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If it is not inspired scripture, why does a passage from the Song of Solomon appear three times in the Doctrine and Covenants?

Reading the Song of Solomon as a Latter-day Saint

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When I ask my Old Testament students at BYU what they know about the biblical book Song of Solomon, they respond almost in unison, “It’s not inspired!” “How do you know that?” I ask them.

“Joseph Smith said so,” they reply. My students accept the Prophet’s assessment, as indicated in the Joseph Smith Translation. And so do I.¹

But when I ask my classes what else they know about the Song of Solomon, I get little or no response. “Since it is not inspired scripture, why is it in the Bible?” Silence. “Since it is not inspired scripture, what is it?” More silence. “Since it is not inspired scripture, why does a passage from the Song of Solomon appear three times in the Doctrine and Covenants?” Further and somewhat confused silence. These are questions I think all Latter-day Saint students of the scriptures ought to be able to answer. My Old Testament students are required to learn the answers.²

Although the Song of Solomon (hereafter, the Song) is generally ignored in the standard Latter-day Saint Church curriculum,³ it *is* part of the traditional biblical canon that Latter-day Saints share with Jews and other Christians. It has been the object of much study by many Bible believers

during the past two millennia, and an exceptionally large amount of commentary has been produced on this small book during this time. Furthermore, there are a few distinct Latter-day Saint connections to the Song. I therefore think there is value for all students of the Bible in knowing a few basic points about this book, rather than being willfully ignorant of it. Following a brief introduction to the Song, I will answer the four questions posed in the opening paragraphs.⁴

Introduction: About the Song

Containing no third-person narration, the Song employs only spoken words, primarily those of its two main characters: a male and a female lover.⁵ The opening line of the book, “The song of songs, which is Solomon’s” (1:1), provides the basis for its two most common names in English, “Song of Songs” and “Song of Solomon.” It is also known as “Canticles,” anglicized from its Latin name *Canticum Canticorum* (Song of Songs) in the Vulgate. Most modern-day Jews and Christians now refer to this book as the “Song of Songs,” based on the first phrase of the book, while those who still use the King James Version (KJV) usually refer to it as the Song of Solomon, in harmony with the older tradition represented therein.

The expression “song of songs” represents a Hebrew idiom used to express the superlative. Thus the “song of songs” means “the best song, the most wonderful song.” As grammarians routinely indicate, other biblical examples of this type of superlative phrasing include holy of holies (usually translated “most holy” in the KJV, e.g., Exodus 26:33), “God of gods, and Lord of lords” (Deuteronomy 10:17), the “heaven of heavens” (usually translated “the highest heavens,” 1 Kings 8:27), and “king of kings” (Ezekiel 26:7). Thus the opening phrase of the Song declares the nature and status of the book. It presents itself as a great song, celebrating certain aspects of human love.

According to 1 Kings 4:32 (Heb. 5:12), Solomon composed 1,005 songs. However, actual Solomonic authorship of the Song is now generally viewed as having no real basis in history.⁷ There are, of course, allusions to Solomon and some of his possessions in the Song (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12), as well as the fact that the woman refers early on to her lover as a “king” (1:4; although see 1:7, in which she depicts him as a shepherd).⁸ However, the LDS Bible Dictionary rightly indicates that the traditional ascription of this book to Solomon “is doubtful.”⁹ So, while linking the Song to Solomon in antiquity presumably helped provide the text with a regal aura, may have increased its

authoritative status, and secured its place in the biblical canon, there is really no reliable way to know who composed it.

Ascertaining the date of the Song’s composition is equally challenging, with suggestions ranging from the tenth to the third centuries BC. Most scholars tend to favor a later date (Persian to Greek period), based in part on certain linguistic considerations.¹⁰ Interestingly, one Talmudic tradition insists that the “men of Hezekiah” were responsible for collecting these love poems, about two centuries after Solomon.¹¹ Recently, a composition date of about 900 BC “in the northern kingdom of Israel” has been proposed.¹² There is, however, no way to confidently date the original form of the Song.¹³

Bound up with the question of dating is also the question of the unity of the Song. Earlier scholars generally presumed the Song was an originally unified composition, while many scholars now judge the canonical form of the Song to be a compilation of several previously independent songs, which may have been composed in different centuries.¹⁴ Ultimately, this question, like the issue of the Song’s date, remains unanswered.

Question 1. What is the basis for the Latter-day Saint claim that the Song of Solomon is not “inspired” scripture?

The fact that Latter-day Saints institutionally ignore the Song of Songs is, I presume, primarily due to what is probably the best known fact regarding the Song in the Latter-day Saint tradition: that the Joseph Smith Translation, Joseph Smith’s inspired revision of the Bible, not only provides no revisions at all to the text of the Song,¹⁵ but contains the comment “The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings [*sic*].”¹⁶ This statement dates to July 1832.¹⁷

Among other things, this assertion implies that the other books of the Bible, in whole or in part, *are* inspired writings, thus giving the Song a lesser status compared with the rest of the biblical canon. Given that Joseph Smith taught that there was even some potential religious value in the Apocrypha and that the Holy Spirit could guide one to whatever truths were found therein (see D&C 91:1–6), my interpretation of the JST claim that the Song is “not inspired writings” is that it was not produced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and that it contains no explicit religious truths. Seen as such, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints views the Song of Songs as void of religious authority and value.

A secondary question raised by Joseph Smith’s claim is, what does the plural form “Songs . . . are” convey in the statement “The Songs of Solomon

are not Inspired writings”? Although this could be viewed as support for the position mentioned above, that the canonical form of the Song resulted from the compilation of several originally independent songs, it is perhaps just a slip of the tongue or the pen.¹⁸ The fact is that neither Joseph Smith nor his peers provided any surviving commentary on this JST claim.

This latter point makes it difficult to *confidently* suggest *why* the Song is considered “not inspired.” Although the Song’s sexual nature and its dearth of explicit religious content are potential reasons for its status, no official reason has been stated by the Church beyond the JST statement itself (see also the discussion of what the Song was originally, below). Thus the JST statement has, in effect, come to represent the official Latter-day Saint position.

Question 2. Since the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture, why is it in the Bible?

Commentators usually attribute to Rabbi Aqiba the influence that swayed early Jewish rabbinic leaders to include the Song in the Hebrew canon of scripture.¹⁹ Aqiba was active in the early decades of the second century AD (lived ca. 50–135). Reading in its full context the oft-quoted statement from the Mishnah (*Yadayim* 3:5) that is attributed to Aqiba is instructive because it illuminates the debate that occurred among at least some Jewish leaders concerning the status of the Song.

