

# SONG OF SONGS

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. General

A. George Shwab's opening statement in his 2008 commentary (EBC Revised, 6:369) on Song of Songs well expresses the difficulty in understanding the book.

When a newcomer reads the Song of Songs, he or she is confronted with a jumble of images that seem to run together or suddenly shift with no rhyme or reason. One may ask, "When does one section end and another begin? Is there a story being told, and if so, who are the characters and what is the plot?" Without an answer to those questions, the book is confusing and enigmatic.

To many, the Song of Songs remains a closed book. They can discover little practical value in its eight chapters. The book does not speak of God, the law, or the history of Israel. Paul claims that all Scripture is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Ti 3:16-17) – but how can this be true of the Song of Songs?

B. The book has been understood in many different ways throughout history by both Jewish and Christian interpreters. Indeed, the famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century German theologian and Hebraist Franz Delitzsch called it "the most obscure book in the Old Testament" (EBC, 5:1202). Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, interpreting the book clearly calls for a large dose of humility and recognition that other approaches may be correct.

C. My own understanding has been greatly influenced by the recent (2015) commentary of Iain Duguid in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series. We part company on some details, but his overall approach and view of the structure of the book was immensely helpful to me. Rather than explore various alternative understandings, my goal in the class is simply to share with you my take on the book. As always, I leave it to you to judge how closely I have captured the Spirit's intention.

## II. Title(s)

A. The book is known by several different English titles. Verse 1 literally reads "Song of songs, which is to Solomon." The title "Song of Songs" is taken from the first clause, which consists of the first two words of the Hebrew text (*šîr haššîrîm*).

B. The title "Song of Solomon" is drawn from the second clause and highlights Solomon's connection with the work. But as I will explain in a minute, to the extent that title conveys the sense Solomon is the author I think it is misleading.

C. The title "Canticle of canticles," or simply "Canticles" for short, comes from the way "Song of songs" was rendered in the Latin Vulgate. It was there translated *Canticum canticorum*, which words came into English as canticle (hymn or song) and canticles (plural form).

### III. Genre

A. The opening verse informs the reader that what follows is a song, lyric poetry, rather than some other genre of writing like proverbs or historical narrative. So it must be read and interpreted as poetry.

B. In that regard, Duguid quotes (p. 72) C. S. Lewis's remarks about the Psalms, which is another collection of songs:

What must be said . . . is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung; not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons . . . Most emphatically, the Psalms must be read as poems: as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise, we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.

### IV. Authorship

A. The author of Song of Songs traditionally was thought to be King Solomon based largely on a particular understanding of v. 1. The second clause of that verse literally reads "which [is] *lē* Solomon." The preposition has a wide range of meanings, and though it could mean the book was "by" Solomon in the sense of being authored by him, other meanings are possible and, in this case, I would say probable.

B. That v. 1 does not *demand* Solomonic authorship is widely recognized. To cite some examples:

1. The note in the New English Translation states in part:

The preposition ל in אֲשֶׁר לְשׁוֹלֹמֹה ( *'asher lishlomoh*) has been taken as: (1) *authorship*: "which is written by Solomon." The *lamed* of authorship (also known as *lamed auctoris*) is well attested in Hebrew (see GKC 421 §130.b), particularly in the psalms (e.g., Pss 18:1; 30:1; 34:1; 51:1; 52:1; 54:1; 56:1; 57:1; 59:1; 60:1; 63:1; 72:21); (2) *dedication*: "which is dedicated for Solomon." The *lamed* of dedication is attested in Ugaritic psalms dedicated to Baal or about Baal (CTA 6.1.1 = UT 49.1); or (3) *topic*: "which is about/concerning Solomon." The *lamed* of topic is attested in Hebrew (e.g., 1 Chr 24:20) and in Ugaritic, e.g., *lb`l* "About Baal" (CTA 6.1.1 = UT 49.1).

2. Tremper Longman III states (*Song of Songs*, NICOT, 3):

The preposition *l*<sup>e</sup> that is prefixed to Solomon's name can theoretically be understood in more than one way in this context:

*To Solomon:* The book is dedicated to Solomon.

*By Solomon:* Authorship

*Concerning Solomon:* Solomon is the subject matter of the book.

*Solomonic:* which may mean something like "in the Solomonic/wisdom literary tradition."

3. Duane Garrett states (*Song of Songs*, WBC, 23B:124):

לְשֹׁלֹמֹה may be rendered "of Solomon" in the sense of "belonging to Solomon's collection." It could also be taken as the *lamed auctoris*, "(written) by Solomon." It could possibly mean "to Solomon" in the sense of dedicated to Solomon or written for Solomon. Finally, it could mean "concerning" after the analogy of Jer. 48:1, "concerning Moab" (לְמוֹאָב).

4. Robert Jensen states (*Song of Songs*, Interpretation, 2): "Then there is the clause, 'which is Solomon's.' This is not necessarily an ascription of authorship, 'by Solomon.' It could also be rendered 'dedicated to Solomon' or 'about Solomon' or 'in Solomon's style,' or perhaps in yet other ways."

5. Iain Duguid states (TOTC, 73): "The remaining words in the title, *which is Solomon's*, are ambiguous. They could mean that this song was written by Solomon. . . . However, the preposition *lamed* has a wide variety of uses: *lišlōmō* may mean 'belonging to Solomon' (1 Kgs 10:28) or 'pertaining to Solomon' in a more general sense (1 Kgs 5:30 [Eng. 5:16])."

C. There are a number of reasons to doubt that v. 1 was intended to convey Solomonic authorship.

1. When *lamed* is used in the titles of Psalms to denote authorship (including authorship by Solomon in Ps. 127:1), the relative pronoun *’āšer* (which) that is used in Song of Songs 1:1 is never found. So there is a grammatical difference.

2. Solomon is referred to throughout the Song of Songs in third person (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12), which is not what one would expect if he were the author. Moreover, he seems to be viewed from a distance in 3:7-11 and 8:10-12.

