

# “I Am the Lily of Sharon, the Lotus Blooming in the Valley” (Song 2:1–2): The Floristic Metaphor of the Bride in the *Song of Songs*

## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the problem of interpreting the floral metaphors (lily, lotus) used to describe the bride in the *Song of Songs* (2:1–2). The difficulty arises from the ambiguity of identifying the specific species of the flowers mentioned in the Hebrew text. Various translations, spanning from antiquity to the present, illustrate this challenge, as the symbolism associated with different flower species can vary significantly.

The purpose of this study is to revisit and interpret the floral symbolism in *Song of Songs* 2:1–2. In order to achieve this, a lexical analysis of the terms within their literary context was carried out. Furthermore, botanical and geographical information about the referenced plants was considered. The interpretation of the symbolism was then extended to a broader cultural context, including references to Egypt and the Jerusalem Temple.

The findings suggest that the symbolic floral references carry strong connotations of fertility. In antiquity, a woman's beauty was revered not only for her virginity but also for the mystery of fertility and life. The imagery of the lily and lotus, as applied to the bride in the *Song of Songs*, expands on this symbolism and can be interpreted as an allusion to Eve as the “Mother of the Living” in Genesis 3:20.

## KEYWORDS

*Song of Songs*, bride, floral symbolism, lily, lotus, fertility, vitality

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## Introduction

The metaphor of the lily as applied to the bride in the *Song of Songs* is well established in tradition. For many readers, it may be difficult to imagine that this metaphor and comparison could be interpreted differently. Expressions such as “Like a lily in the midst of thorns” (*Song of Songs* 2:3) have, within the framework of allegorical and mystical interpretations, been associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary throughout the development of theological tradition. Marian devotional songs frequently reference the *Song of Songs*, with phrases such as: “Like a fragrant Lily among flowers,” “Hail, spotless Lily,” “Lily of delightful Paradise,” “Most grateful flower, Lily,” “Loveliest flower, Lily,” “Oh, Lily, how splendid thou art,” and “Holy Mary, white Lily.”<sup>1</sup> The allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, in which Mary is identified with the Bride, has long occupied a prominent place in theological tradition. This viewpoint has dominated for centuries, despite compelling arguments that the original intent of the inspired Biblical poet may have been more consistent with an expressive interpretation. Interest in investigating alternative interpretations began to emerge in the 18th century (Herder 1778; Baildam 1999).

A significant milestone in Catholic Biblical exegesis was the 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by Pius XII, which emphasized the importance of understanding the literary form of Biblical writings. In Polish Catholic scholarship, efforts to interpret the *Song of Songs* in its literal sense emerged gradually and often met resistance. Lech Stefaniak, for instance, when contemplating the meaning of the *Song of Songs*, asserted that “holiness and eroticism cannot be absolutely reconciled” (Stefaniak 1960: 194). Similarly, Józef Kudasiewicz acknowledged the exceptional interpretive issues associated with this Biblical book (Kudasiewicz 1978: 184–198). However, the expressive interpretation, commonly referred to as literal interpretation, gained

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1 These expressions come from various songs about Mary, such as (Polish titles): “Zawitaj, Królowo Różańca,” “Królowej Anielskiej śpiewajmy,” “Zdrowaś Maryja,” “Gwiazdo Jasności,” “O Maryjo, kwiecie biały” (Breza 2015; Siedlecki 2017).

traction, particularly through the work of Tadeusz Brzegowy, who championed this view beginning in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

A fresh interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, one that seeks to uncover the original intentions of the inspired Biblical poet, often reveals a depth of symbolism drawn from the natural world, alongside references to cultic traditions. In the ancient Middle East, love and fertility were commonly associated with the divine sphere, and the cult of fertility was deeply rooted in that culture (Müller 1976: 23–41). In this context, the comparison of the bride to flowers in *Song of Songs* 2:1–2 is not a mere aesthetic embellishment, but carries specific and significant symbolism tied to particular species of flowers. The problem lies in the uncertainty surrounding the precise identification of these species in the verses. The floral metaphor in the second chapter of the *Song of Songs* is open to diverse interpretations and its meaning, with altered accents, is equally rich and meaningful.