- A. All sacred scriptures impart uncleanness to hands [i.e., are holy and inspired].²⁰
- B. The Song of Songs and Qohelet [Ecclesiastes] impart uncleanness to hands.
- C. R. Judah says, “The Song of Songs imparts uncleanness to hands, but as to Qohelet there is dispute.”
- D. R. Yose says, “Qohelet does not impart uncleanness to hands, but as to Song of Songs there is dispute.” . . .
- E. Said R. Simeon b. Azzai, “I have a tradition from the testimony of the seventy-two elders,
- F. “on the day on which they seated R. Eleazar b. Azariah in the session,
- G. “that the Song of Songs and Qohelet do impart uncleanness to hands.”
- H. Said R. Aqiba, “Heaven forbid! No Israelite man ever disputed concerning Song of Songs that it imparts uncleanness to hands.

- I. “For the entire age is not so worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel.
- J. “For all the scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is holiest of all.
- K. “And if they disputed, they disputed only concerning Qohelet.”
- L. Said R. Yohanan b. Joshua the son of R. Aqiba’s father-in-law, according to the words of Ben Azzai, “Indeed did they dispute, and indeed did they come to a decision.”²¹

Aqiba’s claim in this passage is an eloquent overstatement, presumably made to help fortify in rabbinic circles his perspective of the Song. Unfortunately, neither this nor any other ancient text indicates the *basis* for the determination by some early Jewish leaders that the Song of Songs was holy scripture. About a century later, early Christian Father Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254) expressed a sentiment similar to Aqiba’s: “Blessed . . . is he who understands songs and sings them . . . , but much more blest is he who sings the Songs of Songs!”²²

The standard explanation for the Song’s canonization as a biblical text is the allegorization of its content—the Song’s portrayal of the delightful love of a man and a woman seen as representing Yahweh’s/Jehovah’s love for Israel, or for Christians, Jesus’ love for the Church, or for individual Christian souls.²³

However, allegorization of the Song is a process about which nothing is known. It is not clear whether the Song was viewed allegorically *prior* to canonization or whether it was later allegorized to justify its canonization. If the latter option is true, that the allegorization of the Song came after its canonization, there is no ancient indication of how or why the Song gained the popularity necessary to be canonized in the first place.²⁴ (I assume Aqiba’s statement indicates allegorization had taken place by his day.) The remains of four copies of the Song of Songs were found among the Qumran manuscripts (Dead Sea Scrolls), suggesting the text had a certain amount of popularity among some Jews in the Herodian period (30 BC–AD 50), but again, no explanation of how the Song was actually viewed has survived from before the Jewish Mishnah (ca. AD 200; quoted above).²⁵

Whether the allegorical (sometimes called the spiritual) approach to the Song of Songs was intended from the start or later developed, the Song was accepted by the majority of premodern Jewish and Christian exegetes and Bible believers as allegorically representing the reciprocal love and desire between the Lord and his people.²⁶

Question 3. Since the Song of Solomon is not originally inspired scripture, what is it?

Joseph Smith is not the only one to claim that the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture. Already in the eighteenth century some scholars asserted the Song was not about God and his people. For example, William Whiston (1667–1752), known for his translation of Josephus' works, wrote in 1723 that "the Book of Canticles is not a Sacred Book of the Old Testament; nor was it originally esteem'd as such, either by the Jewish or the Christian Church [*sic*]."²⁷ A century later, Harvard University professor George R. Noyes, who considered the allegorical view of the Song as "mere fancy," declared in 1846, "I do not regard . . . the Song of Solomon, to have an express moral or religious design."²⁸ Noyes went on to cite scholars in Europe, and specifically in England, who in the preceding century had rejected the allegorical or "spiritual" view of the Song, including Eichorn, Jahn, and Ewald, as well as "the distinguished Methodist, Adam Clarke" and "the Calvinist dissenter, John Pye Smith."²⁹ Adam Clarke skeptically asked in his commentary, originally published in eight volumes between 1810 and 1826 (the 1830 edition is used herein), "In a word, does Solomon here represent Jesus Christ? . . . And where . . . is the proof?" After then reviewing the various allegorical proposals known to him, Clarke defiantly claimed, "Nothing but a direct revelation from God can show us which of these opinions is the correct one, or whether any of them are correct. The antiquity of an opinion, if that be not founded on a revelation from God, is no evidence of its truth."³⁰

There is no reason to suggest a cause-and-effect influence from Clarke or anyone else on Joseph Smith and his thinking that the Song was "not inspired." There is no explicit support for such a supposition.³¹ Rather, Joseph Smith appears to be one of several independent thinkers—and an inspired thinker, as Latter-day Saints would add—arriving at the same conclusion concerning the status of the Song. But in the early 1800s, religious leaders (as opposed to scholars) in the United States who shared his view were definitely in the minority. As Noyes observed in 1846, "in this country [the USA], the old notion, that the book sets forth the mutual love of Christ and the church, is probably the most prevalent."³² Furthermore, Joseph Smith is the only religious leader I know of in his time period (or any other) who made his assertion about the Song in the context of his role as a prophet.³³

Currently, the vast majority of Bible scholars agree that the Song did not originate as inspired scripture. As indicated above, the opening line of this book

concisely indicates its genre: "The song of songs, which is Solomon's" (1:1). And since this poetic book is about love, the Song is best understood and is now commonly accepted as an example of Israelite love poetry.³⁴ This conclusion is supported by at least three points: (1) the Song is devoid of the name of God, (2) it demonstrates no obvious religious intent, and (3) it shares several features with Egyptian love poetry. Egyptian texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth dynasties (ca. 1300–1150 BC) of the New Kingdom period currently provide the closest non-Israelite parallels to this love poetry.³⁵ These factors have led some scholars, attempting to distance the Song from the traditional view of divine allegory, to refer to the Song as "secular" poetry.³⁶

Some similarities between the Song and Egyptian love poetry can easily be illustrated with these excerpts from the Egyptian text known as Papyrus Chester Beatty I:

The Beginning of the Sayings of the Great Entertainer
(*Boy*) (Number 31)

One alone is my sister, having no peer:
 more gracious than all other women.
Behold her, like Sothis rising
 at the beginning of a good year:
shining, precious, white of skin,
 lovely of eyes when gazing.
Sweet her lips when speaking:
 she has no excess of words.
Long of neck, white of breast,
 her hair true lapis lazuli.
Her arms surpass gold,
 her fingers are like lotuses.
Full (?) her derrière, narrow (?) her waist,
 her thighs carry on her beauties.
Lovely of walk when she strides on the ground,
 she has captured my heart in her embrace.
She makes the heads of all men
 turn about when seeing her. . . .

