

## ***Gazelles, Does, and Flames: (De)Limiting Love in Song of Songs***

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*Some of the most commented upon and enigmatic passages in Song of Songs are the adjuration refrains (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and the comparison of love to a flame (Song 8:6). This paper proposes that these verses serve to delimit and define love in Song of Songs while also limiting the expression of that love. In each context there is a reference to God—often by clever circumlocution (Song 2:7; 3:5)—thereby defining the legitimate expression of love according to divine intent. This use of circumlocution and its omission at Song 8:4 build suspense for the punch line at Song 8:6 which finally reveals the involvement of God in love and its expression between the Shulammitte and her beloved.*

KEYWORDS: *Adjuration; circumlocution; oaths; Shulammitte*

Some of the most commented upon and enigmatic passages in Song of Songs are the adjuration refrains (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and the comparison of love to a flame (Song 8:6). There are several major questions raised by the refrain: Why are the Daughters of Jerusalem called upon to take an oath by the gazelles and does of the field? What does it mean to awaken and arouse love? If one is not to arouse love until it desires what is it that love desires and when does it desire it? The comparison of love to a flame has one oft-debated question: Is the flame to be understood as an intense flame or a flame of Yah? I contend that these questions are resolved by understanding the relationship of the adjuration refrains to the flame analogy. These two passages illuminate each other when one understands the author's use of clever references to the deity, delayed revelation of the answer to the poet's teasing and playful language, and his view of the proper sexual expression among humans.

## THE ADJURATION REFRAIN

There are four adjurations in the Song of Songs, all of them addressed by the Shulammitte to the Daughters of Jerusalem (Song 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). Three of these adjurations are the well-known refrain from the Song concerning awakening love. The first two occurrences of the adjuration refrain are identical:

השבֹּעֲתִי אֲתֶכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּצִבְאוֹת אוּ בְאֵילוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִמְתַּעֲרוּ וְאִם־  
תִּעֲוֲרוּ אֶת־הָאֱהָבָה עַד שֶׁתַּחֲפֹץ:

I place you under oath, Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the does of the field, that you do not awaken and you do not arouse this love until it desires. (Song 2:7; 3:5)

The third occurrence is similar, but contains noticeable and important differences:

השבֹּעֲתִי אֲתֶכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם מִהֲתַעֲרוּ וּמִהֲתַעֲרוּ אֶת־הָאֱהָבָה עַד שֶׁתַּחֲפֹץ:

I place you under oath, Daughters of Jerusalem: Why would you awaken and why would you arouse this love until it desires? (Song 8:4)

There are two differences from the earlier adjurations: The oath is not sworn by the gazelles and does of the field, and the oath begins with the interrogative particle *מה* instead of *אם*. These differences are important and account for the way I propose to understand and translate this occurrence of the adjuration refrain differently than the previous two. However, before delving into these differences, I will explore the first two occurrences of the refrain and then return to the third instance to justify my understanding.

## THE ADJURATION REFRAIN AT SONG 2:7 AND SONG 3:5

*Swearing by Gazelles and Does*

## Attempts at Explaining the Gazelles and Does

The meaning of the rather strange and mystifying adjuration to swear by animals of the field has always been elusive. In fact, it has given rise to a number of explanations. Among them are:

1. It is natural for shepherds to use objects around them to attest to their oath.<sup>1</sup>
2. Gazelles and does are chosen because they are easily frightened animals, and they therefore communicate that you cannot force love upon another.<sup>2</sup>
3. Gazelles and does wait until mating season to couple, therefore, they signify that humans, too, should wait for God's timing in matters of love to respect God's created order.<sup>3</sup>
4. The Shulammitte is depicting herself as beautiful, vigorous, and sexually active like a gazelle (Song 2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:3; 8:14).<sup>4</sup>
5. Since the refrain implies that love is not to be disturbed, the speaker compares it to gazelles and does which are lovely and free and roam the hills.<sup>5</sup>
6. The word צבאות is to be understood as the heavenly *armies* (plural of צבא) or as an apocopation of the phrase *Yahweh of Armies* (יהוה צבאות), not as *gazelles* (plural of צביה). The oath is to be witnessed by God's angelic armies or God himself.<sup>6</sup>

1. A. Cohen, *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text & English Translation with Introductions and Commentary* (Soncino Books of the Bible; Soncino: London, 1946), 7.

2. Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; Continental Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994), 92.

3. Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 698.

4. Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC 14; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 392.

5. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (trans. James Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1976), 6.46. [The original German edition of commentary on Song of Songs was published in 1872; see Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 6.x].

6. This appears to be at least as old as the Septuagint: ἐν ταῖς δυνάμεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἰσχύσεσιν τοῦ ἀγροῦ; similarly the Targum has "by the Lord of Hosts and the Strength of the Land of Israel [בה' צבאות ובהקפי ארעא ד'שראל]; according to Pope, a similar view was held by Joüon. (Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7C; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 385.

7. Those who espouse that the Song was originally intended for a pagan cultic setting see a connection with Astarte, the Canaanite fertility goddess to whom these animals were said to be sacred.<sup>7</sup>

These explanations of the use of gazelles and does in the refrain fall into three types. The first is represented by explanation 1 above. This explanation takes seriously that oaths require attestation by an outside party. However, it rather arbitrarily asserts that shepherds would call upon ordinary creatures in their environment as witnesses. There are two reasons why this approach is unsatisfactory. First, it does not account for the choice of animals. Why gazelles and does and not doves (יונים; Song 1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2, 12; 6:9; turtledove [תור] Song 2:12), or goats (עזים Song 4:1; 6:5) or ewes (אילים Song 6:6) or even many of the flora mentioned in the Song? Second, it does not take seriously that throughout the ancient Near East and certainly in the OT, oaths most often called on a deity or deities as witnesses (e.g., Ruth 1:17; 1 Sam 3:17; 19:6; 2 Sam 2:27; 1 Kgs 17:12; 18:10; 2 Kgs 6:31; Job 27:2; Jer 44:26; Amos 8:14). In a few cases oaths called on a superior as a witness (e.g., Pharaoh, Gen 42:5; the high priest Eli, 1 Sam 1:26; Jonathan as David's superior, 1 Sam 20:3; Elijah as Elisha's superior, 2 Kgs 2:4, 6; see Heb 6:16). God, of course, having no superior, swears by himself as witness (e.g., Num 14:21, 28; Deut 32:40; Isa 49:18; Jer 22:24; 46:18; Ezek 5:11; 14:16, Zeph 2:9; see Heb 6:13). However in biblical terms, it is difficult, if not impossible to construe gazelles and does as superior to any human.

The second type of explanation is one that attempts to view the gazelles and does as animals that are representative of some concept in the Song's context, either immediate context of the adjuration refrain (explanations 2, 3, 5) or the wider context of the Song as a whole (explanation 4). These explanations at least have a contextual connection of some sort to the Song. However, they attenuate or even eliminate the gazelles and does as witnesses to the oath in favor of making them symbols of some theme or motif. Yet, oaths in the OT (and in the ancient Near East more generally) commonly called on witnesses to guarantee their solemnity, and the adjuration refrain in the Song appears on its surface to do just that. In addition, this type of explanation is somewhat arbitrary. Interpreters choose something about gazelles and does that appeals to them and their sense of the Song's message without any defense of why such a choice is better than others that could have been made. Gazelles can be characterized as skittish (explanation 2), mating in

7. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 385–86.

season (explanation 3), beautiful, vigorous, sexually active (explanation 4) and free roaming (explanation 5). But which of these is being emphasized in the refrain? All of them have some type of claim, but none is clearly superior to the others. In addition, nothing is used to justify the Song's choice of gazelles and does over other animals. Other wild animals can be skittish; other animals mate in season; others can be considered beautiful; others are free roaming. Why gazelles and does? Why not some other animals, such as a beautiful dove (Song 2:14) or goats (Song 4:1; 6:5), which also mate in season?

