

Songs 1,4 in the Maltese Translation

Anthony Abela

When read by itself this textual extension creates a number of difficulties for understanding and interpretation. For instance, given that this text forms part of the literary world of the Song of Songs, who is speaking in the text and who is the addressee? How are we to dispose the text colonwise? Is verse 4 one strophe or two?

The Speaker

There are a number of features that would indicate that it is still Lady Lover of Songs 1,1-3 who is speaking in Songs 1,4, and her addressee is the male Lover her mate as in verses 1-3. If the definitive moment in the poem where Lady Lover discloses whose poetic voice we hear in the first strophe(1,1-3) is verse 5(Abela 2009:35-36), it is very probable that it is she who continues to speak in verse 4. It is also possible that with verse 4 there starts a new strophe, taking as the only indication for this hypothesis the two imperatives, or rather the imperative **בָּרְכֵנִי**, **מְשַׁכְּבֵי** and the cohortative **בְּרִיזְנֵהוּ**. Imperatives of whatever person often serve to introduce new strophes(Zogbo & Wendland 2000:54-55) though this indication is not absolute. Longman III and Barbiero do not seem to recognise the delimitation of the first strophe in the Song of Songs at verse 3, with a new strophe starting at verse 4. But this option is not impossible. While we are still in the first strophe Lady Lover introduces her mate and their love, in verse 4 she asks him to draw her after him and invites him to run together to some secluded place where they would be able to express in depth their love. In verse 4 her invitation for love making becomes more concrete.

A New Strophe

Verse 4 constitutes a new strophe within the first poem of the Song of Songs wherein Lady Lover introduces her mate, his lovemaking, and their relationship though this latter theme is nowhere mentioned explicitly. This strophe is made up of five cola:

- (a) מִשָּׂכֶּנִי אֶחְרִיד נְרוּצָה
 (b) הִבִּיאֵנִי הַמְּלָךְ חֲדָרָיו
 (c) נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּךָ
 (d) נִזְכְּרָה דַדְּיָךְ מִנִּין
 (e) מִיִּשְׁרָיִם אֶהְבִּידְךָ

Some general comments:

- 1) As the opening line a), colon a) is constituted of two imperatives(though of different persons), one may be justified in asking whether line c) does not constitute also the opening line of a new strophe. If the answer is positive, the first strophe would be made up of the first two lines(a-b), while the second strophe would be made up of the last three cola(c-e). Though this is possible, the present writer prefers to read these five lines as forming one strophe with the last line picking up an item of contents already somehow treated by the last line in the first strophe(verse 3): he is loved by the womenfolk of their neighbourhood that would include of course the Lady Lover (this would colour, the first person plural of lines c) and d).
- 2) The two pairs of verbs in lines a) and c) behave differently. Not only because formally the verbs in line c) are conjoined by the conjunction waw while the second verb in a) is marked by the asyndeton; but because the presence or absence of the conjunction marks the different character of the verbs. The absence of the conjunction to join the two verbs in line a) is due in part to their different morphology; the first verb in this line is an imperative מִשָּׂכֶּנִי of the verb מִשָּׂךְ 'to draw, to drag' which in some texts is applied to 'lead and draw in love'(Hos 11,4; Jer 31,3)¹ while the second verb is a cohortative of the verb, רָוַץ, 'to run'. While with the first verb the male Lover is asked to do something to the speaker, with the second verb he is invited to do something with her, to run with her though the whereto is not defined. Lady Lover wants to stay alone with her lover and for this reason she invites him to run with her away from where other people were. Of course, she wanted to stay alone with him for lovemaking(verse 2a) which normally requires privacy. With the first verb she invites him to drag her along with him as he is presumably stronger and quicker.

1. Cfr. BDB. 604.

The two verbs in line c), **נִגְיִלָה** and **נִשְׂמְחָה**, are actually synonyms; they are often in parallel positions (cfr. Pss 14,7;16,9;32,11;48,12; 53,7; 96,11; 97,1.8; Prov 23,24.25)²; both of them may govern the source of the joy or gladness through the preposition **בְּ** so that the **בְּךָ** in this colon serves both verbs not the verb **נִשְׂמְחָה** alone. Who is the subject of the two verbs? Of course, both lovers even though the perspective is that of the female lover alone as she is the speaker. She is envisaging that their lovemaking will bring them both joy and rejoicing; probably this statement was based upon past experience as the first strophe gives one to surmise

**יִשְׂקֵנִי מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ
כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדִיךְ מִיָּוִן (v.2)**

Lady Lover is relying upon her own reception of their lovemaking concluding thereupon that what was pleasurable and intoxicating for her was likewise for him. This explains the first person plural of the cohortatives in line c).