(*Girl*) (Number 32)

Second Stanza

My brother roils my heart with his voice,
 making me take ill [i.e., love sick].
 Though he is among the neighbors of my mother's house,
 I cannot go to him. . . .
O brother, I am decreed for you
 by the Golden One. . . .

(*Girl*) (Number 36)

Sixth Stanza

I passed close by his house,
and found his door ajar.
My brother was standing beside his mother,
and with him all his kin.

The first shared trait illustrated here is that the male and female lovers refer to each other in the Egyptian text as “my sister” and “my brother,” respectively. See similarly in Song 4:9–10, “You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; . . . How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!” (ESV; see also 4:12; 5:1, 2, for “my sister”; and Song 8:1 for “brother”). Clearly, the language in both Egyptian and Israelite texts does not refer to incestuous activity; rather, these are expressions of endearment, and similar usage appears sporadically in other ancient Near Eastern texts.³⁸

The second shared trait, evident between this passage of Egyptian love poetry and the Song, is the male’s poetic description of the female, beginning with features of her head and moving down her body.³⁹ See similarly, the male’s description of the female’s body in Song 4:1–7:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
 behold, you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
 behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
 leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes. . . .
Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
 and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
 behind your veil.

This situation is a classic illustration of how knowing something about the cultural world that lies behind the biblical text helps us better understand and interpret the contents of the Bible itself.⁴⁰ Thus the answer to the question “since the Song of Solomon is not originally inspired scripture, what is it?” is, it was originally Israelite love poetry. This interpretation correlates with the JST claim that the Song is “not inspired.”

*Question 4. Since the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture, why is a passage from the Song of Solomon quoted several times in the Doctrine and Covenants?*⁴¹

Joseph Smith’s claim that the Song of Solomon/Songs is not inspired appears to be at least superficially at odds with his use of Song 6:10 in the 1836 dedicatory prayer for the temple in Kirtland, Ohio (D&C 109). Song 6:10 reads in the KJV, “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?” The Hebrew word *shabar*,⁴² translated “morning” in the KJV, more specifically designates the “dawn, the first light of the new day.”⁴³ It is generally accepted that the “comparison [of the female in Song 6:10] to the dawn, moon, and sun suggests the radiant beauty of the woman.”⁴⁴

The restoration passage in question is Doctrine and Covenants 109:73, presented here in the context of verses 72–74:

Remember all thy church, O Lord, with all their families, and all their immediate connections, with all their sick and afflicted ones, with all the poor and meek of the earth; that the kingdom, which thou hast set up without hands, may become a great mountain and fill the whole earth;
 That thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners;
 And be adorned as a bride for that day when thou shalt unveil the heavens, and cause the mountains to flow down at thy presence, and the valleys to be exalted.

Although this paper is not the place for a detailed study of this or of the other two passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that contain the language of Song 6:10 (mentioned below), it can at least be observed that D&C 109:73 is part of a passage that contains bold imagery from several passages from the Bible: verse 72, Daniel 2:44–45; verse 73, Song of Songs 6:10 (however, the phrase “come forth out of the wilderness of darkness” is only found in D&C 109:73); verse 74a, Revelation 21:2; verse 74b, Isaiah 64:1; and verse 74c, Isaiah 40:4.

Joseph Smith shows no apparent concern about quoting from a biblical book that four years earlier he labeled as “not inspired writings.” The Song of Songs *is*, after all, in the traditional biblical canon, and as such the Prophet utilized it as a source for imagery depicting the latter-day Church (then beginning to “dawn” upon the world), along with imagery from other canonical sources, in this temple-focused prayer. Seen this way, the lyrical line

in Song 6:10 aptly conveys a significant attribute of the restored Church, as expressed in D&C 109:73.⁴⁵

Two other passages in the Doctrine and Covenants contain language from Song 6:10. D&C 5:14 uses the language of this verse in reference to the Church, but reverses the adjectives describing the sun and moon: “And to none else will I grant this power, to receive this same testimony among this generation, in this the beginning of the rising up and the coming forth of my church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.” This text is dated to March 1829, and thus precedes Joseph Smith’s work on the JST. As with D&C 109:73, D&C 5:14 employs the description of the female’s radiant and overpowering beauty in Song 6:10 to signify the nature of the restoration as it dawned upon the world. Accepting D&C 5 as a revelation from the resurrected Christ through Joseph Smith, as Latter-day Saints do, implies that the Lord himself approved of utilizing this phrase from the Song for its symbolic value.

The final text in the Doctrine and Covenants that contains the language of Song 6:10 is section 105:31: “But first let my army become very great, and let it be sanctified before me, that it may become fair as the sun, and clear as the moon, and that her banners may be terrible unto all nations.” Again, the wording of Song 6:10 is somewhat rearranged, but is unmistakable. This time, however, the imagery of Song 6:10 does not specifically represent the dawning of Christ’s latter-day Church, but rather is applied to the Lord’s “army.” Dating to June 1834, the historical context for this revelation is the march of Zion’s Camp “army” from Ohio to the Jackson County to deal with mob violence against Latter-day Saints in Missouri, although no military action resulted. The context suggests the emphasis in D&C 105:31 is thus on the latter phrase in Song 6:10: “terrible as an army with banners.” Thus all three passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that employ the language of Song 6:10 are viewed by Latter-day Saints as the inspired use of imagery from a source that is “not inspired.”

In an effort to seemingly justify the use of Song 6:10 in the Doctrine and Covenants, a few Latter-day Saint commentators have proposed that the canonical form of Song 6:10 may contain a quote from an earlier inspired source no longer available to us.⁴⁶ Certainly, this is possible, but I take such a suggestion as evidence of an attempt to distance the canonical Song of Songs from the Doctrine and Covenants, as if the communicative value of the imagery in Song 6, on its own and by itself, is not enough justification for its use.

D&C 5:14 and 109:73 may well employ the imagery of Song 6:10 in relation to the coming forth of the latter-day Church *because* female imagery was sometimes used anciently to represent God’s people in the Old Testament and Christ’s Church in the New Testament (see, for example, Hosea 1–3; Isaiah 54:5; Matthew 25:1–13; Ephesians 5:28–33).⁴⁷ Of course, Latter-day Saints do accept the scriptural meta-allegory that presents Christ’s Church as a beloved woman, as his “bride.”

