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A Hebrew Pastoral: Rural and Pastoral Imagery in the Song of Songs and Isaiah.

The Passionate Shepherd to his Love

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me and be my love.

The shepherds' swain shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

Christopher Marlowe

The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love

Time drives the flocks from field to fold
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb;
The rest complain of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrows fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy bed of roses
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon whither, soon forgotten—
In folly ripe, in season rotten.

Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,
The coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind may move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Sir Walter Ralegh

Hebrew poetry resonates with imagery of the rural and the pastoral. The use to which this imagery is put can be as utopian as Marlowe's famous pastoral poem, but more often the sanguine rejoinder of Ralegh's antipastoral nymph holds sway. The remarkable exception is the Song of Songs, which nearly alone in the Hebrew canon gives us imagery employed in celebration of all sensual delights and acts as a polar opposite to the tradition of the fall in the Garden of Eden and the despair of Job. That nature imagery can be turned to both of these uses is shown at its starkest in Isaiah where the shepherd and the natural world is either a hope or a threat depending on the situation of the author. Pastoral imagery in these Hebrew

poems can convey social criticism when the privileged become estranged from the people or can convey hope when a people are enslaved. The imagery in this poetry does not resolve a question but create a tension, between what is and what might have been and could be again.

The Pastoral is a feature of many literatures belonging to different peoples and eras. The use of rural and pastoral imagery has functioned to evoke innocence, nostalgia, and social comment from Theocritus and Virgil in classical times through to the medieval mystery plays, and on to Petrarch, Marlowe, Milton and Auden.[1] In essence, "it displays a nostalgia for the past, for some hypothetical state of love and peace that has been lost."[2] While never generally considered part of the pastoral canon, Hebrew pastoral does sit comfortably alongside the varieties of the genre over time and cultures and certainly sets "a pattern for the subsequent moralistic uses of pastoral imagery".[3] It mines the same pastoral motifs for its evocation of both a prelapsarian golden age and the political realities of a minor power. Within Hebrew poetry there exist examples of a longing for a natural Eden, recognition of failed communities and an antipastoral rejection of rural simplicity as any sort of goal. The shepherd and his rural world provide the recurrent images that do allow these texts to be considered a Hebrew pastoral.

When Walter Raleigh's nymph replies to Marlowe's shepherd, the stench of putrefaction replies to the passionate shepherd's perfect bliss. In the Song of Songs the dialogue between the shepherd and his love brooks no such concessions to death and decay. For all the desperate attempts at allegorising these poems, they are about erotic love and, more than that, the song of "a woman who expresses

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[1] Melvin Bragg, "Pastoral Literature", *In Our Time* BBC radio broadcast 6 July 2006. http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/inourtime20060706.shtml accessed 8.9.2006.
[2] J. A. Cuddon (ed) *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1980), 490.
[3] Andrew Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 11.

forthrightly her erotic longings".[4] This is a world of guilt-free sexuality and celebration of fecundity, beauty and desire bursting with nature images of God's garden: a nostalgia for Eden before the fall.

The Songs of Songs is certainly capable of broad definition as a pastoral work. Theocritus is given credit as the source of the pastoral in the third century BC with his *Idylls*[5], and parallels have been noted between the works of that author and the Song.[6] It has been argued that the Song of Songs is not in the same genre as classical Greek pastoral[7], but that is hardly surprising — if it is a pastoral, it is a Hebrew pastoral, just as Marlowe is English pastoral. In any case, beyond the abundance of nature imagery in the poems, the object of the singer's desire is, after all, a shepherd (1:7, 2:16). The passionate shepherd even compliments her after images of the goats and sheep from his day-to-day work:

> your hair is like a flock of goats
> frisking down the slopes of Gilead.
> Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
> as they come down for washing. (4.1-2)

The imagery employed is of nature, the world the shepherd inhabits away from the sophistication of the city. Bergant captures the poems' repeated recourse to where the "natural world dazzles the senses."[8] It is a world too good to be true, a pastoral idyll no doubt. It could be Marlowe's passionate shepherd saying this:

