



Best preserved of all the Lady Mary mosaics is a network composed of eighty small birds and two outside peacocks. Each bird is enclosed in a medallion which is linked with others on all sides to form an overall carpet. Puzzle for an ornithologist, this mosaic covered the floor of the chapel.



Minted at Constantinople is this gold coin of Phocas (A.D. 602-610), the last Emperor but one to rule Palestine. The hoard included four more coins of Phocas, two of Maurice Tiberius (A.D. 582-602), and three of Heraclius (A.D. 610-641).



When a stone-paved floor was stripped, apparently in antiquity, a rich hoard of gold hidden beneath the paving went unnoticed. It included this chain, a bracelet, and ten gold coins. The gold was probably hidden during the Arab conquest of A.D. 636, when Palestine's link with the Roman Empire was severed.

"Love Finds a Way"
Part of the reverse of a tablet, inscribed about 1750 B.C., excavated by the University of Pennsylvania some seventy years ago, and now in the Hilprecht Collection of the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, East Germany.



The Biblical "Song of Songs" and the Sumerian Love Songs

by SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER



The Biblical book commonly known as Solomon's "Song of Songs" or "Canticles," is like no other book in the Old Testament. Unlike the other Biblical writings, it is not concerned with the history of the Hebrew people, and contains no revealing prophecies or inspiring preachments; in fact it seems to be nothing more than a loosely organized collection of sensuous love songs devoid of any religious, theological, moralistic, or didactic motivation. No wonder that there was considerable debate among the early Rabbis about the propriety of including it in the Biblical canon altogether, although once included, it came to be looked upon as one of the most inspiring books in the Old Testament, since it was interpreted allegorically with Jahweh in the role of the lover, and the Hebrew people in the role of His bride.

Modern scholarship, however, cannot accept this whimsical and fanciful allegorical interpretation, attractive as it may be. To judge from what we now know of the history and culture of the Ancient Near East, there is good reason to conclude that at least some of the passionate and rhapsodic love songs of which the book is composed, are cultic in origin, and were sung in the course of the *hieros gamos*, or "sacred marriage," between a king and a votary of Astarte, the Canaanite goddess of love and procreation whom even so wise a Hebrew king as the great Solomon worshipped and adored, according to 1 Kings 11:5. But as more than one scholar has surmised, this Canaanite rite itself has Mesopotamian roots; it goes back to the Tammuz-Ishtar cult, which in turn is a Semitic Akkadian counterpart of the Sumerian Dumuzi-Inanna cult. Until recently, there was little of a tangible and substantive nature to support this hypothesis. But in the course of recent years, a considerable amount of new Sumerian literary material has come to light which points to the importance of the Sumerian legacy to Biblical literature as a whole, and tends to confirm the thesis that at least

some of the songs in the book of Canticles reflect Sumerian origins. The following pages will sketch briefly the contents of the relevant Sumerian literary compositions, most of which are inscribed on tablets excavated by the University Museum itself or in association with some other institution, and will present translations of the more pertinent among them.

The Dumuzi-Inanna cult and the sacred marriage ceremony which was its central rite, originated as far as we can tell at present in the city known in the Bible as Erech, in the cuneiform literature as Unug or Urug, and in modern Arabic as Warka. The ruins of this city, situated about two hundred miles south of modern Baghdad, have been excavated on and off for more than three decades by a highly competent German expedition which has made innumerable archaeological and epigraphic discoveries, including hundreds of pictographic tablets that take us back to the very beginning of the cuneiform system of writing. But when it comes to the Dumuzi-Inanna cult, our basic sources of information are the tablets excavated by the University Museum at Sumer's cultural center, Nippur, about sixty miles northwest of Erech. From the compositions inscribed on these tablets about 1750 B.C., whose contents may go back to a considerably earlier date, we may infer the following historical development behind the Dumuzi-Inanna cult.

