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A CALL FOR A SEXUAL REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ADJURATION
REFRAIN IN THE SONG OF SONGS

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BY
DREW PATRICK
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INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the topic, the Church displays its lack of full understanding whenever the conversation surrounding that topic is limited to a list of do's and don'ts. Sadly enough, often times when it comes to the topic of sex in the church the conversation immediately turns in this direction. This is especially the case when it comes to those who are young or single. This clear tendency in Christian circles is the result of an underdeveloped theology of sex. Though the conversation of what is and is not permissible before marriage according to God's word is important, it must not be the only message heard by those dealing with these God-given desires for marriage.

There is nothing inherently wrong with applications of biblical principles to life, but when they are separated from and presented without the undergirding principles they don't present a compelling vision to the world and they rob Christians of the biblical grounds for living a holy life. Our conversation around sex in the church must not just be a list of do's and don'ts but should also contain a beautiful presentation of the goodness of marriage the way God designed it. Song of Songs was written to help present us with both an apologetic and vision for the beauty of Christian marriage and sex.

In this paper I will be arguing that in the adjuration refrain found in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4 we see much more than simply a repeated call to chastity. Rather, what we have in these refrains is a re-affirmation of the goodness of God's design as she moves through the various stages from courtship through marriage. I will seek to show this by moving through the refrains, one at a time noting the continuity and development in each subsequent one. Then I will address a few differing interpretations to these refrains and how they fail to show the full significance of them. Finally I will seek to apply the results of this argument to our

understanding of the purpose of the Song and how it sheds light on our biblical understanding of sex.

STRUCTURE OF THE SONG

Before we can jump into discussing the role of the adjuration refrain in the Song we must first briefly comment on the various interpretations of the Song as a whole. The predominant view of this passage historically is known as the allegorical view where this Song is not depicting an actual relationship between a man and a woman but rather serves to display the relationship between God and his covenant people. Schwab notes about the Song that “it was read almost exclusively as an allegory up until the last century.”¹ Murphy for example says that the Song is “a commentary on the joyous marriage between Yahweh and His Spouse.”² While this interpretation has the benefit of history on its side, due to the rather clear sexual language and license it has shown to give interpreters towards absurd exegesis, it has become an untenable position for many modern Old Testament scholars.³

Where there remains considerable difference of opinion even today is on the existence of a “plot” of sorts in the Song. This debate is understandable, for when one reads through the Song of Songs for the first time it can seem rather random and disconnected. For this reason, Murphy says about the Song, “There is no plot, no conflict, but a series of scenes on an imaginative plane. There is no question, therefore, of a development in the mutual love of the

¹ George Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Proverbs - Isaiah*, Revised Edition., vol. 6, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

² Roland E. Murphy, “Structure of the Canticle of Canticles,” *TCBQ* 11.4 (1949): 382.

³ For another example of this allegorical approach, see Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume III* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2009).

man and woman.”⁴ Similarly, Longman remarks, “we thus conclude that the Song is an anthology of love poems, a kind of erotic psalter.”⁵ For these scholars, attempts to discern a narrative or continual story throughout strike them as “overly eisegetical.”⁶ The major issue with the argument that the Song is a collection of love poems is that it fails to give a sufficient reason for the adjuration refrain that goes throughout the Song which gives strong evidence for its structural unity. Also, as Van Pelt points out, “The Song’s title in the superscription directs us to read this poetic composition as a single unified song, ‘*The Song* [singular!] of Songs.’”⁷

Yet even within the camp of those who take the Song to be both literal and a unified work there remains disagreement on how many characters are involved in the story. Along with the previous two disputes, this one bears significant weight on how the entire Song and the refrains are understood. Van Pelt, among others, argue for a three-character view where you have Solomon, the Shulammite, and the Shepherd. In this understanding of the Song Solomon is attempting to add the Shulammite woman to his harem but she is in love with the Shepherd and will not allow Solomon or his harem to persuade her otherwise. This view sees Solomon in a very negative light, posits that the daughters of Jerusalem are the members of

⁴ Murphy, “Structure of the Canticle of Canticles,” 383; so to Schwab comments, “Its overall design is not seen as one of plot and progression but of artistic composition with a view to emphasizing certain aspects of love.” Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

⁵ Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁶ Longman, *Song of Songs*.

⁷ Emphasis original Miles V Van Pelt, “Song of Songs,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V Van Pelt (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016), 427.