Biblical translations demonstrate the differences in how the flower names describing the bride have been rendered. These variations reflect the difficulty of unambiguously interpreting the original Hebrew terms and underscore the range of possibilities explored by translators. In Polish translations, several distinct patterns emerge. The first term shows greater variation, while the second term is most consistently rendered as “lily”:

1. “Like a **flower** in the field and a **lily** in the valley” (*Bible* translated by Wujek 1923). “I am a **flower** on the plain of Sharon, a **Lily** blooming in the valley” (*Bible of St Paul’s order*).
2. “I am the **narcissus** of Sharon, **lily** of the valleys” (BT III–V). “I am the **narcissus** of Sharon, **lily** of the valleys” (Langkammer 2016). “I am the **narcissus** of Sharon, **lily** of the valleys” (*Poznań Bible*; *Warsaw Bible – British Bible*).
3. “I am like a **rose** of Sharon, and like a **lily** near the valleys” (*Gdańsk Bible* 1881). “I am the **rose** of Sharon, **lily** of the

2 Fr. Professor Tadeusz Brzegowy continued work on the *Song of Songs* in articles, monographs and reviews such as: *Jak rozumieć Pieśń nad Pieśniami* [How to Understand Song of Songs] (1985), *Ku dosłownej interpretacji Pieśni nad Pieśniami* [Towards the Literal Interpretation of the Song of Songs] (1988), *Miłość małżeńska według Pieśni nad Pieśniami* [Married Couple’s Love according to the Song of Songs] (1994), *Złożoność i jedność literacka Pieśni nad Pieśniami* [Complexity and Literary Unity of the Song of Songs] (1995), *Pisma mądrościowe Starego Testamentu* [Wisdom Texts of the Old Testament] (2007).

valleys” (Izaak Cylkow 1904). “I am the **rose** of Sharon, I am the **lily** of the valley” (Miłosz 1984).

4. “I am the **lily** of Sharon and **rose** of the valley” (Brandstaetter 1988).

The aim of this article is to revisit and reinterpret the floral symbolism in *Song of Songs* 2:1–2. The objective will be undertaken through a detailed analysis of the floral terminology in these verses, a discussion of the possibilities for their interpretation, symbolism, and meaning within the broader message of the *Song of Songs*. The study begins with a brief compositional analysis of the literary passage containing these floral metaphors and comparisons.

### Composition of the pericope 2:1–3

The passage 2:1–3, which includes the analyzed “floral” fragment (verses 1–2), consists of three verses which feature alternating utterances by the bride and the groom:

Bride

1. *I am the lily of Sharon,  
the lotus blooming in the valley.*

Bridegroom

2. *Like a lotus among thorns  
is my friend among girls.*

Bride

3. *Like an apple tree among forest trees  
is my loved one among young men.  
I am glad to rest in his shade  
and taste his sweet fruit.*

The utterances correspond to one another, forming a line of dialogue. Moreover, they share a relationship in both the form of speech, and terminology. The bride speaks first, referring to herself. This is her second act of self-presentation (cf. 1:5). The bridegroom responds to her comparison/metaphor by building on the floral motif, contrasting the flower with thorns (v. 2). She then parallels his words by comparing the bridegroom to an apple tree, which she contrasts with the trees of the forest (v. 3a). This final verse will not be analyzed here. The last phrase (2:3b) transitions from description to action,

a stylistic feature characteristic of the *Song of Songs* (3:7–11; 4:1–6; 7:2–9). Where earlier verses relied on comparisons and metaphors from the animal world (1:9–11, 15), this section shifts to imagery from the plant world, beginning in 1:16 and continuing here.

## Discussion on terminology

“I am *ḥawaššelet* of Sharon,  
*šūšān* of the valleys.”

