Solomon, God, and Sharon Rose Walk into a Song: Dialoguing Polysemy in the Song of Songs

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INTRODUCTION

On account of the ubiquitous manipulation of metaphor therein as well as its lengthy history of interpretation, the Song of Songs lends itself particularly well to a study of how units at both the lexical and discursive levels of language communicate distinct, and potentially conflicting, meanings to readers. However, whereas previous treatments of such polysemy in the Hebrew Bible have largely focused on elements in the lexical domain at the expense of those in the discursive domain, this article outlines a cohesive model for analyzing polysemy across both linguistic strata. Situated within a critique of the theoretical approaches adopted in earlier studies of Hebrew polysemy, the framework suggested here blends the hermeneutical insights of Paul Ricoeur with those available in critical media studies; the result is a narrower definition of polysemy as a strictly denotative phenomenon, which I further distinguish from instances of polyvalency and double coding. Following an extended theoretical prolegomenon, I apply this model to two interconnected case studies, namely, Song 5:2–6 and 5:7, foregrounding in each instance a selection of salient differences that have emerged amongst recent commentators concerning the referential content of these passages. Informed by this survey, I contend that the presence of terms with expansive semantic ranges contributes in a cumulative fashion to the discernibly polysemous quality of both these texts and, by extension, the Song as a cohesive discourse.[1]

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, I will not be engaging the question of the Song's unity; rather, I proceed according to the working assumption that it constitutes a semantically definable unit of cohesive text. In this respect, I follow the understanding of cohesion presented by M.A. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (English Language Series, 9; London: Longman, 1976). For a recent discussion of the cohesion of the Song of Songs using the theoretical lens of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Lin-

POLYSEMY, POETRY, AND DISCOURSE

An increasingly recognized object of study for interpreters of Hebrew poetry,[2] including the Song of Songs particularly,[3] lexical polysemy has entered the vocabulary of biblical scholars to describe both a form of aesthetic ambiguity as well as a particular subcategory of wordplay. Adele Berlin has given particularly forceful expression to the former approach, which draws significantly from the theoretical frameworks delineated in the works of Umberto Eco and Roman Jakobson;[4] she argues that the multiplicity of potential interpretations available for such constructions as Ps 62:12 and Hab 3:3 is an essential product of their organization into parallel lines. In support of her position, Berlin identifies a twofold function for poetic parallelism, contending that this device enables a single line to facilitate the transmission of information communicated in another construction (disambiguation) whilst also suggesting further, dissonant understandings of that same statement (polysemy).[5] Relating this description to the observable terseness of texts such as the Song,[6] Berlin further recognizes a creativity in this interplay of meaning insofar as it enables a poetic discourse to convey a range of distinct connotations with fewer linguistic elements than would be necessary in more typically monosemous prose.[7]

Berlin's comments have particular import for my later analysis of the denotative capacity of a discourse, especially given their contrast with the dominant tendency within recent biblical scholar-

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guistics, see D.M. Dalwood, "A Text of Songs? Some Observations Regarding Cohesion and Texture in the Song of Songs," *JNSL* 43 (2017), 1–18.

[2] For recent approaches, see, e.g., G.A. Rendsburg, "Double Polysemy in Genesis 49:6 and Job 3:6," *CBQ* 44 (1982), 48–51; D.T. Tsumura, "Polysemy and Parallelism in Hab 1,8–9," *ZAW* 120 (2008), 194–203.

[3] E.g., for Song 2:12, C.H. Gordon, "New Directions," *BASP* 15 (1978), 59–66 (59–60); D. Bergant, *The Song of Songs* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 29 n. 2.

[4] Cf. L.R. Waugh, "The Poetic Function in the Theory of Roman Jakobson," *Poetics Today* 2 (1980), 57–82 (73); citing U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

[5] A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 98–99.

[6] Cf. ibid., 5–6.

[7] The effects of polysemy in terms of the economy of a discourse have been treated from a psychological perspective by H. Rabagliati and J. Snedeker, "The Truth about Chickens and Bats: Ambiguity Avoidance Distinguishes Types of Polysemy," *Psychological Science* 24 (2013), 1354–60. Note, however, that ambiguity may enhance meaning in narrative texts, as well (A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994], 53). For the applications of these observations to the Song of Songs specifically, see T. Longman III, *Song of Songs* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 10; J.C. Exum, *Song of Songs* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 19.

ship to subsume treatments of polysemy under broader discussions of Hebrew wordplay.[8] Illustrative of the latter are the writings of Wilfred G. Watson and Susan E. Gillingham. Each understands polysemy to be principally lexical and, consequently, classifies it alongside literary-phonological techniques such as assonance and alliteration.[9] Note, for instance, Watson's remark that polysemy "[s]imply implies that one and the same *word* can have several meanings."[10] Gillingham's comments on the phonologically similar pairs מִשְׁפָּט (justice)/מִשְׂפָּח (bloodshed) and צְדָקָה (righteousness)/צְעָקָה(cry) in Isa 5 are likewise telling; she observes that

