

# Evaluation of The Passion Translation: Song of Songs

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The Passion Translation of the Song of Songs is not a translation, but at best, an interpretive paraphrase. A translation takes the original Hebrew and works to represent the message in a way that will communicate the original message of the author to an audience who reads a different language (in this case, English).

It is true that translations must make interpretive decisions as they translate, but translators must work hard to avoid importing ideas that are foreign to the text, so as to not obscure or distort the meaning of the original text.

The main problem with The Passion Translation's treatment of the Song of Songs is that it treats the Song as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the individual Christian. Even if the Song was intended to be understood as an allegory, a translator should not import the allegorical interpretation into the translation, but rather, provide a commentary that would guide the reader into an allegorical understanding.

The closet analogy to The Passion Translation's treatment of the

Song of Songs is the Jewish Targum written in Aramaic sometime in the second half of the first millennium AD. The Targum reads the Song as if the man is Yahweh and the woman is Israel. Then, it interprets the book as an account of the history of redemption so that the opening few lines beginning, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine. Oh king, let’s run, the king has brought me into his bedroom” are taken as a reference to the Exodus from Egypt. The woman, Israel, calls on the man, God, to take her into his bedroom (the Promised Land).

While I don’t think we have a similar and specific parallel to the Aramaic Targum in Christian tradition, it is well known that Christians did interpret the Song as an allegory through the Middle Ages and up to the nineteenth century. We might think of Hippolytus (around AD 200) who took SS. 1:13 (“my lover is to me a sachel of myrrh lodged between my breasts”) as a reference to Jesus Christ who spans the Old and New Testaments. I would not be surprised if The Passion Translation intentionally mimics such an interpretive tradition.

There is a logic to this type of interpretation (not translation), but it is based on a clearly incorrect identification of the type of book (genre) the Song is. The reason why precious few people take the Song as an allegory today is because it has become clear that there are no indications in the Song itself that it is an allegory. Also, we can understand and criticize the reason why the church and the synagogue took the Song as an allegory through the Middle Ages.

Let me explain the first comment that the Song shows no signs of being an allegory. Authors write in order to communicate to readers, and they present signals to the reader concerning how their words should be taken. A non-biblical example of such a signal would be an opening that said, “once upon a time.” A reader immediately knows to take the words of the text as a fairy tale. The Bible itself sends out various signals. Think of Jesus’ teaching often referred to as a “parable.” We could go on.

The interesting thing about allegories is that they are pretty obvious to the reader. A non-biblical, but well-known example is *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Just summarizing the plot demonstrates that true allegories are obvious to the reader. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is

about a man named Christian who is traveling to the Celestial City and runs into obstacles like the Slough of Despond. Now that is an allegory, as is Bunyan's other work, *Holy War*. Here, the main character is again, Christian, who has just lost the Town of Mansoul to Commander Beelzebub, and now with the help of General Wisdom, etc., is trying to take it back. One can't miss the fact that this is an allegory.

The Bible does have allegories, but they too are obviously intended by the author/speaker to be taken as allegories (see Judg. 9:7-15; Gal. 4:21-31). There are no such signals in the Song of Songs. It is clearly a love poem.

But if the Song isn't an allegory, why was it taken as such for so long? First of all, there were people who did recognize that the Song was a poem about human love and physical intimacy, but these readings were repressed by the church authorities. In retrospect, we understand that the obvious sexual language of the Song was suppressed because it was thought (influenced by Neo-Platonic philosophy) that the body, and in particular, sex, was hostile to spiritual growth. So, it was thought that the Song could not possibly be about what the words on their surface were saying. Thus, an allegorical reading of the Song was imposed on it, in order to "de-sex" it. Again, please note the difference between the text being an allegory and an allegorical interpretation being imposed on it. The latter is what The Passion Translation does, and by so doing, it obscures the important message of the Song.

