

## SONG OF SONGS 8:12a: WHO SAID IT?

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Samuel Sandmel once said that where the evidence is maximal the theories are minimal and that where the evidence is minimal the theories are maximal. Relative to the Song of Songs the theories are maximal. Stage directions, gender indicators, contextual clues and other hints given us to answer our questions are minimal. Therefore the theories are many and varied, sensible and bizarre, persuasive and capricious.

Song 8:12 reads as follows in the *NIV*: "But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon, and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit." My primary question: Who speaks these words? Secondary questions are: To whom are the words spoken? What is the vineyard? And what is the force of *lēpānāy* (literally "[is] before me")? Before listing the options let us examine the background.

### I. CONTEXT

Virtually all agree that vv 11 and 12 form a unit. The words and motifs that bind them together are far more obvious than anything that binds this pericope with what precedes or follows.

"Vineyard" occurs three times in these two verses. While "vineyard" (along with "garden," "orchard" and "field") constitutes one of the major themes in the Song, "vineyard" does not occur in the immediate vicinity of 8:11-12 ("gardens," however, is in v 13).

"Solomon" occurs in each of these two verses. That name is five times elsewhere in the book but, again, not nearby.

The verb *ntr*, "keep," is in each verse. The only other occurrence of that root in the book is in 1:6, but more on that later. The word "thousand" also ties these two verses together. It appears elsewhere only in 4:4, a totally unrelated passage.

Chapter 8 is the most difficult to integrate into the book. Those who perceive a story line or a dramatic plot through the book must work hard to make the disparate parts of chap. 8 fit. If it were not for the repetition of key words and terms, some of which occur in the verse under consideration, most commentators would be willing simply to write off the two or more scenes of chap. 8 as totally unrelated appendices. But it is the very presence of these recurring motifs that makes chap. 8 one with the rest of the book. One mind—call him or her a monarch, a poet, an editor, a scribe, or a collator—obviously was responsible for including chap. 8 with the balance of the Song.

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Those who deny a story line through the book (and I am among them) have less of a problem. For them the book is a collection of love songs. Some are the banter and compliments of the groom, some the questions of a chorus, some the words of her brothers. But most are the yearnings, dreams, fantasies and reactions of the bride. What we have here at the end of the book are a few more songs that simply do not fit nicely with the rest of the book. But then who said they must fit?

Incidentally, while I see no story through the book I nevertheless see structure. There is a developing pattern of intimacy that has its climax in the center of the book (4:16-5:1). While this is the high point, the shoulders or sub-peaks are the lost-and-found motifs that precede and follow. Those sections are in turn preceded and followed by the more remote wish-thoughts of the bride. Just as her wish to be kissed opens the first chapter, so again at the beginning of chap. 8 she wishes to kiss him.

There is a series of inclusios. Ideas introduced in chap. 1 enjoy closure in chap. 8. Already we have noted key words and themes of 8:12 that occurred earlier in the book. And just above we noticed the kiss-wish ideas. But also note 1:4, where again she yearns to elope with him. That is the concluding idea of the whole book.

It is the comparison of 1:6 with 8:12 that is the most striking, however. In particular the phrase "my own vineyard" (*karmi šelli*) and the verb "tend, keep" (*ntr*) bind these verses together, though the distance of nearly the whole book separates them. In chap. 1 the bride had to tend the vineyard of others while she neglected her own. In chap. 8 the reverse is the case. Others tend their own vineyard while her vineyard is her own—presumably to tend, to enjoy, to profit from, or to give as she wished.

Another intriguing observation is that her brothers were the villains in 1:6, whereas in chap. 8 she apparently is asserting her independence of them (8:8-10).

The first four verses of chap. 8, as mentioned above, seem more integral with chap. 7. In fact the refrain of v 4 is nearly the same as 2:7; 3:5.

