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**THE DIVINE FEMININE IN THE  
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A COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

***Zacharias Kotzé***

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## Abstract

The elusive identity of the beloved in the Song of Songs has long intrigued interpreters. While the allegorical interpretation of the beloved as the people of Israel in the Judaic tradition or the bride of Christ in the Christian tradition is widely recognized, recent scholarship has increasingly explored her role as a representative of diverse female archetypes. Yet, an intriguing avenue remains only partially explored: the possibility of perceiving her as an embodiment of an ancient Near Eastern deity. This article investigates the presence of mythological elements within the character and actions of the beloved. Employing comparative hyleme analysis, it endeavours to illuminate the parallels between the beloved's qualities and deeds and those of Inanna/Ishtar as chronicled in ancient Near Eastern literature.



Die schwer fassbare Identität der Geliebten im Hohelied hat die Forschung seit jeher beschäftigt. Während die allegorische Deutung – sei es als das Volk Israel in der jüdischen oder als Braut Christi in der christlichen Tradition – weithin anerkannt ist, richtet sich das Interesse neuerer Forschungen zunehmend auf ihre Rolle als Repräsentantin verschiedener weiblicher Archetypen. Eine besonders aufschlussreiche Perspektive blieb dabei bislang weitgehend unbeachtet: die Deutung der Geliebten als Verkörperung einer altorientalischen Göttin. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht mythologische Elemente in der Figur und im Handeln der Geliebten. Mithilfe einer vergleichenden Hylemanalyse werden strukturelle Parallelen zu Inanna/Ishtar, wie sie in der altorientalischen Literatur überliefert ist, herausgearbeitet.



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## THE DIVINE FEMININE IN THE SONG OF SONGS: A COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

*Zacharias Kotzé*



The Song of Songs, nestled within the biblical canon, stands as an enigmatic and captivating text, drawing scholars and interpreters into its rich tapestry of love, longing, and desire. Its allure lies not only in its poetic beauty but also in the complex character of the female beloved, whose identity has long fascinated interpreters and eluded precise definition. Throughout history, scholars have approached the Song of Songs from diverse perspectives, each offering unique insights into its meaning and significance.

From allegorical interpretations to cognitive linguistic analyses (cf. Gault 2019), the Song of Songs has been subjected to a myriad of readings. Francis Landy and Fiona Black (2015) delve into its allegorical dimensions, viewing the work as a depiction of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in Jewish tradition and between Christ and the Church in Christian interpretation. This allegorical approach, deeply rooted in both synagogue and church traditions, elevates the text to a

sacred realm, where the intimate relationship between the divine and the human is expressed through passionate love metaphors. Saadia Gaon, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra are among the commentators who have contributed to this ongoing conversation, shaping interpretations that seem to transcend time.

In contrast, others have questioned the purely allegorical reading of the text, seeking to uncover its historical and cultural roots. Theophile Meek (1922) proposes that elements within the Song of Songs may have originated from earlier religious ceremonies, particularly those celebrating the union of deities such as the sun god and the goddess of fertility. Drawing parallels between the lover in the Song of Songs and figures from Sumerian mythology, Meek suggests a deeper connection to ancient Near Eastern traditions, where love songs played a central role in religious rituals.

Further explorations of this connection led scholars to consider the influence of cultic love songs, particularly those associated with the Inanna-Dumuzi cult. Meek's theory, although facing criticism, found favor among some scholars, highlighting the enduring fascination with the intersection of mythology and biblical texts. Samuel Noah Kramer's (1962, 1963, 1969) extensive studies of Sumerian literature and love songs mark a significant milestone in this inquiry, suggesting that the Song of Songs may indeed have roots in ancient rituals, possibly nuptial ceremonies where the king played the role of the groom.

Marvin H. Pope (1977) challenges traditional interpretations, proposing a cultic setting for the Song of Songs at funeral feasts rather than at fertility rites. His theory, although eccentric, highlights the multi-faceted nature of the text; he draws parallels with Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Indian texts to support his argument. Similarly, Hans-Peter Müller (1976) emphasizes the mythical nuances of the poetry, suggesting a theomorphic elevation of the human being through the incorporation of magical elements derived from Near Eastern love magic.