> This sort of word-play is often used for effect by the prophets, but it is also a recurrent feature in the psalms. There are at least five particular aspects of such word-play: *assonance* (a form of vowel repetition); *alliteration* (a form of consonant repetition); *onomatopoeia* (where the sound of a word imitates its meaning); *homonymy* (where words which are identical in sound are used with different meanings); and *polysemy* (whereby the same *word* is used with several meanings).[11]

Scott B. Noegel develops his taxonomic approach along lines similar to Gillingham's, providing a tripartite classificatory index of the major polysemous devices attested within the Hebrew Bible. Distinguishing between homonymous, homographic, and semantic polysemy, Noegel's study represents an attempt to redress the perceived terminological imprecision of previous analyses of Hebrew wordplay. To that end, Noegel redefines such phenomena as poetic acrostics and a biblical author's manipulation of bilingual terms using the more linguistically precise categories of structural and lexical polysemy, respectively.[12] Diminishing the theoretical value of Noegel's work, however, is its marked degree of conceptual and terminological overlap with existing literary analyses; these include, for instance, Roland E. Murphy's delineation of form-critical cate-

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[8] See, for instance, G.A. Rendsburg, "Double Polysemy in Proverbs 31:19," in A. Afsaruddin and A.H. Zahniser (eds.), *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 267–74; citing J.M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the OT," in G.A. Buttrick (ed.), *IDBSup* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 968–70; cf. S.B. Noegel, " 'Word Play' in Qoheleth," *JHS* 7 (2007), 1–28.

[9] W.G. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup, 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 237–46 (emphasis added).

[10] Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 237.

[11] S.E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 192 (emphasis added).

[12] S.B. Noegel, "Polysemy," in G. Khan (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 3:178–86; cf. E.L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *ABD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:968–71.

gories for the wisdom literature.[13] Though not eliminating the value of Noegel's study, such overlap raises questions of justification and interpretive necessity that Noegel only implicitly addresses. In particular, one wonders whether Noegel's reclassification of the above-mentioned qualities of texts using the linguistic category of *polysemy* is either consonant with the current theoretical literature on polysemy as a linguistic phenomenon or necessary to clarify (rather than obscure) outstanding interpretive difficulties for which existing literary models do not effectively account.

As might be expected from the foregoing review, in the secondary linguistics literature more generally polysemy largely falls within the purview of lexical semantics, being distinguished from other features of language such as homonymy insofar as it pertains specifically to the potential for a multiplicity of meanings to attach to a single term whilst maintaining an identifiable relationship.[14] In polysemy's synchronic realization,[15] the examination of which has been the predominant focus of those biblical scholars cited here, the degree to which these meanings are associated at any one point in time may be further characterized according to a gradient that ranges from homonymous contrasts (e.g., "*match* [a small stick with a tip which ignites when scraped on a rough surface] and *match* [contest in a game or sport]") to semantic complements (e.g., "in

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[13] Compare, for instance, the definitions he provides for the "Acrostic Poem" and the "Alphabetizing Poem" (R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* [FOTL, 13; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981], 172–73).

[14] B. Nerlich and D.D. Clarke, "Polysemy and Flexibility: Introduction and Overview," in B. Nerlich et al. (eds.), *Polysemy: Flexible Patterns of Meaning in Mind and Language* (Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs, 142; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 3–30 (3); C. Goddard, *Semantic Analysis: A Practical Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23–25.

[15] By referring to synchrony and diachrony, I am distinguishing between the instantiation of a polysemic relation at a given temporal and discursive point (synchrony) and the processes that conditioned the emergence of that state (diachrony). A. Blank helpfully elaborates upon the connection between the two; although cautioning that "there is no complete isomorphism between diachronic processes and synchronic states," he observes that the former has a particularly overt impact on the production of the latter in cases such as "metaphoric polysemy which derives in most cases from metaphor as a diachronic process. Both are based on a more or less salient similarity between two concepts that belong to different or even distant conceptual domains" ("Polysemy in the Lexicon and in Discourse," in B. Nerlich et al. [eds.], *Polysemy: Flexible Patterns of Meaning in Mind and Language* [Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs, 142; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003], 267–93 [268]). I suggest below that a similar interface obtains on a more limited temporal scale in the act of reading itself, which, inasmuch as its object is text (in the Hallidayan sense to which I alluded in n. 1), is a diachronic process that generates synchronically polysemous meanings.

