"AWESOME" ARTISTRY: *AYUMMAH KANNIDGALOT* IN SONG OF SONGS 6:4, 10

JOSHUA M. SEARS

Translators and commentators have often disagreed over a "famous crux"[1] in Song of Songs 6:4 and 6:10: how to understand the repeated phrase *ayummah kannidgalot*, rendered *awesome as bannered hosts* in the NJPS. In part, the difficulty is that the meaning in 6:4 may or may not be the same as the meaning in 6:10. I believe that insights from modern linguistic theory can help alleviate the difficulty many have seen in rendering this phrase in distinct ways.

In Song of Songs 6:4–5a, the man speaks to his beloved, *You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem,* [ayummah] *as* [nidgalot]. *Turn your eyes away from me, for they overwhelm me!* In 6:10, the man speaks of her in the third person: *Who is she that shines through like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun,* [ayummah] *as* [nidgalot]*?* In both passages, the poet makes a series of three similes using the Hebrew preposition *ki* ['like' or 'as'].

The first word, *ayummah*, is a feminine adjective that only appears in these two verses (though a masculine version appears in Hab. 1:7 where it refers to the "terrifying" Chaldean army). English translators usually render it as "terrible" or "awesome." Shelomo Goitein cited examples from Arabic, Syriac, and Ethiopic to argue that *ayummah* should encompass more than simple fear: there is a fine line between "awesome" as *frightful* and "awesome" as *extraordinary* or *thrilling*.[2] Many scholars have built on his argument to suggest that *ayummah* should not be read harshly here when used for the man's beloved, and perhaps should be rendered as something more like "majestic."[3]

The second word, *nidgalot*, has usually been understood as a *niphal* feminine participle from *dgl*, a verb meaning "[to] carry, or set up [a] standard, banner."[4] Literally, this would render "bannered," "banners," or "bannered ones," reflected in NJPS's "bannered hosts." A related noun, *degel*, appears several times in the book of Numbers in reference to the banners or standards raised for the and also appears in Persian-period Aramaic texts with the meaning of "military detachment," suggesting how audiences contemporary with the Song may have thought of the term.[5] Alternatively, some scholars beginning with Robert Gordis have claimed there is connection with the Akkadian verb *dagalu*, "to look upon, gaze, behold," which has been used to reinterpret *nidgalot* as "visions" or "sights."[6]

This two-word phrase in Song of Songs 6:4 and 6:10 has been understood in various ways. First, some scholars have seen military imagery in both verses.[7] In 6:4, *beautiful* and *comely* are unremarkable descriptions for the man's beloved, but Tirzah and Jerusa-

Joshua M. Sears has a PhD in Hebrew Bible from The University of Texas at Austin and is an assistant professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

lem are strikingly unexpected, given that women in biblical literature are rarely compared to cities (although cities are often compared to women, e.g., Isa. 60:1–12 or Ezek. 23:4–5). These cities served, respectively, as the capitals of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The militaristic connotation invoked by fortified rival capitals is reinforced in 6:5 when the man is so "overwhelmed" by what he sees that he asks the beloved to turn away. The verb *rhb* has a general sense of energizing, pressing, acting against strongly (the nominal form, *rahab*, appears in Isa. 51:9 as a primordial sea monster).[8] All this could suggest that *nidgalot* in 6:4 should be understood in militaristic terms, a "bannered host." Given those implications in 6:4, many scholars then assume the same meaning applies in the more enigmatic 6:10.

Second, some scholars have seen astral imagery in 6:4 and 6:10.[9] They typically begin with 6:10, where *nidgalot* is the third item in a list beginning with the moon and the sun. In biblical literature, the trio of sun, moon, and stars often appear together, suggesting *nidgalot* could be filling in for the stars in this case.[10] The fact that *nidgalot* appears to relate etymologically to the word for army banners need not pose a problem, as stars are often described using the language of armies (see Deut. 4:19; 17:3; II Kgs. 23:5; Jer. 8:2). Scholars who argue for this reading of 6:10 then read the astral imagery into 6:4 as well.

Third, some scholars have read "sights/visions" in 6:4 and 6:10.[11] As described above, this approach reinterprets *nidgalot* based on a proposed Akkadian cognate. If that be accepted, then in both 6:4 and 6:10 *nidgalot* refers back to the objects previously mentioned – Tirzah and Jerusalem in the former and the sun and moon in the latter.[12] Robert Alter argues his preference for this approach (he translates "daunting as what looms on high") on the grounds that it preserves ambiguity and could refer to either cities or stars.[13]

Finally, some scholars have interpreted the Song as invoking military imagery in 6:4 and astral imagery in 6:10.[14] Differentiating between the meanings in each passage has been a minority approach but has the advantage of taking the context of each passage seriously. However, even those who translate each passage distinctly have expressed some discomfort over rendering the same phrase so differently when these passages appear so close together. For example, one proposal suggests that each passage began as an independent composition and a redactor used the parallel phrasing as an excuse to place 6:10 shortly after 6:4.[15] I believe that insights from linguistics can make a valuable contribution to this discussion.

