

Powers and Forces
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Song 2:7 (BHS)

הַשְּׁבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
בְּצִבְאוֹת אוֹ בְּאַיִלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה
אַם־תִּעֲרִירוּ וְאַם־תִּעְוְרוּ אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה
עַד שֶׁתִּתְקַפֵּץ:

Song 2:7a (NEB) / 2:7b (NIV)

I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem,
By the spirits and the goddesses of the field
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

Line 1 begins with *shaba'* (“shavah”), “to swear.” Translations generally gloss something like, “I adjure you” or “I charge you.” You can readily identify Jerusalem. But don’t bother trying to coordinate line 2 with the New English Bible. The first word there (red) is from *sibyah* and means “gazelles,” which of course other translations follow. The next word is “or” (not NEB’s “and”), followed by (blue) *'aylot*, “doe.” This is followed by (green), the “field.” In line 3, both instances of *'im* should be read as negatives. The verbs are both from *'or*, “stir up” or “arouse.” The word following the direct object marker is of course “love” with the article. Line 4 features *haphets*, “to delight in.” Some biblical books like the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes use the ψ prefix (purple) as the relative pronoun, “what” or “which.”

Line 2 patently does *not* say, “by the spirits and the goddesses of the field.” It says, “by the gazelles or by the doe of the field.” Check any translation. Why then is the New English Bible so different? (I used NIV for the second half to keep from having to explain that, too.)

By what do people normally swear? Usually God (e.g. Gen 21:23). Swearing by woodland animals makes no sense. Where the text has “gazelle” and “doe of the field,” we would expect a reference to God. But Greek reads, “by

the powers and forces of the field.” The Aramaic Targum reads, “By the Lord of Hosts and the Strength of the land of Israel.” The NEB takes this tack. But they are looking at exactly the same Hebrew text as you are! So what gives?

Look again at the color-coded words. The red one sounds like *Sabaoth*. Remember Martin Luther’s *A Mighty Fortress* where it says, “Lord Sabaoth his name / From age to age the same.” It means “hosts,” as in the divine title, Lord of Hosts. The blue and green words sound something like *’el Shaddai*, “God Almighty.” The terms are periphrastic references to the Divine.

The Song is one of those books in the Bible that lacks any *direct* reference to Yahweh. But here, right where love’s life-dominating power is felt, the reader is urged to swear by “gazelle” and “doe of the field” not to (prematurely) stir it up. The beasts are circumlocutions for God.

But gazelle and deer in the Song are also used as symbols for both male and female sexuality (2:17, 4:5, 8:14, etc.). Thus, indirect pointers to love’s Creator also serve as images of human sexual potency. It is by this that the daughters of Jerusalem are urged to swear. God has placed in sexuality such unstoppable power that one should handle it with great deference and caution.

Has the power of love ever dominated your life? There is nothing more prone to be turned into an idol than an object of love. Love produces loneliness, depression (because you don’t have who you want), anxiety (does the other person like me back?), hurt feelings, jealousy. A whole chapter of the Bible is devoted just to the jealous aspect of love (Numbers 5). Have you ever gone too far physically, past where your conscience says you should stop? Love is a compelling force, so swear not to get it started until it is right.

It is interesting that incorporated into the very symbols of sex are divine titles. Sex is like worship. In the nuptial embrace something is experienced that echoes our heavenly destiny, the union between Christ and his church (Eph 5:31 – 32). It is easy to forget that. Among other things, sex is for experiencing this heavenly echo ahead of time. But it is only an echo. A chaste single person can also experience in Christ all the divine love that can be possessed this side of glory. In fact, since singles currently have no earthly counterpart to physically love, sometimes they appreciate Christ's love better. This seems to actually be a biblical principle (1 Cor 7:32 – 34). Perfected humanity is celibate (Matt 22:30).

So look to Jesus and the love he has for you, and be content. This goes for single and married people. And the Lord of Hosts, 'El Shaddai, who created sex, will bring you into the consummate fullness of tangible love when he returns. It is to that day that we press on and try not to get distracted. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!