Solomon's harem, and the message of the book is "to teach woman how to make a wise choice in the selection of a husband."⁸

Self admittedly, the three-character view was the most difficult one for me to wrestle with in interpreting the Song. The strength of the three-character view comes in its ability to interpret some rather unclear passages in the Song such as 6:12-13 and 8:11-12.⁹ Despite this important strength of the three-character view, it falls short primarily in two respects. First, based on how it perceives the plot unfolding it cannot admit to a wedding procession and the consummation of the marriage in 5:1 so it has to resign to saying that this section is Solomon is only promising lovemaking rather than it actually being a metaphorical description of the act of lovemaking.¹⁰ This in itself is enough to discredit this view because structurally and linguistically this is the clear climax of the Song and cannot be simply reduced to one of Solomon's attempts at persuading the Shulammite woman. Second, I find the overall purpose and instruction of the Song as simply helping women make the right choice in a husband underwhelming and unpersuasive. For these reasons and ones that will be unpacked as we look more at the adjuration refrain themselves, I take the two-character approach to the Song of Songs. This approach sees the Shulammite woman and Solomon as a couple that progresses through the stages of a relationship through marriage despite the difficulties along the way.

⁸ By implication of this perspective, the three-character view sees the adjuration refrain as the Shulammite woman's calling on the harem to not make her become one of Solomon's concubines. Van Pelt, "A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament," 431.

⁹ For brief interpretations of these passages from a three-character perspective, see Van Pelt, "A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament," 435–36.

¹⁰ Van Pelt, "A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament," 435.

Role of the Refrain

It has rightly been said that “dealing with this refrain, however, which appears in three places throughout the Song necessarily requires treating the whole Song.”¹¹ Therefore, we must start broad on a macro level as we seek to understand the central place of these refrains in the book. This is because, as Johnston points out, these refrains serve “an important role as a structuring device.”¹² Structurally, these refrains share much more in common than meets the eye. The first thing that is noted when one begins examining the context of the refrains is that all three of them come on the heels of “some expression of union between the two persons.”¹³ On top of this, Johnston notes how “each of these three sections opens with desire (1:2-4; 3:1; 7:12-14) and closes with fulfillment (2:6-7; 3:4-5; 8:3-4).”¹⁴

The first adjuration refrain is immediately preceded by her recounting *being held* by her beloved (2:6). The second adjuration refrain is the exact opposite, she is recounting her *holding* her beloved and bringing him to her mother’s house (3:4). In the final adjuration refrain you see both her talking about *bringing* him into her mother’s house and a word-for-word repetition of her recounting *being held by* him (8:2-4). In this final refrain you have the combination of the preceding refrains depictions of union. After the consummation of their

¹¹ Joseph Poggemeyer, “Following Love’s Dynamic: A Study of the Adjuration Refrain of the Song of Songs” (Pontifical Gregorian University, n.d.), 2.

¹² He also noted that it is common in Ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew poetry to see refrains being used to segment poems. Gordon H. Johnston, “The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 3,” *BSac* 166 (2009): 290.

¹³ Murphy, “Structure of the Canticle of Canticles,” 387.

¹⁴ Johnston, “The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 3,” 293.

marriage in 5:1 the mutual holding of one another, her holding him and him holding her, is presented in parallel fashion to symbolize the completion on their union.¹⁵

Another structural element surrounding the refrains was helpfully pointed out by Van Pelt when he noted, “In all three occurrences, the oath is followed by the announcement of an individual’s arrival.”¹⁶ The first two adjuration refrains are followed by the Shulammite woman witnessing her beloved coming to her (2:8; 3:6). In the final refrain we read not of the woman seeing her beloved coming up but rather of the onlookers seeing the woman coming up “leaning on her beloved” (Song 8:5). Before the consummation of the marriage it was the Shulammite woman perceiving her beloved “coming up from the wilderness” (3:6) but after the marriage they are seen coming up together from the wilderness (8:5) further solidifying not only the structural unity of the Song but also highlighting the central role of the refrain in the work.

Meaning of the Refrain

Now that we have spent some time looking at the larger context surrounding the refrain we will dive into the adjuration refrain itself and break it down to discern its meaning. Right off the bat we get the phrase “I adjure you” which is why this is commonly called the adjuration refrain. On this phrase, Van Pelt comments, “Technically speaking, the woman is placing the daughters of Jerusalem under an oath....”¹⁷ The idea of an oath with a curse for breaking this

¹⁵ “The adjuration refrain seems to act as a mini-marshall, dispersing wisdom to the reader who has just watched love’s movement from the last unit.” Poggemeyer, “Following Love’s Dynamic,” 60.

¹⁶ Van Pelt, “A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament,” 427.

