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AROMATICS AND PERFUMES IN THE SONG OF SONGS

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I

A few years ago Professor C. Rabin advanced a theory of Tamil influence on the Song of Songs. His hypothesis includes a tentative dating of the poems to a period during which there existed trade relations between ancient Israel and India, i.e., the era of the First Temple, possibly even the reign of King Solomon.¹ The theory is based mainly on similarities of theme and tone between the love lyrics of Tamil Šangam poetry and the Song of Songs, and is supported by information about trade with Southern Arabia and—through it—with Southern India in Solomon's time. (Cf. the story of the Queen of Sheba's visit and the account of Solomon's wealth and trade, 1 K 10 = 2 Ch 9.)

As part of his argument Rabin cites names of luxury products imported from India which occur in the Song of Songs, and whose etymology can be related to Dravidian or Sanskrit. Among these there are quite a few names of aromatic plants used for the preparation of perfumes and spices. The relevant terms—*kōper*, *nērd*, *karkōm*, *qānēh*, *qinnāmōn*, and ^a*hālōt*—are the subject of this paper; and through them I would like to attempt an examination of Rabin's hypothesis, as well as the problem of dating the Song of Songs in general.

II

Let us begin by reminding ourselves that none of our terms appears within the preserved corpus of the Solomonic narratives. In the stories about King Solomon the only term employed is the blanket term *bōsem* (pl. *bēšāmīm*) = 'perfume,' 'aromatic.' Neither do the Song of Songs terms appear within contexts that can be established as early (from the early monarchical period) with little or no doubt. The

specific terms in the Book of Genesis, for instance, are different. These are *lôt*,² *š'orî*,³ and *nêkô't*.⁴ On the other hand *qânêh*, *qinnāmôn* and *hālôt/hālīm* do feature in pre-exilic passages—namely, in some prophetic verses, Prov 7.7, and Ps 45. Hence, some vague clue as to their knowledge is possible even before we start to investigate the Song of Songs. It seems that the last three terms, at least, were known during the pre-exilic period. Nevertheless, they do not appear within the Solomonic narratives. As for *kôper*,⁵ *nêrd*,⁶ and *karkôm*⁷—here the situation is different. Apart from our Book, these do not appear elsewhere in the OT (although they recur in post-biblical Hebrew). Therefore, no conclusion can be drawn from internal biblical sources other than the Song of Songs about them and the products they denote.

Karkôm and *nêrd* are closer in form to their Persian rather than to their Indian cognates. Thus, Heb. *karkôm* = Pers. *kurkum* = Sanskr. *kuṅkuma*; Heb. *nêrd* = Pers. *nardin* = Sanskr. *nalada*.⁸ The earliest attested cognate to *karkôm* is the Akk. *kurkanû*, which features already in MB and NA.⁹ The Sanskrit *kuṅkuma* itself is of a relatively late date, and no Indian etymology is supplied for it.¹⁰ Therefore, on the surface it would seem that both *kuṅkuma* and Hebrew *karkôm* are derived from the Akkadian term.

The following arguments can be put forth against this view. Löw identifies *karkôm* not with *Crocus sativus* L., which was possibly cultivated in Syro-Palestine in the Talmudic period,¹¹ but with *Curcuma longa* L.¹² *Crocus sativus* was used for dyeing and as a spice; *Curcuma longa*, on the other hand, was used in Mesopotamia and Egypt as an aromatic too.¹³ It would seem, then, that the identification of *karkôm*, *kurkanû* as *Curcuma longa* is quite plausible. This identification is significant, for the plant under discussion is indigenous to India. Although it has been—and still is—cultivated in other tropical Asian countries,¹⁴ there is no proof of its cultivation in the ancient Near East. Now, if the plant and its products did originate in India, this makes the possibility of a linguistic loan in the opposite direction—from the Near East (Akk.) to the Far East (Indo-Aryan, Sanskrit)—much less plausible. Although, in principle, it is conceivable that a foreign name given to a product could be borrowed into its native land to the point of supplanting the indigenous name, there is no reason to assume that this actually happened in this case. In fact, it is much more common to find that a linguistic item travels across borders and languages together with the extra-linguistic entity it denotes. Therefore, even though the earliest attested occurrence of the term is in Akk., this fact is less meaningful than could be expected.