3. In addition, Solomon's harem and his approach to the institution of marriage are compared negatively to the love relationship that runs through the song. His well-known excesses serve as a foil to help bring the joy and blessing of the "starring" couple's relationship into full relief. It is unlikely Solomon would present such a subtle critique of his choices. If he intended to express his repentance, he certainly would identify his wrongs more overtly; and if he had not repented, he would not suggest his guilt in any form.

4. As someone who engaged in political marriages and had hundreds of wives and concubines, Solomon's life is completely at odds with the portrait of the loving couple in Song of

Songs. There is simply nothing in his life to suggest he knew or appreciated the kind of relationship that is the focus of the poem.

D. As I see the Song of Songs, it is an anonymous poem that speaks of the power and delight of young sexual attraction and extols the blessedness of that attraction culminating and being satisfied in marital exclusivity. It is about sexual love that finds fulfillment in marriage, and it makes the point that marriage enhances rather than diminishes the relationship.

1. I take v. 1 to mean the poem "relates to" or is "directed to" Solomon (probably posthumously) as Israel's most famous representative of one who took a contrary marital path, one who rejected or missed God's ideal for the expression of human sexuality. The song speaks to all mankind to the extent that we in our sinfulness likewise miss or reject that ideal. Duguid remarks (p. 36, 76):

In fact, the Song of Songs is best understood as a wisdom piece about two idealized people, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and committed love is deep but, like all loves in this fallen world, far from perfect. Their idealized love story is contrasted with the alternative Solomonic model of 'love' that we see in 1 Kings 11, a model that views marriage primarily as a commercial and political transaction, a means to wealth, security or political advancement.

[I]t seems more plausible overall, given Solomon's negative role in what follows, that the author is anonymous, and he intends to contrast the true, wholehearted, lifelong devotion of the couple that he describes with Solomon's notoriously different perspective on 'love'.

2. Behind all this, and magnifying the song's significance, is the larger truth that the marriage relationship has from the beginning been a metaphor for God's relationship with his people (Isa. 50:1, 54:6; Jer. 2:2, 3:1, 20; Ezek. 16:8, 32, 23:1-13; Hos. 2:2, 3:1) and Christ's relationship with the church (Eph. 5:22-33). The joy, depth, excitement, intimacy, fulfillment, and exclusivity of the marriage relationship as poetically idealized in Song of Songs speaks to the relationship God intends for us to have with him.

## V. Identity of the Main Characters

A. As I indicated, I do not believe that Solomon is one of the main characters in Song of Songs, one of the lovers. Indeed, Solomon, either as prince or king, would never have been out in the field with flocks as indicated in Song 1:7. Rather, they are fictional characters created by the poet as vehicles to present God's ideal for the expression of human sexuality and to speak indirectly to our relationship with God. As Duguid notes (p. 75), "The focus of the Song is . . . not on the specific identity of the lovers so much as it is on the nature of their love (Walsh 2000:7)."

B. This raises questions about how to understand the references to "the king" in 1:4 and 1:12 and the various references to Solomon that I mentioned. I will give you my thinking on those questions as we work through the text.

## VI. Date

A. Since I think Song of Songs is an anonymous work that was directed to Solomon only as a kind of tragic counterexample, it could have been written any time after Solomon's view and treatment of marriage was known. It was translated into Greek in the third century B.C. (LXX), so it obviously was written prior to that time.

B. Moreover, Song of Songs may well be a collection of independent love songs that were put together by an inspired editor to develop certain themes and paint something of a story. If so, the individual units may have originated at different times.

## VII. Structure

There is much disagreement about the structure of Song of Songs. The outline presented below is from Duguid's commentary (with a few modifications).

## VIII. Translation and Resources

I prepared the translation given below in consultation with the major English versions: KJV, ERV, ASV, RSV, NAS, NIV, NEB, REB, NAB, NRSV, NASU, NKJV, NJB, ESV, NET (with its very helpful notes), TNIV, and CSB. I also drew regularly on the expertise and discussions of a number of leading commentators (mainly Iain Duguid [TOTC], Tremper Longman [NICOT], Duane Garrett [WBC], Tom Gledhill [BST], and Richard Hess [BCOT]) and periodically consulted the standard Hebrew lexicons and theological dictionaries.

# THE TEXT

## I. Title (1:1)

*The song of songs that relates to Solomon.*

A. The phrase "song of songs" could mean simply that the work is a single song that is made up of a number of independent songs, but most scholars understand it as a superlative title, like "King of kings" or "Holy of Holies." In other words, it is understood to mean that this is the best or greatest of songs.

B. This need not mean the writer is asserting this is the best or greatest of all songs of whatever kind. It could mean simply that this is the best or greatest of all songs relating to Solomon. It transcends all of them because it so beautifully paints a picture of God's ideal for the expression of human sexuality against the contrasting background of Solomon's rejection of that ideal.

C. If it means it is the best or greatest song absolutely, that assertion most likely is tied to the larger truth that the marriage relationship is a metaphor for God's relationship with his people. As the greatest portrait of God's ideal for the expression of human sexuality, it is the greatest song ever because that ideal points to the most significant relationship of all, that of God and his people.

## II. Prologue (1:2 – 2:7)

### A. Introduction (1:2-14)

#### 1. Desire (1:2-4)

**Woman:** <sup>2</sup> *Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your caresses are more delightful than wine!* <sup>3</sup> *As for fragrance, your oils are delightful. Your name is poured-out oil. No wonder the eligible young women love you.* <sup>4</sup> *Take me away with you – let us hurry. May the king bring me into his bedroom chambers!*

**Daughters of Jerusalem:** *We will exult and rejoice in you; we will praise your caresses more than wine.*

**Woman:** *Rightly do they love you!*

a. The poet launches immediately into his subject matter by painting a vivid picture of the depth and power of sexual love. The young woman is longing for the passionate kisses of the man she loves and for the sensual delight she anticipates their lovemaking will be. The word translated "caresses" (*dôdîm*, plural form of *dôd*) is commonly translated "love," which connotes a mental state, but that misses the sense of sexual touching that is evident from other occurrences of the plural form in the Old Testament (Prov. 7:18; Ezek. 16:8, 23:17). That is why the word is translated "lovemaking" in the NET and NJB (see also footnote in CSB). The girl is filled with sexual desire.