- 3) Line b) is both narrative and comment. Without any preannouncement or preparation, Lady Lover shifts to the third person style to announce that her lover whom she calls **הַמֶּלֶךְ**, 'the king' which could be an indirect reference to King Solomon mentioned already in the title verse (1,1) or simply a metaphorical identification or description of her male lover as 'her king' with rights being given to him over her and her body during their lovemaking. We are told by Lady Lover that 'the king' brought her: the verb **הִבִּיאַנִי** which is the perfect hiphil of the verb **בוא** 'to come, come in, go, go in' (BDB), qualified by the personal pronoun of the first person singular to mark the object of the verb: 'the king brought me'. The place where he led her to is represented by the noun **הַחֲדָר** normally translated as 'chamber, room' meaning 'private quarters'. The noun **הַחֲדָר** appears in the plural probably signifying that he took her not to a room in a house but to a house. The noun is qualified by the masculine personal pronoun 'his (own) quarters'. The line therefore means that after Lady Lover had asked her mate to draw her after him and run with her to some private place, he took her to his own quarters.
- 4) In line c) Lady lover returns to addressing her mate. This line is made up of two cohortatives and the preposition **בְּ** through which the verbs govern their object

2. Ibid., 162.

as well as the addressee. This line gives rise to several questions concerning the meaning of the two verbs, the function of their coupling together in this colon, what their morphology say about what happened in male lover's וַיִּרְדֵּף ; it is to him that the line is addressed; the line is ambiguous also as to whether the preposition בְּ qualified by the personal pronoun, בְּיָדָי , actually refers to only one of the loving partners.

In some more details: i) The poet is here coupling two verbs that to all ends and purposes are synonyms³ although this does not mean that the two verbs may be used interchangeably. ii) The two verbs may both govern the object of the subject's joy or rejoicing through the preposition בְּ so that וַיִּרְדֵּף in this line may be serving, and is actually serving, both verbs not simply וַיִּשְׂמְחוּהוּ which comes immediately antecedently to the preposition. iii) In the Hebrew Bible, the two verbs are used both as parallel to each other (Pss 14,7; 16,9; 32,11; 48,12; 53,7; 96,11; 97,1.8; Prov 23,14.25; 1Chr 16,31; Hab 1,15) as well as together.⁴ In our text we have an instance of the latter use. We are bound to investigate the function of the coupling of the two verbs in this context. iv) One should note that the speaker, Lady Lover, actually achieves a change of perspective. Although the poet himself must have been responsible only for the consonantal text, the reading tradition which included the masoretic vowelization of the consonantal text, understood the cluster בְּיָדָי as referring not simply to the male lover but also to the female lover, who is the speaker herself. The visible sign of this shift of perspective is the morphology of the two verbs as well that of the pronominal suffix attached to the preposition בְּ . Had the masoretes understood the morphology of the pronominal attachment to the preposition as referring solely to the male lover, the cluster would have read בְּיָדָיו ; but the poet meant, and the masoretes understood him to have meant, to refer to both lovers and hence the masoretes chose a slightly ambiguous form in that the morphology of the preposition may refer to both male and female addressees.⁵ Lady Lover understood that her mate will enjoy himself together with herself during their love making which she dearly desired, as shown in the first strophe.⁶

3. David J.A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, II, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, 345.
4. Cfr BDB, 162-163.
5. Giovanni Deiana & Ambrogio Spreafico, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew*, Urbaniana University Press/Società Biblica Britannica & Forestiera, Rome 1998, 47.
6. Cfr. Abela, "The Female Lover".

- 5) What we have identified as the final two lines of the strophe in verse 4, may actually be taken as one line, a bicolon. This last line has been built as a chiasmus made up of four elements:

a, b, b¹, a¹

Elements a/a¹ are verbs, elements b/b¹ consist of comparative phrases. This chiasmatic arrangement has its weaknesses. For instance, the verbal elements have different subjects. The verb **נִזְכְּרָה** has a first person plural subject encoded within the morphology of the verb, while in the morphology of the verb **אֶזְכְּרֶה** is encoded a third person plural subject. Nothing explicit is said of either subject except what is contained in the verb which in each case is the primary element of the predicate in the two clauses. The reader remains with his/her questions as to who could have remembered the addressee's **דְּרִים** more than wine and as to who loved the addressee more than anything precious (**מִיֶּשְׁרִים**). In order to identify all these characters mentioned or hinted at in this line we have to delve deeper into the strophe as a whole.

