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

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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 Jehovah 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 culic in origin, and were sung in the course of the hiero 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-Isthar cult, which in turn is a Semite 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 literate 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 Uru or Ur, 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, 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 during 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:

Lhit him (Enmerkar) bend the neck before us, carry the basket for me;
When he bends 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,
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 Kulliumana, Amanshumgalamma, and Kullianti), 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 Kulliumana met me,
The lord put his hand into my hand, Amanshumgalamma embraced me.

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

Come now, set me free, I must go home,
Kulliumana, 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 sung 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 eypress oil on the floor,
To my mother Ningal he will say the word, Will sprinkle eypress oil on the floor,
He whose dwelling is fragrant Whose word brings joy.
My lord of pure and seemly limbs, Amanshumgalamma, the (future) son-in-law of Sin (Inanna's father),
My lord sweet is your increase, Tasty your plants and herbs in the plain,
Amanshumgalamma 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 wooed 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 admission 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 tapis laceful beads about her neck, 
Fastened the cornelian 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 practised by the Sumerians some four thousand years ago. Most of the poem consists of a tite-six-line 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?"

While the poems cited in the preceding pages celebrate the courting and marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi himself, the king of Ereh, 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-wavers" 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 Enil, 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 black-haired people gather,
He (the king) erected a date for the "Queen of the Palace" (Inanna),
The king, the god, lived with her in its midst.
In order to cure 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,
It is bathed at the lap of Iddin-Dagan,
The holy Inanna is scrubbed with soap,
Pragnati 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,
Ammushugalunnu (one of the names of Dumuzi) beds with her,
Fondles lovingly her holy lap,
After the queen had long reposed on the holy lap,
She murmurs......
"O Iddin-Dagan, you......
For the holy sacrifices, for the well-established rites,
For the fire-scoured altar, for the cypress (?)-sprouting altar,
For the abundant bread-offerings, for the amply-filled vases,
He entered with her in his lofty palace,
He embraced his beloved wife,
Embraced the holy Isinna,
Led her forth like the light of day to the throne on the great day,
Installed (?) himself at her side like the king Utu, (the sun god),
Paraded abundance, cheer, and plenty before her,
Prepared a goodly feast for her,
Paraded the blackheads before her, (saying):
"With the drum (?) whose speech is louder than the storm,
The sweet-voiced lyre (?), the ornament of the palace,
The harp that soothes the spirit of man,
O singers, let us utter songs that rejoice the heart."
The king put a hand to the food and drink,
Amaushumgalanna put a hand to the food and drink,
The palace is in song, the king in joy,
By the people tasted with plenty,
Amaushumgalanna stands in lasting joy,
May his days be long on the fruitful throne.

As is clear from the lines quoted above, part of the celebration of the holy marriage rite consisted of "songs that rejoice the heart" accompanied by musical instruments. A number of these songs have actually been found in Nippur and elsewhere, but the contents of most of them are fragmentary and obscure. One of the best preserved is a passionate love song inscribed on a Nippur tablet now in the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, which was probably recited by a priestess and votary of the goddess Isinna, selected to be the holy bride of king Shu-Sin who reigned over Sumer about 2000 B.C. Addressing her king and husband-to-be, she sings:

Bridegroom, dear to my heart,
Goodly is your beauty, honey-sweet,
Lion, dear to my heart,
Goodly is your beauty, honey-sweet,
You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you,
Bridegroom, I would be taken by you to the bedchamber,
You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you,
Lion, I would be taken by you to the bedchamber.

Bridegroom, let me caress you,
My precious caress is more savoury than honey,
In the bedchamber, honey filled,
Let us enjoy your goodly beauty,
Lion, let me caress you,
My precious caress is more savoury than honey.
Bridegroom, you have taken your pleasure of me,
Tell my mother, she will give you delicacies,
My father, he will give you gifts.
Your spirit, I know where to cheer your spirit,
Bridegroom, sleep in our house until dawn,
Your heart, I know where to gladden your heart,
Lion, sleep in our house until dawn.
You, because you love me,
Give me pray of your caresses,
My lord god, my lord protector,
My Shu-Sin who gladdens Endis heart,
Give me pray of your caresses.
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-skin 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-Isinna 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 adoptions—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 Anarte 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-Isinna 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.