b. The aroma of her man's cologne (aromatic oils) is delightful to her senses. And he is thought of so highly that his name is a pleasing aroma to those who hear it; speaking about him is like spreading perfume. He is a man of substance and character, so her love for him is not merely physical. She is crazy about him as a complete person. Indeed, he is such an amazing "catch" that all the eligible young women, those who have come to the age of marriage, naturally love him, or so it seems through her eyes. They would be foolish not to!

c. The intensity of her desire for the man she loves is expressed in her longing to be carried away by him quickly to his bedroom. She is aching for the fulfillment of her sexual attraction, which in the context of Scripture and Judaism can be done morally only in a marriage relationship. And as we will see, "the centerpiece of the book is a wedding scene that concludes with the consummation of their relationship (3:6 – 5:2)" (Duguid, 41). In that section, the man six times refers to the woman as "my bride." Tom Gledhill remarks (p. 27-28):

In order to anchor the Song securely in the social context of ancient Israel, it makes sense to assume that the lovers are a betrothed couple. . . . It was

sometimes the case that the man and woman had never met before their betrothal, and thus the relationship started from cold, as it were. But romantic love could also blossom even in the more restricted social intercourse of Israelite society (see later, on 8:5). So it is not inappropriate to view the Song as the joyous, tentative explorations of love of the betrothed couple, culminating in their marriage and full sexual union in 5:1.

d. Most scholars recognize that the woman's reference to her man as "the king" is not intended literally but is, within the poem, an expression of her attitude toward him, an ascription to him of the dignity, nobility, and honor of royalty. He is a king in her eyes. Indeed, it is thought that in some Ancient Near-Eastern marriage ceremonies "the bride and groom were called king and queen for the period of the wedding festivities" (Gledhill, 96-97). If that is correct, and she is anticipating fulfillment of her passion on her wedding night, her thinking in such terms is understandable.

e. The eligible young women who were said in v. 3 to love the woman's man now express their intention to celebrate his marital union with her. The one-flesh union of marriage is a good thing, a blessing from God, so it is an occasion for rejoicing when those who are loved enter into that blessing. The community of faith, as represented by the maidens, will "amen" sexual intimacy and fulfillment in the proper context of marriage.

f. The woman confirms again that the young women are right to love her man. In her eyes, he is worth every bit of it.

g. Notice how far the spirit of this poem is from the glorification of celibacy that crept into the early church. Sexual love in the God-given context of marriage is a good and beautiful thing. And it's not that simply because of its procreative potential; the experience and fulfillment of sexual passion in marriage is delightful for its own sake.

## 2. Defense and request (1:5-7)

**Woman (cont.):** <sup>5</sup> *I am dark but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.* <sup>6</sup> *Do not stare at me because I am dark, for the sun has glared down on me. The sons of my mother were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, [but] my vineyard, the one belonging to me, I have not kept.* <sup>7</sup> *Tell me, O you whom my soul loves: Where do you graze [your flock]? Where do you give [them] rest at midday? For why should I be like a covered woman beside the flocks of your companions?*

a. The young woman who is head over heels in love with the man who is viewed by the daughters of Jerusalem as a great catch defends herself in vv. 5-6 against being looked down on by them. She is dark-skinned in a culture that associated female beauty with a paler complexion, but she declares she is nevertheless beautiful. She exhibits both the darkness of the tents of the Bedouin tribes of Kedar and the beauty of the tent curtains associated with Solomon, which presumably adorned his palace or was part of the tent in which he dwelled during military campaigns or was part of a well-known structure he had built.

b. In v. 6 she tells the daughters of Jerusalem not to gawk at her because she is dark. She got that way because her angry brothers, whom she refers to merely as sons of her mother, forced her to serve as caretaker of the vineyards. This required her to work in the glaring sun which resulted in her dark tan. In keeping their vineyards she did not keep her own, meaning she did not protect her own body from the darkening effect of the sun.

c. In v. 7 the young woman addresses her man, the one her soul loves, asking where he will be grazing his flock, especially at midday when it is time for his sheep to rest. She wants directions to his location so they can rendezvous and spend quality time together when the sheep are resting and thus not demanding so much of her man's attention.

d. Without those directions, she will be left to wander and hang around various flocks trying to ascertain if it was the flock her man was shepherding. In doing so, she would be like the proverbial "covered woman" Tamar (Gen. 38:12-19) who posed as a prostitute by sitting as an unaccompanied woman at the entrance to Enaim. Her loitering around flocks as an unaccompanied woman could send the same signal.

### 3. Response and assurance (1:8-11)

**Man:** <sup>8</sup> *If you do not know, O most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flock, and graze your young goats beside the shepherds' tents.* <sup>9</sup> *I liken you, my darling, to a mare among the chariots of Pharaoh.* <sup>10</sup> *Your cheeks are beautiful with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels.* <sup>11</sup> *We will make ornaments of gold for you, with studs of silver.*

a. The man now speaks for the first time in the poem. He describes his love as the most beautiful of women, thus putting to rest any insecurity she may have about her beauty in his eyes. He tells her to follow the tracks of the flock out to his location and to bring some of her young goats to graze next to the shepherds' tents, their temporary base of operations. Having goats to graze will alleviate her concern about the perception of an unaccompanied woman loitering about for no apparent reason, and presumably the man will make arrangements so he can meet her at that location when she arrives.

b. He likens her to a mare among the chariots of Pharaoh because of the beautiful ornamentation on her cheeks and neck. As royal horses from this time often were highly decorated, so she, in his eyes, is splendidly accessorized in a way that magnifies her dignity and natural attractiveness.

c. In v. 11 he pledges that together they, as a married couple, will make for her ornaments of gold studded with silver. It is an expression that she will continue to be exalted by him after their marriage, esteemed in his eyes as one worthy of such extravagant provision.