the case of *record . . .* the physical object and the music").[16] Although such synchronic analysis finds modest reflection in Noegel's tripartite description of Hebrew polysemy, and is deliberately developed with some nuancing in Moisés Silva's treatment of lexical semantics,[17] conspicuously absent from the discussions surveyed above is an acknowledgement of this polysemous spectrum's diachronic underpinnings (Watson's monograph being the possible exception).[18] This gap in current biblical scholarship is perplexing given the broad recognition amongst semanticists that the relationships between polysemic meanings most commonly emerge as a result of connotations and metaphorical uses attaching to a term as that term is employed within particular linguistic settings over time; besides generating instances of polysemy, moreover, these patterns of usage may further serve to obfuscate the aforesaid relations insofar

> as conversational implicatures generating *ad hoc* ambiguities and polysemies can become conventionalized or grammaticalized over time. . . and as the distant senses of a polysemous word can at any time change status and generate new homonyms, that is, the semantic link in the network of senses can become obscured.[19]

By way of example, note the attention devoted to polysemy's diachronic dimensions in the work of Stephen Ullmann, which Watson explicitly cites as forming the basis for his own understanding of polysemy,[20] as well as recent scholarly attempts to classify the

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[16] For which, including the above examples, see Nerlich and Clarke, "Polysemy and Flexibility," 8; cf. L.R. Waugh, "Iconicity in the Lexicon: Its Relevance for Morphology and Its Relation to Semantics," in E. Hajičová et al. (eds.), *Prague Linguistic Circle Papers*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), 251–84 (267–68).

[17] M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 114.

[18] Besides those already mentioned, see also the explicit rejection of the interpretative relevance of the diachronic dimension of polysemy by R.L. Androphy, "Paranomasia in the Former Prophets: A Taxonomic Catalogue, Description, and Analysis" (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 2011), 19. Androphy's comments are, however, unduly dismissive of both a principal mechanism by which polysemy develops and an important means by which instances of this phenomenon may be identified (cf. P. Ricoeur, "The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem," in D. Ihde [ed.], *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. K. McLaughlin [Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974], 62–78 [68]).

[19] Nerlich and Clarke, "Polysemy and Flexibility," 10; citing E.C. Traugott, "Grammaticalization and lexicalization," in R.E. Asher and J.M. Simpson (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1994), 3:1481–86.

[20] S. Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell,

nature of semantic change.[21] Inasmuch as divergent meanings must retain a discernible relationship in order to be appropriately classified as *polysemous*, diachronic histories are often indicative (if not necessarily definitive) of synchronic semantic networks; the contrast between polysemy and homonymy is in this respect illustrative, the latter term referring to "etymologically unrelated words that happen to be represented by the same string of letters in a language."[22]

Attention to the intersection between diachrony and synchrony in the manifestation of multiple meanings at the lexical level offers a means of extending the preceding discussion of polysemous lexical items to include a treatment of the polysemous capacity of entire discourses *vis-à-vis* the diachronic quality of the reading process itself. The latter alludes to the cohesive qualities of discourses *qua* texts, that is, the "relations of meaning" (e.g., ellipsis and conjunction) that obtain between the various constitutive elements (lexical or otherwise) of a text. While an elaboration of the notion of cohesion proper is beyond the scope of the present study, note for the present purposes that identifying an element's participation in a cohesive relation suggests that the interpretation thereof is contingent on interpreting instantiations of that element elsewhere in the text;[23] increasingly complex networks of meaning develop for each element as the reader moves through the text and is informed by her temporally prior encounters with that linguistic unit, including in previous readings of the discourse.[24] In light of the foregoing, Ricoeur's understanding of "ordered polysemy" is particularly helpful in that it recognizes both the cumulative effects of semantic change, which Ricoeur identifies as engendering the progressive expansion of lexical meaning, as well as the restrictive effects exerted by the semantic field itself.[25] Thus, although he acknowledges the potential for a term to acquire such a diversity of denotations that its value as a signifier is functionally lost, Ricoeur recognizes a limiting force in the semantic oppositions between words that result from their incorporation into a functioning linguistic system; the latter is analogous to the oppositions that obtain between a language's phonological elements.[26] Once they have

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1963), 117; cf. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 237.

[21] See, for example, Blank, "Polysemy in the Lexicon and in Discourse," 268–72; cf. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961), 147.

[22] Y. Ravin and C. Leacock, "Polysemy: An Overview," in Y. Ravin and C. Leacock, *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2–29 (2).

[23] See Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 4.

[24] It is in this last sense that a text may be intertextual with itself.

[25] Ricoeur, "The Problem of Double Meaning," 69.