¹⁷ To bring out the force of the idea of this opening phrases being an oath, he says the verse would literally read, “*I put you under oath*, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, *if you stir up or arouse love before it is willing, [may you be cursed].*” Van Pelt, “A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament,” 427.

adjuration more fully brings out the passion in which this refrain is spoken. This is not merely advice that the Shulammite woman is giving out to the daughters of Jerusalem. She speaks as someone who has conviction on this topic of awakening love and is content to bind the conscience of her hearers in the charge that follows.¹⁸

Next we come to the ambiguous audience of the Shulammite woman's adjuration, the "daughters of Jerusalem." In part due to Van Pelt's three-character understanding of the Song and due to his analysis of Song 6:8-9, he argues for understanding the "daughters of Jerusalem" as those virgins taken into Solomon's harem in order to be prepared as potential concubines.¹⁹ Granted, in the three-character approach to the Song this perspective of the "daughters of Jerusalem" is understandable given the Shulammite woman's place and struggle. If that three-character approach is not adopted though, I don't find the argument for this view persuasive on the evidence of Song 6:8-9 alone. To add to this, if this group is understood to be potential concubines in Solomon's harem trying to convince the Shulammite woman to stay as the three-character approach understands it, how do they explain their speech in Song 6:1? As the daughters went from questioning her beloved's importance (Song 5:9) to them trying to help her find him (Song 6:1) as a result of her praising him are we to assume that Solomon's harem was convinced of the worth of her beloved Shepherd boy (as would have to be the case since the three-character perspective clearly understands Solomon's harem to be questioning the worth of the Shepherd boy in Song of Songs 5:9)? Due to these objections and the

¹⁸ For an example in the Song where she uses the same phrase "I adjure you" in a context that clearly communicates more than just merely advice, see Song 5:8 where she calls on the daughters of Jerusalem to help her find where he beloved had gone. This is further solidified by their response where they indicate the seriousness of her adjuring them (Song 5:9d).

¹⁹ Van Pelt, "A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament," 425.

mysterious nature of this group I am content to conclude that we cannot be sure on the identity of this group but it seems rather unlikely that they were members of Solomon's harem.²⁰

Next we come across the seemingly strange reference to the “gazelles” and the “does of the field” in the refrain. One will notice that this part of the refrain does not show up in the third and final occurrence of the refrain in Song of Songs 8:4.²¹ As has been previously established, this refrain has the force of an oath and these two animals are mentioned here as what is being invoked in support of the oath. Simply put, the woman is swearing by these animals in this oath so discerning their meaning is crucial for understanding what is going on here. These animals here serve two main purposes: Primarily, they represent the “images of love itself” and secondarily they represent God.²² Exum points out how her beloved’s “movement to reach her is like that of a gazelle” in Song 2:9 and Murphy made the insightful connection that “the word ‘hind’ [or doe] is used of a wife in Prov 5:19” in the context of calling the young man to be satisfied in the wife of his youth.²³ In fact, when one observes the

²⁰ Additionally, the interpretation that understands the daughters of Jerusalem to be members of Solomon's harem undermines the applicability of this Song to the modern day reader. If we are really to understand this refrain as the Shulammite woman calling them to not force her to be a part of Solomon's harem the usefulness of this Song to today is severely limited. Rather, I argue that whatever our interpretation of the daughters of Jerusalem is, it must be one where we can agree with what Longman says when he states, “In a sense, then, the *daughters of Jerusalem*, are surrogates for the reader. We too are to learn the same lesson...” Longman, *Song of Songs*.

²¹ We will come back to this observation in the “Development of the Refrain” section below.

²² For on how they represent love, see Brian P. Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love’: The Meaning of the Enigmatic Refrain in Song of Songs,” *BBR* 20.2 (2010): 184; And for how these animals represent God, see Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

²³ Cheryl Exum, “Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs,” *ZAW* 85.1 (1973): 54; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, *Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

usage of Gazelle in the bible it becomes clear that this animal is used in “explicitly sexual contexts.”²⁴

The secondary purpose of these animals being selected is a little less obvious but still very significant in our understanding of the refrain. Indeed, based on the nature of oaths one would expect God to be invoked where these animals instead were used.²⁵ For this connection I am indebted to Schwab who clearly showed that what we have here is the beasts as “circumlocutions for God...”²⁶ Though the Shulammite woman here is literally calling on these animals, in a veiled way she is also calling on God. Schwab helpfully connects these two ideas summarizing, “The girl is then seen urging the maidens to swear, not merely by sexuality but also (using circumlocution) by the God of sexuality not to arouse love prematurely.”²⁷ Rather than her appeal to the animals being out of place and odd, upon further analysis they prove to be rich with layered meaning that helps us understand the refrain and Song as a whole.