Othmar Keel (1994) builds upon Müller's approach, highlighting the extensive use of ancient Near Eastern divine imagery in the Song of Songs. Keel's contributions, along with Michael V. Fox's (1985), shift the focus to ancient Egyptian love poetry as a more relevant parallel to the biblical text. By exploring iconographic material from Egypt



and Mesopotamia, Keel illustrates the cultural context of the Song of Songs, framing it as a collection of love songs imbued with mythological allusions.

In recent decades, scholars have expanded their focus to explore socioreligious and linguistic aspects of the text, particularly as they relate to Akkadian love literature. Martti Nissinen (1998, 2001, 2008, 2016, 2023) argues for the continuity and modification of sacred marriage practices, highlighting the transition from Sumerian to Akkadian perspectives (cf. Wasserman 2016). By comparing the formal structure and common motifs between Akkadian love lyrics and the Song of Songs, scholars uncover a shared reservoir of erotic-lyric tradition, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries.

While scholars have explored the parallels between the female beloved of the Song and ancient Near Eastern deities, challenges remain in providing a rigorous and systematic analysis of the mythological elements present. The limitations of prior methods become apparent as scholars grapple with issues of consistency, conflicting narrative materials, and the evolving nature of ancient narratives.

In response to these challenges, this article employs the approach of comparative hyleme analysis, as developed by Christian Zgoll and Annette Zgoll (2020). Unlike previous approaches, hyleme analysis systematically dissects the narrative fabrics of ancient texts, revealing the smallest meaningful units, or hylemes, that contribute to the overall meaning of the narrative. By employing this innovative method, this study seeks to navigate the intricate layers of storytelling, providing a fresh perspective on the enduring resonance of mythological motifs in this enigmatic biblical text.



## **Hyleme Analysis: Unraveling Narrative Fabrics**

In the study of ancient narratives, especially in texts such as myths and epics, understanding the intricate layers of narrative materials is essential. This process allows scholars to dissect these narratives into their constituent elements, which are referred to as hylemes. Hyleme analysis offers a unique approach by focusing on the core building blocks,

or hylemes, of myth rather than the specific narrative structures emphasized in narratology. Hylemes are the smallest meaningful units of a narrative, capturing fundamental actions or relationships within a story. By analyzing these basic units, examining hylemes allows for a detailed comparison of recurring narrative patterns across different texts (Zgoll et al. 2023). Unlike traditional narratology, which examines plot structure and sequence, hyleme analysis abstracts essential elements across variations in myth, allowing for a comparison and identification of recurring symbolic or thematic units that transcend particular storylines. This method enables a more flexible examination of myths across cultures and versions, avoiding the constraints of linear plot while revealing underlying consistencies and broader archetypes within the mythological material. Each hyleme consists of at least one hyleme element, its logical subject, and one hyleme predicate. In the standardized approach, hylemes are expressed in the present tense and active voice, such as: “Inanna is the daughter of Nanna.” Sequences of hylemes are given in lists introduced by a dash, for example:

- Inanna is a young, unmarried girl.
- Dumuzi brings gifts to Inanna.
- Dumuzi praises Inanna’s beauty.
- Inanna marries Dumuzi.

To distinguish them from the titles of texts, given in italics, such as *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, the names of Erzählstoff versions, or narrative materials, are given in small capitals, for example, INANNA BRINGS THE NETHERWORLD’S INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO EARTH. Each hyleme contributes to the overall structure and meaning of the narrative, and their analysis can reveal the underlying complexity of ancient stories.