In addition to the three passages in the Doctrine and Covenants just cited, it is worth noting that a phrase from Song 6:10 is also found towards the end of a multipage entry in Joseph Smith’s journal, under the date of February 21, 1843. Although not scripture, it provides additional indication that Joseph Smith did not shy away from the language of the Song. Willard Richards recorded some comments by Joseph Smith about finishing the Nauvoo House, and at one point notes, “& if you are not careful will be lifted up & fall and they will cover up & cloak all your former sins— & hide a multitude of sins. & shine forth fair as the sun &c.” However, it is challenging to make very much of this, given the incomplete nature of the journal entry.⁴⁸

Lastly, there is one other reported occasion when Joseph Smith employed imagery from the Song of Songs in his communications, again beyond canonical scripture. Song 2:15 reads in the KJV: “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.” The Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book reports that in August 1842 Joseph Smith taught, “The servants of the Lord are required to guard against those things that are calculated to do the most evil—the little foxes spoil the vines—little evils do the most injury to the church.”⁴⁹ Whether this indicates that this phrase was a popular saying with which Joseph Smith was familiar or whether he was aware of it from reading the Song of Songs cannot be determined.⁵⁰

Although finding a few connections with the Song in reports of his speech is statistically insignificant, such instances, in addition to the three occurrences of Song 6:10 in the Doctrine and Covenants, further demonstrate that Joseph Smith (and the Lord) did not shy away from using the language found in the Song of Songs, even though he stated the Song was “not inspired writings.” On the one hand, this does not seem to me to be all that different from Elder Henry D. Taylor quoting Song 2:11–12 in his April 1959 general conference address: the poetic imagery in Song 2 beautifully expressed his point.⁵¹ On the other hand, of course, the employment of Song

6:10 is more theologically focused in the Doctrine and Covenants, and its use therein is attributed by Latter-day Saints to the inspiration of the Lord.

Concluding Thoughts on the Latter-day Saint Position

Obviously, there is much more that can be (and has been) said about the Song of Songs/Solomon. And there are certainly some understandable reasons why the Church has chosen to avoid the Song of Songs in its curriculum and other venues. Besides the claim that the Song is not inspired writing, the next most likely reason for this stance is the imagery and language employed to express the beauty and appeal of human bodies and the emotions and desires these can arouse. The exotic and sometimes erotic nature of the text, with its frequent use of nature imagery to convey sexually oriented allusions and double entendres, is presumably what led Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in a 1984 address to students at Brigham Young University entitled “The Bible, a Sealed Book,” to claim “the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing.”⁵² In this statement, Elder McConkie not only cited the JST claim about the Song, but went further by employing the pejorative term “trash” to emphasize what he considered the Song’s inappropriate and uninspiring sexually oriented contents.⁵³

Finding support from the era of Joseph Smith and the Restoration, Elder McConkie’s view is much closer, for example, to that of non-Mormon Professor George Noyes, who, in arguing against the allegorical view of the Song in 1846, compared it to “erotic poetry,” claiming that “there is language in the Canticles which I could not apply to the Supreme Being . . . without feeling guilty of blasphemy.”⁵⁴ However, this perspective is far removed from the one expressed, for example, by John Wesley (1765), who claimed the Song was “pious . . . , breathing forth the hottest flames of love between Christ and his people, most sweet and comfortable, and useful to all that read it with serious and Christian eyes.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Watson, who accepted the Song as an allegory, claimed in 1832 that “it is justly entitled Song of Songs, or most excellent song, . . . tending, if properly understood, to purify the mind, and to elevate the affections from earthly to heavenly things.”⁵⁶

I understand *why* the Song is not in the seminary and youth Sunday School curricula. However, the Song *is* in the Bible. Commentators have wrestled with it for centuries. Preachers have employed it in sermons for just as long. Although Latter-day Saints have never institutionally accepted the allegorical approach to the Song of Songs, such an approach has been

productive for many Jews and traditional Christians over many centuries. Still today, for example, many Jews read the Song of Songs at Passover as a celebration of God’s love for his chosen people, whatever each individual Jewish person might think of the Song. And, as reviewed above, one passage of the Song is employed in the Doctrine and Covenants to symbolically convey the beautiful nature of the Lord’s restored Church.

Beyond its theological value for some readers, the Song is also a cultural artifact. Artists and authors have applied their talents to expressing the content and mystery of the Song and its evocative imagery.⁵⁸ As former BYU religion professor Ellis Rasmussen wrote, the Song is “worthwhile to enjoy [for] its beauty as romantic literature, complementary to the other great types of the literature of Israel . . . [the Latter-day Saint designation] ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic . . . poetry from a very literate people.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, a number of popular sayings derive from the Song, including “your love is better than wine” (1:2);⁶⁰ “the flowers appear on the earth . . . and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (2:12);⁶¹ “the little foxes that spoil the vines” (2:15);⁶² and “set me as a seal upon your heart . . . for love is strong as death” (8:6).

For all these reasons, *I* believe it is important for students of the scriptures to at least know these few basic things about the Song of Songs, not just that it is “not inspired.” It is possible to understand and appreciate the Song, like most other literature, for what it is without wholeheartedly embracing it as divinely inspired or without completely denigrating it. Reading the Song of Songs can be viewed as comparable to going to an art museum. Depending on individual inclinations, some people will marvel at the skill of a painter or sculptor to express the beauty and subtleties of the human form, including depictions of nudes, while some others may avoid representations of the nude human form because they deem them inappropriate. This latter perspective does not diminish the skill of the artist or the power of the work to convey beauty or emotion, but is a personal choice about taste.⁶³ That some people have long struggled with the sexual nature of the canonical Song is evident in statements such as this one by Origen of Alexandria: “I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.”⁶⁴

As David Rolph Seely has observed, “the Song of Solomon can be profitably read from many perspectives.”⁶⁵ One illustration of this is evident in the

statement by Rasmussen, quoted above, “[the Latter-day Saint designation] ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic . . . poetry.” Another perspective is now evident in the non-allegorizing view found in the writings of some conservative commentators. For example, Tremper Longman III, a conservative Christian Bible scholar, writing in the series preface to a commentary on the Song states that “the Song of Songs is a passionate, sensuous love poem that reminds us that God is interested in more than just our brains and our spirits; he wants us to enjoy our bodies. It reminds us that we are not merely a soul encased in a body but [are] whole persons made in God’s image.”⁶⁶ And the introductory comments to “The Song of Songs” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* claims that perspectives such as Longman’s are “to be welcomed by our various faith communities, since they affirm that the God who created us is concerned with our sexuality and romantic dimensions, that these are significant aspects of marriage, and that religious people can enjoy them without shame.”⁶⁷ Such comments, of course, are made within canonical constraints or parameters to which Latter-day Saints do not feel bound (Articles of Faith 1:8).