- 6) The fact that the last two cola of the strophe (lines d and e) were actually conceived as half lines rather than as full though shorter lines, raises the issue as to whether the previous lines in the same strophe, and perhaps all the lines in the poem(1,1-4), may not be working in the same way. We have noticed the difference in style between line a) and line b) of this strophe: while in line a) lady Lover addresses her mate directly inviting him to draw her behind him and to run with her(the cohortative) to some secluded place so that they could live their lovemaking; in line b) she shifts to third person, narrative style, and reports that he brought her to his **בֵּיתוֹ** which we interpreted as 'his house'. This shift in style explains the use of asyndeton between the two lines: "Asyndetic constructions, those without conjunctions, omit any linking word or expression, depending totally on the semantic system operating behind the text to establish the interpositional relationships"⁷

What shall we say about the next couple of lines, line c) and line d)? Are they also working together as members of a bicolon so that they form one line rather than two as we have hypothetically envisaged so far taking the colon as the basic line unit? There are indications that show that what we have identified

7. Bruce K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 1990, §38.1h

so far as two separate lines are actually a bicolon, that is a line made up of two half lines. The two lines have a number of features in common: i) The verbs in the two lines encode first person plural subject:

c) נְגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה
 d) נִזְכְּרָה דְרָדִיף מִיָּו

ii) Both lines are addressed to the male Lover as the pronominal suffix attached either to the preposition through which the verbs control their object (line c) or to the object governed by the verb (line d) shows. iii) The yiqtol verbs in the two lines are actually cohortatives. While in line c) Lady Lover invites her mate to enjoy and to be cheerful of each other (the causal beth⁸ qualified by the pronominal suffix, בְּךָ tends to be slightly ambiguous; while it is the female partner addressing her mate, the suffix seems to be feminine); in line d) we notice the same ambiguity as the verb is a cohortative that encode a male and female subject, the love or love making is supposed to be the male partner's as the pronominal suffix attached to the nominal רְוּיִם suggests. These two lines therefore have all the appearance of being members of a bicolon and not two separate though short lines.

This reasoning raises two issues: is line e) standing alone? What is its role in the strophe? The strophe as it is now disposed should look something like this:

(A) מְשַׁכְּנֵי אַחֲרֶיךָ נָרַץ וְצִהָהּ הִבִּיאֵנִי הַמְּלִיךְ חֲדָרָיו
 (B) נְגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּךָ נִזְכְּרָה דְרָדִיף מִיָּו
 (C) מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְבִּיבֶךָ

What we have originally seen as being lines a) and b) now are seen as forming line A), what originally were labeled as line c) and d) now are seen as forming line B), while the concluding colon forms line C). We have now to exegete line C), and research its function within the strophe, if not the poem, as a whole.

The poem read from its final line

We shall start with reading this strophe. i) We have first to establish the consistency of line C. Does it consist, as it appears above, of the verb אֶהְבִּיבֶךָ somehow related

8. Ibid., §11.2.5e

to the cluster מִיִּשְׁרָיִם or to the two clusters that proceed the verb so that we have to add the cluster מִיִּיָּן? In literature we find the two versions. Gianni Barbiero reads the cluster מִיִּיָּן as qualifying the verb נִזְכָּרָה which governs the nominal דְּרִיבָּ:

ricorderemo le tue carezze più del vino⁹

while the final line in verse 4 he renders

a ragione ti amano!

Tremper Longman III offers a very similar exegesis and rendering¹⁰:

We will praise your love more than wine!

They rightly love you!