To come back to the Hebrew lexeme itself, *karkôm* is morphologically closer to its Persian cognate rather than to its Akk. counterpart, while there is no evidence of a previous alternative (closer to the Akk.) in Hebrew. Therefore, although the ultimate provenance of *karkôm* is debatable, at least we can say that it entered Hebrew not directly from its source language (probably Sanskrit) but through the mediating contact with Persian.

Similarly *nêrd*, originally from Eastern Asia as well, was known in Mesopotamia and attested in Akk. from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Again, it seems more likely that the name followed the same direction as the product, not *vice versa*; and that it is derived from an Indian word, despite the fact that no satisfactory etymology has yet been found.¹⁵ In form this lexeme too resembles its Persian—and Aramaic—cognate (*nardin*) rather than its Sanskrit (*nalada*) and Akk. equivalents. Hence, *nêrd* was probably borrowed into Hebrew through Persian.¹⁶

Cognates to *kôper*¹⁷ = 'henna'¹⁸ are to be found in Ugaritic and other ancient languages; 'the term is part of the international Mediterranean vocabulary.'¹⁹ However, no acquaintance with it is contained in any OT text other than the Song of Songs, though post-biblical sources abound in references to it.

Let us now turn to examine those terms—^a*hâlôt*, *qânêh* and *qinnâmôn*—which are far better attested in biblical literature than those discussed above. ^a*hâlôt*²⁰ = 'aloes' is also of East Asian origin.²¹ As in the previous cases, the term itself is probably of Indian provenance; the suggested Sanskrit etymology, however (*aguru*, *agaru*), is far from certain.²² Apart from in the Song of Songs the term appears also in Ps 45.9 and Prov 7.17 (in the latter instance as ^a*hâlîm*). All three texts contain allusions to and explicit descriptions of love and sensuality and, indeed, the connection between love and perfumes hardly needs any elaboration. Nevertheless, the question arises: do the texts share a common chronological context in addition to the similarity in subject matter and poetic/circumstantial framework? Much depends on the independent dating of Ps 45, concerning which there is no agreement among scholars: the psalm is variously attributed to the period of Jehu,²³ Ahab,²⁴ or some other pre-exilic king, such as King Solomon himself.²⁵ Furthermore, even if the psalm is pre-exilic, the chronological and circumstantial factors by themselves do not furnish sufficient clues as to the period in which the imported item ^a*hâlîm*, and consequently the term designating it, became known in ancient Israel.

*qânêh*²⁶ occurs—independently and with modifiers—in texts dating

from the end of the seventh century B.C. onwards. Thus *qānēh* itself (Isa 43.24; Ezek 27.19). *qānēh haṭṭōb* (Jer 6.20) has an early cognate in the form *qanū ṭābu*,²⁷ but is not attested in biblical literature itself before the above mentioned period. *qēnēh bōsem* appears in the recipe for the holy anointing oil (P; Exod 30.23). This recipe is perhaps very ancient, but its present formulation is probably post-exilic.²⁸ Therefore, the earliest reasonably safe dates for Hebrew acquaintance with *qānēh* are supplied by the occurrences in the prophetic books. The existence of Akk. *qanū*²⁹ and Ugaritic doubtful *qn(m)*³⁰ does not contribute much towards the solution of the problem, namely, what was the original native habitat of this aromatic plant³¹ and what is the linguistic provenance of the term for it. Some of the identifications suggested would, again, place the plant in India or Persia;³² however, not much more can be learnt from the available linguistic data.

*qinnāmōn*³³ occurs in the recipe of Exod 30.23 and in Prov 7.17 (cf. ^ʾ*hālīm*/^ʾ*hālôt*), but not in earlier sources. No Indian etymology is available for it, although the product itself did come from southern India.³⁴ It might have originated in Malaya;³⁵ an Indian origin, in any case, is a distinct possibility.³⁶

III

Other terms for aromatics which recur throughout the Song of Songs, but do not feature in the Solomonic stories, are *môr*³⁷ and *l'bonâh*.³⁸ Both occur in Exod 30 as well. In addition, *môr* appears in Ps 45.9 and Prov 7.17 (together with ^ʾ*hālôt*/^ʾ*hālīm*, see above); and *l'bonâh* features in prophetic texts from the end of the seventh century B.C., in post-exilic writings³⁹ and particularly in P passages.⁴⁰ The undisputed South Arabian origin of the two products makes their absence from the Queen of Sheba story quite peculiar.