Thus, although the Song is institutionally marginalized by the Church, it has proven to be a rich, long-term source of imagery for artists, theologians, and Bible believers, as well as for the imagery incorporated into D&C 5:14; 105:31; and 109:73 (all utilizing Song 6:10). In following the Lord’s injunction to learn what we can about the world and people around us, past as well as present (see D&C 88:78–79, 118; 90:15; 93:53),⁶⁸ it is worth knowing a little bit about the Song and its unique status as ancient Israelite love poetry that according to Latter-day Saints has the unique status of being biblical but not inspired. **RE**

Notes

I began outlining this paper several years ago. The impetus to finish it came from my work on another paper: “Fair as the Moon and Clear as the Sun: The Song of Songs in the Latter-day Saint Religious Tradition,” presented at the November 2012 national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I thank my former student assistant Courtney Dotson for her assistance in gathering material for this paper, and my colleague Kent P. Jackson and my wife, Jane Allis-Pike, for suggestions to improve it.

1. I accept Joseph Smith’s statement as theologically valid, and this position is expressed throughout the rest of this article. The Joseph Smith Translation statement is discussed below.

2. Given the size and nature of the Song of Solomon, I have my university students do a little background reading on it, and then we spend about ten to fifteen minutes discussing it in class.

3. This claim is easy to verify by examining, for example, current and past Sunday School (youth and adults), seminary, and institute manuals, as well as the *Ensign* magazine. All these are available at <https://www.lds.org/manual?lang=eng> and also <https://www.lds.org/ensign?lang=eng>.

4. Latter-day Saint treatments of the Song of Solomon are few and generally brief. See, for example, David Rolph Seely, “The Song of Solomon,” in *1 Kings to Malachi*, ed. Kent P. Jackson, *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 467–70; Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 497–501; and Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 281.

A very large number of non-Latter-day Saint commentaries on the Song of Songs have been published, including many in the past decade or two. These commentaries provide much greater detail than my summary introductory remarks here, so interested readers are advised to pursue these for further information. Some of the more recent commentaries include Duane A. Garrett, *Song of Songs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005); Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2005); and Anselm C. Hagedorn, ed., *Perspectives on the Song of Songs* (New York: de Gruyter, 2005). Additionally, I have consulted J. Cheryl Exum, “Song of Solomon” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford, 2011), 335–39; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 7c (New York: Doubleday, 1977); Ronald E. Murphy, *A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia Commentary, vol. 22 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990); Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); and David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible, A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 432–48.

5. The Song also occasionally includes comments to and by a group of women, who are several times referred to as “daughters of Jerusalem” (e.g., 1:5; 2:7; 5:8–9; 6:1), and one short passage presumably representing the comments of the female’s brothers (8:8–9).

6. See, for example, Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 270, §14.5d.

7. The NET Bible Notes on Song 1:1 accessibly summarize the possibilities of how the Hebrew preposition *l-* in the phrase *lišlomob*, literally “(belonging) to/for Solomon,” can indicate possession or authorship, but also dedication to and topic (about). I agree with their assessment that the ancient intent here was most likely authorship, but that this is a traditional ascription, not proof of actual authorship. See further, for example, Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament, A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2011), 487; Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 481, and Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 335. Contrast the views of older commentators who assumed Solomonic authorship, such as Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments: The Text carefully printed from the most correct copies of the present Authorized Translation, including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts with A Commentary and Critical Notes*, “A New Edition with the Author’s Final Corrections,” vol. 3 (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1830), 841; and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Solomon and*

Ecclesiastes, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968; originally pub. 1875), 11, 111.

8. See, for example, Longman, *Song*, 16, who accepts both of these depictions (1:4, 1:7) as “figurative,” providing a basis on which this literary creation was built, but not as “historical” connections. Coogan, as well as others, uses Song 8:11–12 as support against Solomonic authorship. Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 487.

9. <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/song-of-solomon?lang=eng&letter=s>; accessed October 18, 2013.

10. See for example, Exum, *Song of Songs*, 66–67, and Hess, *Song of Songs*, 17–19, 37 n 1. In support of a later dating, commentators often cite the relative pronoun *šē-*, words whose etymologies are usually traced to Persian and Greek, and the names of spices. I agree with those commentators who ultimately view such elements as non-defining of the Song’s compositional date, since they could merely represent a later reworking of an earlier composition.

11. *b. Baba Batra*, 15a. Mentioned, for example, by Rendsburg, “Song of Songs, book of,” 652, and Christl M. Maier, “Song of Songs,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1245.

12. Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon’s Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 184. Their perspective on the Song’s creation in northern Israel is based on their seeing “these Aramaic and M[ishnaic] H[ebrew] parallels not as signs of lateness but as indications of northernness . . . [with comments about Phoenician and Ugaritic]. . . . The totality of the evidence, as realized long ago by Driver, is that the Song of Songs was composed in the northern part of ancient Israel” (54; see 53–55). See, for example, Carr’s challenge to this view in *Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 439 n. 22.

13. As Roland Murphy rightly observed decades ago, “very little can be said with confidence about the authorship and date or social provenance of the Song.” Murphy, *Commentary*, 5. See also Longman, *Song*, 18–19.

14. Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 487: “probably also an anthology of love poems, perhaps from several periods.” See also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 33–37; Longman, *Song*, 19; and Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 3. Earlier authors, such as William Wright, writing in 1845, observed that “the learned are divided on the point whether the Canticles consist of one continued and connected poem, or of a number of detached songs or amoretts.” Wright, “Canticles,” in *A Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*, ed. John Kitto, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845), 383. See similarly, Thomas Edward Brown, “Canticles,” in the first edition of *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. William Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1863), 383 (see also 269). Additionally, there is disagreement over the number of literary units in the Song. Collins notes that the suggested number of poetic songs in the Song “ranges from as few as six to more than thirty.” *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 431 (see also, 480–81). See also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 37–41.

15. This same point can also be made about fifteen books in the Bible, thirteen of which are in the Old Testament, so by itself it is not too persuasive. See Scott H. Fahrling, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2004).

