SCHOLIA TO CANTICLES

(i 4b, ii 4, i 4b, iv 3, v 8, vi 12)

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(1) i 4b: nazkírâ dôdekâ miyyayin mēsārim ʔāhēḇûkā is generally translated along the lines of the RSV: "We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you". But the noun mēsārim is problematic. It is generally taken as functioning adverbially in the sense of "rightly, correctly". Now mēsārim may mean physical evenness or levelness as in Isa. xxvi 7 or, more frequently, ethical righteousness. It does not elsewhere mean morally neutral correctness or justifiability, the sense required by the usual translation of these verses. Ibn Ezra explains mēsārim as "an epithet of wine" (tāʾar ḳayyin) and regards the comparative mem of miyyayin as applying to mēsārim as well. He is, I believe, basically right, except that his explanation requires understanding mēsārim in itself as a name for a type of wine, whereas the other occurrences of mēsārim appearing in conjunction with wine (Cant. vii 10; Prov. xxiii 31, see below) do not show the word functioning in this way. T. H. Gaster emended the word to mimmeraš, "new wine", cognate to Ugaritic mrt and Aramaic mērāt, and changed ʔāhēḇûkā to ʔāhâbekā, "your love", producing: "(We will extol...) more than new wine your caresses".¹ But this proposal requires making two emendations, creating a hapax legomenon, and assuming the existence of a noun form (ʔhb) that does not occur elsewhere in the singular. Other proposals, such as N. H. Tur-Sinai's interpretation of mēsārim as sexual potency,² and M. Dahood's translation of mēsārim as "gullet",³ require the assumption of unattested meanings and produce texts that are hardly more meaningful than the MT.

³ Psalms I (Garden City, NY, 1966), p. 300.
The word mesārim is associated with wine in two other passages: Cant. vii 10, wēhikkēk kēyēn haṭṭōb—hōlēk lēdōdi lēmēšārim, “Your palate is like good wine”—“It flows smoothly to my beloved”, and Prov. xxiii 31, 'al-te-re'yayin kî yiḥaddām ki-yitłēn bakkōs ēnō yitḥallēk bēmēšārim, “Do not look at wine when it gleams red, when it gives forth its sparkle in the cup, flowing smoothly”. The only translation of lēmēšārim and bēmēšārim that fits both these verses well is “smoothly”. This usage is quite clear in Prov. xxiii 31, where the following verse defines the word by contrast as it describes the after-effects of wine: it bites like a serpent’s venom. The adverbs formed from mēšārim, namely bēmēšārim and lēmēšārim, show that mesārim by itself means “smoothness” and may be used in particular of the smoothness of wine. Such a sense accords with the root meaning of the word.

With this in mind I would divide our verse after dōdekā and point yayin as yen. I read: nāgīlā wēnîmēšāhā bāk, nazkīrā dōdekā, miyyēn mēšārim lāhēbûkā. “We will rejoice and exult in you./ We will praise your love./ More than smooth wine do they love you”. yen mēšārim, literally “wine of smoothness”, is of course a natural equivalent of English “smooth wine”. nazkīrā, literally “we shall mention”, here implies “praise”, as in hasdē YHWH ʾazkīr, “I will praise the mercies of the Lord” (Isa. lxiii 7), ʾazkīrā šīmekā bēkol-dōr wādōr “I shall praise your name in every generation” (Ps. xlv 18), and more. This division produces a tristich similar to v. 3.

The enallage of person in i 3-4 is a deliberate literary device, one used also in the Egyptian love songs. The sudden shifts of person convey shifts of perspective. The girl moves back and forth between the first person plural, where she includes the other girls in her appreciation of her lover’s beauties, and the third person plural, where she dances verbally out of the group in order to add a certain objectivity to her statement about the public estimation of his...