The question the chorus asks is reminiscent of 3:6. In this context there is no answer to the question of who is coming up from the desert, although all understand it to be the Shulammitite. In chap. 3 the answer was Solomon riding on his royal palanquin.

The pericope in vv 5b-7 is most enigmatic. In this sketch of the context I will only mention that the apple tree was a point of comparison in 2:3.

The more immediate context for the verse under consideration begins with 8:8. While the margins of most modern translations of the Bible indicate that these words are from the chorus or friends, more precisely the speakers seem to be the brothers. These are the brothers of 1:6. But there they seem to have been guilty of age or gender discrimination or both. She was their sister. She apparently was younger. While they looked at what they did as right and responsible, from her perspective in this chapter it was exploitative, protectionist and unnecessary.

In that culture it was incumbent on brothers to guard the purity of their sisters. It was a matter of family honor. Levi and Simeon are our Biblical examples (Genesis 34), although Absalom also played the role well (1 Kgs

13:21). Having outlined their plans to reward or restrain their sister, their speech or song seems cut short by the Shulammité's words beginning in v 10.

She protests that she is a wall, meaning that she has let no one in. That one line answers to v 9a. She goes on to state that she is physically mature, claiming that her "breasts are like towers." This line answers to v 9b. Since she is not a "door," her response does not echo that figure of speech. But v 10 ends with two problems: (1) Is the word "find" a Qal active participle or a Hiphil participle? (2) Is there a hidden meaning in the word *šālôm*? Or are we, like the allegorists, bent on seeing something beyond the surface—a play on words, perhaps, between *šālôm*, Solomon and Shulammité?

What follows in v 11 seems unrelated to what went before in vv 8-10. The only things that tie them together are (1) that the speaker remains the same, (2) the mention of "silver" and (3) the mention of Solomon. So I think we should insert a space between vv 10 and 11 to show the discontinuity of the two halves of this four-verse section.

Verses 11 and 12 definitely go together for reasons that are too obvious to mention. It is in the middle of this pericope that the question of this study lies. Is she still the speaker? Does she speak v 11 but not v 12? Does she speak all the words except v 12a? Does Solomon say, "My vineyard is my own"?

## II. EXEGESIS

The opening three Hebrew words of v 11 present no problem. It is the typical idiom for showing ownership. Literally it reads: "A vineyard was to Solomon." Even though "vineyard" has a metaphorical meaning elsewhere in this book—in fact, in the next verse—it seems here that a grape-producing plot of vines is in view. It would be most improper on several counts to understand that he had a mistress in such and such a place that he rented out. So we understand that the text is speaking of real estate owned by Solomon.

Baal Hamon is unknown as a place name within or outside the Bible. Therefore there are many guesses. A number of ancient versions translated the name into something like "having a multitude." The Vulgate even translated "Solomon" into *pacifico*. The various Greek uncials do not agree on the translation.

Naturally the allegorists can make much of "the lord of a crowd," especially in view of Solomon's well-stocked harem. From there it is a short jump to the many individual citizens of the nation of Israel, the wife of Yahweh, or the separate members in the Church, the bride of Christ.

My own vote—and it is not original—goes to Baal Hermon. There have been so many allusions to Lebanon, the mountains, and the north that there probably was a place with that name. And a Baal-named place would be more likely in the north.

"He gave the vineyard to caretakers/tenant farmers" (8:11b). The subject of the verb is Solomon, and the vineyard is the one in Baal Hamon. That leaves the identity of the caretakers in question. If they must be identified, the only real choice is the brothers of the girl. The point, however, is not who cares for the vineyard but the vineyard's productivity and worth.

“Tenants” is a Qal active participle masculine plural of *nṭr*. As mentioned earlier, this verb occurs in 1:6 (twice) and will appear again in 8:12. Otherwise it is found five more times only in the Bible, and all of those refer to “keeping anger.”

“Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver.” About the five Hebrew words concluding 8:11 there is likewise not much question. Some read the verb as the indicative “brought” rather than the oblique construction above, which cannot easily be expressed in Hebrew. On the surface it reads as if the rent is, or that the proceeds from the vineyard should be, “a thousand silvers.” Even this question, which is complicated by the figures of v 12, is of less consequence. There are in fact many questions for which we have no answers: How many tenants were there? How large was the vineyard? How was the work of the vineyard divided between the tenants? What provision was there for drought years or bumper crops? When was the payment due? If these matters were important to the poet’s point they would have been answered. They are not. It is like the “thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels” of Isa 7:23. They were choice vines, the finest that money could buy.

Now comes the phrase *karmi šelli lēpānāy*. Woodenly it reads “my vineyard that is mine before me.” The first two words are the same in 1:6. As is the rule in this book, the short form of the relative pronoun appears (1:1 is the only exception). There does seem to be a certain similarity between v 11a and v 12a: There was a vineyard of Solomon’s, there is a vineyard that is “mine.” His was in Baal Hamon, mine is right here. The prepositional phrase *lēpānāy* is somewhat of a crux. The problem is complicated by the question of who speaks these words. While it may appear that the girl says them, that is not the way about one-third of the commentators read it. And that is the reason for our focusing on this verse.

What does it mean to be “before me”? In the vast majority of occurrences it refers to God—in his sight, in his presence, etc. In a few places it means temporal priority. In a few more places it means rather literally in the physical presence of the speaker. Judg 11:9 perhaps comes closest to helping us here: “Jephthah announced, ‘Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?’” Here it has the sense of “to dispose of, exploit, enslave.” All these shades of meaning fit best if the groom is speaking of the bride. She is his to have, to hold, to enjoy, or to use. If *lēpānāy* has the idea of “control” or “own” then it makes sense that she speaks the words.

### III. TRANSLATIONS

The *KJV* reads: “My vineyard, which is mine, is before me.” No substantial differences from this can be found either in the rendering of this phrase or of the two verses that embrace it until Moffatt (1922): “I keep my vineyard to myself.” In 1944 Knox read: “A vineyard I have of my own, here at my side.”

The *RSV* (1952) was somewhat fresh: “My vineyard, my very own, is for myself.” From that date on the number of ways to translate the phrase multiplied. Here are some of the more interesting samples: “My vineyard, my

own, lies before me" (*Berkeley*); "My vineyard, which belongs to me, is at my disposal" (*New World*); "But my vineyard, which is mine (with all its radiant joy), is before me!" (*Amplified*); "But I look after my own vineyard, myself" (*JB* [1966]); "My vineyard is at my own disposal" (*NAB*); "But my vineyard is mine to give" (*NEB*); "My very own vineyard is at my disposal" (*NASB*); "I look after my vineyard which belongs to me" (*Beck*); "My own vineyard is before me" (*AB*); "I have my very own vineyard" (*NJPS*).

Most Bibles from 1966 on have indications in the margins or at the heads of the paragraphs labeling the speakers. *JB*, though it regularly labels the speakers, considers our pericope the second of two epigrams that in turn are the second of three appendices (8:7-14). No speaker is indicated. The *NAB* heads this section "The Bride and Her Dowry." All other contemporary versions credit these versions to "The Bride" (*NEB*; *NASB*), "The Girl" (*Living Bible*), "She" (*Beck*), "Beloved" (*NIV*), "The Shulammitte" (*NKJV*).

Only the *TEV* attributes vv 11-13 to "The Man." Though the standard editions have minimal introductory comments, the only explanation I can come up with is that the editors saw the male lover as someone other than Solomon. In this study we are not going to address the question of whether we have two or three main characters in the book. I support the two-character view.

So there is a nearly unanimous vote from the English versions that the speaker of the phrase in question is the girl of the poems. The standard German version is very literal, but the French version of the Second text has "Ma vigne, qui est a moi je la garde" (which is like the *JB* or *Beck* translations noted above).