What is that important message? When taken at face value, and particularly in the context of its ancient setting, the Song is a poem about human love and sexuality. To read it as an allegory obscures that important contribution that signals to us that God created us as sexual beings, and that sexual pleasure within marriage is possible, though not easy. Indeed, the Song is part of an important biblical theology of sexuality that begins in Genesis 2. In Genesis 2, we learn that sexual relations between a man and woman are part of his creation purposes for us. And this is not just for the procreation of children, but for the uniting together of a husband and wife (see Gen. 2:23-24). At creation, there is harmony between God and humans, and so between a husband and wife (they are naked and

not ashamed, Gen. 2:25).

But of course, Genesis 3 explains why such intimacy is difficult today. Human sin ruptures the harmony between God and humans, and therefore, also between humans. The man and the woman hide from each other, and no longer can stand naked and feel no shame.

The important message of the Song is that, while sin does make physical intimacy difficult (and this difficulty is communicated in some poems such as 5:2-6:3), it is nonetheless still possible. The Song of Songs is about the already-not yet redemption of sexuality.

Furthermore, to repress the human relationship dimension of the Song is also to miss the important teaching of the Song about the healthy, vibrant relationship that God intends for a husband and a wife. Their relationship is one that is characterized by passion, mutuality, exclusivity, and more. We are getting a picture of the type of relationship that God wants us to enjoy, though there is (as I already stated) an acknowledgment in some of the poems that there are obstacles to such enjoyment.

Now all that said, there is a further theological dimension to the Song that shows that the Church Fathers (or for that matter, The Passion Translation) were not wrong that there are implications for the divine-human relationship, too. But again, let me hasten to point out that The Passion Translation is a serious problem because it represses the important teaching of the book laid out above, but also because, like the Fathers, it tries to assign specific theological meaning to the details of the Song (like Hippolytus where the two breasts=the Old and New Testaments).

The theological meaning of the Song emerges when we read the Song in the context of the whole canon where the husband-wife relationship is used to tell us something important about God's relationship with his people. It's true that most of the time this metaphor of the divine-human relationship is used negatively in the Old Testament. Israel has prostituted itself by worshiping other gods, thus betraying its relationship with God, which like marriage, should be exclusive (see for example Hosea 1; Ezekiel 16, 23). But even in the Old Testament, we occasionally see the positive use of the metaphor (Jer. 2:1-3; Hos. 2:14-15).

Of course, in the New Testament, the Christian's relationship with Christ is also pictured as a marriage (Eph. 5:20-33; Rev. 19:1-10, and more). Let me be clear though, that this in no way justifies an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, and certainly not a translation of the Song like *The Passion Translation*. The latter, as I said, does great harm by repressing what we might consider to be the primary message of the book.

So, to summarize the above, the single biggest problem of *The Passion Translation* is that it treats the Song as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the Christian, which suppresses the primary message of the book. As the comments on particular verses below in the addendum attest, much of the translation cannot be justified by the Hebrew, but emanates from this faulty genre identification.

But there are other problems. He achieves his translation by utilizing a number of ill-advised or simply wrong interpretive strategies. I will briefly comment on these now. I will also cite selective examples from my comments on specific verses and their notes below. Note that the vast majority of my examples below are specific illustrations of how he imposes his inappropriate allegorical interpretation on the text.

He appeals to the etymology of a word in a way that opens him up to the criticism that he commits what is commonly called the etymological fallacy, which is looking at root etymology to discover a word's meaning (4:14 is an excellent example of this problem).

He will sometimes use the Septuagint (Greek) as a source for his translation instead of the Hebrew. Now there are, sometimes, good textual reasons to do this, but in this case there are none (and he doesn't offer any), leaving us with the impression that he just uses the Septuagint when he prefers the reading (that is, when it supports his general approach). (4:8; 5:8)

He will sometimes justify an unusual meaning for a word based on an appeal to a Semitic root. The example in 4:9 is a good example. It does not seem valid, but he does not tell us what Semitic language (Arabic? Aramaic?) attests such a meaning.