In this version though line C is very short when compared to the previous two lines. On the other hand this would be somewhat remedied if the participial phrase מִיִּיָּן is transferred from line B to the following line C:

מִיִּיָּן מִיִּשְׁרָיִם אֶהְבִּיבָּ

ii) What would be the meaning and function of the cluster מִיִּשְׁרָיִם within line C as reconstructed here? The initial *mem* attached to the cluster seems to stand for the preposition מִן prefixed to the adjective יִשְׁרָיִם; This means that the cluster מִיִּשְׁרָיִם may be another comparative phrase just like מִיִּיָּן, perhaps more intensive as it also qualifies the verb אֶהְבִּיבָּ together with the phrase מִיִּיָּן, given its position within the line. It is generally parsed as the masculine noun מִיִּשְׁרָיִם 'evenness, uprightness, equity' but used in this context as an adverb, 'rightly'.¹¹ This would explain the standard translation of this line found in a number of modern and not so modern translations: 'Rightly do they love you' (NKJV); 'C'est à bon droit que l'on t'aime' (NBS); 'Bil-ħaqq li jħobbuk' (Saydon¹²); 'Comme on a raison de t'aime' (BJ); 'Rightly do they love you' (NRSV); *Iva, għandhom raġun iħobbuk* (MBS); 'Elles ont bien raison, le filles, d'être amoureuses de toi!' (BE); 'Con razón te amán' (SB).

The present writer is proposing at least three alterations to this standard translation; these alterations are based upon alternative parsing and hermeneutics: a) The initial *mem* in the cluster מִיִּשְׁרָיִם is not to be parsed as the first radical of the nominal מִיִּשְׁרָיִם meaning 'evenness, uprightness, equity'¹³ normally judged to be

9. *Cantico*, 59.

10. *Song of Songs*, 90.

11. Cfr BDB, 449.

12. Peter Paul Saydon, *Il-Bibbja*, Societas Doctrinae Christianae, Malta 1995.

13. Cfr BDB, 449

used in this context as an adverb rendered 'rightly'. Instead this mem is to be read as the first radical of the preposition מִן 'from' but when used in comparisons carries the meaning of 'beyond, above' and idiomatically in English 'than' (BDB). In Jdgs 14,18 we find the famous proverb מַדֵּה מֶתוֹן כִּמְרִישׁ 'what is sweeter than honey?' The preposition here is affixed to the nominal cluster ישרים which we shall study next. This means that this מִן is put in parallel to the preposition מִן in the cluster מִיַּיִן which is another comparative phrase, 'than wine' used adverbially to qualify the verb אָהֲבִיךָ. b) What does the nominal מִיִּשְׂרָיִם stand for? This cluster is normally parsed as a case of 'abstract adverbial accusative'.¹⁴ Instead, the present writer suggests that we read it as a comparative phrase qualifying the verb אָהֲבִיךָ. In this syntactical role the phrase מִיִּשְׂרָיִם is not alone but goes together with the other phrase מִיַּיִן 'more than wine' which must then be transferred from line d) where it is seen as qualifying the verb נִזְכְּרָה

We will praise your love more than wine (Longmann III)

to line e) where it qualifies the verb אָהֲבִיךָ. The strophe in verse 4 will thus end with an emphatic statement. The phrase מִיִּשְׂרָיִם functions as an intensive adverbial phrase:

More than wine, more than choice wine, will they love you.

Where does this meaning come from? In part it comes from the basic meaning of the adjective יָשָׁר which carries the significance of 'right, pleasing'. Often it has God as object, 'that which is pleasing in the eyes of God, that is, what is agreeable to God' (cfr. Ex 15,26; Dt 12,25; and many other texts cfr BDB 449). But the adjective may have man as well as object: cfr Dt 12,8; Jdgs 17,6; 21,25; 2Sam 19,7; Jer 40,5; Prov 14,12; 16,25. But this meaning comes also from the new context where it plays the role of the intensive adverbial phrase, side by side with the phrase מִיַּיִן. Together the two comparative phrases qualify the concluding verb אָהֲבִיךָ.

Short Bibliography

Abbreviations used in this study: **BJ**: La Bible de Jerusalem (1978); **BDB**: Francis Brown & S.R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1907.1974; **BE**: *La Bible Explicite* (2004);

14. Longman III, *Songs*, 90; Barbiero, *Cantico*, 59.

CEI: *La Bibbia di Gerusalemme*(1977); **MBS:** The Malta Bible Society, referring mainly to its version of the Bible, *Il-Bibbja*,1984.³2004; **NBS:** *La Nouvelle Bible Segond*(2002); **NKJV:** *New King James Version*(1990); **NRSV:** *New Revised Standard Version*(1989); **SB:** *Santa Biblia*(1960).

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Department of Holy Scriptures
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida, Malta