The third type of explanation takes into account the frequent and even expected calling upon God as witness to an oath. Explanations 6 and 7 above are examples of this. In favor of this type of explanation is that it takes seriously the ancient preference for swearing oaths by the God or at least a surrogate for him, the angelic hosts.<sup>8</sup> However, one of the explanations (explanation 6) falls short in dealing with the second witness: the does. There is no real justification for viewing the does as a reference to powers as in the Septuagint or "strength of the land of Israel" in the Targum (see note 6). Does have association with beauty in the OT but not strength (cf. Gen 49:21; 2 Sam 22:34; Job 39:1; Ps 18:34; 22:1; 29:9; Prov 5:19; Song 2:7; 3:5; Jer 14:5). About as close one can come to strength associated with does is a reference to their surefootedness (Hab 3:19). The other explanation in this category (explanation 7) assumes an unproven original setting among pagan Canaanites for the Song. Most scholars would reject this presumed original *Sitz im Leben*, and even if one were to endorse this view, it would still remain highly speculative and impossible to prove without documentary evidence.

Finally, it should be noted that these explanations neither acknowledge nor account for the strange collocation "the gazelles and does *of the field*." The addition of the modification השדה to a specific type of animal is unique to Song 2:7; 3:5 in the OT. Elsewhere this appellation occurs only with generic terms that denote animals in general. The phrase "animal of the field" (חית השדה), occurs twenty-nine times and usually denotes wild animals (e.g., Exod 23:11; Hos 2:12), though at times it appears to differentiate between animals that are earthbound as opposed to birds which fly in the sky (עוף השמים; e.g., Gen 2:19-20). The equivalent phrase, בהמת השדה, is used once (1 Sam 17:44). Therefore, the phrase "the gazelles and does of the field" ought to catch the reader's attention. It appears to be somewhat nonsensical. It surely cannot denote wild gazelles and does as distinct from domesticated

8. The NT acknowledges swearing by surrogates for God such as heaven, earth, or Jerusalem (Matt 5:34-35; Jam 5:12).

gazelles and does. Nor can it differentiate between earthbound gazelles and does and some species of bird, a differentiation that would make little sense.

### Gordis's Suggestion

However, there is an explanation that accounts for all of the features of the phrase "the gazelles and does of the field." Many commentators follow the lead of Gordis who proposed that the phrase *בצבאות או באילות השדה* was a circumlocution for the similarly sounding *ביהוה צבאות או באל שדי*.<sup>9</sup> This circumlocution would have been used to avoid direct mention of any divine names in an oath, especially an oath connected with the physical aspects of love.<sup>10</sup> This type of circumlocution is common in many languages for oaths, expressions of shock and surprise, and profanity. Note English "Holy Cow" for "Holy Christ"; "Jiminy Christmas" for "Jesus Christ"; French "sacré bleu" for "sacré dieu"; the now archaic German "Potz Blitz" for "Gotts Blitz."

The particular circumlocution used in the adjuration refrain is especially appropriate since these females of gazelle and deer species are associated with expressions of love elsewhere (Prov 5:18–19; Song 4:5; 7:3; for the male counterparts cf. Song 2:9, 17; 8:14). Moreover, they fit the Shulammitte's words well, since she is consistently depicted as a girl from the countryside.

The adjuration itself evokes for the reader the concept of God as witness. Simply by stating, "I place you under oath" (*השבעתי אתכם*) the Shulammitte raises the expectation that an invocation of God as witness is to follow (see Gen 24:3). A contemporary example may help: Suppose someone working in carpentry accidentally struck his thumb with a

9. Gordis proposed that the first image is a circumlocution for *באלהי צבאות*. However, the phrase *יהוה צבאות* is much more common in the Hebrew Bible.

10. Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary* (Rev. and augmented ed.; New York: KTAV, 1974), 27–28. Others who have given full or qualified support to Gordis' proposal include Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985), 110; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 133; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 116; Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, 684–5; Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (WBC 23B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 152; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 119; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 82.

hammer and exclaimed, “Cheesy Crust!”<sup>11</sup> Although this is not a commonly used circumlocution for *Jesus Christ*, many who heard it would immediately understand it this way, since in modern culture it is an unfortunate custom of many to use exclamations involving God’s name in expressions of surprise. The context of surprise and pain evokes an expectation of such an expression. In ancient Israel, the context of an oath similarly evokes an expectation of God as witness. While this is somewhat culturally conditioned, it is not beyond moderns to perceive it with the adjuration refrain. For instance, consider the observation of C. F. Keil over 140 years ago about the refrain at Song 2:7:

It is permitted to the Israelites to swear, נשבע, only by God (Gen. xxi. 23); but to adjure, השבעתי, by that which is not God, is also admissible, although this example before us is perhaps the only direct one in Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Keil’s attempt to draw a distinction between the N stem (Niphal) and H stem (Hiphil) of the verb to explain the gazelles and does as witnesses in the adjuration refrain is strained. Apparently, he was trying to justify the use of animals as witnesses to an oath, though his implication that there is *indirect* evidence for this in Israel is, to my knowledge, unfounded. However, his observation that Israelites usually swear by God as witness is telling.<sup>13</sup> Even for moderns familiar with the OT, it is possible for the adjuration refrain to evoke an expectation of calling on God as witness to the oath. This expectation is fulfilled via the circumlocution “by the gazelles and does of the field.” If contemporary scholars are uncomfortable with the use of a circumlocution for God, it is at least partially due to the fact that in contemporary usage, such circumlocutions nearly always carry negative connotations because of the contexts in which they normally occur.<sup>14</sup> However, such negative connotations should not be projected anachronistically back onto ancient Israelites.

11. I am indebted to my colleague John Rhoads for this example.

12. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 6.47–48.

13. Of course, Keil is wrong that Israelites only swore by God, as the examples given above about swearing by superiors demonstrate.

14. For such discomfort see, for instance, the comments of Garrett about this being “probably little more than wordplay” (Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 152) or Huwiler’s comment that Gordis’s suggestion is “both charming and plausible but cannot be proved.” (Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NIBC 12; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 257.) Of course, many interpretations of difficult passages cannot be proved beyond doubt. The same is true of

Another reason for contemporary scholars' discomfort with Gordis's suggestion is that it involves circumlocution in which the surface meaning of the words is severely subordinated to their implied intended meaning. Exegetes are comfortable with plays on words as long as the surface meaning predominates. Circumlocutions where the surface meaning of word is less important than their sound quality or where the surface meaning is not at all part of the intended meaning are rare, even in modern parlance. However, they exist and are intelligible if one recognizes the contextual clues that signal they are being used. Yet, many would tend to discount identifying the phrase "the gazelles and does of the field" as a circumlocution by characterizing it as a "less than straightforward" interpretation. To reject Gordis's proposal simply because other proposed explanations appear to be more straightforward is to ignore the fact that these other explanations are far from straightforward in themselves. As demonstrated above, they rely on supposition, arbitrary associations proposed by interpreters, and ignoring important textual or contextual features of the adjuration refrain. The categorization of interpretations as more straightforward or less straightforward not only introduces a slippery and ill-defined concept into exegetical method, but it also downplays or eliminates an important factor in judging between interpretations: Which is most likely the intended sense of the author given all of the verbal and contextual clues in the text?

Gordis's explanation of the phrase is the only one that is able to account for a very important textual clue: the strange addition of the appellation "of the field." This descriptor is not added to the phrase "gazelles and does" for any semantic refining of the reference to these animals. It is added in order to make the circumlocution sound similar to the appellation אֵל שָׁדַי ("God Almighty"). In fact, the very nonsensical nature of adding הַשָּׂדֶה ("of the field") calls attention to the fact that the phrase "by the gazelles and does of the field" is a circumlocution and is to be understood as such.

Given the fact that Gordis's explanation does not run afoul of the problems that plague other approaches to explaining the enigmatic phrase "by the gazelles and does of the field," it is to be preferred over them. It takes seriously that most oaths held the expectation that God would be invoked as a witness. It elicits the pastoral origins of the Shulammitte depicted throughout Song of Songs and through the clever choice of words that denote wild animals that are also associated with the lovers in the Song (Song 2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:3; 8:14; see Prov 5:18–19). It

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the seven other examples given above. However, some interpretations can be shown to be more probable and convincing than others.



also accounts for the rather unexpected and semantically inexplicable “of the field” appellation applied to the gazelles and does, a feature of the phrase that calls attention to its use as a circumlocution for God.

### *Awakening and Arousing Love*

The admonition warns against awakening and arousing love. Both verbs are from the verbal root עור. The first is an H stem form (causative: *awaken*), the second a D (Polel) stem form (factitive: *arouse*). These verbs are often discussed in commentaries, and they appear to be crucial to understanding the point of the adjuration.