[26] P. Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," in D. Ihde (ed.) and R. Sweeney (trans.), *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston, IL: Northwest-

acquired a multiplicity of denotations, the interpretations available for individual terms within a discourse are further constrained by means of adjacent lexical items, which, if sufficiently precise, serve to obscure certain readings such that a text becomes "univocal" in its signification. Nevertheless, in certain registers, including those mentioned above in relation to Berlin's treatment of poetic ambiguity, lexical polysemy may be matched by co-textual indeterminacy such that a discourse opens itself to a finite range of discrete, and potentially conflicting, interpretations.[27]

As has been argued persuasively in more recent studies, however, these divergent interpretations are not uniformly polysemous in character. Instead, a further distinction must be drawn between textual polysemy, in which a discourse expresses multiple denotations, and polyvalency, in which the readers of a text are in agreement as to its referential meaning(s) but disagree with respect to the value they ascribe to the various elements therein.[28] Illustrating this dichotomy by way of an example from within the Song of Songs, one may thus identify as polysemous that book's capacity to both make reference to God, as evidenced in the readings of spiritualizing allegorists and feminist theorists alike,[29] and to banish the divine figure beneath its pervasive eroticism.[30] On the other hand, it is a matter of polyvalency whether, amongst those scholars acknowledging a role for the deity, this individual is understood to be a positive or a negative presence in the discourse.

Related to the concepts of polysemy and polyvalency is that of double coding, which describes the potential for a single text to communicate distinct messages for different groups of readers based on how those audiences understand and relate to the language therein.[31] Insofar as there is interpretive disagreement as to

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ern University Press, 1974), 79–98 (93–94).

[27] Ricoeur, "The Problem of Double Meaning," 70–71. However, neither individual lexical items nor texts are open to an infinite range of interpretations, against the reading of the Song of Songs provided by J. Kristeva, "Holy Madness: She and He," in idem, *Tales of Love*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 83–102 (91).

[28] C.M. Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989), 103–22 (106–8); cf. L. Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998), 395–415 (398–99); D.L. Cloud, "The Limits of Interpretation: Ambivalence and the Stereotype in 'Spenser: For Hire'," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9 (1992), 311–24 (313–14).

[29] E.g., V. Burrus and S.D. Moore, "Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 11 (2003), 24–52 (50–52); and as an example of a recent allegorical reading, see M. Lutz, *Intimacy with God* (Hanover: Christopher Publishing House, 1997).

[30] Cf. A. Brenner, "On Feminist Criticism of the Song of Songs," in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (FCB, 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 28–37 (28).

[31] See U. Eco, *On Literature*, trans. M. McLaughlin (Orlando: Harcourt,

whether a particular message is being expressed it is suitable to classify a text as polysemous; this definition therefore excludes those instances where interpreters merely select the degree to which they wish to engage certain aspects of a work, several of which are highlighted by Eco.[32] Both intertextual allusions, given that they may be recognized by one individual and not by another (including the author[s] themselves),[33] as well as ideological considerations, which prejudice readers to accept one meaning as legitimate whilst excluding others,[34] represent mechanisms through which the polysemous potential of a doubly-coded work may be realized.

As will become evident shortly, the distinctions sketched here have especial significance for the present argument insofar as they provide a loose terminological schema for classifying the semantic effects of the metaphorically charged language ubiquitous within the Song. Owing to its frequency, such language opens the text to the interpretations of both those who appreciate (and in their reading perhaps contribute to) the esotericism of the rhetoric therein as well as those who focus their attention on less-nuanced aspects of its sensuality.[35] The historical distance separating interpreters of the Song compounds the polysemous capacity of these metaphors; situated in distinct social, historical, and literary locations, said interpreters have arrived at strongly divergent conclusions with respect to their identification of the referential meanings communicated in this poetic text.[36] The foregoing methodological comments thus suggest the usefulness of bringing various readings of the Song into dialogue with each other, devoting particular attention to their points of disagreement in order to clearly and consistently determine whether the text genuinely exhibits discursive polysemy.[37] To that end, the remainder of this article is struc-

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2004), 214–18.

[32] Ibid., 218.

[33] Cf. ibid., 228–30.

[34] See T.K. Beal, "Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production," in D.N. Fewell (ed.), *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 27–39 (28).

[35] F. Landy, "Song of Songs," in R. Alter and F. Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987), 305–19 (306).

[36] E.M. Good, *The Song of Songs: Codes of Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 27–30; cf. Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," 107; G. Aichele, "Canon as Intertext: Restraint or Liberation?" in R.B. Hays, S. Alkier, and L.A. Huizenga (eds.), *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 139–56 (142).