> Come then, my love,
> my lovely one, come.
> For see, winter is past,
> the rains are gone.
> The flowers appear on the earth.
> The season of glad songs has come,

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[4] Anthony Robinson, "Singing of Sex," *Christian Century* 121.2 (2004), 12.
[5] Ian Ousby (ed.) *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 760.
[6] Anselm Hagedorn, "Of Foxes and Vineyards: Greek Perspectives on the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 53.3 (2003), 337.
[7] Jill Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 93.
[8] Dianne Bergant, *Song of Songs: The Love Poetry of Scripture* (New York: New City Press, 1998), 26.

the cooing of the turtledove is heard
in our land.
The fig tree is forming its first figs
and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.
Come then my love,
my lovely one, come.
My dove hiding in the clefts of the rock,
in the coverts of the cliff, show me your face
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet
and your face is beautiful. (2.10-14)

The imagery of safety and shelter, of rocks and caves, is taken over by the dangerous thrill of the open and springtime. The woman has already described herself in terms of the flowers of spring (2.1-2)[9], the image of regeneration and new life. The dove is more than a term of affection (2.14) or even just a description: "your eyes are doves." (1.15) It is an archetypal symbol of rebirth of the land recalling the reappearance of the bird song in the Palestinian spring and, more expansively, the dove that confirmed the end of the days of desolation by returning to Noah with an olive branch. (Gen 8.11)

The woman in Song of Songs is herself no stranger to the outdoors world of her shepherd paramour. She is a tanned girl, much to the disdain of the city women,[10] as it suggests working for a living. She has been forced to work the vineyard by her brothers in punishment for not looking after her own vineyard (1.6), possibly scandalising her brothers with her sexual behaviour.[11] Certainly, as a meeting place for assignations, the vineyard was proverbial in the ancient world as "both a place for sexual activity and a metaphor for women".[12] The vineyard image intermingles with the other images of taste, smell and sight of this eternal spring of

[9] Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 35.
[10] Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 23.
[11] Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 24.
[12] Hagedorn, "Of Foxes and Vineyards," 343.

desire and when added to the intoxication of "spiced wine" (8.2) amplifies the woman's open approach to her sexuality.[13]

Bergant questionably suggests that the poems are making a statement against "stereotypes of physical beauty."[14] Far from this, the poems celebrate youth and natural beauty both in the woman, "wholly beautiful…without a blemish," (4.7) and the man:

> His belly a block of ivory
> covered with sapphires.
> His legs are alabaster columns
> set in sockets of pure gold. (5.24-25)

There is nothing to cheer up sagging bodies here, and that is the point. The poet has recreated an account of his golden age, Eden, and in keeping with prelapsarian ethics, youth and beauty are givens and sexual shame is not an issue. Bergant rightly notes that the woman betrays not the slightest shame in her natural lustiness.[15] The woman is a rehabilitated Eve who can eat the fruit (2.5) as something that makes her whole — the man as the apple tree (2.3) is her guiltless sex partner. As a myth, the garden of Eden explains shame, suffering and the hostility of nature, all rebutted by the Song, which can be seen as a brave attempt to reclaim the paradise existing before the fall simply through love.[16]

> In the Song of Songs, through culture man tries to recreate Paradise, cooperating with, as well as exploiting nature… In the Song…civilisation is vulnerable; it only survives through love, and only love is of ultimate value…Thus then Song of Songs inverts the story of the garden of Eden; man rediscovers Paradise.[17]

Their union is celebrated as a union within nature — "all green is our bed" — (1.17) provides the setting, which is heightened by the multilayered metaphors of

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[13] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron,* 101.
[14] Bergant, *Song of Songs,* 26.
[15] Bergant, *Song of Songs,* 25.
[16] Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron,* 105.
[17] Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98.4 (1979), 524.

fertility: "flocks, kids, vineyard, myrrh and henna blossoms"[18]. Even the animal images used speak to this — the hind and the gazelles (2.7) — exemplify freedom and sexual potency respectively.[19]

Of course the female lover should be ashamed in the context of her culture. The obverse of her freedom is that those who own her are necessarily shamed. The property rights over women were a prominent feature of the culture. This very image of the woman who appropriates her own sexuality was considered so threatening that it was used as the equivalent of choosing to follow a god other than Yahweh.