### One Suggestion: Do Not Disturb Lovers

Gordis understood the verbs to mean something like “disturb” and “interrupt” so that the adjuration is a warning against disturbing and interrupting lovers in the throes of passion.<sup>15</sup> His reasoning was that the context indicates that the Shulammitte was experiencing such passion immediately before the adjuration:

His right hand is under my head, and his left hand embraces me.  
(Song 2:6; cf. Song 8:3)

Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held on to him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother’s house and into the room of the one who conceived me. (Song 3:4)

Thus, the reasoning appears to be that the Shulammitte is placing the Daughters of Jerusalem under oath that they not interrupt *her* love until it desires to be aroused—that is, until it is sated.

There are two problems with this interpretation, however. One is that it is not all that clear from the context that the Shulammitte is speaking about *her* love in the adjuration refrain. She may well be speaking about the love potentially to be experienced by the Daughters of Jerusalem—they are not to awaken or arouse love in themselves until it desires.

15. Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 82; Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 175–6; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 89, 124.

More importantly, as numerous commentators have pointed out, the verbal root עור signifies rousing someone to action, not stopping or interrupting action already in progress.<sup>16</sup> One defense of Gordis's position was offered by Fox. He opined that "the way one disturbs lovemaking is to wake the couple in the morning."<sup>17</sup> Exum rejects Fox's suggestion because it "strains the sense of the verse" and when "love" (אהבה) is used elsewhere in Song of Songs it seems to refer to love in the abstract, not lovemaking in particular (2:4, 5; 3:10; 5:8; 7:6 [Hebrew 7:7]; 8:6–7).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, at Song 2:5 and again at Song 5:8 the Shulammitte indicates she is "sick with love" which can hardly mean "sick with lovemaking." (אהבה can denote lovemaking however, see Prov 7:18).

Gault seeks to rescue Gordis's interpretation by claiming a sort of poetic license on part of the author of Song of Songs. The couple is at peaceful rest, and the verbs are used metaphorically to indicate that the Daughters of Jerusalem are not to rouse them from such peace.<sup>19</sup> This appears to me to be special pleading, and it is not all that different from Fox's suggestion.

Gault, however, in seeking another defense of Gordis's position, offers a helpful suggestion. He notes that אהבה always occurs in the adjuration refrain with the article. In fact, the article is used with this noun only in Song of Songs out of all of the books of the Hebrew Bible (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4, 7). Some commentators take this use of the article to indicate that love is being personified.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, there is personification of love in the adjuration refrain. Love can be awakened and aroused, and it has desire. The verbs accomplish this personification. However, if it is the article that personifies, then why is the article used at Song 8:7 where love is quenched, flooded, and cannot be bought? There is no requirement to see personification in these metaphors. Love is a flame, a place, and cannot be commoditized—but none of these involve personification at Song 8:7. Gault suggests, instead, that the article is

16. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 118; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 115; Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 152; Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 133.

17. Fox, *Song of Songs*, 110.

18. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 118.

19. Brian P. Gault, "An Admonition against 'Rousing Love': The Meaning of the Enigmatic Refrain in Song of Songs," *BBR* 20 (2010): 176–7.

20. E.g., Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 699.

used as a deictic particle, a use that is not unknown elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in this passage *הַזֶּה* means “this [kind of] love.” Gault seeks to limit the reference of “this love” to the immediate context and therefore, only to the sexual expression of love as indicated in the verse immediately preceding each instance of the adjuration refrain. However, I believe this is too narrowly limiting the context to only the immediately preceding verse. “This love” in the adjuration refrain is referring to the strong emotional, psychological, and familial attachment that the Shulammitte feels for her beloved throughout Song of Songs. Otherwise she could not be “sick with love” just two verses before the first occurrence of the adjuration refrain (Song 2:5; cf. 5:8). Such love between a woman and a man, of course, also entails the desire for physical affection.