When it comes to interpretation of the meaning of specific metaphors,

he simply asserts that x equals y, without justification. He typically does not tell us why x equals y or show us other places in Scripture where the metaphor is used in such a way. (1:8, 11; 3:6; 4:1, 6; 5:11)

On a number of occasions, he will cite authorities to support his ideas, but in ways that we cannot follow up on. He uses phrases like “some scholars” or “some Hebrew scholars.” By not telling us who, we can’t evaluate whether they exist, or if they do, whether they are competent modern scholars (2:17; 5:11; 6:4).

Often, he will distort the Hebrew by overplaying the emotional register of a translation. 3:1 is a good example. There are examples of factual errors (1:14; 2:1, 6; 8:6).

On many occasions, there is no Hebrew behind his translation, and he does not indicate this with italics (see 2:10).

He appeals to homonyms to justify the meaning of words, but why should we think that both meanings are relevant to the translation or understanding of the verse (1:14; 2:5, 12)?

## **Conclusion**

The Passion Translation is a deeply flawed presentation of the Song of Songs. Its imposition of an allegorical interpretation represses the primary meaning. One can’t hear God’s intended message in this translation. The addendum provides examples of the many problems with this interpretation.

## **Addendum**

### **Translation**

1:2 “. . . his Spirit-kiss divine.”

This represents nothing in the Hebrew text and is pure invention. The note connects this to Genesis 2:7, but there is nothing in the

language of this verse that would make that connection. It is pure fabrication based on his faulty identification of the Song as an allegory.

1:4 "...into the king's cloud-filled chamber."

There is nothing to justify this in the Hebrew. The note explains his reasoning. He takes *heder* to refer to a "chamber inside of a chamber" and makes this a reference to the Holy of Holies, a chamber inside a chamber in the tabernacle/temple. This depends on his incorrect allegorical association between the king and Jesus. The word *heder* in this context most likely refers to the bedroom.

1:5 There are so many problems with this translation, I don't know where to begin.

First, there is absolutely no indication that this is anything but the speech of the woman, though he has divided it into a back and forth between the male and female speakers.

Also, the reference to the "curtains of Solomon" he takes as a reference to the "fine linen tapestry hanging in the Holy Place." This seems odd (even if it is Solomon here and not a reference to the tribe of Salma), since it is in parallel with Kedar.

1:6 He translates the same word that in the previous verse he took as a reference to "twilight darkness" as a reference to the woman's "dark and sinful ways." Again, this is not a translation as much as an allegorical interpretation.

I am not at all sure what he means by "ministry vineyards." The Hebrew simply has vineyard and so it is a result of his allegorical interpretation to be sure, but in reference to what, specifically, I do not know.

1:8 "...just follow in my footsteps where I lead my lovers. Come with your burdens and cares. Come to the place near the sanctuary of my shepherds."

This is his translation for "follow the tracks of the sheep, and feed your young goats by the dwellings of the shepherds."

He has a note that says "Or 'graze your goats by the shepherds'

tents.’ This is a metaphor that speaks of her responsibilities and labors.”

The problem is that he does not justify reading this metaphor this way. He pulls it out of thin air. It’s really not a reading of a metaphor, but the imposition of an allegorical interpretation on a text that is not an allegory. 4:1 is a particularly egregious example, but see also, 1:8, 11; 3:6; 4:6; 5:11, among others.

### Notes:

1:2 “The word for Solomon occurs seven times in this book, which points us to the perfect King, Jesus Christ. We are one spirit with our King, united with him. You have become the Shulamite.”

This comment can only be justified by means of an allegorical reading of the Song of Songs. It is a tad ambiguous and he does not explain. What points to Jesus Christ? Solomon, the fact that the name occurs seven times (a symbolic number of completion or totality in the Bible), or both?

Well first, it is factually incorrect to say that his name occurs seven times. Solomon occurs five or possibly six times in the book (1:1, 5 [may not be a reference to Solomon]; 3:9, 11; 8:11, 12). Yes, Solomon is the son of David, and therefore in the line that leads to Christ, but that does not mean that Solomon points to Christ, particularly since Solomon plays a mainly negative role within the book.

See cover letter as to the problem of this kind of allegorical approach to the book.

1:4 “The Hebrew word for ‘rejoice’ is a homonym for ‘spinning in a circle or dance.’ The implication is that we dance for joy when we remember his love.”