> The male Israelite's worship of other gods is understood as parallel to a woman's sexual activity, because in each case the offender has transferred the exclusive rights of the one in authority (at the second level, Yahweh, rather than husband or father) to a second, competing party (the other god).[20]

The utopian visions of the Song find some further expression in the Psalms, envisaging a situation "when human performance and divine expectation are in perfect accord."[21] There, too, a vision in accordance with the idyllic life of supposedly carefree shepherds with their songs and loves is invoked:

> Let us wake in the morning filled with your love
> and sing and be happy all our days;
> make our future as happy as out past was sad,
> those years when you were punishing us. (Psalm 90.14-15)

Job knows about God's punishment and how far the world falls short of paradise. Like the singer in Song of Songs, he too laments dark skin (30.30) but he

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[18] Daphna Arbel, "My Vineyard: My Very Own, Is for Myself," in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (eds) *The Song of Songs: Feminist Companion to the Bible* second series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic press, 2000), 94.
[19] Bergant, *Song of Songs*, 37.
[20] Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 30.
[21] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 129.

is no beauty with his rotting flesh and bad breath (19.17, 19). He too was a shepherd, blessed with seven thousand sheep covering the countryside (1.3, 10) until his farm and more are removed by God. Augustus, another god, removes a farm from the shepherd in Virgil's Ecologues, providing an avenue for political comment in that pastoral.[22] The author of Job has similar, though heightened, raw material and instead tackles more universal questions in an antipastoral wisdom poem. He describes the fate of the wicked:

> They let their infants frisk like lambs,
> their children dance like deer.
> They sing to the tamborine and the lyre,
> and rejoice in the sound of the flute.
> They end their lives in happiness
> and go down to peace in Sheol. (21.11-13)

Job's pastoral idyll is the home of the wicked and he would have no trouble judging the lovers in Song of Songs as deserving ill fortune (31.9-12). His imagery is of the real world of suffering, death and decay but still uses the images of farm and country to portray his assessment. He compares himself to a shrub as God "uproots ... hope" (19.10), and to the hapless prey of God "taking me by the neck to dash me to pieces." (16.12) Job is hunted down by God as a lion (10.16), the natural enemy of the sheep and shepherd. Job curses the day of his birth (3.7) by comparing it to sterile earth or a solitary crag in the wilderness, a nuance not obvious in the Jerusalem translation:

> One ought to translate the verse twice: "That night — let it be sterile ground…": "That night— let it be solitary crag…!"… The image of a solitary structure standing in the desert functions as an objective correlative of Job, who…expresses utter loneliness.[23]

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[22] Lawrence Lerner in Melvin Bragg, "Pastoral Literature," *In Our Time.*
[23] Edward Greenstein, "The Language of Job and its Poetic Function," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 122.4 (2003) 656.

Unlike the Song of Songs' perpetual flowers of spring, Job knows what must follow: man "blossoms, and he withers like a flower." (14.2) To describe the swift passage of his miserable life he uses an image from the world of the wool producer:

> Swifter than a weaver's shuttle my days have passed,
> and vanished, leaving no hope behind.

This delightful image of the shuttle that gets absolutely nowhere, in its earthy connection to the natural world and life of the worker, trumps his fellow wisdom writer's whole wordy prologue of Ecclesiastes (1.1-11).

The pastoral imagery in Isaiah is well catalogued by Peter Quinn-Miscall.[24] The usefulness of his exposition is somewhat called into question, however, by his idiosyncratic handling of the text. Essentially he ignores the usual divisions into three sections[25] to look at the work as a whole and while this allows him to focus on topics of imagery in functional categories, it seems an opportunity is lost to observe the varying use of pastoral imagery by the different authors in their individual circumstances. This obscures the use of pastoral imagery in Isaiah which, depending on the author's circumstance, varies from utopian to antipastoral and political.