16. Fahrling, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 785. Initial printings of the Latter-day Saint Bible Dictionary included this not-quite-literal version of this statement: “the JST manuscript contains the note that ‘the Song of Solomon is not inspired scripture.’” However, this has been corrected in the current version. See, for example,

<http://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/song-of-solomon?lang=eng&letter=s>, accessed September 12, 2013.

As an aside, I find it an interesting irony that, based on the canonical order in the English Bible, the “not inspired” Song of Songs is placed just before the book of Isaiah, whose writings were loved by the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi and praised by the resurrected Jesus (see respectively, 2 Nephi 25:5, “my soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah,” and 3 Nephi 23:1, “great are the words of Isaiah”).

17. See Fahrling, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 70–72, for the dating of the various portions of JST OT Manuscript 2.

18. In theory, the plural form could result from misspeaking or mishearing the traditional singular form, or from personal convictions of Joseph Smith, or from impressions from the Spirit. Common usage at the time, based on non-Latter-day Saint publications from the early 1800s, was to refer to the Song in the singular, “the Song of Solomon is.” Note that many centuries earlier (about AD 240–50), Origen of Alexandria complained, “let us not overlook the further fact that some people write the title of this little book as Songs of Songs. That, however, is incorrect; it is called the Song of Songs in the singular, not the plural.” Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, trans. and annot. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman, 1957), 55.

19. See, for example, Seely, “The Song of Solomon,” 468.

20. On the rabbinic notion, still challenging to understand, that sacred objects, including inspired scripture, defiled the hands of a person touching them, see Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 25–31, who provides discussion along with Talmudic and modern academic citations.

21. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1991).

22. A fuller quotation is “Blessed too is he who enters holy places, but far more blest the man who enters the holy of holies! . . . Blessed likewise, is he who understands songs and sings them . . . but much more blest is he who sings the Songs of Songs! And as the man who enters holy places still needs much to make him able to enter the holy of holies . . . so also is it hard to find a man competent to scale the heights of the Songs of Songs, even though he has traversed all the songs in Scripture.” Origen, “The First Homily,” in *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, 266. The careful reader will have noted the plural form “Songs of Songs.” This is unusual in light of Origen’s comment quoted above; see note 18. Other Church Fathers, including Hippolytus (ca. AD 170–236) similarly shared Origen’s opinion about the Song’s canonical status and allegorical representation. For an overview, see “Solomon, Song of,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., ed. F. L. Cross (New York: Oxford, 1997), 1517.

23. This point is so commonly made that I provide only two references here: Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 488 (“so erotic is the Song that from early in the Common era, Jewish and Christian commentators generally interpreted it allegorically”); and Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 336. Note also that Adam Clarke in the early nineteenth century cited six different interpretations for the Song of Songs of a spiritual nature, each of which “has its powerful supporters.” Clarke, *Commentary*, 3:842.

24. As Exum has stated, “whether the Song was included in the canon because it had been allegorized or was allegorized because it had been included in the canon has long been debated.” She further claimed, “allegorization alone cannot have been the reason the Song was included, since the text must have already achieved a certain status—perhaps as national

religious literature—for anyone to have taken the trouble to develop an allegorical interpretation of it.” Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 336. On our lack of knowledge about how and why the Song was canonized, see also, for example, Murphy, *Commentary*, 5–6; and J. P. Fokkelman, who claims that because of the sexual nature of the Song, “interpreters decided to whitewash all offensive elements . . . by . . . allegorization. . . [Jews and Christians] tried to sell this interpretive technique as a form of spiritualization.” Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry, An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 190.

25. Crawford notes that “the presence of the *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes* at Qumran would at least indicate their acceptability as reading matter during the Second Temple period.” Sidnie White Crawford, “Five Scrolls,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: New York, 2000), 295. For summary comments on the fragmentary remains of the manuscripts of the Song of Songs found at Qumran, see Crawford, 295, and Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, 612.

26. As true as this general statement is, Jenson points out, “there was no consensus [among commentators] about what the Song says about them [the man and woman / the Lord and his people] in any individual passage.” Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 10. See also page 11. See similarly in older publications such as, for example, Adam Clarke, *Commentary*, 3:842; and Richard Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary: Explanatory of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Jews and Neighboring Nations*, “Revised by the American Editors” (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1832), 217–18.

Jenson is one modern commentator (2005) who has proposed that the Song did not originate as simply love poetry but originated with coding to invite hearers to think of divine love for humans. He asserts, “there seems to be no reason why such an Israelite poet should not have written these songs for that love [between the Lord and his people].” Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 7 (for the quote; Jenson discusses his suggestion on pages 5–8). Although it really is not proof of his position, Jenson does not see how else to explain that allegorization “was the unanimous answer of Jewish and Christian premodern exegesis—of the ancient rabbis and the later Jewish commentators, and the Fathers of the church and the medieval and Reformation commentators—that these poems belong in the canon.”

27. William Whiston, *A Supplement to Mr. Whiston’s Late Essay, towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament, Proving That the Canticles Is Not a Sacred Book of the Old Testament; Nor Was Originally Esteemed As Such Either by the Jewish Or the Christian Church* (London, 1723), 5. A century later, John Brown complained, “in vain Whiston, and others, upon scarcely the shadow of a ground, have denied its [the Song’s] authenticity.” “Song, or Hymn,” in *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (London, 1824), 639.

28. Noyes, *A New Translation of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Canticles* (Boston: James Munroe, 1846), 123, 119.

29. Noyes, *A New Translation*, 121. See also the names provided by Thomas Brown, “Canticles,” in Smith’s *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 271–72.

30. Clarke, *Commentary*, 3:842. Because he thought that there was no scriptural support for an allegorical reading of the Song, Clarke further wrote, “I advise all young ministers to avoid preaching on Solomon’s Song. . . I repeat it, and I wish to be heard by young ministers, take the plainest texts when you attempt to convince men of sin.” He further observed that “What eminent talents, precious time, great pains, and industry have been wasted” in an attempt to “explain the Canticles” in a way that Clarke saw as invalid (849).

31. For the possibility of Joseph Smith’s exposure to, or at least proximity with a copy of, Clarke’s *Commentary* in the late 1820s, see, for example, the comments by Ronald V.

Huggins, “‘Without a Cause’ and ‘Ships of Tarshish’: A Possible Contemporary Source for Two Unexplained Readings from Joseph Smith,” *Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (2003): 173. However, there are no specific reports of Joseph Smith consulting the commentary on the Song or any other issue, so no direct link can be established. References to Adam Clarke and his commentary in the *Times and Seasons* are too late for consideration with the status of the Song.