Dumuzi, whose life and deeds had made a deep impression upon his own and future generations, was a prominent ruler of the important Sumerian city-state of Erech early in the third millennium B.C. The tutelary deity of Erech was Inanna, a goddess who throughout Sumerian history was deemed to be the deity primarily responsible for sexual love, fertility, and procreation, and the names of Dumuzi and Inanna no doubt became closely intertwined in the early myth and ritual of Erech. Sometime about the middle of the third millennium, however, when the Sumerians were becoming more and more nationally minded, and the theologians were in the process of systematizing and classifying the Sumerian pantheon accordingly, there arose the seemingly quite plausible and not unattractive idea that the king of Sumer, no matter who he was, or from what city he originated, must become the husband of the life-giving goddess of love, that is, Inanna of Erech, if he were to insure effectively the fecundity and prosperity of the land and its people. After the initial idea had become accepted dogma, it was actually carried out in ritual practice by the consummation of a marriage ceremony, which was probably repeated every New Year, between the king and a specially selected hierodule from Inanna's temple in Erech. To lend importance and prestige, however, to both the credo and the rite, it was advisable to carry them back to earlier times, and the honor of being the first mortal ruler to have become the husband of Inanna, Erech's most revered deity, not unnaturally fell to Dumuzi, the Erech ruler who over the centuries had become a memorable figure in Sumerian legend and lore.

Actually it may turn out that the rite of the sacred marriage between Inanna and the king goes back to pre-Dumuzi days. In one of the Sumerian epic tales recovered in recent years, which concerns the power struggle between Erech and a city-state probably situated in northwestern Iran, known as Aratta, we find the ruler of Aratta sending a threatening message to Enmerkar, a king of Erech, which reads:

*Let him (Enmerkar) bend the neck before us, carry the basket for me;
When he has bent the neck before me, has bent the . . . neck before me,
Then he and I—
He will live with Inanna by the wall,
(But) I will live with Inanna in the lapis lazuli house of Aratta,
Will lie by her side on a fruitful bed,
Will lie in sweet slumber on the ornate (?) (bed);
He will gaze upon Inanna (only) in dreams of the night,
(But) I will converse with Inanna near her feet, all-white.*

While not everything in this passage is crystal clear, it does indicate that already in the days of Enmerkar who, according to Sumerian historical tradition, reigned in Erech two generations before Dumuzi, the royal marriage with the goddess Inanna was an essential part of Sumerian rite and creed. Be that as it may, it was the premarital courting and wooing of Inanna by

Dumuzi which became a favorite subject of the Sumerian poets and bards. One of the most charming of these consists of a two-column tablet now in the Hilprecht collection of the University of Jena in East Germany, which may not inaptly be entitled "Love Finds a Way" or "Fooling Mother." Its two main characters are the goddess Inanna "Queen of Heaven," the Sumerian Venus, and Dumuzi (known also by names Kulianna, Amaushumgalanna, and Kulienlil), her mortal sweetheart and husband-to-be. The first stanza begins with a soliloquy by Inanna who says:

*Last night as I, the Queen, was shining bright,
Last night as I, the Queen of Heaven, was shining bright,
As I was shining bright, was dancing about,
As I was singing away while the bright light conquered the night,
He met me, he met me,
The lord Kulianna met me,
The lord put his hand into my hand,
Amaushumgalanna embraced me.*

Then follows an amorous tête-à-tête between the two lovers with Inanna pleading:

*Come now, set me free, I must go home,
Kulienlil, set me free, I must go home,
What can I say to deceive my mother,
What can I say to deceive my mother Ningal?*

But this does not stop Dumuzi who has a ready answer:

*I will tell you, I will tell you,
Inanna, most beautiful of women, I will tell you.
(Say) 'My girl friend took me with her to the public square,
There a player entertained us with dances,
His chant, the sweet, he sang for us.'
Thus deceitfully stand up to your mother,
While we by the moonlight take our fill of love;
I will prepare for you a bed pure, sweet, and noble,
The sweet day will bring you joyful fulfillment.*

The first half of the second stanza is destroyed; the second half consists of a monologue by Inanna announcing joyfully that Dumuzi will speak for her hand to her mother, and concluding with an ecstatic eulogy of her husband-to-be:

*I (Inanna) have come to my mother's gate,
Walking in joy,
I have come to Ningal's gate,
Walking in joy.*

*To my mother he (Dumuzi) will say the word,
Will sprinkle cypress oil on the floor,
To my mother Ningal he will say the word,
Will sprinkle cypress oil on the floor,
He whose dwelling is fragrant
Whose word brings joy.*

*My lord of pure and seemly limbs,
Amaushumgalanna, the (future) son-in-law of Sin (Inanna's father),
My lord sweet is your increase,
Tasty your plants and herbs in the plain,
Amaushumgalanna sweet is your increase,
Tasty your plants and herbs in the plain.*