The structure of this sentence is straightforward. It consists of two consecutive phrases: *ḥawaššelet of Sharon* and *šūšān of the valleys*. Both terms refer to flowers and are presented in the *constructus* form, paired with place-denoting units (*Sharon* and *valleys*). However, it is difficult to determine whether the terms describe a single flower species defined by two phrases within this (synonymic) parallelism, or two different species, collectively used to symbolize the beauty of a woman (synthetic parallelism).

The term *ḥawaššelet* (BDB: 2261), which refers to a flower, has not been definitively identified. As a result, some translations do not specify the species, opting instead for a general term such as “flower” (Murphy 1990: 132). The *Septuagint* renders it as *Egō anthos tou pediou* (*I am the flower of the field*), while the Vulgate similarly translates it as *ego flos campi* (*I am a field flower*). The term appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in Isaiah 35:1, where it symbolizes the flourishing of various plants, contrasted with images of drought and wilderness.

The word *ḥawaššelet* is thought to refer to different species of flowers, which has led to diverse interpretations in translations. Suggested identifications include lily, rose, anemone, crocus, hyacinth, tulip, dahlia, iris, and other flowering plants (Stoop-van Paridon 2005: 98–97; *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971–1972, vol. 6: 1365). In many Biblical translations, narcissus is the dominant choice (Ravasi 2005: 62; Roberts 2007: 83; *Poznań Bible*; Gerleman 1965: 115; Müller 1992: 20), though other options such as crocus (Fox 1985: 106; Pope 1977: 367), rose (Garret 2004: 148; Assis 2009: 57), and coastal lily (Keel 1997: 93) are also proposed.

Although it is difficult to identify the exact species of *ḥawaššelet*, it is known to have been one of the exuberant flowers in Sharon (Fox 1985: 107). The bridegroom's response contrasts the *ḥawaššelet* in the lush meadows of Sharon with *šûšân* among thorns. However, this contrast does not necessarily define the intent behind the bride's statement. The plain of Sharon was a land of unique fertility and abundance, and merely mentioning the flowers of Sharon has positive overtones. The image of Sharon as a flat region with forests, hills, and valleys is supported by geographical and botanical evidence. During the winter season, rainfall fills the streams in its valleys, which dry up by early spring. This end of the rainy season parallels the description found a few verses later in the so-called Song of Spring (cf. 2:11–12), which depicts nature awakening to life (Stoop-van Paridon 2005: 97).

Geographically, the Plain of Sharon lies along the Mediterranean coast between Jaffa and Carmel. Historically, it was celebrated for its fertility, the vineyards cultivated there, its sand dunes, and marshes (Keel 1997: 94), so it was an environment conducive to the growth of both lilies and lotus flowers (Barbiero 2011: 84). The prophet Isaiah also mentions Sharon, alongside Lebanon and Carmel, as a region of particularly lush and flourishing vegetation, specifically referencing the *ḥawaššelet* just beginning to bloom (cf. Isa 35:1–2). Given this context, it is difficult to accept the interpretation offered by some exegetes that *ḥawaššelet* represents an inconspicuous flower, one of many among the abundant vegetation of Sharon, or the view which frames the woman's statement as coquettish self-effacement (e.g., "I am just one among many girls").

The second term, *šôšân* or *šôšānnâ*, has three forms and is generally understood to refer to a flower resembling a lily (BDB: 7799). This term appears repeatedly in the *Song of Songs* (2:1, 2:16, 4:5, 5:13, 6:2, 6:3, and 7:3). For centuries, following the Greek Septuagint (*krinon*) and the Vulgate (*lilium*), *šôšân* has been translated as "lily." In more recent translations, it is rendered either as "lily" or "lotus" (Pope 1977: 50; Keel 1997: 93). The *Lilium candidum* (white lily) is the only species of lily known to have grown in ancient Palestine. However, this species did not grow in valleys but was found in Upper

Galilee and on Mount Carmel, thriving in shady hollows and among cliffs (Stoop-van Paridon 2005: 97; Löw 1926–1934, vol. 3: 193). Some scholars believe that the term refers to the water lily, which the Israelites may not have distinguished from the lotus and thus used a simplified name for both flowers (Garret, House 2004: 148). However, this interpretation is contested, as the lotus was an edible and, cultivated plant, which makes it unlikely that the two were conflated in such a simplified manner.