### 4. Desire (1:12-14)

**Woman:** <sup>12</sup> *While the king is at his table, my perfume spreads its fragrance.* <sup>13</sup> *My love is to me a pouch of myrrh that will spend the night between my breasts.* <sup>14</sup> *My love is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi.*

a. Even when she is apart from her love, when he is seated at his table or on his couch, her perfume (nard) spreads its fragrance to him, meaning she continues to command his attention. He cannot get her out of his mind even when she is out of sight.

b. He is to her a pouch of myrrh, something delightful and exciting to the senses, which she eagerly anticipates will be spending the night lying between her breasts. Recall how the adulteress in Prov. 7:17 speaks of the sensually pleasing aroma of myrrh in her attempt to seduce the young man.

c. And her love is a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi. I think she simply is emphasizing how sensually pleasing her love is to her. The sweet fragrance of a cluster of henna blossoms in the beautiful setting of the famous oasis of Engedi on the western shores of the Dead Sea is a sensory "10."

## B. A litany of love (1:15 – 2:7)

### 1. Mutual affirmation (1:15 – 2:3)

**Man:** <sup>15</sup> Behold, you are beautiful, my darling! Behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves.

**Woman:** <sup>16</sup> Behold, you are handsome, my love! Oh, how delightful! Our bed is verdant. <sup>17</sup> The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters are pines. <sup>2:1</sup> I am [just] a wildflower of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

**Man:** <sup>2</sup> Like a lily among brambles is my darling among young women.

**Woman:** <sup>3</sup> Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my love among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my mouth.

a. The man twice declares his love's beauty and then specifically compliments her eyes saying they are doves. It is unclear whether they resemble doves in their shape, color, or liveliness, but clearly he is taken with them.

b. The woman declares her love's handsomeness and exclaims it is delightful. The statement their bed is verdant, characterized by flourishing greenery, reflects her expectation, born of their passion for each other, that they will be fruitful in terms of having children. And their love for each other will be the strength of their home, the beams of cedar and rafters of pines that will provide the stability and permanence in which to raise a family.

c. In 2:1 the woman modestly resists her love's exclamation of her beauty, asserting that she is just an ordinary flower like a desert crocus (see Isa. 35:1) or a common lily. The translation of the first term (הַבַּצְלֵת, *hābaṣṣelet*) as "rose" is almost certainly wrong. As the note to the NET states:

Early English translators knew that it referred to some kind of flower but were unsure exactly which type, so they arbitrarily chose "rose" because it was a well-known and beautiful flower. In the light of comparative Semitics, modern Hebrew lexicographers have settled on "asphodel," "meadow-saffron," "narcissus," or "crocus" (BDB 287 s.v. הַבַּצְלֵת; HALOT 287 s.v. הַבַּצְלֵת; DCH 3:153 s.v. הַבַּצְלֵת). . . . The location of this flower in Sharon suggests that a common wild

flower would be more consonant than a rose. The term appears elsewhere only in Isa 35:1 where it refers to some kind of desert flower – erroneously translated "rose" (KJV, NJPS) but probably "crocus" (NASB, NIV, NJPS margin).

d. In 2:2 the man picks up her self-deprecating reference as a common lily and turns it into a compliment of her distinctive beauty. If she is a common lily, she is like a single lily in the midst of thorn bushes. In his eyes, her beauty surpasses that of all others.

e. In 2:3 the woman reciprocates saying her love is like an apple tree among the trees of the forest meaning he stands out in a positive way in comparison to all the other young men. She delights to come under his shade, to come within the protection he affords, and declares that what she receives from him, his fruit, is pleasing to her.

## 2. Anticipation of union and the dangers of love (2:4-7)

**Woman (cont.):** <sup>4</sup> *He has brought me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love.* <sup>5</sup> *Strengthen me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am sick from love.* <sup>6</sup> *May his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me!* <sup>7</sup> *I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*

a. Having spoken of her delight to come under her love's protection, which would occur in their marriage, she anticipates his having brought her to the banquet hall (lit. "house of wine") where, at least in her imagination if not in reality, the wedding celebration would occur. In that act she comes under his banner, his military standard, as her primary loyalty shifts from her parents' household to her husband's and he becomes the new source of her protection and provision. The fact his banner is love speaks well of their relationship and future.

b. The intensity of her sexual desire as she anticipates the day of its release is such that she describes herself as being sick from love. She calls for sustenance in the form of raisin cakes and apples lest she faint from the emotional longing.

c. The only cure for her distress is the sexual fulfillment she will experience in marriage. So she expresses her longing for that sexual intimacy in v. 6.

d. Because the aching of her unfulfilled sexual desire is so intense, she charges the daughters of Jerusalem in v. 7 not to get that sexually "revved up" before the appropriate time, before those emotions are able to be satisfied. This is not so much an actual demand as it is a way to emphasize the strength of her sexual desire for her love. She is saying, in our vernacular, that the wait until consummation is "killing her," so much so that she wants to spare others. The fact the charge is issued "by the gazelles and does of the field" is probably related to these animals being culturally associated with sexual activity. Thus, the man in the Song is like a gazelle (Song 2:9, 17, 8:14) and the woman's breasts are like the twins of a gazelle (Song 4:5, 7:3; see also Prov. 5:19). This association of gazelles and deer with sexuality is documented in broader ancient Near Eastern culture.

### III. Before the Wedding: Not Yet and Anxiety (2:8 – 3:5)

#### A. Morning (2:8-17)

**Woman (cont.):** <sup>8</sup> Listen! My love [is approaching]! Look, here he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills! <sup>9</sup> My love is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. <sup>10</sup> My love speaks and says to me,

**Man:** Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come away! <sup>11</sup> For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. <sup>12</sup> The blossoms appear in the land, the time of singing has come, the sound of the turtledove is heard in our land. <sup>13</sup> The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth [their] fragrance. Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come away. <sup>14</sup> O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your appearance is lovely.