For the sake of the exercise, let us put aside—for the moment—the Song of Songs passages whose date we shall attempt to uncover, together with the P passages (since even relatively late P texts may contain old materials)—and adopt the other passages cited as a guide. According to these other (more easily datable) texts, the upper chronological limit for the widespread usage/knowledge in Israel of *qānēh* and *qinnāmōn* (of Indian or at least Far Eastern provenance), and of *môr* and *l'bonâh* (of South Arabian origin), can hardly be attributed to the age of Solomon or to a slightly later era. Had the names and the products been known by the first narrator of Solomon's grandeur he could have utilized them in the interest of the story. The absence of such specific terms is perhaps an indication for the rarity of

the products here cited and, consequently, the lack of knowledge about them.

Therefore, we may ask, was there a period (apart from Solomon's era) when trade with Southern Arabia flourished, a time therefore when local as well as Indian products (together with the borrowed linguistic terms denoting them) may have been introduced into ancient Israel and thus into biblical Hebrew?

After the age of David and Solomon we hear of intensive trade connections between the Arabians and Judah during Hezekiah's reign (end of the eighth—beginning of the seventh century).⁴¹ During the interim period most of the Arabian commerce to the area was conducted through the Arameans because of the uncertain political situation. From the end of Tiglath Pileser III's reign the Assyrian hold over Syro-Palestine began to grow weaker. The Arabians themselves largely supported the Babylonians.⁴² In Palestine the kingdom of Judah became the strongest political factor. Josiah's territorial expansion was facilitated by the economic development and growth that took place during his grandfather Manasseh's long and peaceful reign.⁴³ During the era of the Neo-Babylonian empire there existed roads that led from Babylonia through the Arabian Peninsula and to Egypt.⁴⁴ Later on, of course, the whole area was incorporated within the Persian empire, and communications made easier still. Hence, commercial links with the Far East through Arabia flourished from the last quarter of the seventh century B.C. onwards.

To come back to the linguistic data. Even if we disregard the controversial *pardēs* (Song of Songs 4.13, within the word context of the aromatics we have discussed)—two of our terms, *nērd* and *karkōm*, probably entered Hebrew via Persian. The other terms, when attested elsewhere in the OT, belong to texts dating from the end of the seventh century onwards. Therefore, the examination of this limited segment of Song of Songs lexis would favour an upper date for the corpus within which it is embedded immediately before the Exile. As we have seen, this is possible in the light of extra-linguistic (cf. *qānēh*, *qinnāmōn*, ^u*hālōt*/^u*hālīm*) and historical evidence. On the other hand, the borrowing of *nērd* and *karkōm* through Persian would require an even lower date, well within the Persian period. This too is in keeping with historical evidence, and with Albright's suggestion for dating the Song of Songs as a whole.⁴⁵ A lower date would, at the same time, allow for other features prevalent in the Book, such as borrowings from Aramaic.⁴⁶ At any rate, linguistic as well as historico-economic factors point to either a very late pre-exilic or else an exilic to early post-exilic date of composition/compilation.

IV

It must be remembered that here we have worked with one segment of Song of Songs vocabulary only. If our conclusion is to be upheld, other lexical sectors should be examined and the results compared to ours, in the hope that they would be similar. Finally, our conclusion does not invalidate the possible influence of—or similarity to—Tamil poetry, its artistic form and its themes. On the contrary: if the Indian origin of the terms discussed above (or some of them) be accepted, and the Book as a whole (or large parts thereof) attributed to the late seventh or first half of the sixth century—then the relationship between the two literary traditions appears more plausible still. Commercial and hence inter-cultural and linguistic links between India and Israel during the late Neo-Babylonian and early Persian period seem quite possible. However, our conclusion does not support Rabin's dating of the Song of Songs to the Solomonic era.