#### Another Suggestion:

##### Avoid Arousing this Love Inappropriately

Since the verbs denote rousing someone to action, the more commonly encountered interpretation is that the adjuration refrain is a warning to the Daughters of Jerusalem against arousing love in themselves before it desires.<sup>22</sup> The Shulammitte addresses the Daughters of Jerusalem to inform and instruct them elsewhere in Song of Songs. At Song 1:5 she informs them of her suntanned skin. Commentators are divided as to whether she is affirming or denying her beauty, but the informational and instructional function is the same in either case. They are to learn about the love of a man who appreciates a woman for whom and what she is. At the end of her description of her beloved in Song 5:16, she summarizes by saying, “this is my beloved, and this is my friend, Daughters of Jerusalem.” She now has taught the Daughters of Jerusalem that she appreciates her beloved for whom and what he is so that they might learn someday to appreciate their beloveds in like manner. Similarly, at Song 3:11 she tells the Daughters of Zion to look at Solomon dressed as if it were his wedding day so that they can learn of his joy. In each of these, as in the four adjurations where the Daughters of Jerusalem are addressed, the point of the address is to impart knowledge for the benefit of the Daughters of Jerusalem. Eschelbach concludes that the Daughters of Jerusalem “are friends of the beloved,

21. Exod 9:27: *הַפַּעַם* = “this time”; Num 11:6 *הַמָּן* = “this manna”; Num 21:5 *בְּלֶחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל* = “this worthless food”; Num 22:8 *הַלַּיְלָה* = “tonight” (i.e., “this night”); 2 Kgs 19:29 *הַשָּׁנָה* = “this year”; the frequent use of *הַיּוֹם* = “today” (i.e., “this day”).

22. Michael Eschelbach, “Song of Songs: Increasing Appreciation of and Restraint in Matters of Love,” *AUSS* 42 (2004): 312; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 118; Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 152; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 115; Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 700.

who participate in her desire for and pursuit of a husband and who are expected to learn from the experience.”<sup>23</sup> This argues that the adjuration refrain is instructional for the benefit of the Daughters of Jerusalem—that they not stir up their own feelings of love inappropriately.

This understanding is even more plausible if the suggestion offered by both Longman and Eschelbach is correct: the Daughters of Jerusalem serve as surrogates for the readers.<sup>24</sup> The adjuration refrain, then, teaches readers not to force love, no matter how much they may long to be in a relationship like the Shulammitte has with her beloved.

#### THE ADJURATION REFRAIN AT SONG 8:4

This still leaves one question unanswered about the meaning of the adjuration refrain: If one is not to arouse love “until it desires” what is it that love desires and when does it desire it? To answer this we must turn to the final occurrence of the refrain and note its two major differences from the previous two occurrences.

##### *Oath Beginning with מַה Instead of אַל*

The oath at Song 8:4 is very similar to the oath at Song 2:7; 3:5. Despite the change in wording, most commentators simply argue that the expressions are equivalent since the refrain must be expressing the same sentiment and it is otherwise identical in wording. Some try to nuance this slightly by holding that מַה makes the negation “do not awaken. . .” more emphatic and urgent.<sup>25</sup> Occasionally an attempt is made to justify the use of מַה as a negative particle, as would be required if the oath were simply started with אַל used as a negative particle.<sup>26</sup> Often 1 Kgs 12:16 and Job 31:1 are given as examples of such usage.<sup>27</sup> However, both of these passages use מַה as an interrogative particle to introduce a question that expects a negative answer:

23. Eschelbach, “Song of Songs” 308.

24. Eschelbach, “Song of Songs,” 308; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 115.

25. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 206.

26. Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 1152; Mitchell cites BDB s.v. מַה 2a (b); Joüon § 144h, GKC § 137b, note 1; *HALOT* s.v. מַה C.

27. E.g., Joüon § 144h.

וירא כל־ישראל כי לא־שמע המלך אליהם וישבו העם את־המלך דבר לאמר  
מה־לנו חלק בדוד

All Israel saw that the king did not listen to them. So the people answered the king, “What portion do we have in David?”

[Expected answer: “None!”] (1 Kgs 12:16a)

ברית כרתי לעיני ומה אתבונן על־בתולה:

I have made a covenant with my eyes, so how can I look with  
lust at a virgin? [Expected answer: “I can’t!”] (Job 31:1)

It is not unusual for *מה* to introduce a question that expects a negative answer, but this does not make *מה* a negative particle. In fact, there is no example in the entire Hebrew Bible of *מה* serving simply as a Hebrew negative particle. Thus, there is no real justification for holding that it is a negative particle in the adjuration refrain at Song 8:4. The author is varying the oath for effect, since this is the last and climactic occurrence of the refrain, and the difference in expression is designed to catch the reader’s attention.