While according to this poem, Inanna and Dumuzi kept their love a secret and were even prepared to deceive Inanna's mother, there is another version of the affair according to which Dumuzi woos his bride in the open, and with her mother's full approbation. According to this myth, Dumuzi, the shepherd, comes to Inanna's house carrying fat and milk, and begs the goddess for admittance. After consultation with her mother, Inanna bathes and anoints herself, puts on her queenly robes, and awaits her lover expectantly. Dumuzi pushes open the door, enters the house beaming, and the pair take their joy in love. Here there is a break in the tablet of perhaps

some fifty lines or so; when the text becomes intelligible again, we find Dumuzi addressing Inanna as his wife, telling her that he will take her to his city and the house of his god. The remainder of the poem is fragmentary; as far as we can tell, it seems to relate what happened upon the arrival of Inanna at Dumuzi's city.

Following are the two well-preserved passages in the myth which have some bearing on our theme. The one has Dumuzi begging for admittance to Inanna's house, and reads:

The shepherd carried fat in his hands,
Dumuzi carried fat at his side,
Fat and milk he carried in small pots at his side,
Milk and beer he carried in pitchers (?) at his side,
[The shepherd] speaks by the house,
Dumuzi speaks by the house:
"Open the house, my lady, open the house,
[Open the house, Inanna, open the house]."

In the second passage we find Inanna dressing up in her "Sunday" best to greet Dumuzi with joy and love:

Inanna at her mother's command,
Bathed herself, anointed herself with sweet oil,
Dressed herself in robes of noble Ladyship,
Took her ,
Arranged the lapis lazuli beads about her neck,
Fastened the carnelian beads about her hands,
The Queen awaited (?) him expectantly.
Dumuzi pressed open the door,
Like the light of the moon, he entered (?) the house,
Rejoiced at the sight of her,
Embraced her

The nuptial bed of Inanna and Dumuzi is the theme of another Sumerian poem which is of no little significance for the history of technology, since it provides us with a step-by-step account of the process of weaving, as practiced by the Sumerians some four thousand years ago. Most of the poem consists of a tête-à-tête between Inanna and her brother, the sun god Utu, which reads:

"Sister mine, I will bring you plucked (?) flax,
Inanna, I will bring you plucked (?) flax."

"Brother, after you have brought me the plucked (?) flax,
Who will comb it for me, who will comb it for me?
That flax, who will comb it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring it to you combed,
Inanna, I will bring it to you combed."

"Brother, after you have brought it to me combed,
Who will spin it for me, who will spin it for me,
That flax, who will spin it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring it to you spun,
Inanna, I will bring it to you spun."

"Brother, after you have brought it to me spun,
Who will braid it for me, who will braid it for me?
That flax, who will braid it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring it to you braided,
Inanna, I will bring it to you braided."

"Brother, after you have brought it to me braided,
Who will warp it for me, who will warp it for me?
That flax, who will warp it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring it to you warped,
Inanna, I will bring it to you warped."

"Brother, after you have brought it to me warped,
Who will weave it for me, who will weave it for me?
That flax, who will weave it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring it to you woven,
Inanna, I will bring it to you woven."

"Brother, after you have brought me the woven flax,
Who will dye it for me, who will dye it for me?
That flax, who will dye it for me?"

"Sister mine, I will bring you the flax dyed,
Inanna, I will bring you the flax dyed."

"Brother, after you have brought me the flax dyed,
Who will bed with me, who will bed with me?"

"With you he will bed, he will bed,
With you your husband will bed,
Amaushumgalanna will bed with you,
Kuli-Enlil will bed with you,
He who has come forth from the fertile womb will bed with you,
The seed begotten on the dais, will lie with you."

While the poems cited in the preceding pages celebrate the courting and marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi himself, the king of Erech, we now have two compositions portraying the marriage of the goddess with later rulers of Sumer who were identified symbolically with Dumuzi. Thus on a recently published tablet of unknown provenience we find a composition designated by the ancient scribe himself as "A Ritual(?) Song of Inanna," which provides a step-by-step description of the holy marriage rite between the goddess and an unnamed Sumerian king, which may be tentatively sketched as follows: After the king had prepared the nuptial bed, and had food and drink placed before him, the holy men known as "linen-weavers" address him as Dumuzi and in riddle-like phrases announce the presence of Inanna. The goddess then invites the king whom she calls Dumuzi by name, to approach her, and we then find the pair standing before Enlil, the leading deity of the Sumerian pantheon, in a shrine known as the Kiur, where Inanna utters a prayer for the king's life and reign. The ceremony concludes with the king praying to the goddess to give him her breast from which he will drink the milk, to assure, no doubt, the fertility and prosperity of Sumer and its people.