One characteristic of pastoral literature through time has been its use for social criticism.[26] Petrarch, for example, uses the bad shepherd as a description of the Pope in his criticism of papal politics.[27] Third Isaiah, too, uses the image of the bad shepherd in his description of the leaders in Jerusalem.

> Our watchmen are all blind,
> they notice nothing.

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[24] Peter Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah: Poetry and Vision* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 75-82.
[25] Yehoshua Gitay, "Isaiah," in Paul Achtemeier (ed.) *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 427.
[26] Helen Cooper, in Melvin Bragg, "Pastoral Literature," *In Our Time.*
[27] Helen Cooper, in Melvin Bragg, "Pastoral Literature," *In Our Time.*

Dumb watchdogs all,
unable to bark,
they dream to lie down,
and love to sleep.

Greedy dogs that are never satisfied,
Shepherds that know nothing. (Isaiah 56.10-11)

This is the reality facing those returned to Jerusalem from exile who found the promise less than fulfilled.[28] Quinn-Miscall notes Isaiah linking pastoral imagery with the theme of justice[29] from Yahweh (61.11) but these hopes for future greatness are extolled in the wishful thinking of

Strangers will be there to feed your flocks,
foreigners as your ploughman and vinedressers;
but you, you will be named "priests of Yahweh." (61.5)

Faced with the distinct lack of success back in Jerusalem, this prophet somewhat ill temperedly turns his back on the pastoral and relegates it as a concern for slaves in some future empire. For the few to whom this prophesy came true a later commentator would unfavourably note that the "cries of the reapers have reached the Lord of hosts." (James 4.5)

This contrasts with Second Isaiah who, writing in hope of release from slavery in Babylon, is much more utopian with his description of Yahweh as the perfect shepherd. (40.11) Even Cyrus is lauded as the shepherd who will allow Jerusalem to be rebuilt. (45.28) God here is the gardener who will bring life back to Israel. Plants are seen to be sprouting and great plantations arise (41.19) due to God's action for his chosen people. The promise of imminent release from exile is

[28] Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 444.
[29] Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah*, 80.

"filled with images of rebuilding, restoring, renewing, and recreating," [30] and these are frequently expressed in terms of nature, even going so far as to invoke Eden.

> Yes, Yahweh has pity on Zion,
> has pity on all her ruins;
> turns her desolation into an Eden,
> her wasteland in to the garden of Yahweh.
> Joy and gladness shall be found in her,
> thanksgiving and the sound of music. (51.3)

The return of Israel from exile is a "radical transformation of nature"[31] with the disappointments of the past to be forgotten. There is acceptance that "all flesh is grass" (40.6) and withers but nonetheless Yahweh is coming in power (40.10) trumpeting the same dominion over nature that Job hears from the whirlwind (Isaiah 40.12-26, Job 40.6-26). Using the imagery of failed crops God's control is extended to the works of princes. (40.24) This is pastoral as apocalypse but also consolation. God is here the good shepherd, "gathering lambs in his arms," (40.11) and the ultimate natural reassurance, the "baby at the breast" (49.15).

First Isaiah, facing conquest and exile, has yet another approach to nature imagery, using it as a motif for the chaos and the breakdown of civilisation.[32] Further the positive image of the garden seen elsewhere now becomes associated with the apostate fertility rites and becomes a negative:[33]

> you will blush for the gardens
> that charm you.
> Since you will be like a terebinth
> with faded leaves,
> like a garden without water.
> The man of high estate will be tinder,
> his handiwork a spark. (1.29-31)

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[30] Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament,* 416.
[31] Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah,* 82.
[32] Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah,* 78.
[33] Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah,* 75.

Like Job's author, first Isaiah can use the lion, enemy of the shepherd, in his description of God's pronouncements against Assyria. The imagery relies on the way shepherds react to their greatest fear, predators after their sheep.