That the oath may be more emphatic and urgent is not signaled by *מה* alone. It is signaled by phrasing the oath as an exclamatory rhetorical question: “*Why in the world* would you awaken and *why in the world* would you arouse this love until it desires?”<sup>28</sup> It appears to me that this exclamatory oath anticipates topics in the remainder of Song of Songs 8 that explicate the reason for this adjuration:

1. Love has been awakened between the Shulammitte and her beloved—and it leads to mutual dependence and satisfaction between the lovers. She leans on him (Song 8:5a), and he is awakened (root עור!) by her (Song 8:5b).
2. Love is stronger than death and a blazing flame that cannot be extinguished—so do not fool around with it until it desires (Song 8:6–7a).<sup>29</sup>
3. Money cannot buy love—so do not treat it lightly (Song 8:7b).
4. Chastity is desirable—so do not misuse love’s physical

28. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 248 suggests this as a possible reason for the wording of the oath here.

29. Exum, *Song of Songs*, 248.

expression. Instead, in your chastity your beloved will find peace (Song 8:8–12).<sup>30</sup>

5. When love is appropriately awakened, you will find joy in your beloved (Song 8:13–14).

#### THE LACK OF GAZELLES AND DOES

All this enables the reader to understand what love desires, but there is one missing piece to this puzzle: When and why does love appropriately desire these things? I would suggest the answer lies in the omission of the gazelles and does in the final occurrence of the adjuration refrain. The reader, who by now knows to anticipate the circumlocution of the gazelles and does, is left to contemplate where this concept has gone. Where is the divine perspective that was implied by this circumlocution? I suggest that the reader need only read two more verses to find it at Song 8:6:

ממות אהבה קשה כשאול קנאה רשפיה רשפי אש שלהבתיה

Love is as relentless as death; ardor is as relentless as Sheol, its flames are fiery flames of the fiercest blaze.

Or:

Love is as relentless as death; ardor is as relentless as Sheol, its flames are fiery flames of Yah's blaze.

The much discussed exegetical question for this verse is the meaning of the last word.

Is שלהבתיה to be understood as a direct reference to Israel's God, reading ה as an explicit use of the divine name, "Yah's blaze"?<sup>31</sup> If so, then the missing circumlocution for God in the adjuration refrain at Song 8:4 is made explicit at Song 8:6. What is implicit in the earlier double entendre has become explicit, and now the reader knows when love ought to be awakened—when the Lord lights the flame—and why it desires the things it does—because the Lord has blessed these things as good for humans.

30. No matter what the meaning of the material about Solomon's vineyard (Song 8:11), it is clear that the rest of these verses are about the value of chastity.

31. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 240; Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 1188–89.

On the other hand, many exegetes understand  $\eta$  here to be used to form a superlative as is sometimes done by reference to God.<sup>32</sup> This understanding sees the use of this hypocoristic form of the divine name to have been emptied of any theological impact. Longman argues that this must be understood as simply the superlative use since elsewhere in Song of Songs the name of God is avoided. He cites the first two adjuration refrains in support of this. In doing so, he misses the impact of the superlative, if that is what the usage of the divine name indicates here. That is, there would be another circumlocution at Song 8:6: The superlative would be a circumlocution for using the divine name as a direct reference to God. The fiercest of flames is implied to be a divinely kindled one.

No matter which option one chooses here, the general results are the same. The references to God delimit love's appropriate boundaries and limit its proper expression to what he determines. Beginning with Song 8:6 the divine perspective on love is finally explicated.

#### CONCLUSION

The adjuration refrain introduces tensions in the text and raises questions to be resolved when it is first introduced. The clever circumlocution in the refrain hints at the resolution and supplies some answers to the questions. The Song finally reveals all of the answers by altering the refrain at its final appearance, temporarily introducing more tension and a new question. Shortly thereafter the flame analogy supplies final resolution and closure for readers. Ultimately the refrain and the flame analogy illuminate each other when the reader finally is led to understand the author's use of clever references to the deity, delayed revelation of the answer to the poet's teasing and playful language, and his view of the proper sexual expression among humans.

32. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 255; Gordis, *Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 26, 99. Gordis cites Jer 2:31; Ps 118:5; Gen 10:0; Ps 80:11; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 212–13.