**Woman:** <sup>15</sup> Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, for our vineyards are in bloom. <sup>16</sup> My love is mine, and I am his – he grazes among the lilies. <sup>17</sup> Before the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn around, my love, like a gazelle or young stag on the mountains of Bether.

1. Having emphasized the distress of the woman's sexual longing as she awaits their marriage, the poet represents the man's similar longing. He bounds over mountains and hills, like a gazelle or young stag, to get to his love, and she is naturally very attuned to and excited by his coming.

2. The setting is around daybreak, and her love stands outside her family dwelling getting a glimpse of his darling through the latticed windows. He expresses his desire for her, his darling and beautiful one, by appealing to her to come away with him. It is springtime so the land is full of pleasing and sensual sights, aromas, and sounds. It is a picture perfect time for them to steal away and enjoy each other's presence.

3. She is to him like a dove among the cliffs in that she is beautiful but he gets only what seems to him to be glimpses of her. He wants her sustained presence where he can hear her sweet voice for a prolonged time and gaze on her beauty. He is as "hot" for her as she is for him, which is why the kind of isolated and prolonged visit he envisions, in a sensual atmosphere no less, would be morally dangerous. They easily could be overcome in such a setting by the power of sexual temptation.

4. Despite her intense sexual desire as portrayed in the prior section, the woman calls for the catching of the little foxes that would endanger their blooming vineyards, meaning cause them to misuse their sexually mature bodies. In other words, as much as part of her longs to give herself sexually to her love, she not only knows it would be wrong and damaging to do so before the right time but also recognizes the temptation the man's proposal would put them under. That "little fox" must be caught before it can do its damage.

5. In v. 16 she affirms their mutual love and devotion to each other, so that is not the basis of her refusal. The statement "he grazes among the lilies" may be a way of saying the

man's attention is focused on her, that she is the patch of lilies to which he is attracted. It could also be a reference to their having kissed in the past and his enjoyment of it (note lilies represent his lips in 5:13), which would emphasize his interest and focus on her. It is even possible that the phrase should be translated "he grazes [his flock] among the lilies," in which case it simply further identification of him as a shepherd.

6. In v. 17, the woman turns her love away because the time is not yet right. Maintaining the imagery of a gazelle or stag, she urges him go back quickly to the mountains, before the day comes to life ("breathes") and extinguishes the shadows of dawn. As Duguid states (p. 100), "Her 'No' is a 'Not yet, my love,' not a 'Never'."

## B. Night (3:1-5)

**Woman (cont.):** <sup>1</sup> *On my bed night after night, I sought the one whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.* <sup>2</sup> *I will arise now and go around in the city; in the streets and squares I will seek the one whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.* <sup>3</sup> *The watchmen who go around in the city found me. "Have you seen the one whom my soul loves?"* <sup>4</sup> *Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one whom my soul loves. I seized him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house and into the room of her who conceived me.* <sup>5</sup> *I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*

1. Having declined her love's invitation to a temptation-laden getaway, she experiences anxiety over losing him which manifests in her repeated dreams. She is unable to locate her love even after searching for him throughout the city. Her desperation is evident in her asking the city watchmen if they have seen him, and then in typical dream fashion, she immediately bumps into him.

2. She physically takes hold of her love and brings him into a place of lovemaking, the room where her mother had conceived her. The desire that cannot yet find satisfaction in real life bubbles out in her dreams under the added pressure of having properly declined her love's invitation.

3. Given how her unfulfilled sexual desire is now disturbing even her sleep, she renews the charge from 2:7 to the daughters of Jerusalem not to get as inflamed as she is before those emotions can be satisfied in marriage. It can be a real struggle if the match is lit too soon.

## IV. The Wedding (3:6 - 5:1)

### A. Question (3:6)

**Man:** <sup>6</sup> *Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?*

1. It is better to take the relative pronoun (*mî*) in the sense of "Who" (KJV, ERV, ASV, REB, NET, NKJV, NIV) rather than "What" (RSV, NAS, NEB, NRSV, ESV, NJB, CSB). The pronoun normally is used for persons rather than things, and in the two other occurrences of the exact phrase "Who is this" (6:10, 8:5) the woman clearly is the referent (the demonstrative pronoun "this" [*zeh*] being a feminine singular form [*zô't*]). Moreover, the woman is associated with the described perfumes of myrrh and frankincense in 4:6 and 4:14, and the columns of smoke are more literally palm-like columns, which ties with the woman's poetic description in 7:7 and 7:8 as a palm tree.

2. The man refers to his love coming up from the wilderness because she is coming to the blessing of his home, so in his perception, it is like she is moving from a state of relative insecurity and want to safety and plenty. For him, her arrival is absolutely riveting, almost surreal, like columns of smoke approaching. She is perfumed with the finest fragrances imaginable. It is the time of the long awaited and eagerly anticipated wedding.

## B. Solomon's glory (3:7-11)

**Man (cont.):** <sup>7</sup> Behold! His bed – Solomon's – sixty mighty men surround it of the mighty men of Israel! <sup>8</sup> All are skilled with a sword, experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side because of the terrors of the night. <sup>9</sup> King Solomon made for himself a canopied bed from the wood of Lebanon. <sup>10</sup> He made its posts of silver, its roof of gold, and its cushion of purple fabric; its interior was paved with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. <sup>11</sup> Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

1. The word *mittah* in v. 7 often is translated as "litter," meaning a portable bed or couch, but the word often refers simply to a bed, which in the case of a king is often elevated and made of expensive materials (1 Kings 21:4; 2 Kings 1:4, 6, 16; 2 Chron. 24:25; Esther 7:8; Amos 6:4; Ezek. 23:41). Translating it as "litter" is influenced by the view that v. 6 speaks of a thing coming up from the wilderness rather than a person, a view I reject.

2. The word *'appiryôn* in v. 9 often is translated a sedan-chair, but this is the only place it appears in the Old Testament, and its etymology is uncertain (Duguid, 107). Having translated *mittah* simply as "bed" in v. 7, I follow Michael V. Fox in rendering *'appiryôn* "canopied bed" (see also, Jack M. Sasson, "A Major Contribution to Song of Songs Scholarship," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107.4 [1987], 736).