The last portion of the refrain reads “that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” What is of great importance here are the two main verbs “stir up” and “awaken”.²⁸ Here we will come to deal with a common understanding of the adjuration refrain as a “do not disturb

²⁴ For its uses, see Song 2:17, 4:5, 7:3, 8:14; Prov 5:19. Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love,’” 185.

²⁵ “This reference to the gazelles and hinds seems to be an imitation of an invocation of God.” Murphy, *The Song of Songs*.

²⁶ “The word ‘gazelles’ is in Hebrew צבָח, identical with ‘hosts’ of the divine appellation ‘Lord of Hosts.’ Also, ‘does of the field’ sounds remarkably similar to אל שְׁרֵי, ‘God almighty.’” Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

²⁷ Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

²⁸ Though not perceivable in English, these two words come from the same root verb עוֹר.

sign” of sorts.²⁹ This view argues that what is happening here is the woman is asking the daughters of Jerusalem for privacy and uninterrupted love-making with her beloved. While the preceding scenes of unity possibly lean in the favor of this view, the main issue with this view is its rendering of **עֹר** translated as “stir up” and “awaken in this verse. Roberts points out the issue well here when he says, “While HALOT does give ‘disturb’ as a gloss for **עֹר** the basic sense is always ‘to awaken.’ In cases where ‘disturb’ does fit, it is always disturbing something that is dormant, either literally or metaphorically, and bringing it out of a state of dormancy.”³⁰ For the “do not disturb” view to be correct they are forced to admit to a totally unique rendering of this word in the Hebrew Bible. On top of this, if the “do not disturb” view is to be taken as correct one still has to explain how Solomon is praising her virginity in Song of Songs 4:12 which occurs after this supposed love-making scene in Song 2:6-7.

The more natural and consistent rendering of this verb is reflected in the ESV’s choice of “stir up” and “awaken”. As Exum notes, “the verb **עֹר** always appears in explicit erotic contexts.”³¹ Commenting on the repetition of the verb, Longman states “The repetition has an emphatic force, similar to ‘whatever you do, don’t arose...’ It is a strong note of caution then.”³² For this reason, Villiers and Burden suggest replacing the term “adjuration refrain” with “warning refrain”.³³ The last phrase to be analyzed in the refrain is what we are to make of “until it pleases.” While there are various positions

²⁹ Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love,’” For an overview of many different understandings of the adjuration refrain as well as an argument for the “do not disturb” option, see; also, Brian P. Gault, “A ‘Do Not Disturb’ Sign? Reexamining the Adjuration Refrain in Song of Songs,” *JSOT* 36.1 (2011): 93–104.

³⁰ D. Phillip Roberts, *Let Me See Your Form: Seeking Poetic Structure in the Song of Songs* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 94.

³¹ Exum, “Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs,” 58.

³² Longman, *Song of Songs*.

³³ “A more accurate term to describe the refrain, in keeping with its function, would therefore be ‘warning refrain’ (rather than ‘adjuration refrain’).” DW Villiers and JJ Burden, “Function and Translation: A Twosome in the Song of Songs,” *OTW* 2.1 (1989): 6.

as well on this phrase, I prefer Schwab's take on the meaning being "until every element is in place."³⁴ She is calling on the daughters of Jerusalem to not arouse the sexual passions within them until the proper time, when the necessary elements are there. The Shulammite woman, in the midst of feeling great desires to be physically intimate with her beloved, commands the daughters of Jerusalem to not exercise this passion outside of the context of a committed, exclusive marriage. This position will become increasingly clear as we move into the following section.

Development of the Refrain

While the refrain itself and its importance structurally in the Song has received much attention, in my limited research I noted far less discussion on the importance of the refrain in the overall story of the Song. While the chastity position that I just laid out is what I believe is the most exegetically defensible in the text itself, I propose that the chastity argument shines most brightly when it is seen in light of the plot of the Song. To put it another way, where these refrains occur in the Song is crucial for a full understanding of the power of the refrain and the message of the Song. In summary, the adjuration refrain occurs at three distinct spots in the life of the relationship of the couple that allows us to see the impetus of the refrain more forcefully.

The first occurrence of the refrain in Song 2:7 is during a phase in the couple's relationship that could be called their betrothal. Their love for one another and desire to be together has been mutually expressed from the beginning of the book. In this context of their mutual affirming of their love for each other the woman utters this call to chastity for the first time. What is unique about the refrain in this first occurrence is that as she is warning the daughters of Jerusalem she is also warning herself of the danger of arousing love before "it

³⁴ Schwab, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

pleases.” In the midst of her passion for her beloved she holds fast to the biblical call to chastity before marriage. Her swearing by the animals here is due partially to the fact that she has no experiential authority to declare that chastity is indeed good, that it’s worth it.³⁵ Here we see the Shulamite woman clinging to what she has been told is good and calling others to it as well.