I know of no such homonym. Seems like he confuses this with *hyl*.

1:7 He derives his translation of the verb ‘*atah*’ by referring to the Hebrew meaning, and also to the different direction that the Vulgate and Aramaic take it. This, of course, is illegitimate; both can’t be correct.



1:11 He says that “we” in this verse is a reference to the Trinity “which will be involved in making every Shulamite holy and radiant.”

He pulls this out of thin air. There is no reason to take it as a reference to the Trinity.

He goes on to say “The concept of silver in the Bible always points to redemption, the price paid to set us free. The cross is a ‘stud of silver’ planted into Calvary’s hill that opened the grace fountain for all the world to drink from.”

He doesn’t even cite one example where this is the case that it points to redemption.

1:12 Only his allegorical approach can justify that the table here is a reference to communion. It goes without saying that no OT person would have read it this way.

1:14 He says that En-gedi means “fountain of the Lamb” and obviously wants us to think that this is some kind of allusion to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Unfortunately for him, gedi means goat and the place name means “fountain of the goat.”

1:15 A dove is sometimes a dove. . . and not a reference to the Holy Spirit.

## **Song of Songs 2**

### **Translation**

2:1 “. . . the very theme of his song.” This is the translation he provides for “of Sharon” which in the notes he says, “can be translated ‘his song.’” No, actually, it can’t be.

Not sure where he gets “overshadowed by his love” out of the word that means “lily” or “lotus.” There is no note.

2:2 The Hebrew should be translated something like, “Like a lily among the thorns is my darling among boys.”

His translation takes thorns as a reference to “the curse of sin” and justifies that by referring to Genesis 3:18. But the word “thorn” (*hoh*) does not occur there.

He then says that the lily symbol is a symbol of purity, but does not really give any grounds for taking it that way. He simply mentions that there are lilies engraved on the upper part of the pillars of the temple (and then he imposes a NT use of temple imagery on this OT text).

2:3 He gives no justification for translating “shadow” as “grace shadow.”

2:4 “...his unrelenting love divine.” His note about banners certainly does not explain the introduction of “divine” here, but it is part of his unwarranted treatment of the Song as an allegory.

2:10 I have come as you have asked  
to draw you to my heart and lead you out.  
For now is the time, my beautiful one.

This has no Hebrew behind it.

2:11 There is nothing to suggest “hiding” in this verse either.

2:13 There is nothing about a “new day of destiny” or “early signs of my purposes and plans” in this passage.

## Notes

2:5 I am unaware of a true homonym between the word for raisin cakes and fire. If he means ‘*ash*’ or ‘*ish*’, there is no true relationship there.

In reference to apples, which he says might be apricots, he says, “these are sweet promises of grace that sustain us.” But he does not tell us why we should take them in that meaning.

2:6 “The Hebrew word for ‘left’... can also mean ‘dark.’” I am unaware of this. He then goes on a long midrash about the mysteries of God’s ways.

2:9 What makes him think that the woman is hiding? True, he wants her to come out and join him, but there is nothing really suggesting, at this point, that she is unwilling.

2:12 True, there is indeed a homonym here (“pruning” and “singing”), but that does not justify using both in the translation.

2:14 There is no justification to connect the “cleft of the rock” with the wounded side of Jesus. Very arbitrary and unjustified.

2:17 “Some scholars say Bether was a spiritual representation of a mountain of fragrant spices, i.e., the realm of holiness.” I’m always suspicious of “some scholars” without naming one. If there is someone to be named, I would like to evaluate what kind of scholar they truly are. I am aware of none that would take it this way.

## Song of Songs 3

### Translation

3:1 A comparison of the Hebrew with The Passion Translation shows that the latter distorts the emotional tenor by accentuating it. There is nothing about a “bed of travail,” just a “bed.” There is no “heart that aches for him,” but rather, she searches for him.

3:4 Only his unwarranted allegorical approach allows for the idea that “the house of my mother, room of my conception” can be turned into “where I was given new birth—into my innermost parts, the place of my conceiving.”