> As a lion or lion cub
> growls over its prey,
> and even when a whole band of shepherds
> gathers against him,
> he is not frightened by their shouting
> or alarmed by the noise they make. (31.4)

First Isaiah uses the imagery of the vineyard, but is a world away from the "the blossoming vines giv[ing] out their fragrance" (2.13) in the Song of Songs. His is a massive case of sour grapes equating with the lack of justice in Judah. The Song of the Vineyard (5.1-7) evokes rich farmland and high expectations and then dashes them all to wasteland.

> My friend had a vineyard
> on a fertile hillside.
> He dug the soil, cleared it of stones,
> and planted choice vines in it…
>
> I expected it to yield grapes.
> Why did it yield sour grapes instead?…
>
> I will lay it waste, unpruned, undug;
> overgrown by the briar and the thorn. (5.1,2,4,6)

In response to the actions of his people this is a destroying God, not a shepherd as in second Isaiah. Isaiah is concerned to illustrate the destruction that has come to Israel, the northern Kingdom, and which is apparently inevitable for Judah.[34] The image of the vine serves a similar purpose in Ezekiel with the added image of the fire devouring the vine to make it suitable for carving (15.1-8). The best that can be hoped for is the survival of a remnant, "the shanty in a vineyard,"

[34] David Peterson and Kent Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 81.

(Isaiah 1.8) isolated and alone but surviving,[35] or the fool's hope for the impossibility of wolves not eating lambs (11.6).

In the Song of Songs the women of Jerusalem are complicit with the lovers in their fragrant embrace (2.7, 3.5, 3.11, 5.8, 8.4), but in first Isaiah their concern with such trifles is symbolic of Jerusalem's failings and pride:

> Instead of a scent, a stink;
> Instead of belt, a rope;
> instead of hair elaborately done, a shaven scalp,
> and instead of a gorgeous dress, a sack;
> and brand marks instead of beauty. (3.23-24)

As befits a corpus rather than an individual author, Hebrew poetry has examples of pastoral imagery that invoke God both as a benevolent shepherd and as a destroying lion. Nature is both wild and desolate, where naked and alone man is lost, but it is also fruitful and creative, where love redeems all. Hebrew poetry uses the images of nature to draw out this paradox and allow thought to be suspended between both. Song of Songs, fantasy as it is[36], remains all the more precious and beautiful for Eden's prediction of its fall and Job's anger and sad sighs. Isaiah's authors' encompassing of desolation, renewed hope and further disillusion plot this tension in a snapshot of the history of disappointed expectation. Doubtless this is a situation that has universal resonance, but in Hebrew pastoral, yields to consolation within the familiar images of the natural world. Hebrew pastoral accepts the fall but dreams of the impossible hope of redemption, and this tricky dance can be seen to continue right through to the Isaian strains of the twentieth century pastoral of Auden.

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[35] Theodore Steinberg, "Isaiah the Poet," in Vincent Tollers and John Maier (eds) *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 303.
[36] David Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 117.

Paysage Moralisé

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,
Round corners coming suddenly on water,
Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,
We honour founders of these starving cities
Whose honour is the image of our sorrow,

Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow
That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys;
Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities
They reined their violent horses on the mountains,
Those fields like ships to castaways on islands,
Visions of green to those who craved for water.

They built by rivers and at night the water
Running past windows comforted their sorrow;
Each in his little bed conceived of islands
Where every day was dancing in the valleys
And all the green trees blossomed on the mountains,
Where love was innocent, being far from cities.

But dawn came back and they were still in cities;
No marvellous creature rose up from the water;
There was still gold and silver in the mountains
But hunger was a more immediate sorrow,
Although to moping villagers in valleys
Some waving pilgrims were describing islands…

'The gods,' they promised, 'visit us from islands,
Are stalking, head-up, lovely, through our cities;
Now is the time to leave your wretched valleys
And sail with them across the lime green water,
Sitting at their white sides, forget your sorrow,
The shadow cast across your lives by mountains.'

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains,
Climbing up crags to get a view of the islands,
So many, fearful, took with them their sorrow
Which stayed with them when they reached their unhappy cities,
So many, careless, dived and drowned in water,
So many, wretched, would not leave their valleys.

It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Then water
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.

W.H. Auden

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