The second instance of the refrain in Song 3:5 is technically still in the betrothal period of their relationship but, significantly, it is the night before their wedding. Directly following this adjuration we read of Solomon’s grand wedding entrance and the eventual consummation of the marriage in Song 5:1. Now, on the eve of her wedding, the Shulammite ushers out the exact same call to the daughters of Jerusalem. At this point her desire for him if anything has increased but now she awaits the wedding day with eager excitement to experience this one flesh union with her beloved. She still references the gazelles and the does because she has not had that personal experience of sex that she can lean on instead. In comparison to the first refrain this one still occurs before the experience of sex in marriage but it occurs significantly closer to the wedding day. Where the first refrain called out to the daughters of Jerusalem out of a conviction to wait until marriage, the second refrain comes on the eve of her wedding when she can reflect on the conviction to wait and see how it has been worth it. She looks back on all of her relationship thus far with her beloved and offers the exact same refrain, saying in a sense, “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

The third refrain occurs after the wedding and in many ways is the most compelling of the three. With the omission of the phrase on the gazelles and does the refrain is identical to the first two. It is here where the significance is in what is not said. Whereas previously she had to lean on the authority of sexuality that she had never personally experienced, now she

³⁵ In a striking fashion this changes in the third occurrence of the refrain.

can swear this oath by herself. As one who has experienced the immense joy of sex in a committed exclusive marriage, she speaks with a new authority. She is no longer clinging to what she has been told is good and right, but rather she now personally knows it to be good and right. She not only swears by herself but speaks the exact same words. Here she is putting the final stamp of approval on what she expounded twice before about chastity before marriage.

A critique of the abstinence option for interpreting the Song is that it is not in line with “the celebration rather than suppression of passion in the Song.”³⁶ The heart of the chastity option is missed in this critique. As has become clear in the development of the refrain, the chastity option is not suppressing passion, it is indeed celebrating it but in the proper context. What underlies the chastity position is not a belief that sex needs to be repressed but rather that the best sex is sex the way God designed it. The paradox behind chastity is that though it can be seen as holding people back from something, it is actually trying to give people something better than they could ever imagine. This third occurrence of the adjuration refrain is doing nothing but affirming the goodness of sex in marriage. If there was no third occurrence of this refrain the audience would be simply left to wonder what the Shulammite woman’s post-marriage perspective on chastity was. By providing us with the same refrain a third time she is affirming everything that she has said before and doing it on her own experiential authority.

CONCLUSION

This study has not only defended the chastity view of the adjuration refrain but has shown its development in the Song based on the overarching plot. But, as Gault rightly states,

³⁶ Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love,’” 176.

“Interpreting the adjuration refrain in Song of Songs is not merely an academic debate for scholars but has implications for a biblical theology of sexuality.”³⁷ The reality is that the Song of Songs is one of the least used and interacted with books in all of the bible today. Well-meaning Christians don’t read this book because they don’t know what to do with it and how to handle the seemingly crass sexual language throughout. I believe the abstinence view of the refrain helps shape how this book is seen and the message it communicates to our world today.

Schwab says of the refrain, “It is arguably the moral of the Song of Songs.”³⁸ The fact is that he is exactly right, what we decide about the meaning of the refrain of the Song dictates its message and how we apply it. The reality is that the chastity position advocated for above is exactly what the church and the world need today. While most people hear the words “chastity” and “abstinence” and immediately think about what those positions tell you not to do, what this book does so well is that it shows you what these words actually mean.

To the world with its commoditization and oversaturation of sex, the Song paints a beautiful picture of the glory and goodness of a married couple fully enjoying one another. If the biblical view of sex is ever going to be compelling to the world it must not just be presented as what it forbids but also what it cultivates. To the church with its subtle communication of sex being dirty and a necessary evil, the Song reminds us that “sexuality and passion are good gifts from our creator to be enjoyed and indulged, in the proper context.”³⁹ When the church simply accepts sex as an unavoidable reality to merely be controlled it is betraying its lack of a biblical view of sexuality. I firmly believe that the revival of the use of this book by the

³⁷ Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love,’” 182.

³⁸ Schwab, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

³⁹ Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love,’” 183.

church will result in better marriages through healthy sex lives, less prevalence of pornography use among singles and youths through seeing the goodness of sex in marriage, and a greater testimony to the watching world of the goodness of our God through the enjoyment of his gifts!

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