3. I follow the CEB in rendering "seat" (*merkab*) in v. 10 as "cushion" (though CEB makes it a plural; see also GNT, NLT, and *The Message Bible*). The area on which one sits on a bed (e.g., 1 Sam. 28:23) would be a cushion of some sort.

4. As Elie Assis suggests (*Flashes of Fire: A Literary Analysis of Song of Songs*, 114), I think "paved with love" is a metaphor for the acts of love that occurred there between Solomon and the daughters of Israel. I remind you that Solomon, in disobedience to God, had 700 wives, not to mention 300 concubines, who turned his heart from God (1 Kings 11:3).

5. The point, as I see it, is that the security and opulence that Solomon offers a bride pales in comparison to the rich love and covenant loyalty that will characterize the marriage of the man and woman. The young women, now called daughters of Zion to distinguish them from the daughters of Jerusalem who paved Solomon's bed with love, are called to look upon King Solomon on his wedding day, in light of all the women with whom he has shared his bed, and to reflect upon what really matters in a marriage. Is not a marriage with modest means but genuine love and exclusive devotion better than entering a royal harem, regardless of how content Solomon may be with the situation? Duguid comments (p. 108), "If [interpreting 'paved with love' as a metaphor for sexual conduct] is correct, then Solomon's lovemaking to the many daughters of Jerusalem in these opulent surroundings would contrast dramatically with the exclusive love of the man and his beloved in the much simpler surroundings."

6. This perspective on the section is in keeping with the negative implication that accompanies the only other mention of Solomon in the book (8:11-12). There his business-like harem, a crowd that is attended by others and provides a return in the form of political and other advantages, is contrasted with the woman's choice regarding her own vineyard, her own body.

### C. The beloved's glory (4:1-7)

**Man (cont.):** <sup>1</sup> Behold, you are beautiful, my darling! Behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are like doves. Your hair is like a flock of female goats flowing down from Mount Gilead. <sup>2</sup> Your teeth are like a flock of newly-sheared sheep coming up from the washing place, all of them bearing twins; there is not a bereaved one among them. <sup>3</sup> Your lips are like scarlet thread; your mouth is lovely. Your cheek behind your veil is like a slice of pomegranate. <sup>4</sup> Your neck is like the tower of David, built in rows of stone; on it are hung a thousand shields, all shields of mighty men. <sup>5</sup> Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that graze among the lilies. <sup>6</sup> Before the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go up to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. <sup>7</sup> You are altogether beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you.

1. Having interjected by way of contrast the reference to Solomon's splendor and his many sexual partners, the man now answers the question of v. 6. The one coming up from the wilderness is his beautiful darling. He previously described her eyes as doves (1:15). In doing so now, he refers to her veil, which probably is an indication of their wedding.

2. He compares her flowing black hair to a flock of black goats streaming down Mount Gilead. He speaks of her white and symmetrical teeth, her red lips, and her lovely mouth, which probably includes the speech that flows from it (*midbar* describes the mouth as an organ of speech). Her cheeks are rosy like a slice of pomegranate, and her neck has a stately bearing and is decorated with layered necklaces resembling the rows of shields mentioned.

3. He continues moving his gaze downward from her captivating face, to her stately and decorated neck, to her breasts. They are symmetrical and move gently as she moves, like two fawns grazing among the lilies.

4. At this point, the man breaks off his description of his love's captivating beauty and declares his intention to enjoy her breasts before daybreak, the mountain of myrrh and hill of

frankincense. He is on the verge of realizing the sexual fulfillment he has imagined for what seems like a very long time. This consummation is portrayed in the next section.

5. He pronounces his darling, who now is or immediately will be his bride (v. 8), altogether beautiful. She is flawless in his eyes.

#### **D. Consummation (4:8 – 5:1)**

**Man (cont.):** <sup>8</sup> *[Come] with me from Lebanon, [my] bride; with me from Lebanon come. Descend from the peak of Amanah, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.* <sup>9</sup> *You have stolen my heart, my sister, [my] bride; you have stolen my heart with one [glance] from your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.* <sup>10</sup> *How beautiful are your caresses, my sister, [my] bride! How much better are your caresses than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than all spices!* <sup>11</sup> *Your lips drip nectar, [my] bride; honey and milk are under your tongue, and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.* <sup>12</sup> *A locked garden is my sister, [my] bride; you are an enclosed spring, a sealed-up fountain.* <sup>13</sup> *Your shoots are a park of pomegranates, with choice fruits – henna and nard, <sup>14</sup> nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices.* <sup>15</sup> *[You are] a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.*

**Woman:** <sup>16</sup> *Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden; let its spices flow. Let my love come into his garden and eat its choice fruits.*

**Man:** <sup>5:1a</sup> *I come to my garden, my sister, [my] bride. I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk.*

**Daughters of Jerusalem:** <sup>5:1b</sup> *Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with caresses.*

1. Verse 8 is the man's appeal for his love to come from her place of inaccessibility to him, represented by mountain peaks that were inaccessible because of both topography and the presence of predators, and to join him on life's journey as a married couple. He tells her in v. 9 that she drives him crazy and that it was love at first sight – she had him at "Hello." In calling her "sister" as well as "bride," he indicates that his attraction to her is relational as well as physical. Their bond resembles the friendship and closeness that exists between brothers and sisters.

2. In v. 10 he is longing for the lovemaking he is about to enjoy with his bride, as the woman longed for it in 1:2, though she at that time was further from fulfillment. Verse 11 depicts the sensual carnival he experiences as they engage in foreplay. The aromas are wonderful, and her lips and kisses are sweet.

3. Verse 12 portrays the fact she is a virgin. She has until now been closed to all others; no one has entered her garden, spring, or fountain.