32. George R. Noyes, *A New Translation*, 122. See further pages 120–21, where Noyes claimed the allegorical view “would seem to be the most general opinion at the present day, if we may judge of the opinion of the Christian church by what is expressed in the popular commentaries.” See also Thomas Brown’s overview of the developing “literalist” movement in the 1700s into the 1800s, and of those who reasserted the “allegorical” approach (“it must not be supposed, however, that the supporters of the allegorical interpretation have been driven from the field”) in “Canticles,” in Smith’s *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 270–72; quotation from 271b.

33. D&C 35:20; 42:56–59; and 76:15 all connect Joseph Smith’s JST “new translation” with his prophetic calling. See also such later claims as Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s statement that the JST “contains inspired revisions to Bible . . . there should be no doubt about the current status of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. It is a member of the royal family of scripture.” “Scripture Reading, Revelation, and Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible,” in *Plain and Precious Truths Restored: The Doctrinal and Historical Significance of the Joseph Smith Translation*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Robert J. Matthews (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 11, 13.

34. See, for example, Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 335, and Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985).

35. See Michael V. Fox, “Love Songs,” in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, vol. 1 (New York: Brill, 1997), 125–30, for brief introductory comments and a sample of Egyptian texts, with annotations. Still the most extensive work on the Song of Songs and Egyptian love poetry is Fox’s *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (1985). For comments on Mesopotamian love poetry and its relationship to the biblical Song, see Tawny L. Holm, “Ancient Near Eastern Literature: Genres and Forms,” in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. Daniel C. Snell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 285–87. See also the review by Exum, *Song of Songs*, 47–63.

36. For example, Gary A. Rendsburg, “Song of Songs, Book of,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (Oxford: New York, 1997), 652 (“manifest secular character”). See also Exum, “Song of Songs,” 336; and Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 2. While I understand this distancing effort, the word “secular” seems to me oddly out of character with the ancient Near Eastern world.

37. Michael V. Fox, “Papyrus Chester Beatty I (1.51),” in *The Context of Scripture*, 1:128–29 (text #1.51).

38. As observed for example in the NET Notes, Song 4:9 (note 13), “The appellatives ‘my sister’ and ‘my brother’ were both commonly used in ancient Near Eastern love literature as figurative descriptions of two lovers. For instance, in an Ugaritic poem when Anat tried to seduce Aqhat, she says, ‘Hear, O hero Aqhat, you are my brother and I your sister’ (Aqhat 18 i 24). In the Old Testament Apocrypha husband and wife are referred to several times as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ (e.g., Add Esth 15:9; Tob 5:20; 7:16).”

39. Such descriptions, found in Song 4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–7; and 7:1–7 (moving in this last passage in reverse order from foot to head), and which involve metaphorical analogies,

are sometimes compared with later Arabic love poetry known by the term *wasf*. See, for example, comments by Hess, *Song of Songs*, 31, and Exum, *Song of Songs*, 20.

40. Of course, there are other minority views currently held on the original intent and context of the Song, but they are not the focus of this paper. See summary comments in, for example, Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 5; and see John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 481. For an overview of the opinions of early Christian authors, see, for example, P. Meloni, “Song of Songs,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, trans. Adrian Walford (New York: Oxford, 1992), 786–87.

41. In addition to what follows in this section, it is interesting to consider that the name of a city Latter-day Saints established on a bend of the Mississippi River is “Nauvoo,” which is a transliteration of the plural form of a rare Hebrew verb form, *na’vu*, that means, “to be pleasing, delightful.” This particular form occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 52:7 and Song of Songs 1:10, which reads, “Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments” (plus, there is a related adjective *na’veh*, which means “lovely, delightful”). Joseph Smith and some other early Mormon leaders began to study Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, in late 1835. Professor Joshua Seixas was hired to teach biblical Hebrew in Kirtland from January 6 to March 29, 1836. They used Seixas’s *A Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners*, 2nd ed. (Andover, MA: Gould and Newman, 1834). In 1839, Nauvoo was named. Although it cannot be proved, this interesting datum provides one more potential link between Joseph Smith and the Song of Solomon. I thank my colleague Matthew Grey for reminding me of this fact.

42. In this article I have used the “General-Purpose Style” of transliterating Hebrew words, as found in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, ed. Patrick H. Alexander et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 28, §5.1.2.

43. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew words translated “moon” and “sun” are not the usual Hebrew words for these celestial bodies, but descriptors. The word *lebanah*, “white one,” represents the moon in this verse, and *hemmah*, “hot one,” denotes the sun. These two words also appear together in a different context in poetic passages in Isaiah 24:23; 30:26. Presumably, these terms occur in the Isaiah and Song passages to more fully evoke the aspects of whiteness, brightness, and heat that the moon and sun represent, respectively.

44. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 178. There is some debate on who actually speaks the boast of the female’s beauty in 6:10. Most commentators think the group of women say this, while a few suggest it is the man who makes this claim.

45. A major challenge, which must be dealt with elsewhere, is the meaning or intent of the last phrase of Song 6:10, “terrible as an army with banners.” How does this relate to the church of God coming out of darkness to light? Is the church of God as referenced in this phrase supposed to be “terrible or fearsome”? Is it supposed to be “like an army [charging forth] with banners”? Some earlier non-Latter-day Saint commentators have argued that it is, at least in regards to “heretics” and rebellious people. See, for example, Richard F. Littledale, *A Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Pott and Amery, 1849), 273.

46. See, for example, Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, who suggest with no real basis: “this beautiful expression [Song 6:10], it is reasonable to suppose, is not original with this uninspired book and, we may well suppose, was a current expression in ancient times.” They go on to say, however, that whatever its source, there “is no reason why the Lord could not use it in a revelation given to the Church in our own day.” *The Doctrine and Covenants Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith Jr., the Prophet, with an Introduction and Historical and Exegetical Notes*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978, reprint of 1955 2nd ed.; originally published in 1919 as *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*),

27–28. See also Joseph F. McConkie, who commented that the use Song 6:10 in the Doctrine and Covenants suggests the “possibility” that it comes from “a scriptural source now lost to us.” “Joseph Smith and the Poetic Writings,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1985), 106. Also, Monte Nyman wrote in reference to D&C 5:14 that “the book [Song of Songs] may be quoting from other inspired writings which are now lost.” Nyman, *More Precious Than Gold*, 100. See also Monte S. Nyman, *It Came from God: Commentary on The Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 2 (Orem, UT: Granite, 2009), 345. To be fair, McConkie found this thought expressed as a possibility, albeit in reference to the content of verse 10 and its relation to the rest of Song 6 (not in relation to the Doctrine and Covenants) in Theophile J. Meek, “Song of Songs,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 5 (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 133. And Nyman also wrote, “there may be parts of it [the Song] which are inspired.” But this suggestion is challenging in its own right, at least because the JST claim is pronounced on the Song as a whole, not on parts of it. Interestingly, neither McConkie nor Nyman referenced the statement by Smith and Sjodahl.