Hyleme analysis begins with the recognition that narratives, particularly in ancient texts, often consist of multiple layers of narrative materials and variants (Zgoll 2019). These materials are combined into a cohesive narrative, creating a multilayered fabric of storytelling. This process is not unique to a specific genre but is particularly prominent in myths and other forms of ancient narrative. For instance, Zgoll et al. (2023) highlight a stratigraphical analysis of the praise song *Inanna’s*



*Descent to the Netherworld* that revealed the presence of at least three different versions of the myth within the composite narrative. These versions were combined to form a complex composition, reshaping the narrative's meaning and significance.

In this context, it is essential to acknowledge that the combination of multiple strata into one composite narrative is a complex endeavor. It is not merely a matter of merging different fabrics into a single garment; instead, it involves the selection of specific narrative versions and the determination of which version holds dominance. This process reflects the priorities of the storyteller and often acts as a battleground for competing worldviews.

Comparative hylistics, a specialized branch of hylistic studies, has emerged as a discipline that focuses on the comparative study of narrative materials across different versions, genres, and media. Zgoll et al. (2023) outline several essential steps for successful comparative analysis, including (1) creating comparable conditions across all variants, compensating for differences in the number of hylemes or level of abstraction; (2) maintaining a meaningful level of abstraction and (in) determinacy in the comparison; and (3) identifying hyper-hylemes that summarize complete external narrative materials in a single hyleme. This comparative approach allows scholars to uncover similarities and differences between narrative materials, even when presented in different textual formats. For example, the myth INANNA BRINGS THE NETHERWORLD'S NUMINOUS INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO EARTH is embedded in both *Inanna's Descent* and *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, but the contexts provided by each narrative differ significantly. This illustrates how the same myth can take different forms in various textual manifestations (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 128–54). To return to the tapestry analogy—holding up two tapestries next to each other, one might notice both similarities and differences in the two creations. While the core narrative material remains consistent in different textual creations, the context and emphasis may differ, resulting in varying and even contrasting messages.

In summary, hyleme analysis presents a structured and comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of narrative materials within ancient texts. This analytical framework, considered alongside





the principles of hyleme analysis and comparative hyleme analysis, offers valuable insights into the layers of storytelling, variations, and the interplay of narrative materials.

Hyleme analysis serves as an ideal tool to delve into the narrative fabrics of the Song of Songs, since the comparative aspect allows for the recognition of core narrative materials that persist across various versions in different cultural contexts (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020). Identifying recurring mythological elements or motifs associated with the female beloved within the Song of Songs promises to shed light on the deeper mythological layers concealed beneath the poetic verses of this biblical text.



## Mythological Stoff Variants Relating to the Beloved

The narrative material pertaining to the beloved and her actions in the Song of Songs contains various hylemes that bear a striking resemblance to Stoff variants found in Mesopotamian mythology, specifically in the tales of Inanna's descent into the underworld and Dumuzi's death. These myths formed part of a group of "sphere-change" myths about the descent of various deities into the underworld that were very influential from the third to the first millennia BCE in Mesopotamia (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020). The myth of Inanna's descent held immense cultural significance throughout the history of Mesopotamia. It served as the foundation for festivals dating back to the fourth millennium BCE in Uruk and persisted for quite some time, influencing the establishment of deities even in the first millennium BCE. In the context of Mesopotamian kingship, rulers identified themselves as both the spouses of Inanna and the embodiments of the god Dumuzi.

To compare myths effectively, it is crucial to consider mythological substance in chronological order, regardless of the sequence presented in the text (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 98–114). In the context of Inanna's journey, the initial element to examine is the commencement of her sphere change, specifically her descent into the underworld. In her comparison of the epic praise songs *Angalta* ("From the Great Heaven"), traditionally known as *Inanna's Descent*, and *Innin me gal-*

*gala* (“Mistress of the Numinous Instruments of Power”), traditionally known as *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, Annette Zgoll demonstrates that Inanna’s journey was motivated by her desire to obtain instruments of power from the underworld (2020, 115–17). In *Angalta*, Inanna puts on seven tools of influence in preparation for her journey. In *Innin me galgala*, she is dressed in a beautiful garment before leaving heaven to come to earth and enter the underworld.