[37] In some respects, this aspect of my project, although differing in objective, finds similarities in the postmodern reading of the Song presented by F.C. Black, "Nocturnal Egression: Exploring Some Margins of the Song of Songs," in A.K. Adam (ed.), *Postmodern Interpretations of the*

tured around studies of two related passages that highlight the Song's capacity *qua* discourse to communicate a multiplicity of denotations whilst remaining a single, cohesive linguistic unit: the woman's sexual escapade in Song 5:2–6 and her second encounter with the watchmen in 5:7, each of which has been selected on account of the diversity of responses it has elicited from recent interpreters. In keeping with the model outlined in this section, my analysis of these verses identifies and describes instances of polysemy at both the lexical and the discursive levels, demonstrating thereby how instances of the former contribute to the broad referential potential of the latter.

IMAGES OF THE (AUTO)EROTIC IN SONG 5:2–6

The overtly sexual language of Song 5:2–6[38] provides an apt initial case study for tracking what I have thus far termed the Song's discursive polysemy; note, first, these verses' structural position as the literary centre of Canticles[39] and, secondly, the wide-ranging interpretive disagreement concerning the meaning and significance of the contents thereof.

Of the elements within this pericope that lend themselves to the production of conflicting readings, the apparently dream-like quality of the scene described herein deserves initial comment insofar as it highlights the connection between lexical and discursive polysemy introduced above.[40] To this end, it is apposite that much of the scholarly discussion has hinged on understanding the opening phrase אֲנִי יְשֵׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר (I was asleep but my heart was awake) and, more particularly, determining whether the woman's level of consciousness as marked in this construction continues to obtain

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Bible: A Reader (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 93.

[38] Although the literary unity of Song 5:2–6:3 is well noted by interpreters (e.g., R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, in S.D. McBride Jr. [ed.], [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990], 168), I have chosen only to analyze these first verses out of consideration for space and because the diversity of readings they have engendered adequately illustrates the interpretive value of my chosen approach.

[39] Black, "Nocturnal Egression," 98.

[40] See F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (BLS; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 58. Exegetes have often merely assumed a dream interpretation of this passage; examples include, e.g., A. Brenner, "Women Poets and Authors," in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (FCB, 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 86–97 (89); Black, "Nocturnal Egression," 98 n. 20. Along similar lines, see the psychological interpretation offered by D.C. Polaski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammite? Women, Power, and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 5 (1997), 64–81 (78). As an anonymous reviewer kindly drew to my attention, however, stringent criticisms of the dream interpretation have been forthcoming, as recently evidenced in C. Meredith's study, *Journeys in the Songscape: Space and the Song of Songs* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), esp. ch. 2.

throughout the subsequent verses. The inclusion of the adjective יְשֵׁנָה alongside the *qal* participle עֵר contributes to the ambiguity of this expression, the former referring elsewhere in 1 Sam 26:12 and Dan 12:2 to the act of sleeping[41] and the latter functioning in the prophetic literature especially to denote the literal act of being awoken.[42] In Song 5:2, עֵר serves as a predicate modifying the noun phrase וְלִבִּי;[43] commentators such as Marcia Falk and Ilana Pardes have consequently treated the juxtaposition between the mention of the female's sleep and the subsequent allusion to the wakeful-ness of her heart as indicative of this figure's subconscious state and, therefore, the inherently illusory character of what follows.[44] The necessity of this conclusion is challenged, however, by the semantic capacity of the root עור to refer as well to an individual's sexual arousal (cf. Song 4:16),[45] a denotation that, if realized in 5:2, might plausibly suggest that the woman introduced in vv. 2–6 is instead a conscious participant in an extended sexual episode.[46] A literalistic reading of the narrative development of these verses lends *prima facie* tenability to this latter interpretation, with the man's immediate arrival and violent pounding (דוֹפֵק) at the door in 5:2b leading several exegetes to reject the possibility that the woman maintains her slumber throughout the remainder of the pericope.[47] In light of such antonymous readings, the model of discursive polysemy adopted here acquires explanatory power, allowing for the potential legitimacy of each of the foregoing inter-pretations (along with multitudinous variations and hybridizations thereof) without thereby necessitating that one posit multiple, homophonous underlying texts.

Recent interpretations of the woman's own activities within this erotic scene have similar import, drawing further attention to the polysemous quality of Song 5:2–6. Focusing attention first on elements in the lexical domain, observe the poet's ubiquitous

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[41] *DCH*, 4:335.

[42] E.g., Isa 52:1; Hab 2:19. See *DCH*, 4:314–15.

[43] Cf. B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 623–24.

[44] M. Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 121; I. Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 131. Though, note that Falk identifies the blurring between reality and fantasy as beginning in v. 4 when the woman begins to go to her lover (Falk, *Song of Songs*, 122).

[45] E.g., J.C. Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *ZAW* 85 (1973), 47–79 (61); D. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in D. Garret and P.R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (WBC, 23B; Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 206.

[46] Cf. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 161.