3:6 “. . . like a pillar of smoke” inappropriately gets turned into “the pillar of the glory cloud,” making it a reference to the pillar of smoke in the wilderness which he then associates with the glory cloud.

3:8 The Hebrew has no reference to “angelic warriors” in this verse, nor is there any Hebrew behind “to protect the king and his fiancée.”

3:9 There is no justification to translate “*appiryon*” as “mercy seat.”

3:10 Somehow, “Its post he made of silver; its canopy of gold” has become “He made pillars of smoke like silver mist—a canopy of golden glory dwells above it.” By the way, the word he translates “pillars” here, and seems to draw a connection with v. 6, is a different word than in v. 6.

## Notes

3:2 In the Hebrew, the woman searches through the city to find the one she loves. In this allegorical interpretation, you have the woman in this case representing the individual Christian trying to find the man who is Jesus, so the note reads, “The city is a picture of the local church, a place with government, order, and overseers. She goes from church to church, looking for the one she loves.”

There is absolutely no justification, other than taking the verse as an arbitrary allegory, to read it this way.

3:6 He says, “These spices (myrrh and frankincense) are found in the Bible as ingredients of the sacred anointing oil.” He gives no reference, but does not appear to be accurate. Only myrrh of the two is used in the sacred anointing oil, according to Exodus 30:22-29. Frankincense is used in the incense (but not myrrh; see Exodus 30:34-38).

And his statement that “Myrrh points to the suffering and death of Christ, while frankincense reveals the fragrance of his perfect life and ministry” is speculative, at best.

## Song of Songs 4

### Translation

4:1 Hebrew has (as his note admits):

“Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead.” But he translates, “What devotion I see each time I gaze upon you.”

You are like a sacrifice ready to be offered.” His note justifies this by saying, “Hair is a symbol of our devotion to Christ. Mount Gilead (‘hill of testimony’) is where the sacrificial animals were kept in preparation for temple sacrifices. So a goat coming down Mount Gilead was a sacrifice ready to be offered.”

But there is, as far as I can see, no justification for either of these statements. In terms of the latter, where can we see this? Not in the Bible, I don’t think. Why would they keep sacrificial animals at Mount Gilead, which is on the other side of the Jordan, and far, far away from the temple?

4:2 Hebrew has:

“Your teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep, coming up from a washing.  
Each is paired and not one of them is missing.”

Very little connection with the translation:

“When I look at you,  
I see how you have taken my fruit and tasted my word.  
Your life has become clean and pure,  
Like a lamb washed and newly shorn.  
You now show grace and balance with truth on display.”

There is no note, so there is no telling how he got from the Hebrew to his translation.

4:3-5 A comparison with any translation of these verses show that The Passion Translation has arbitrarily read this description of the woman’s body in a purely allegorical way, and without notes, it is hard to tell why he has gone the direction that he has. When there are attempts at notes (like in 4:3 where he makes a connection between the woman’s mouth being like a scarlet thread and Rahab’s scarlet thread, and then from there to Christ’s blood), the connections are suspect, and are also reading back NT meanings into the OT text.

4:7 Notice how he adds “within” to make it appear that this refers to spiritual rather than physical beauty, though the Hebrew gives no indication of this.

4:8 "...through the archway of trust" rather than "the mount of Amana." The latter is more likely because of all the geographical references in the verse (which he also suppresses). He cites the LXX, and it is true that the LXX takes it that way, but on what grounds does he take the LXX as the superior text here? No grounds, just preference.

4:11 "... for I find the Promised Land flowing within you." He notes, by putting it in italics, that this is not in the Hebrew (he is not consistent about this though). And it is true that some interpreters over the years have seen a connection there (those who interpreted it allegorically). But I think it is wrong (involving generic misidentification [see summary statement above]) and in any case, the Hebrew does not support "your tongue releases milk and honey" when it says "milk and honey are under your tongue."

4:14 His translation of the various spices and fruits, etc. are allegorical, and the etymological explanations he gives are either wrong or commit what is called the etymological fallacy.