47. This point, of course, is one that is made by those who have justified the allegorical interpretation of the Song. See for example, John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (Bristol: William Pine, 1765; reprinted Salem, OH: Schmul, 1975), 3:1926.

48. Joseph Smith’s Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843, p. 208, as found at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-1-21-december-1842-10-march-1843?dm=image-and-text&zm=zoom-inner&tm=expanded&p=216&cs=undefined&sm=none>, accessed November 8, 2013. Also found in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 166.

49. See the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 31 August 1842, p. 81, at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book?p=78>, accessed May 14, 2013. Also found in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 130. Cited in Galbraith, ed., *The Scripture Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 258 (hereafter, *STPJS*).

50. Latter-day Saint Church leader Heber C. Kimball observed in a sermon in 1861, “You know the old proverb says that it is the little foxes that spoil the vines.” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9, 40. This suggests the possibility of Joseph Smith’s use of this expression from Song 2 as being dependent on popular usage in his day. Likewise, Brigham Young employs the “little foxes” expression in a sermon preserved in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:318.

Perhaps language from the Song of Songs lies behind two other expressions attributed to Joseph Smith: (1) Richard C. Galbraith (*STPJS*, 149, n. 13) suggests connecting Joseph Smith’s statement “that every species of wickedness and cruelty practiced upon us will only tend to bind our hearts together and seal them together in love” with Song 8:6, which in the KJV reads, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death.” (2) Galbraith (*STPJS*, 153 n. 4) suggests connecting Joseph Smith’s statement “those who have not been enclosed in the walls of a Prison without cause or provocation can have but little idea how sweet the voice of a friend is” with Song 2:14, which in the KJV reads, “O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.” These statements from Joseph Smith occur, respectively, in (1) a letter written from Liberty Jail, 20 March 1842; found in History, 1838–1856, volume C-1, p. 81, and available at: <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/>

history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842?p=81 [accessed March 5, 2014], and (2) the same letter written from Liberty Jail; found in History, 1838–1856, volume C-1, p. 84, and available at: <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842?locale=eng&p=84> [accessed March 5, 2014].

51. Henry D. Taylor, “Gratitude,” found at <http://scriptures.byu.edu>, accessed May 14, 2013. Similarly, many different modern Church leaders have quoted non-scriptural poetry or other literature to help illustrate or clarify points they were emphasizing in their remarks.

52. Available at <https://www.lds.org/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-370-471-and-475/the-bible-a-sealed-book?lang=eng&query=Song+of+Solomon>; accessed October 18, 2013. Although presumably representing his own opinion, at the time of his remarks Elder McConkie was one of the Twelve Latter-day Saint Apostles. The full sentence in which his comment was made is “Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations are interesting books; Job is for people who like the book of Job; and the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing,” spoken in the context of a paragraph in which he overviewed the books of the Old Testament, commenting on their varying worth.

53. A further additional example of concern about the Song was expressed to me in personal communication by someone in relation to 3:1–3, in which the young female relates that her unrealized desire for her male companion to join her results in her roaming the city at night looking for him. While I agree that this teaches an undesirable model for youth, there are certainly more challenging and troublesome passages elsewhere in our canonical Old Testament.

54. Noyes, *A New Translation*, 125. William Wright, quoting Beza, noted that Castello of Geneva (1544) saw the Song as “impure and obscene,” once he denied the allegorical view of it. Wright, “Canticles,” 387.

55. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 3:1927.

56. Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary*, 218. See, similarly, Brown’s claim that “to such as have experienced much fellowship with Christ, and read it [the Song] with a heavenly and spiritual temper of mind, it will be the savour of life unto life.” John Brown, *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, 639–40.

57. Rendsburg, “Song of Songs, Book of,” 652.

58. For a brief overview of the Song in art and other media, see J. Cheryl Exum, “Song of Solomon,” 2:338–39.

59. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament*, 497.

60. The four phrases quoted here from the Song are taken from the English Standard Version translation.

61. Song 2:11–12 was included by Henry D. Taylor in an April 1959 sermon on gratitude, in which he commented on the beauty of nature in the springtime. Henry D. Taylor, “Gratitude,” found at <http://scriptures.byu.edu>, accessed May 14, 2013.

62. See, for example, Joseph Smith’s use of this expression, as recorded in the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 31 August 1842, p. 81, at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book?p=78>, accessed May 14, 2013. See also Heber C. Kimball’s claim in a sermon in 1861: “You know the old proverb says that it is the little foxes that spoil the vines.” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9, 40.

63. There are, obviously, literary and graphic depictions that cross the line between artistic and pornographic. Additionally, I am always perplexed and distressed when I hear what I consider to be extreme action in admittedly anecdotal incidents about a few mission

presidents who have instructed missionaries to either staple together or rip out of their Bibles the pages containing the Song of Songs/Solomon (personal and written communications, in my possession). Ironically, there are more explicit things than the Song in the Bible itself (e.g., Gen 19, including verses 30–38), as well as what can be found almost instantaneously on the World Wide Web and in many public places.

64. Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, 23. Note, however, that Origen was a severe ascetic.

65. Seely, “The Song of Solomon,” 470.

66. Longman, in Hess, *Song of Songs*, 8. Likewise, Hess, another conservative Christian Bible scholar, writes in his own preface to his commentary, *Song of Songs*, 11, “In a fallen world in which the first couple was expelled from the garden of Eden, this song [the Song of Songs] offers the hope that couples today may find something of that garden again and may see in their love that which is beautiful and good, from the good God.”

67. Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, 611. Of course, there is no clear indication in the Song that the lovers are actually married; they certainly do not live together. However, Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich appear to be applying the theme(s) of the Song to married couples, as premodern commentators had done. See also, for example, Jensen, *Song of Songs*, 13–14.

68. I realize that some may object to me citing D&C 88:118 or 90:15 here, since they may think the Song does not qualify as among the “best books” or “good books,” but I am thinking in the broader perspective of these D&C passages.