[47] See, e.g., M.D. Goulder, *Song of Fourteen Songs* (JSOTSup, 36; Shef-field: JSOT Press, 1986), 41; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 170; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 206.

manipulation of double entendre,[48] with terms such as רֶגֶל ,רֹאשׁ ,יָד, and חֹר communicating both banally innocuous and titillatingly carnal meanings that cumulatively contribute to the indeterminacy of these verses. As is the case for doubly-coded discourses, the polysemous potential of these terms is realized in the practices of those exegetes who embrace one set of denotations whilst arguing that others remain unexpressed in the denotative range of the text itself. The readings of Michael D. Goulder and Murphy are illustrative in this respect; each maintains that the narrative development of these verses is sufficiently clear to exclude all but a decidedly non-sexual, and seemingly innocently surficial, understanding of these lexical items.[49] Calling into question the value of such exclusionary reading practices, however, are the pervasively sexual interpretations that abound within the wider exegetical literature, which include attempts to identify connections between each of the aforementioned expressions and specific components of both male and female genitalia.[50] Thus, to cite but a few well-known examples, note that יָד may be understood as evoking phallic imagery in Song 5:4 when read intertextually with Isa 57:8–10 and the Ugaritic text "The Birth of the Beautiful God";[51] similarly, רֹאשׁ may be taken with reference to the man's penis rather than merely as a signifier of his head;[52] finally, the noun רֶגֶל has a well-noted usage elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as a euphemism for the genitals.[53] Instead of effecting the univocality of the discourse, the cumulative result of this lexical polysemy is to contribute to the plurality of meanings communicated in the pericope, obscuring for readers the precise content of the events described. Roland Boer's pornographic retelling of this passage appositely exhibits the constructive opportunities available when engaging with such polysemous spaces; in a further demonstration of the degree to which the language of the Song licenses interpretations that differ sharply from the literalism of Goulder and Murphy, Boer incorporates these various lexical items into a dramatic account of the violent penetration of his female character Sue Lammith by the male figure Frank Incense.[54]

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[48] This literary device is taken as a form of polysemy by Noegel, "Polysemy," 179.

[49] Goulder, *Song of Fourteen Songs*, 41; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 171.

[50] Cf. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 165–66; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 207–8.

[51] M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB, 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 517; cf. *DCH*, 4:82.

[52] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 207.

[53] See *DCH*, 7:411.

[54] R. Boer, "Night Sprinkle(s): Pornography and the Song of Songs," in idem, *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (Biblical Limits; London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 53–70 (69). Tellingly, Boer states at the outset of this section that his intent is to "take a 'literal' reading to its logical extreme" (ibid., 64).

Aside from Boer's approach, the broad denotative capacity of the woman's self-narrated sexual escapade in vv. 5:2–6 is thrown into further relief by those exegetes who, in a natural development of treatments of this pericope that recognize it as an unfolding dream sequence,[55] analyze these verses as an extended autoerotic fantasy. Championing this view is Carey E. Walsh, for whom the text's mention of the woman's progressive opening of herself, the accumulating fluids on the woman's fingers (וְיָדַי נָטְפוּ־מוֹר וְאֶצְבְּעֹתַי מוֹר עֹבֵר [My hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh]; 5:5),[56] and, finally, the disappearance of the man (5:6) shortly after the ostensive reference to an orgasm in the construction וּמֵעַי הָמוּ עָלָיו (and my womb moaned on account of him; 5:4b)[57] together suggest that the female lover is recounting an experience of masturbation.[58] In light of the distinction proposed above between polysemy and polyvalency, note the manner in which Walsh's interpretation alters the referential content of the male figure, who recedes to being merely an entity constructed and projected by the woman's (and perhaps the reader's) erotic imagination;[59] of course, it remains for the reader to determine whether, and if so how, he or she will accept the text's ostensive invitation to participate with the female lover in her masturbatory fixation on the beloved (see, e.g., Song 8:13). In contrast to Walsh's proposal,[60] however, most recent interpretations of this passage have proceeded according to the assumption that the man is physically present to interact with the woman.[61] Thus, as an additional example in this regard, Marvin H. Pope sees in the inclusion of the previously discussed phallic imagery a description of heterosexual intercourse.[62] Duane Garrett follows a similar line, albeit with the additional nuance that the coitus so described also entails the loss of the woman's virginity.[63] In both these and the previous readings, the interpretive disagreement reflects the ambiguity of the text's inclusion of polysemous lexical items to convey the erotic qualities of this scene.

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[55] Burrus and Moore, "Unsafe Sex," 43 n. 61.

[56] Though she hesitates to identify masturbation as this passage's principal denotation, see Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 132; cf. Boer, "Night Sprinkle(s)," 60.

[57] It is apt that, in Song 5:4a, the woman recalls the action of her beloved thrusting his hand into the (her?) hole (דּוֹדִי שָׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן־הַחֹר).