NOTES

1. Ch. Rabin, 'The Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry,' *Studies in Religion* 3 (1973), pp. 205-219. The article is summarized in M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (Anchor Bible, 1977), pp. 27-33. It also appeared in Hebrew: 'q^ššārīm hōdiyyīm šel šir haššrīm,' in *B. Kurzweil Memorial Volume* (1975), pp. 264-274.
2. Gen 37.25; 43.11.
3. Gen 37.25; 43.11. Also in Jer 8.22; 46.11; 51.8; and Ezek 27.17.
4. Cf. note 2, above.
5. Song of Songs 1.14; 4.14.
6. Song of Songs 1.12; 4.13, 14.
7. Song of Songs 4.14.
8. Rabin, 'q^ššārīm,' p. 272; *idem*, *Encyclopedia Biblica*, IV (in Hebrew), 'Foreign Words,' p. 1079.
9. *CAD*, K, pp. 560f.; *AHW*, I, p. 510.
10. Cf., for instance, the list of cognates supplied by *BDB* (p. 501).
11. M. Zohari, *Enc. Bib.*, IV, p. 312; and Y. Yadin, *Hammimša'im mīymē Bar Kochba* . . . , p. 181.
12. I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden*, II, pp. 7f.
13. Zohari, *op. cit.*, pp. 312f.; A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industry*³, p. 176.
14. Zohari, *op. cit.*
15. Rabin-Zohari, 'nērd,' *Enc. Bib.*, V, pp. 927f., and bibliography cited there.
16. Pope, *op. cit.*, p. 348.
17. Song of Songs 1.14, and cf. 4.13.
18. Löw, II, pp. 218f.
19. Pope, *op. cit.*, pp. 352f.
20. Song of Songs 4.14.
21. Löw, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 643f.; III, pp. 412f.; Pope, *op. cit.*, p. 494; Zohari, *Enc. Bib.*, I, pp. 128f.

22. *BDB*, p. 14.
23. C.A. Briggs & E.G. Briggs, *Psalms* (ICC), I, p. 385.
24. Z.H. Hayyot, *Psalms* (A. Kahana's edition, in Hebrew, 1902), p. 50.
25. E.J. Kissane, *Psalms* (1953), p. 197. W.R. Taylor & W.S. McCullough, *Psalms* (Interpreter's Bible, IV), pp. 234f. The latter, and also A. Weiser, *Psalms* (OTL), pp. 362f., still mention the possibility that the psalm is a post-exilic one.
26. Song of Songs 4.14.
27. *AHw*, II, p. 898 (for OB, MB, and LB). Landsberger, *MSL* VII, p. 7.
28. M. Noth, *Exodus* (OTL), p. 238.
29. *AHw*, *ad loc.*; *MSL*, *ad loc.*
30. C. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, text 120:10 = A. Herdner, *CTA*, p. 141.
31. Löw, I, 692-696.
32. Zohari, *Enc. Bib.*, VII, pp. 200f.
33. Song of Songs 4.14.
34. Rabin, '*qēšārīm*,' p. 272.
35. *BDB*, p. 890. For the identification, cf. Löw, I, pp. 107f.
36. Rabin-Zohari, *Enc. Bib.*, VII, pp. 202f.
37. Song of Songs 1.13; 3.6; 4.6, 14; 5.1, 5(x2), 13.
38. Song of Songs 3.6; 4.6, 14.
39. Jer 6.20; 17.26; 41.5; Isa 43.23; 60.6; 66.3; Neh 13.5, 9; 1 Ch 9.29.
40. Of which one can say that they contain ancient, pre-exilic materials and phraseology that are, in most cases, much worked over. Cf. A. Hurvitz, 'The Usage of *šēš* and *būš*,' *HTR* 60 (1967), pp. 120f.
41. M. Elat, *Economic Relations in the Lands of the Bible (circa 1000-539 B.C.)*, pp. 221f. (in Hebrew).
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 108f.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 222f.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
45. W.F. Albright, 'Archaic Survivals in the Text of Canticles,' *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to G.R. Driver* (ed. D. Winton Thomas and W.D. McHardy), p. 1.
46. S.M. Paul, 'Song of Songs,' *Enc. Bib.*, VII, pp. 651f.

Erratum to JSOT 23 (1982), 123:

lines 10ff. to read: 'the saints of the Most High' in Dan. 7. The latter, according to the interpretation, are present prior to and during the eschatological judgment. While Koch is reasonably certain that the *nomen regens* 'people' refers to Israel, he prefers (with Procksch) to translate the *nomen rectum* of 'saints of the Most High' as a plural (clearer in German as ...