4:15 Needless to say, there is no justification for thinking the wind is the Spirit wind or that the garden is the Garden of Eden (thus justifying the introduction of Adam into the translation).

## Notes

4:6 The Hebrew in the second half of the verse says, "I will go up to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense."

He translates: "I will go to the mountaintop with you—the mountain of suffering love and the hill of burning incense."

He then provides this note: "Literally 'the mountain of myrrh'—the emblem of suffering love." And then he goes on to talk about how this points to the fact that the woman who stands for the Christian must be crucified along with Christ.

He did make this connection with myrrh in 3:6, but notice how he suppresses the reference to frankincense in his translation (taking it as incense). I imagine because in his note referring to 3:6 he says,

“Myrrh points to the suffering and death of Christ, while frankincense reveals the fragrance of his perfect life and ministry,” and that does not fit into his interpretive schema.

4:9 There is a note referring to the word *libabthini* that says it “is from a Semitic root that means ‘to tear bark off a tree,’” and then he draws significance from this fact. Not sure what he is talking about. There is no such Hebrew root with that meaning, and scholars see this Hebrew root as a derivative from the noun *leb* or *lebab*, “heart.” If there is, say, an Arabic root, this would not be that convincing, so the problem is that he states things without giving justification.

## Chapter 5

### Translation

5:1 As you can tell from its length, this is a much-expanded allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew, rather than a translation.

5:2 “Devotion” is not an acceptable translation of the Hebrew “heart.”

5:3 How do we get from “I have washed my feet” to “you have cleansed my life”?

5:10-16 This translation of the *wasf* (descriptive poem) of the man cannot be justified based on the Hebrew, but only as an expression of his allegorical understanding of the Song of Songs.

### Notes

5:2 “This is clearly a picture of Jesus as the Gethsemane Man, the one who prayed all night for us (John 17). This translation takes the liberty of taking the implicit and making it explicit in order to express the dynamic equivalent and aid the reader in understanding the scene.”

First of all, it is not “clearly” any such picture. And the comment about taking liberty can be applied to the whole translation.

5:8 What justifies the use of the Septuagint here, except that it fits his preconceived ideas?

5:11 Even if he is correct about the idea that many Jewish interpreters see this phrase as pointing to the letters of the law written in heaven, why would he think that is a viable understanding of this verse? And certainly, why would he translate it in the way that he has, that has no justification in the Hebrew? By the way, Hebrew letters don't "look like locks of hair."

## Chapter Six

### Translation

6:6 This verse is very similar to 4:2, so why does he offer a completely different translation, and in particular, treat "teeth" differently?

6:7 The same can be said for this verse in relationship to 4:3b.

### Notes

6:4 "This is how various Hebrew scholars have interpreted the phrase. . . ." The problem with this type of note is that he does not name the scholars, so we cannot be sure that there are such scholars, or whether they are scholars that we would trust.

6:5 He refers to his note at 4:1, so see my comments there.

## Chapter 7

### Translation

7:2-3 Throughout, he suppresses the sexual language of the Song, or even the physicality of the description, turning them into spiritual qualities.



For instance, somehow the Hebrew which should be translated something like “Your ‘navel’ is a rounded bowl, which does not lack wine” becomes “out of your innermost being is flowing the fullness of my Spirit—never failing to satisfy.”

“Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle” becomes “Within your womb there is a birthing of harvest wheat; they are the sons and daughters nurtured by the purity you impart.”

## Chapter 8

### Translation

8:1 Again, an instance of avoiding reference to physical, particularly sexual language. The Hebrew has:

Oh, that you were like my brother,  
Who sucked at the breasts of my mother.  
Then I would find you in public and kiss you,  
And they would not shame me.

Again, his rendition is motivated by his allegorical interpretation.

### Notes

8:6 He says, “The ancient Hebrew word for ‘seal’ can also be translated ‘prison cell.’ He longs for his bride to be his love prisoner, in the prison cell of his eternal love.”

He tends to make statements like this but not back them up. Where is this word ever used for a prison cell? The noun is always used for a seal that marks one’s identity on an object, or in this case, a person.