The Israelites were undoubtedly familiar with the lotus flower, as evidenced by its use in architectural ornamentation. For instance, in 1 Kings 7:23–26, a bronze cast of a “sea,” the work of craftsmen, is described. Its edge was adorned with rows of flower cups, with the rim itself shaped like the edge of a *šōšān* cup. Othmar Keel identifies numerous examples of Egyptian and Palestinian artifacts—such as chalices and column capitals (cf. 1 Kings 7:22)—that were shaped like lotuses rather than lilies (Keel 1984: 94–96). The term *šōšān* is also believed to have been borrowed from the Egyptian *ššn*, a term that refers specifically to the water lily, but more precisely to the lotus (Grober 1984: 9, 88; Barbiero 2011: 83; Keel 1984: 95–97). It is highly likely that *šōšān* referred to the lotus flower, which had a unique meaning and carried rich symbolism in ancient Egypt.

### *Lotus and its symbolism*

The symbolism of the lotus flower is rooted in its cycle of growth. Emerging as a bud from the swamp waters, the lotus was interpreted by the Egyptians as a sign of rebirth and triumph over the forces of chaos and death. In Egyptian art and mythology, gods and rulers were often depicted with the lotus flower, symbolizing their power to renew life (Barbiero 2011: 84). This symbolism is also observable in the prophetic vision of Israel’s rebirth in the book of Hosea: “I will become like dew for Israel so that she will blossom like the lotus and develop roots like the cedars of Lebanon” (Hos 14:6). In the love poetry of the ancient Middle East, the lotus functioned as a symbol of life, fertility, renewal, and love (Exum 2005: 114). Its symbolism was known across the Mediterranean region and further east to India and China. Evidence of the lotus’s presence in Canaan can be found

in its depiction on badges featuring the goddess Astarte or other Syrian deities (*ANEP*: 469–470, 472–475, 566).

## Demythologization and theologization of the message of the *Song of Songs*

This raises the question of the cultic reminiscences embedded in the *Song of Songs*, particularly since it is not the only instance in the text that invites speculation about cultic influences.<sup>3</sup> As these references form part of character descriptions, elements of theomorphy may be present, employed as literary and cultural motifs without necessarily implying a direct cultic association. In crafting the poetic figures of the bride and bridegroom, the writers may have drawn on familiar imagery, such as depictions of Canaanite goddesses holding large lotus flower cups in hand, as seen on plaques and stelae (*Biblisches Reallexikon* 1900: 11–119 (Gottesbild); *ANEP* 470–474; Keel 1997: figs. 32–35, 63–65). The lotus was a frequent point of comparison in ancient Egyptian love songs in which the beloved woman's features were likened to lotus flowers, though she need not be a goddess to inspire such comparisons:

“Her shoulders surpass gold, her fingers are like lotuses” (No. 31).

“My sister’s [lips] are a lotus” (No. 3) (Fox, 1985: 269–270).

However, as Michael V. Fox explains in his monograph comparing the *Song of Songs* with Egyptian love literature, Egyptian love songs often have an entertaining, celebratory character, which differs in tone and intent from the *Song of Songs* (Fox 1983: 219–228; 1992: 394). The Biblical use of floral symbolism in reference to the woman is far from incidental; it carries significant weight. When one considers that descriptions and praises of the bride in the *Song* frequently invoke fertility symbols—such as vines and grapes, pomegranates (4:3, 13; 6:7, 11; 7:13), palms (7:8–9), wheat (7:3), and springs (4:12, 15)—it becomes clear that the lotus also belongs within this rich symbolic fabric.

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3 What also appears in the *Song of Songs* are doves (2:14; 5:2; 6:9) and goats, gazelles (2:8–9; 2:17; 8:14), which are associated with the imagery of the goddess of love and fertility, Astarte, Ishtar (Keel 1997: 74–75, 87–89, fig. 10–12, 24–28).