4. He describes her in v. 13-15 as a wonderland of sensual delight. She is like the best of fruits in his mouth and is a mixture of the most beautiful fragrances on earth. She is as delightful as a garden spring that is constantly providing refreshing and life-giving water that streams down from the mountain ranges of Lebanon. We would use different metaphors, but one cannot miss how "into" his bride he is and how he is aching to be intimate with her.

5. Verse 16 expresses the bride's desire that her husband recognize her readiness and now enter into her, described poetically as his coming into her garden and eating its choice fruits. Verse 5:1a tastefully portrays their sexual union, his coming to *his* garden to enjoy all its sensual pleasures.

6. The daughters of Jerusalem (presumably), who in 1:4 expressed their intent to celebrate the couple's marital union, now do so (5:1b). They rejoice in the marital bliss of the newlyweds, urging them to enjoy the occasion and each other's bodies. As I said with regard to 1:4, the one-flesh union of marriage is a good thing, a blessing from God, so it is an occasion for rejoicing when those you love enter into that blessing. The community of faith, as represented by the maidens, says "amen" to sexual intimacy and fulfillment in the proper context of marriage.

## V. After the Wedding: Marriage Enhances Desire (5:2 – 6:3)

### A. Night (5:2-8)

**Woman:** <sup>2</sup> *I was asleep, but my heart was awake. Listen! My love is knocking.*

**Man:** *Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.*

**Woman:** <sup>3</sup> *I have taken off my tunic, how can I put it on [again]? I have washed my feet, how can I dirty them [again]?* <sup>4</sup> *My love thrust his hand through the latch-opening, and my heart was thrilled within me.* <sup>5</sup> *I arose to open to my love, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the bolt.* <sup>6</sup> *I opened to my love, but my love had turned and gone. My heart sank [lit. my soul went out] at his departure. I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he did not answer.* <sup>7</sup> *The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. They beat me, they bruised me, they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls.* <sup>8</sup> *I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem – if you find my love, what will you tell him? That I am sick from love.*

1. While the woman slept, her mind (lit. "heart" representing her mind and emotions) was awake, which suggests she is dreaming or in a semi-conscious state. She hears her love knocking on the door and calling to her to let him in. He speaks lovingly to her and indicates he has traveled through the night to come to her (that is why he is wet with dew), which speaks of the strength of his desire to be with her.

2. She responds in v. 3 to her love's appeal by playfully putting him off and fanning his flame by mentioning she is already in bed in her underwear. How could she possibly get up to let him in? After that, he's trying to come through the door! He reaches his hand through the latch-opening, perhaps hoping the door is not locked, and the woman is excited by the prospect of their impending union.

3. Yet, as happens in dreams, when she opens the door in v. 6, her love has inexplicably gone away. I think this absence is created by the poet to depict the woman's desire for her man *in their marriage relationship*, after they have experienced each other sexually. That desire is reflected in her despair that he has departed, in her seeking after him, and in her disappointment in not finding him. Their having been sexually intimate has not diminished or

eliminated their desire for each other, as though it is a case of "been there, done that." That is not how it works.

4. On the contrary, having shared in the one-flesh union of marriage, their bond is so close, and thus their desire for each other so great, that being separated from her man produces even more distress and pain than did their separation during betrothal. This is symbolized in her being beaten and abused by the watchmen as she seeks him, unlike what happened in her dream in 3:3, and in her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her love that she is lovesick in the event they succeed in finding him.

## B. The lover's glory (5:9-16)

**Daughters of Jerusalem:** <sup>9</sup> *How is your beloved better than [another] beloved, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than [another] beloved that you charge us this way?*

**Woman:** <sup>10</sup> *My love is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand.* <sup>11</sup> *His head is purest gold. His hair is wavy, black as a raven.* <sup>12</sup> *His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, and fitly set.* <sup>13</sup> *His cheeks are like garden beds of balsam trees, towers of spices. His lips are lilies dripping flowing myrrh.* <sup>14</sup> *His arms are rods of gold set with topaz. His abdomen is polished ivory, bedecked with lapis lazuli.* <sup>15</sup> *His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars.* <sup>16</sup> *His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my love and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.*

1. The daughters of Jerusalem set the woman up to brag on the man she loves. They invite her to reflect on the attributes that have so captivated her. What is so special about him that you are lovesick? In addressing her as "most beautiful of women" they repeat the man's description of her in 1:8. Perhaps this serves to remind her of his deep appreciation of her beauty.

2. The woman describes her love in poetical terms that reflect how she feels about him. It is a representation of him as her idealized superman. In her eyes, he looks amazing, smells amazing, and is a delight to kiss. As she says, "he is altogether desirable." And beyond his physical attractiveness, he is her soul mate, her love *and her friend* (as he refers to her as *his sister*).

## C. Intimacy enjoyed (6:1-3)

**Daughters of Jerusalem:** <sup>6:1</sup> *Where has your love gone, O most beautiful of women? Where has your love turned, that we may seek him with you?*

**Woman:** <sup>2</sup> *My love has gone down to his garden, to beds of spice, to graze in the gardens and gather lilies.* <sup>3</sup> *I am my love's and my love is mine; he grazes among the lilies.*

1. The daughters of Jerusalem ask for the general direction or location where her love went so they can help her look for him. They obviously cannot search everywhere, so some focus is necessary if they are to help.

2. Suddenly and without explanation, as happens in dreams, the distressing separation is over; the man and woman are back together in sexual intimacy. The separation is a literary device to show not only that their marriage has not diminished their love and desire for

each other but also that it has freed them from the frustration that accompanied betrothal. Unlike 2:16, the man here goes down to his garden (see 4:16-5:1a); in other words, he now grazes among the lilies in the fullest sexual sense.

