the lilies.

17 Before the winds of daybreak blow,  
Before the shadows flee,  
Go back, my love, like a gazelle,  
A young stag on the spice mountains.

3.1 In my bed at night I sought my love,  
I sought but did not find him.  
2 So now I'll rise and roam the city,  
Through streets and squares I'll seek my love...  
I sought, but did not find him.  
3 I met the watchmen on patrol:  
"Have you seen the one I love?"  
4 And after I had passed them  
I found the one I love.  
I caught him, would not let him go  
And brought him to my mother's house,  
To the room of the woman who conceived me...

5 By the gazelles I charge you,  
Daughters of Jerusalem:  
By the hinds of the field  
Don't rouse love, don't wake it  
Till it's ready to arise!

~~~

III. (Interlude)

Chorus:

3.6 Who is that coming up from the desert
Like a column of smoke,
Fragrant with myrrh and frankincense
And all the merchant's perfumes?

7 Here is Solomon's bed
Ringed with sixty fighters,
The best of Israel's soldiers,
8 All trained in warfare,
All skilled in war,
Each girt with a sword
Against the night's alarms.

9 King Solomon made himself a litter
From Lebanese wood.
10 Its posts were of silver, its back was of gold,
Its seat was of purple
And inside it was filled with love
By the daughters of Jerusalem.

11 Go and look, daughters of Zion,
At King Solomon,
And the crown his mother set on him
On his wedding day,
On the day of his heart's joy.

~~~

## IV.

*Man:*

- 4.1 You're beautiful, my love, beautiful,  
With your eyes like doves behind your veil,  
And your hair like a flock of goats  
Streaming down Mount Gilead.
- 2 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep  
Coming up from the washing;  
Each one has its twin,  
Not one goes unpaired.
- 3 Your lips are like a scarlet thread  
And your mouth is lovely;  
Your cheeks behind your veil  
Are pomegranate halves.
- 4 Your neck is like the Tower of David  
Built as an armoury,  
Hung round with a thousand shields,  
All the shields of warriors.
- 5 Your two breasts are like twin fawns  
Grazing among lilies.
- 6 Before the winds of daybreak blow,  
Before the shadows flee,  
I will go to the mountain of myrrh,  
To the hill of frankincense.
- 7 All of you is fair, my love,  
Your every part unblemished.
- 8 Come with me from Lebanon,  
From Lebanon, my bride, with me!  
Come down from Amana's heights,  
From Shenir and Hermon;  
Come down from the lions' dens,  
From the leopards' mountains.
- 9 You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride,  
You have captured my heart

With a glance from your eyes,  
With one coil of your necklace.  
10 How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride,  
Much better than wine, and the scent of your perfumes  
Better than all other spices.  
11 Sweetness falls from your lips, my bride,  
Honey and milk are under your tongue,  
And the scent of your clothes  
Is the scent of Lebanon.  
12 You're a walled garden, my sister, my bride,  
A hidden spring, a fountain sealed.  
13 Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates;  
Your fruits are wondrous—henna and nard,  
14 Nard and saffron,  
Calamus, cinnamon,  
Incense-bearing trees;  
Myrrh and aloes,  
All the best perfumes.  
15 You're a garden spring,  
A well of fresh water,  
A stream flowing down from Lebanon.

*Woman:*

16 Awake, north wind,  
Come, south wind;  
Blow upon my garden  
And let its perfume spread.  
Let my beloved enter his garden  
And taste its finest fruits!

*Man:*

5.1 I have entered my garden, my sister, my bride;  
I have gathered my myrrh and my spices;  
I have eaten my honey and my honeycomb;  
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