Among the commentators there is no such unified opinion. In fact, of the more than twenty commentaries I consulted ten seemed to credit the words to the maiden.<sup>1</sup> Eight credited the words to a man.<sup>2</sup> The rest either did not discuss it or gave the speech to another party.<sup>3</sup>

Let us review some in this last category first. Gill and Pope are in the uncertain category. As an allegorist, Gill states: "These are either the words of Christ . . . or else the words of the church. . . . And certain it is that the next

<sup>1</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, *Hohelied Salomonis* (Berlin, 1853); C. D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York, 1970 [1857]); F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, 1980 [1874]); H. Graetz, *Schir ha-Schirim* (Breslau, 1885); P. Jouan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris, 1909); W. J. Fuerst, *Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge, 1975); J. C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (New York, 1977); H. Ringgren (ATD; Göttingen, 1981); F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise* (Sheffield, 1983); G. L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>M. Jastrow, *The Song of Songs* (Philadelphia, 1921); R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs* (New York, 1954); J. C. Rylaarsdam, *The Layman's Bible Commentary* (Richmond, 1964); M. Zlotowitz, *Shir ha-Schirim* (Brooklyn, 1979); G. Krinetzki, *Kommentar zum Hohenlied* (Frankfurt, 1981); R. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, 1981); M. Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Sheffield, 1982); J. M. Reese, *Old Testament Message* 20 (Wilmington, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>J. Gill, *John Gill's Commentary*, Vol. 3 (London, 1852); G. A. F. Knight, *Torch Bible Commentaries* (London, 1955); M. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB; Garden City, 1977); M. Sidders, *An Exposition of the Song of Solomon* (New York, 1981); R. J. Tournay, *Quand Dieu parle aux hommes le langage de l'amour* (Paris, 1982).

clause is spoken by her." Pope, whose comment first piqued my interest in this problem, asks the question but does not give an answer:

The crucial question here is whether the speaker is the bride or the groom. If the groom speaks, declaring dominion over his spouse's body, it is classic male chauvinism. If the female here asserts autonomy, this verse becomes the golden text for women's liberation.

Knight and Sidders are in the third-party category. Knight understands that the "poet" speaks, but this is certainly not the rustic lover of the dramatic theory (which he rejects). Sidders plainly declares that "the Shulammitite's vineyard was her shepherd." According to him she speaks the words but does not refer to her own body (which the majority holds).

Jastrow understands that the male lover (who is not Solomon) speaks the words. By "vineyard" he means the girl:

The lover enthusiastically and passionately exclaims that his vineyard—his beloved—is his own to cultivate by himself to enjoy for himself. . . . What cares the lover for lucre, when he can enjoy the fruitage of his vineyard? "Keep your money, King Solomon. My vineyard is mine."

Gordis views this phrase similarly: "The lover may be poor in money, yet he is far richer than Solomon, for he possesses a priceless treasure, the vineyard of his beloved." A decade later Rylaarsdam said essentially the same thing: "The lover tells this story, and the point of it, for him, is given in verse 12a. 'My vineyard . . . is for myself.' This vineyard is his beloved bride." Zlotowitz agrees:

Following Rashi: God will not forever countenance this injustice. On the Day of Judgment, He will proclaim to the nations, *krmy šly l'pny* [lit. "My vineyard, which is Mine, is before me!—Although I transferred it to you, it is nevertheless Mine. I am the sole owner.

Krinetzki understands that Solomon says these words, but only in the most loving and appreciative way. All his wealth means little to him in comparison to this *Schatz* he has in her. In fact Krinetzki, like other German form critics, calls this a *Prahllied*, a boasting song. Murphy does not argue with his statement that "most commentators ascribe these lines to the man."