[58] C.E. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 113.

[59] Compare the idea of the woman conjuring her beloved in Exum, *Song of Songs*, 188.

[60] Explicitly rejected by Longman, *Song of Songs*, 161; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 208.

[61] E.g., Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 60–67.

[62] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 518–19.

[63] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 212–13.

This section has surveyed a spectrum of distinct readings of Song 5:2–6, which together suggest the polysemous nature of this text inasmuch as they diverge not merely with respect to the values they ascribe to the features therein (polyvalency) but also regarding these verses' referential content (polysemy). I have argued throughout that this pericope's capacity to convey variegated and distinct meanings is promoted by the prevalence of polysemous terms such as עור, which, on account of their ubiquity, contribute in a cumulative fashion to the multiplicity of discursive denotations evident herein. As I will demonstrate in the following discussion, similar considerations emerge when reflecting on the notoriously perplexing events recounted in Song 5:7.

QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES? (SONG 5:7)

Whether it is understood as a component of a larger fantasy, as the violent repression of the female lover's sexuality, or is simply ignored,[64] the watchmen's (הַשֹּׁמְרִים) beating of the woman in Song 5:7 is of particular interest for the current investigation insofar as the range of responses this scene has engendered provides additional demonstration of the Song's polysemous character.[65]

Momentarily setting aside the question of whether this verse recounts a physical or an imagined event, opinions on which are largely conditioned by the exegete's position concerning the woman's state of consciousness in the preceding vv. 2–6,[66] the referential divergence identifiable herein principally pertains to the severity of the watchmen's attack. As has been the case elsewhere, however, the presence of multiple meanings in this passage as a discourse is itself the product of polysemy at the lexical level. The term רְדִיד is particularly germane in this respect, referring here to the article of clothing stripped from the woman in her encounter with the guards. Conditioning the ambiguity of this term is its limited attestation within the Hebrew Bible as a distinct corpus, occurring elsewhere only in Isa 3:23 as a constituent of a longer list of fineries worn by the daughters of Zion (בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן);[67] it is consequently necessary to rely on contextual signals supplied by the language of the Song itself in order to determine the precise signification of רְדִיד in this verse. To that end, several commentators, noting parallels between the actions of the watchmen and those pre-

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[64] It is one of the more glaring omissions in the essay prepared by P. Trible, "Love's Lyrics Redeemed," in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (FCB, 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 100–120.

[65] Note, for instance, the excellent reflections offered in F.C. Black and J.C. Exum, "Semiotics in Stained Glass: Edward Burne-Jones's Song of Songs," in J.C. Exum and S.D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOTSup, 266; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 315–42 (336–40).

[66] E.g., Longman, *Song of Songs*, 169.

[67] Translated as "veil" in *DCH*, 7:420–21; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 527.

scribed in Assyrian legal codes, have posited that the entity men-
tioned is a veil, which as an indicator of luxury that marks the
woman as a seductress (cf. Prov 7:10–12) causes the guards to
mistake her for a prostitute and respond with violence.[68] Given the
significant challenges that beset this proposal, however, including
the guards' failure to consult witnesses before launching their
assault,[69] exegetes have also suggested more obviously figural func-
tions for רְדִיד. As but one permutation of this last approach, note
those psychological readings that treat the garment as signifying the
woman's personal and sexual boundaries, which, in a striking con-
trast to the garment she removed privately in v. 3 (כֻּתֹּנֶת), are here
broken forcefully as the woman is exposed to the scorn of the
public eye.[70]

Taken alongside the text's further inclusion of the denotatively
ambiguous verbs נכה and פצע in its description of the woman's
beating,[71] the range of interpretations available for the meaning of
רְדִיד contributes polysemy to Song 5:7 by obscuring the intensity of
the watchmen's attack. If read as a sexual assault, for instance, the
juxtaposition between the woman being beaten and her being
stripped lends itself within the nighttime setting of this verse to the
construction of a disturbing image of rape,[72] irrespective of one's
views as to which specific garment(s) is removed.[73] Insofar as it
follows after the overt, if slightly surreal, celebration of female
sexuality in 5:2–6, the language of this text further licenses psycho-

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[68] O. Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. F.J. Gaiser (CC; Minneapolis, MN:
Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 195; Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 66; cf. I. Provan,
Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rap-
ids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 335. Though, in an example of polyvalency,
others have argued that even if this connection is correct it is an extra-
neous detail within the Song (e.g., Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 171).

[69] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 198; cf. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 169.

[70] Black, "Nocturnal Egression," 101–2; Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*,
226. Landy further identifies the watchmen as "the guardians of public
morality" (*Paradoxes of Paradise*, 146).