*Chorus:*

Eat, lovers, and drink;  
Get drunk with love!

~~~

V.

Woman:

- 5.2 I slept, but my heart was awake;
I hear my beloved knocking!
“Open to me, my sister, my love,
My unsullied dove;
Because my head is drenched with dew,
My locks with the drops of the night.”
- 3 “I have taken my clothes off;
Must I don them again?
I have washed my feet;
Must I soil them again?”
- 4 My love put his hand through the hole of the door,
And my insides throbbed for him;
- 5 And I got up to open to him,
Fingers dripping with myrrh,
With sweet-smelling myrrh,
Falling on the handle of the bolt.
- 6 I opened to him, but my love had withdrawn;
He was gone, and my soul crumbled.
I searched, but could not find him;
I called him, but no answer came.
- 7 I met the watchmen on patrol:
They beat me, bruised me, took my shawl from me.
- 8 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
If you find my lover, tell him—
Tell him I am faint with love.

Chorus:

- 9 What makes your lover better than others,
O loveliest of women?
What makes your lover better than others,
That you charge us to do this?

Woman:

- 5.10 My beloved is fresh and ruddy,
The first among ten thousand.
- 11 His head is golden, purest gold;
His locks are palm fronds,
Black as a raven.
- 12 His eyes are like doves
By streams of water,
Bathed in milk,
On a brimming pool.
- 13 His cheeks are like a bed of spices,
Mounds of perfume;
His lips are like lilies
Dripping with myrrh.
- 14 His arms are as rods of gold
Inlaid with precious stones;
His belly polished ivory,
Adorned with sapphires.
- 15 His legs are like pillars of marble
Set on foundations of gold;
The sight of him is like Lebanon,
Eminent as the cedars.
- 16 His mouth is like sweet wine;
Every part of him is lovely.
That's my beloved,
That's my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem!

Chorus:

- 6.1 Where has your lover gone,
O loveliest of women?
Which way has your lover turned?
We will seek him with you.

Woman:

6.2 My love has gone down to his garden,
To the beds of spices,
To graze in the garden,
To gather lilies.
3 I am my beloved's,
My beloved is mine;
He grazes among the lilies.

Man:

4 You're beautiful, my love, as Tirzah,
Fair as Jerusalem,
Awesome as an army.
5 Turn your eyes away from me—
They overwhelm me;
Your hair is like a flock of goats
Streaming down Mount Gilead.
6 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep
Coming up from the washing;
Each one has its twin,
Not one goes unpaired.
7 Your cheeks behind your veil
Are pomegranate halves.
8 There are sixty queens
And eighty concubines
And young women without number;
9 But there is only one of her, my dove,
The only one of her mother,
Perfect before the one who bore her.
Women saw her and called her blessed,
Queens and concubines praised her:
10 "Who is that looking forth
As the morning rising,
Fair as the pale moon,
Radiant as the blazing sun,
Awesome as the army of stars?"

6.11

I went down to the nut garden
To watch the valley springing,
To see if the vines were blooming
Or the pomegranates budding—

12

And before I knew it
She had set me riding
In the noblest of the chariots of my people!

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## VI.

*Chorus:*

6.13      Come back, come back, O maiden of Shulam,  
Come back, come back, so that we can watch you!

*Man:*

Why are you watching the maiden of Shulam  
Dancing the dance of two camps? ...

7.1      How lovely in their sandals are your feet,  
O daughter of princes!  
The curves of your thighs are like ornaments,  
The works of a master's hand.  
2      Your navel is a moonlike bowl:  
May it never lack mixed wine!  
Your belly is a heap of wheat  
Surrounded by lilies.  
3      Your two breasts are like twin fawns;  
4      Your neck, a tower of ivory.  
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon  
At the gate of the daughter of princes.  
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon,  
Looking towards Damascus.  
5      Your head is like Mount Carmel,  
Your locks are dark as purple;  
The king is held captive among them.  
6      (How wonderful you are, how sweet,  
O Love, among all the delights!)  
7      I saw you standing like a palm tree,  
Your breasts like date clusters,  
8      And I said to myself: I will climb the palm  
And take hold of its branches.  
May your breasts be clusters of grapes,  
Your breath be like apples,

9 Your mouth like finest wine—

*Woman:*

—Wine flowing smoothly to my beloved  
As over the lips of sleepers.

7.10 I am my beloved's,  
And he desires me;

11 So come, my love, let us go into the field  
And spend the night among the henna bushes.

12 And we'll rise early, and go to the vineyard  
To see if the vines have flowered,  
If their blossoms have opened,  
If the pomegranates have budded;  
There I will give you my love.

13 The mandrakes are fragrant, and every sweetness  
Is at our doors,  
New and old,  
Set aside for you, my dearest one.

8.1 If only you had been my brother,  
Nursed at my mother's breasts!  
Then I could kiss you if I saw you in the streets  
And no one would despise me.

2 I would lead you, I would bring you  
To my mother's house, to teach me;  
And I would let you drink spiced wine,  
My pomegranate juice.

3 His left arm is beneath my head,  
His right arm embraces me...

4 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:  
Don't rouse love, don't wake it  
Till it's ready to arise!

~~~

VII.

Chorus:

8.5 Who is that coming up from the desert,
Leaning upon her lover?

Woman:

I roused you beneath the apple tree,
There where your mother conceived you,
There where she conceived and bore you.
6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,
A seal upon your arm;
For love is ferocious as death,
Jealousy ruthless as the grave.
Its sparks are sparks of fire,
A blazing flame;
7 No flood can quench it,
No torrent drown it—
And if a man were to try to buy it with all the wealth of his house,
He would be utterly scorned.

Chorus (the brothers):

8 We have a little sister
And she has no breasts;
What shall we do for her
When suitors come?

9 If she be a wall,
We shall build on her
A turret of silver;
If she be a door,
We will bolt her in
With planks of cedar.

Woman (the sister):

8.10 I am a wall,
And my breasts are like towers!
And in his eyes
I have found my peace.

Man:

11 Solomon had a vineyard
In Baal-hamon;
He entrusted it to keepers,
And each one gained for its fruit
A thousand pieces of silver.
12 But *my* vineyard, mine, is before me;
You can keep your thousand, Solomon,
And your keepers can have their two hundred!

~~~

# Coda

*Man:*

8.13 O you who dwell in the gardens,  
Friends are listening for your voice;  
Let me hear it!

*Woman:*

14 Run away, my love, like a gazelle,  
A young stag on the spice mountains.

## About the translator

Leonard Ng is a freelance writer, poet, editor and translator. Born and raised in Singapore, he has been translating classical poetry into English since 2005. For a living he helps other people to say what they really want to say. His other translations include the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji*, and



Lu Ji's *Rhapsody on Literature*. His work has appeared in a variety of places, including the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* ([www.qlrs.com](http://www.qlrs.com)), the anthology *Love Gathers All*, and his own site, [rainybluedawn.com](http://rainybluedawn.com). *This Mortal World*, his first collection of poems, is due to be published in mid-2011.

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Peace and love,  
Leonard