Marcia Falk unexpectedly tilts also in the direction that the man speaks the words "My vineyard is my own": "It is better to read the vineyard here as a symbol for female *other* rather than female *self*, and to deduce from this that the speaker is a man." And Reese's view is like Jastrow's and Gordis': "The unidentified speaker, probably the man of the Song, protests that he has *my vineyard, my very own* to care for."

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS

As Marvin Pope has said, the implications can be quite opposite depending on whether the girl or the groom speaks the opening words of Song 8:12. Here are the main choices: (1) girl to her other lover; (2) girl to Solomon; (3) girl to brothers; (4) Solomon to girl; (5) Solomon literally of vineyard; (6) another lover to girl; (7) another lover to Solomon.

All of them are complicated and to some extent vitiated by the fact that Solomon is in the third person in v 11 and in the second in v 12. He has to be ruled out as the speaker of v 11 and the latter two lines of v 12. But if she is the speaker, then at least the vineyard might mean the same thing (or person) in all three places where it occurs in these two verses. The "other lover" view or the triangle view of the book solves some problems, leaves some unsolved and creates still others. I reject the option that a second man is the speaker here for the same reasons that I reject it as a way to interpret the whole book. The strongest of those reasons is that the book is about a wholesome, pure, healthy relationship between two lovers. To introduce a third is to introduce competition, envy, hostility, and other less-than-wholesome features to a series of otherwise beatific scenes.

Having dismissed (whether persuasively or not) options 4-7, I turn now to numbers 1-3. Number 1 is eliminated for the same reasons 4-5 were. That leaves the question of whether she speaks to her brothers or to her lover Solomon. Certainly there is a contrast between the vineyard (which is her own) and the thousand shekels (which are Solomon's). In fact v 12c continues to delineate the distribution of things. So at first blush it seems that she is speaking to Solomon. This is especially supported by the *lēkā* followed by the vocative. Also there is the contrast between the vineyard of Solomon at Baal Hamon in v 11 and the vineyard that is hers in v 12.

Actually the whole pericope would be smoother if v 12a preceded v 11. It intrudes into this little discourse about vineyards and what they rent for. On the other hand v 12a is in the middle of a speech about vineyards. Some vineyards are probably owned and cared for by their owners. Some are leased and cared for by others.

In the middle of these two verses she chooses to lift "vineyard" from its literal, real-estate meaning to its metaphorical meaning, which is well established throughout this book. She insists that she is old enough to make decisions independently. I believe she is speaking to her brothers. She is telling them that she no longer needs their protection, advice, or paternalistic oversight. What she says is not to deny herself to Solomon. Quite to the contrary, she declares her emancipation from her brothers. Indeed, with those translations and commentaries that expand on *lēpānāy* I concur that her vineyard—that is, herself—is at her "disposal" (*New World, NAB, NASB*), is hers "to give" (*NEB, NIV*).

The answer to our initial question—Who speaks in Song 8:12a?—is the girl, the maiden, the Shulammitte, the bride.

But that was, in a sense, only half the question. The other half is this: To whom does she say these words? They are not the protest of an uncooperative wife who resists the leadership or dominance of a husband. This is not the battle cry of a woman liberated from the bondage of a demanding or overbearing spouse. There is some of that, however, in that she asserts here her freedom of choice. In a small way this fragment of a verse reflects the maturity, the mutuality, the equality of the sexes that permeates the entire book. The whole Song of Songs, or each of the songs within it, presents to us a relationship of love, respect, honor and devotion that flows in both directions.

Both parties compliment each other. Both yearn for the other's presence. Both enjoy the courtship and the marriage. Both exercise choice. Both are secure, happy and fulfilled.

The Song tells what love and marriage should be. It is a kind of antidote to the way things were and often still are. Certainly her "vineyard" was her own. Certainly his wealth was his own. But in the context of wholesome marriage, what is his is hers and what is hers is his.

As for the brothers, they did their job—whether well or not so well. Now she is at the place where she chooses to shut the door, leaving them on the outside. After all, who wants a chaperon on the honeymoon?