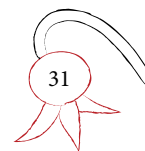
While the Song of Songs lacks explicit references to the beloved embarking on a journey to the underworld, two key moments in the text evoke memories of Inanna’s two deaths within the sphere-change sequence, as depicted in various Stoff variants of Inanna’s descent.

In the Mesopotamian texts, although explicit terms for death are tactfully avoided, Inanna’s demise is unmistakable. In one version, she traverses seven gates of the underworld, with gatekeepers compelling her to progressively relinquish the seven items of power that she put on in preparation for her journey until she arrives in a state of vulnerability, stripped of her clothing, which symbolizes her gradual demise. Her skin, symbolically interpreted as the “pala dress,” is removed at the last gate, representing her ultimate death. Similarly, in *Innin me galgala*, Šukaleduda removes the garment with seven numinous powers that Inanna wore over her genitals before he violates her.

In the Song of Songs, the beloved experiences being “struck” (נכה) and “wounded” (פצע) by the keepers of the walls (5:7), culminating in the removal of her “garment” (רדיד), a term occurring solely here and in Isaiah 3:23’s list of beautiful women’s attire to be removed by Yahweh and replaced with baldness, sores, and illness as part of his judgment. This parallels Inanna’s encounter with the gatekeepers and the ultimate removal of her garment. On a high level of abstraction, therefore, both *Inanna’s Descent* and *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, as well as the Song of Songs share the following hylemes:

- someone attacks the female protagonist.
- someone removes the female protagonist’s garment.

It is conceivable that ancient readers of the Song of Songs, familiar with the myth of Inanna’s descent, would interpret these occurrences as symbolic of the goddess’s death in the underworld.



While the female beloved is attacked in the context of her search for her beloved in the Song of Songs, the search motif occurs after Dumuzi's death in *Angalta* and after Inanna had been attacked by Šukaleduda in *Innin me galgala* (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 119). Moreover, while the search for the beloved is an important theme in both the myths and the Song of Songs, they do not constitute the purpose of Inanna's descent in the original myth. Nevertheless, both INANNA'S DESCENT and the Song of Songs include the hyleme:

- the female beloved searches for her male beloved.

Inanna's second death occurs when she usurps her sister, Ereškigal, to become the queen of the underworld. In this version, the Anuna gods pass a death sentence on Inanna, which Ereškigal executes by gazing upon her with "the eye of death" (*i-bi2 uš2-a*) and suspending her lifeless body on a stake.

In the Song of Songs, the beloved is "scrutinized" (שִׁוּרִי) by the sun and "scorched" (חָרַר) by her brother (1:6). Cheryl Exum (2005, 105) notes that "since the word 'brothers' is not used, but only 'sons of my mother,' no term for the woman's male relatives ever appears in the Song (the term 'brother,' however, appears in 8:1, applied to the male lover)." Wilhelm Erbt (1906, 198), followed by Meek (1922, 10), suggests that one should read "the son of my mother" (singular), rather than "the sons of my mother" (plural), as a poetic parallel for Shemesh, to be understood as the solar deity, which in ancient Sumer was Utu, the brother of Inanna. Reading the poetic reference to the brother in the singular finds support in the fact that the verb (שָׁם) is also in the singular.

Most scholars read the verb חָרַר, "to burn, scorch," as a reference to anger (cf. Pope 1977, 292; Murphy 1990, 109; Exum 2005, 105; James 2017; Gault 2019, 59). The verb is probably related to Akkadian *arāru* and Aramaic חָר, "to glow, burn" (Brown et al. 1996). While it remains unclear why the brother(s) would be angry at the beloved, many interpreters agree that the verse centers on the image of burning. For example, Elaine James (2017) notices symmetry between the personified sun gazing at her and the brother(s) burning against her, thereby taking on the scorching qualities of the sun. The image of searing is reinforced



by the beloved's self-description in verse five as שחרחרת, "dark," which doubles the חר, of the roots חרה, "to burn," and חרר, "to burn, scorch."