## Complexity of metaphors in the *Song of Songs*

The *Song of Songs* is characterized by intricate, multi-layered symbolism, with verses that often have double meanings. The text operates on two levels, intertwining literal themes with deeper spiritual interpretations, or complex symbolism that generates additional layers of meaning. One example of this complexity is found in the opening of a song in chapter 7 (7:1–6). The invocation *šūbišūbi* may presuppose a double meaning. Literally, it is as an exhortation to the dancing Shulamite: “Spin, spin!” as described in the “dance of the two camps” (7:1). Alternatively, it could mean “Return, return!”—a phrase that lends itself to allegorical interpretation. In this context, it may evoke an invitation for Israel to return from distant Babylon (Jer 3:12; 12:15) or to spiritually return to Yahweh (Hos 3:5; 5:15; Ps 116:7). Thus, a seemingly ordinary wedding song transforms into a medium for a different, more profound, spiritual message.

Another example of the *Song of Songs*’ proclivity for double meanings appears in the song of 7:7–10, which opens with the bridegroom’s words: “Oh, how beautiful and how graceful you are, love, most delightful!” (7:7). In this verse, the term “love,” to which this book is dedicated, carries multiple interpretations. On the one hand, it refers to the pleasures of love, while on the other, it denotes the beloved person. The bridegroom thus praises his bride—his beloved—while simultaneously speaking of the abstract concept of “love” that he experiences through her. The bride becomes the personification of love, a metonymy that encapsulates both the individual and the idea (Barbiero 2011: 391).

Similarly, the floral metaphor in 2:1–2 can be read with a dual meaning. In verse 2, the bridegroom expands on the bride’s comparison, but alters the frame of reference: “Like a lotus among the thorns, so is my friend among the girls.” The bride is no longer likened to a blooming lily or lotus flourishing amid the abundant vegetation of Sharon’s fertile plains, but instead to a flower standing out amidst thorns. By juxtaposing the delicate flower with its starkly contrasting surroundings, the bridegroom accentuates the symbolic significance of the image. This metaphor first exposes the uniqueness of the bride—a motif that recurs in 6:8–10. Second, it introduces a deeper symbolic layer rooted in the specific qualities of the flower evoked.

## Lily and lotus as symbols of the bride

The symbolism of thorns is well-established in the Bible; they signify crop failures, suffering, hardship, sterility, and even a curse (cf. Gen 3:18; Hos 9:6; Isa 34:11–15). This stands in stark contrast to the imagery of the lily and, even more so, the lotus. Given that the *Song of Songs* contains other allusions to Genesis and portrays betrothed love as reminiscent of the Garden of Eden (e.g., 4:12; “to me his desire turns,” 7:11—cf. Gen 3:16), one may venture to conclude that the mention of thorns is not coincidental (Gen 3:18). The symbolic connection of the lotus to the rebirth of life further heightens the contrast with thorns, which reinforces this interpretation of the flower species.

The ancients were not only enthralled by the virgin beauty of a woman but were equally captivated by the mystery of fertility and life, as is also evident in Genesis, which underpins much of the *Song of Songs*’ symbolism. The Biblical notion of a woman “building” her husband’s house (cf. Ruth 4:11–12) primarily referred to bearing children. Fertility and the ability to give life were intrinsic to the ancient ideal of womanhood, which shaped perceptions of beauty, goodness, and family relationships. The woman, likened to a lotus flower, embodies the vitality of new life and irresistibly attracts with her charm (Barbiero 2011: 84). The beloved’s beauty, vitality, and fertility possess a “paradise” quality, derived from God’s blessing and originating in His creative power.

## Conclusion

The symbolism of the lily and the lotus in relation to the beloved woman in the *Song of Songs* is clear. While the lily is conceived as a symbol of purity and impeccability, the lotus represents vitality, the awakening of life, and fertility. Fertility, a recurring metaphor in the *Song of Songs*, is not presented as the focal point of a fertility cult but is intertwined with the themes of love, life, and divine blessing. The allusions to Genesis are deliberate and significant. Eve, the “Mother of the Living,” constitutes a paradisiacal archetype, subtly echoed in the image of the bride in the *Song of Songs*.

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