Even more detailed and instructive is another composition, a hymn to Inanna, inscribed on a number of tablets and fragments excavated in Nippur, which closes with the celebration of the holy marriage between the goddess and Iddin-Dagan, a king who reigned a millennium later than Dumuzi, in Sumer's last dying days when it was being overwhelmed by the Semitic nomads from the west. Here is how the ancient poet describes it:

In the palace, the house which guides the land, the house of the king of all the lands,

In its judgment-hall (?), where the blackheaded people gather,
He (the king) erected a dais for the "Queen of the Palace" (Inanna),
The king, the god, lived with her in its midst.

In order to care for the life of all the lands,
To examine closely the ,

To carry out to perfection the divine rules on the day of "sleeping,"

On the New Year, the day of rites,

A sleeping place was set up for "my queen."

They (the people) purify it with pots full of rushes, and cedar.

They set them up for "my queen" as their bed,

Over it they spread a coverlet,

A coverlet which rejoices the heart, makes sweet the bed.

"My queen" is bathed at the holy lap,

Is bathed at the lap of the king,

Is bathed at the lap of Iddin-Dagan,

The holy Inanna is scrubbed with soap,

Fragrant cedar oil is sprinkled on the ground.

The king goes with lifted head to the holy lap,

Goes with lifted head to the lap of Inanna,

Amaushumgalanna (one of the names of Dumuzi) beds with her,

*Your place goodly as honey, pray lay (your) hand on it,
Bring (your) hand over it like a gishban-garment,
Cup (your) hand over it like a gishban-sikin garment.*

In Sumer, then, practically all the love songs recovered to date—and no doubt many more like them are still lying in the ancient ruins—relate in one way or another to the Dumuzi-Inanna cult and its joyous sacred marriage rites. Similarly the love songs of which the Biblical book, "Song of Songs," is composed, must originally have been cultic in character—*a priori*, it is hardly likely that the Hebrew men of letters spent their time and labor on collecting frivolous romantic love ballads current in the street and market place. Then, too, the imagery found in the songs—the similes, metaphors, and rhapsodic adjurations—bespeak court poetry rather than idyllic love lyrics between a man and a maid. And since the lover is designated repeatedly as both king and shepherd, it is not unreasonable to assume that his beloved was an Astarte votary, and that at least some of the "canticles" were recited during a sacred marriage ceremony not too different from that which featured the Sumerian Dumuzi-Inanna cult. To be sure, aesthetically speaking, the songs in Solomon's "Song of Songs," with their concrete, impassioned, and sensuous imagery, are far superior to their stilted, repetitive, and relatively unemotional Sumerian forerunners. But there is little doubt that not a few of the expressions, implications, situations, and allusions in the Biblical masterpiece go back to Sumerian literary sources, which is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the Sumerian language and literature were basic courses of study in the curriculum of the schools throughout the Ancient Near East.

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𒌦𒀭	INANNA	𒄩𒀭𒌦	GU-DA-LA (<i>embrace</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭	AMAUSHUMGALANNA	𒄩𒀭𒌦	ZAG-SAL (<i>harp</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩	NA (<i>bed</i>)	𒄩𒀭	NAR (<i>singer</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭𒌦	KULIANNA	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭	GIŠ-GU-ZA (<i>throne</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭	AMA-MU (<i>my mother</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦	MU-TI-IN (<i>bridegroom</i>)
𒌦𒀭	SIPAD (<i>shepherd</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦	HI-LI-ZU (<i>your beauty</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭𒌦	DUMUZI	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭	LAL-AM (<i>honey</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭𒌦	E-GAL-LU (<i>open the house</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦	KU-KU-DA (<i>sweet</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭	NIN-MU (<i>my sister</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦	SHA-ZU (<i>your heart</i>)
𒌦𒀭	SHESH (<i>brother</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦	KI-AG (<i>love</i>)
𒌦𒀭	LUGAL (<i>king</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦	SHU-TAG (<i>caress</i>)
𒌦𒀭𒄩𒀭𒌦	A-TU (<i>bathe</i>)	𒄩𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦	SIR-SHA-HUL-LA (<i>songs that rejoice the heart</i>)