With reference to the beloved's self-description as dark and beautiful, numerous scholars have written at length about the possible relation, or lack thereof, between beauty and a dark skin complexion in the ancient Near East (cf. Gault 2019). While such considerations may be important, it also seems significant that beauty has been regarded as especially vulnerable to the evil eye throughout history in most cultures where it has been observed (cf. Seligmann 1910; Lykiardopoulos 1976). The request not to be looked at, the self-portrayal of beauty, the sun "looking" at her, and the repeated imagery of scorching all combine to evoke the concept of the evil eye, which in the ancient Near East was linked to the depletion of vital bodily fluids in the victim (Dundes 1981). In this context, the root חרר seems to acquire a sense of ocular aggression in parallel with the sun "looking" (שיף) at her. The sun scrutinizing her with its rays and her brother "burning" against her clearly evoke the desiccating effect of the evil eye. This leads to the hyleme:

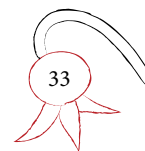
- the beloved's older brother attacks her with the evil eye.

This parallels Inanna's older sister's attack with the "eye of death." On a high level of abstraction, therefore, both narrative variants contain the hyleme:

- an older sibling attacks the female protagonist with the evil eye.

Similarly, the sun, or the sun god Shemesh, "looking" at her, or scorching her and drying her out, parallels the Anuna gods killing Inanna, also with the "eye of death," after her skin has been removed in her initial death.

Inanna's second death at the hands, or eyes, of her sister was incorporated to emphasize her dominion over life and death in a composite myth (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 143–45). By conquering the underworld, she acquires the title previously held by her older sister, Ereškigal, the "Radiant Lady of the Great Earth." The transfer of a deity's name to another deity, thus passing on the power of the original name-bearer to the new one, is a recurring motif in ancient Mesopotamian mythology.



Similarly, the beloved is described as radiant in Song 6:10: “Who is this shining (שִׁקְרָה, “looking down”) like the morning, beautiful as the full moon, bright as the sun, terrifying as the stars?” As demonstrated by Annette Zgoll (2020, 145–48), such references to the “Radiant Lady” can be read as hyper-hylemes, condensing the entire myth into a single statement and signifying the great goddess’s dominion over life, death, and the underworld. While the Song of Songs lacks explicit references to the beloved undertaking a journey to the underworld in the west and emerging again in the east, as in *Angalta* and to some extent in *Innin me galgala*, the description of her shining like the dawn can therefore be read as a hyper-hyleme summarizing the entire journey.

Ereškigal and the Anuna gods executing Inanna with the evil eye represent but one facet of the “eye of death” in the myth of Inanna’s descent. To secure her resurrection, Inanna must first provide a substitute, for which she eventually chooses her own husband, Dumuzi. In the original myth of Dumuzi’s death, demons kill him, prompting Inanna’s mourning and search for him. In the revised myth, Inanna personally slays Dumuzi by casting the “eye of death” upon him. Annette Zgoll (2020, 138–40) notes that this rewriting of the original myth functions to present Inanna as gaining power over death.

The Song of Songs subtly alludes to this pivotal event in the myth of Inanna’s descent. In Song 4:9, the lover laments that the beloved has “ravished” (לָבַב) his heart with one of her eyes. While interpreters often read this idiom as the beloved exciting the lover with her gaze, it can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the beloved violently assaulting the lover with her “eye of death,” as Inanna did with Dumuzi. Support for this interpretation arises from Song 6:5, where the lover beseeches the beloved to avert her gaze as her eyes “assault” (רָהַב) him. Once again, on a higher level of abstraction, both myths encompass the hyleme:

- the female protagonist attacks the male protagonist with the evil eye.