Modern semantic theory suggests that there is a danger in trying to interpret a word or phrase independent of context, for "we do not speak with isolated words but with sentences."[16] Vyvyan Evans explains how linguists have come to understand word meaning: "Words are never meaningful independent of the utterance in which they are embedded, and the encyclopaedic knowledge and extra-linguistic context which guide how words embedded in an utterance should be interpreted. Indeed, evidence from the perspectives of social psychology, cognitive psychology, interactional sociolinguistics, cognitive lin-

guistics, corpus linguistics, and computational linguistics reveals that the view that words constitute fixed, context-independent structures … is untenable. As observed by a large number of scholars, the meanings associated with words are flexible, open-ended, and highly sensitive to utterance context."[17] Or, as British linguist Rupert Firth famously put it, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps!"[18]

This insight may be pushed even further: the semantic environment in which a word is placed does not simply *reveal* a meaning that otherwise would be hidden, it *creates* it.[19] That is why it is possible for a speaker to effectively communicate the meaning of even an invented phrase or a nonsense word: given appropriate contextual clues, listeners determine the meaning not simply through their encyclopedic lexical knowledge but also through their understanding of what *must* be the word's significance in a given situation.[20]

In light of these findings from linguistic theorists, the difficulty that many have seen in reconciling different meanings in Song of Songs 6:4 and 6:10 is significantly alleviated. It is perfectly permissible for *ayummah kannidgalot* to mean one thing in the first context and something else in the second.[21] The respective meanings are revealed and created through the context of each passage. In 6:4, the twin similes *beautiful ... as Tirzah* and *comely as Jerusalem*, by paring two famous cities, prepare the reader to read *ayummah kannidgalot* as an impressive human spectacle, "Awesome as a bannered host!" This majesty is reinforced in v. 5 when the sight is too overwhelming to look upon.

By contrast, in 6:10, the woman is introduced as *she that shines through like the dawn*, a visually compelling title that prepares the reader for the atmospheric images that follow. The references to the sun and the moon are especially potent because the standard terms are replaced by descriptive euphemisms, literally "the white (one)" and "the hot (one)." Using rare words for the sun and the moon heightens their sensory value, inviting readers to recall their colors and temperatures. When readers come to the third simile, *ayummah kannidgalot*, the celestial imagery of the preceding images prepares them to complete the mental sequence *sun-moon-stars*. Had the literal meaning of armies had no connection whatsoever to stars, the reader might have had quite the mental jump to make, but given the existing connections in Hebrew literature, the shift from human armies to heavenly hosts would not have been difficult. The first use of the phrase in v. 4, then, helps prepare the reader for its second use in v. 10, even as the meaning shifts from one appearance to the next.

Thus, translators and commentators need not shy away from rendering two distinct meanings for *ayummah kannidgalot* in Song of Songs 6:4 and 6:10. The contextual coloring can determine the meaning in each case, even as we recognize the brilliance of the Hebrew poet in employing the same phrase in different ways.

NOTES

1. Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York: Ktav, 1974), p. 92.

2. S. D. Goitein, "Ayumma kannidgalot (Song of Songs VI.10): 'Splendid Like the Brilliant Stars'," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 10 (1965): pp. 220–21.

3. For example, Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 560; or J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 218. "Majestic" is suggested in *HALOT*.

4. See the entry for "*dgl* II" in BDB, p. 186. *HALOT* also assigns the words in Song 6:4, 10 to this root.

5. For example, see Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, Volume 2* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. B2 1, line 2.

6. Robert Gordis, "The Root [*dgl*] in the Song of Songs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): pp. 203–4. J. L. Andruska, "The Strange Use of [*dgl*] in Song of Songs 5:10," *Vetus Testamentum* 68 (2018): pp. 1–7, argues that, if there were two different roots behind *dgl* ("raising a banner" and "looking upon"), these must have been semantically related, as military banners are designed to attract visual attention. On those grounds she argues that *nidgalot* in Song 6:4 and 6:10 is related to *dagul* in Song 5:10, with the terms in both chapters referring to the striking visual impact of the figure in view.

7. For example, see Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 (New York: Lang, 2008), pp. 230, 257, 307; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 178; and Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), pp. 30, 38.

8. See Mark Phelps, "*rhb*," *NIDOTTE*, vol. 3 pp. 1063–66.

9. For example, see Goitein, "Ayumma kannidgalot," pp. 220–21; Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 191–92; and Francis Landy, "Beauty and the Enigma: An Inquiry into Some Interrelated Episodes of the Song of Songs," in *Beauty and the Enigma: And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 312 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), pp. 38–39.

10. The practice of comparing a woman to the stars is also attested in extra-biblical literature. Consider this example from Egypt: "One, the lady love without a duplicate, / more perfect than the world, / see, she is like the star rising / at the start of an auspicious year." William Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 315–16.

11. For example, see Exum, *Song of Songs*, pp. 217–19; Gordis, "The Root [*dgl*]," pp. 203–4; Gary Alan Long, "A Lover, Cities, and Heavenly Bodies: Co-Text and the Translation of Two Similes in Canticles (6:4c; 6:10d)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): pp. 703–9; Ronald E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 174–76, 178; and Pope, *Song of Songs*, pp. 558–60.

12. Exum, for example, translates Song of Songs 6:4, "You are beautiful … like Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, as awesome in splendor as they," with a footnote explaining, "Literally, 'awesome as the(se) distinguished sights.'" Exum, *Song of Songs*, pp. 210, 212.

13. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3: The Writings* (New York: Norton, 2019), p. 606n4.

14. For example, see Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, trans. Michael Tait, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 144 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 330–32, 348–49; and Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 193–94, 200, 205.

15. See Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 218, 220.

16. Kurt Baldinger, *Semantic Theory: Towards a Modern Semantics*, trans. William C. Brown (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 15.

17. Vyvyan Evans, *How Words Mean: Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 21–22.

18. John R. Firth, "A Synopsis of Linguistic Theory, 1930–1955," in *Studies in Linguistic Analysis*, ed. John R. Firth (Oxford: Philological Society, 1957), p. 11.

19. "The context does not merely help us understand meaning—it virtually makes meaning." Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 139.

20. See N. J. Enfield, *The Utility of Meaning: What Words Mean and Why* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 11–13.

21. "We might assume that [a word] has exactly the same number of distinct meanings, technically known as senses, as the number of different sentences in which it appears." Evans, *How Words Mean*, pp. 19–20.