[71] The term נכה, the *hiphil* stem of which is used in this verse (הִכּוּנִי),
may denote, among its other meanings, striking as an act of violence (e.g.,
1 Kgs 20:35; Isa 50:6; Mic 5:1) or an attack which results in the object of
the action being killed (e.g., Lev 24:17; 1 Kgs 15:27) (*DCH*, 5:684–85).
The verb פצע, which is found in the *qal* stem in this verse (פְּצָעוּנִי), refers
more generally to wounding an individual. With this denotation, it is
found only here and in 1 Kgs 20:37 (*DCH*, 6:735; *HALOT*, 3: 954). Illus-
trative of the differences of opinion which have obtained with respect to
the meanings of these terms in this verse, Goulder contends, in contrast
to the readings highlighted below, that the text does not indicate that the
guards drew blood in their attack (*Song of Fourteen Songs*, 42).

[72] Black, "Nocturnal Egression," 101; Good, *Song of Songs*, 101; cf.
Longman, *Song of Songs*, 169. In contradistinction to these readings, how-
ever, note the apparent approval of the guards' actions in the work of
Goulder, *Song of Fourteen Songs*, 42.

[73] As has been astutely noted by Exum, *Song of Songs*, 197.

analytic proposals in which the guards serve as projections of the woman's subconscious; possible analyses of these projections include identifying them as reflections of the female lover's internalization of patriarchal attitudes or else of her emotional response to the (apparently traumatic) loss of her virginity in the preceding scene.[74] Finally, note the manner in which Boer's pornographic reading exploits the plurality of denotations communicated in the language of this passage, with Boer adjusting the imagery of 5:7 in order to rewrite it as a depiction of sadomasochistic sex in which the female character endures the literal, and only ambiguously consensual, violence of the watchmen for the erotic pleasure of the viewer.[75]

The rhetorical style of Song 5:7 enables the diversity of interpretations that I have briefly highlighted in the current section; in the abruptness of its description and the lexical ambiguity of its terminology, Song 5:7 opens itself to such conflicting visions as Boer's eroticism and the shocking descriptions of rape identified by feminist interpreters.[76] As was likewise the case in Song 5:2–6, these differences concern the referential values of the text and its constituent elements rather than merely interpreters' appraisals of those elements, ethical or otherwise. Readers might hold contradictory intuitions as to whether the sadomasochistic power exchanges noted in Boer's essay are deserving of esteem or condemnation, and thereby evidence the verse's polyvalence; by attending specifically to contrasts with respect to denotation, however, the present study goes further than merely noting such polyvalence, obtaining results that suggest the appropriateness of treating Song 5:7 as an additional example of discursive polysemy.

CONCLUSION

This article has articulated an integrated understanding of polysemy that accounts for linguistic elements at both the lexical and the discursive levels, thereby attempting to overcome some of the limitations of existing studies of Hebrew polysemy that give exclusive attention to the former. To that end, by identifying and contrasting a broad spectrum of interpretations for my chosen case studies of Song 5:2–6 and 5:7 I have highlighted the manner in which a selection of expressions therein contribute to the multiplicity of mean-

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[74] For the former reading, see Polaski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammite?", 78–79. For the latter, consult Garrett, "Song of Songs," 214.

[75] Boer, "Night Sprinkle(s)," 69. Compare Boer's reading with the pleasure attributed to the woman in her suffering by Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. C. McCambley (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 221. Additional discussion of the Song *vis-à-vis* sadomasochism is offered in Y. Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 5.

[76] Burrus and Moore, "Unsafe Sex," 49.

ings communicated in these passages as cohesive units. Whether through the manipulation of double entendre or the inclusion of a paucity of illumining details in the co-text, in each instance the inclusion of ambiguous terminology lends itself to strongly divergent interpretations of the scene's action. Since these readings differed, and in several instances conflicted, with respect to their identification of the denotations of the underlying discourses whilst nevertheless cohering etymologically in that their objects were Song 5:2–6 and 5:7 as cohesive texts, both case studies were argued to be instances of discursive polysemy that, in turn, suggest the polysemous (rather than homophonous) character of Canticles as a whole.

Concerns of space precluded me from offering more than a cursory discussion of those macro-features within the Song that evidence its broad denotative capacity; consequently, further researchers would benefit from expanding my own corpus to include a more thorough analysis of instances of polysemy elsewhere in this discourse. Likewise, expanding the range of interpretations under review, particularly to include those from outside the modern and postmodern periods, would be a fruitful next step for scholars seeking to systematically draw out the variegated meanings expressed in the Song in light of the diachronic dimension of polysemy referenced above. Nevertheless, given the consistency with which my model enabled me to identify and describe instances of polysemy in my two chosen case studies, any such extensions of the present work would benefit from adopting the framework proposed here to inform their approach.