Annette Zgoll (2020, 137–54) note that Inanna’s act of killing Dumuzi in the revised myth underscores her dominion over death. The combined myths of Inanna and Dumuzi also depict her as the one who wields power over life, enabling her to revive Dumuzi from the



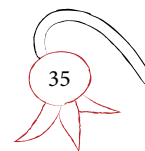
underworld. This capability to retrieve individuals from the underworld marked a revolutionary shift, transforming the “land with no return” into the “land with return.” This power of Inanna held profound significance for Mesopotamian kingship, as it was believed that the king embodied Dumuzi. Inanna’s dominion over life and death, symbolized by her ability to bring individuals back from the underworld, was instrumental in reshaping ancient Mesopotamian beliefs.

Significantly, a comparable theme is discernible in the Song of Songs. In Song 8:5, the beloved proclaims: “I have awakened you under the apple tree where your mother brought you forth and gave birth to you.” This awakening conveys a sense of resurrection, particularly in the context of the repeated verbs associated with giving birth. On a higher level of abstraction, therefore, both narrative variants encompass the hyleme:

- the female protagonist revives the male protagonist.

Before this “awakening,” she “leans” (מתרפקת) on him, a term that appears as a hapax, presenting a challenge for interpretation. In the following verse, she implores: “Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm, for love is stronger than death and harsher than the underworld.” In a manner reminiscent of Inanna, the beloved is portrayed as the mistress of life, death, and the underworld. The seals offered as protection against the forces of death and the underworld could well have been associated with the numinous instruments of power that she fashioned in the underworld and subsequently brought back to earth for use in the worship of the great goddess (cf. Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 143).

In summary, the hyleme analysis applied to the beloved’s narrative in the Song of Songs reveals intriguing parallels with Mesopotamian myths, particularly those surrounding Inanna and Dumuzi. These shared hylemes, such as the assault by keepers and the removal of garments, or the concept of the evil eye and resurrection, illuminate a complex interplay between life, death, power, and love in both accounts. The exploration of these common hylemes invites a deeper understanding of the Song of Songs, its cultural context, and its potential connections to ancient Mesopotamian mythological traditions.





## Conclusion

The hyleme-based approach provides a systematic method to identify underlying thematic parallels in the Song of Songs and Mesopotamian myths, shedding light on the mythological substratum of the text. Earlier interpretations, such as those by Marvin Pope and Othmar Keel, have contributed valuable insights by establishing connections between the Song of Songs and ancient Near Eastern mythology and iconography. However, hyleme analysis offers specific methodological advantages that enrich these interpretations.

Pope's interpretation highlights the mythological elements within the Song of Songs, focusing on individual symbols and motifs that parallel ancient Near Eastern myths. Although insightful, this approach sometimes examines these elements in isolation, without fully integrating them into the broader thematic structure of the text or its connections to Mesopotamian myth. Hyleme analysis, by contrast, breaks down the text into core elements and investigates how these elements interact to depict the beloved in ways that resonate with portrayals of Inanna in Mesopotamian tradition. This more holistic approach reveals how subtle references to key mythological themes are interwoven, providing a fuller understanding of the text.

Similarly, Keel's iconographic approach draws visual parallels between the Song of Songs' imagery and ancient Near Eastern art, adding valuable context. Yet, its primary focus on imagery sometimes overlooks the narrative and thematic depth of the text. Hyleme analysis complements Keel's findings by exploring how these motifs function within the text's narrative and contribute to its thematic landscape. By situating the Song of Songs within the broader cultural and religious contexts of the ancient Near East, hyleme analysis shows how traditional motifs are reinterpreted and transformed in ways that evoke themes of power, love, life, and death, giving the poem a distinctive literary voice.

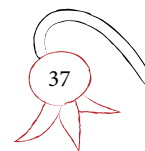
In conclusion, the hyleme analysis offers an integrated, nuanced understanding of the Song of Songs, bringing out the complex portrayal of the female beloved through allusions to the myths of Inanna. This approach not only deepens our comprehension of the text's literary and theological dimensions but also firmly anchors it within the rich



cultural tapestry of the ancient Near East. In doing so, hyleme analysis enhances our appreciation of the Song of Songs as a work of profound literary artistry and cultural resonance, offering fresh perspectives that continue to advance scholarly dialogue.

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