## VI. Contemplation and Renewed Consummation (6:4 – 8:4)

### A. Contemplation of the beloved (6:4-10)

**Man:** <sup>4</sup> *You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, lovely as Jerusalem, awe-inspiring as [an army] with banners.* <sup>5</sup> *Turn your eyes away from me – they overwhelm me! Your hair is like a flock of female goats flowing down from Mount Gilead.* <sup>6</sup> *Your teeth are like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing place, all of them bearing twins; there is not a bereaved one among them.* <sup>7</sup> *Your cheek behind your veil is like a slice of pomegranate.* <sup>8</sup> *There may be sixty queens and eighty concubines and virgins without number,* <sup>9</sup> *[but] she is unique, my dove, my perfect one! She is unique to her mother, pure to her who bore her. The daughters saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her:* <sup>10</sup> *Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the full moon, pure as the sun, awe-inspiring as [an army] with banners?*

1. The man now returns her post-marriage adoration with that of his own. As the NET note states, in v. 4 "[h]e compares her beauty to two of the most beautiful and important cities in the Israelite United Kingdom, namely, Jerusalem and Tirzah. The beauty of Jerusalem was legendary; it is twice called 'the perfection of beauty' (Ps 50:2; Lam 2:15). Tirzah was beautiful as well – in fact, the name means 'pleasure, beauty.' So beautiful was Tirzah that it would be chosen by Jeroboam as the original capital of the northern kingdom (1 Kgs 15:33; 16:8, 15, 23)." He describes her as awe-inspiring, breathtaking, like the sight of an army spread across the land with their banners in full view.

2. Though married, he has it so bad for her that he still melts when she looks at him. The effect is so powerful he asks her to turn her eyes away to keep from overwhelming him.

3. He is as taken as ever by the beauty of her hair, her white, symmetrical teeth, and her rosy cheeks. He then declares, in essence, that however many women the king may have, none can hold a candle to his bride. She is one of a kind, the perfect woman in his eyes.

4. Indeed, she is so outstanding that all the king's women – maidens, queens, and concubines – confess her superiority. They acknowledge she is so far out of their league that they speak of her in terms of heavenly bodies. In this context, the "army with banners" probably refers to the stars in procession, marching across the sky in splendor.

### B. Her response (6:11-12)

**Woman:** <sup>11</sup> *I went down to the garden of nuts to see the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom.* <sup>12</sup> *I did not know my own desire; it has set me in a chariot with a noble man.*<sup>1</sup>

1. The woman is moved by her love's extravagant praise and explores whether she feels the time is right for lovemaking. This is represented poetically by her assessing whether the sensual environment was properly stimulative. Recall how in 2:12-13 the man described the sensually pleasing springtime environment in his appeal to have her come away with him, and she declined because of the temptation of being in such a setting with him.

2. She is surprised by the strength of her own desire, so presumably the time was indeed right for lovemaking. She then indicates her pleasure over the fact her desire (perhaps here more broadly conceived) has led her to unite with her love in marriage – has set her in his chariot so to speak – whom she considers a noble man. As NIDOTTE (p. 31) states, "The word *nādīb* describes the noble man who counsels generous/noble things and possesses magnanimity of character (Isa 32:8). It also describes a heart that is generous, willing, even noble, such as was possessed by those who gave freely to the tabernacle and the temple when they were under construction (Exod 35:5, 22; 2 Chron 29:31)."

### C. Renewed contemplation of the beloved (6:13 – 7:9a)

**Man:** <sup>13</sup> *Turn, turn, O Perfect One! Turn, turn, that we may gaze at you! How you gaze upon the Perfect One, like on the dance of two camps.* <sup>2</sup> *How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter. The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of an artist's hands.* <sup>3</sup> *Your navel is a round mixing bowl – may it never lack mixed wine! Your belly is a mound of wheat, surrounded by lilies.* <sup>4</sup> *Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.* <sup>5</sup> *Your neck is like a tower made of ivory. Your eyes are the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon that looks toward Damascus.* <sup>6</sup> *Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel, the hair of your head like purple cloth – a king could be held captive in your tresses.* <sup>7</sup> *How beautiful and how pleasing you are, O love, with your delights.* <sup>8</sup> *Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.* <sup>9</sup> *I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples,<sup>9a</sup> and your palate like the best wine . . .*

1. Here the man calls his love, whom he labels the Perfect One,<sup>2</sup> to turn so as to display her great beauty. He then comments on how transfixed the people are. They gaze upon

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<sup>1</sup> This verse is notoriously difficult to translate and comprehend. Longman says (p. 187), "No one can speak with much certainty about its rendition or its interpretation." In the translation presented (see NRSV and Duguid, 141), the MT *'ammī* is read as *'im* based on the Peshitta (early Syriac version). Other possibilities for the final clause include "it has set me over the chariots of my noble people" and "it has set me among the chariots of Ammi-nadib." The former may mean that in leading her to marry her love, her desire had elevated her (in her estimation) above royalty. In the latter, Ammi-nadib may be a pet name for her love that means something like "My love is a prince" (see Garrett, 233). The meaning in that case would be that her desire brought her to his household, which is described from her perspective as being set among his chariots.

<sup>2</sup> With NET and Duguid, *hashshulammit* is rendered "O Perfect One" rather than the more common "O Shulammitite."

her as on the dance of two camps (or "the Mahanayim," taking it as a place name), which apparently refers to some kind of attention-riveting event or performance the specifics of which are lost to us.

2. Beginning in chapter 7, the man launches into another description of his love's great beauty. This time he begins with her feet and works up, perhaps because her turning (or maybe dancing) drew attention to her feet. The word that is used for feet here (*pa'am*) normally indicates feet in motion, so the compliment may refer to or include her gracefulness.

3. In calling her a "noble daughter" he is praising her in the same way she praised him in 6:12 (recognizing the difficulties with that verse). Longman remarks (p. 194), "[*Nādīb*] is a term of respect and endearment. It does not necessarily imply that the woman is noble by blood, but even if the term did imply this, we would understand the appellation in the same way we understand 'king' in reference to the man, although he is not royal. They are regal in each other's eyes."

4. He praises the curves of her thighs, the upper part of her legs, which as Duguid notes (p. 143) includes her buttocks. To him, they are extremely attractive, like the curves of jewels formed by a master craftsman.

5. Her navel is like a mixing bowl for wine, where the wine was made all the more pleasing by the addition of sweeteners and aromatic scents in preparation for a joyful feast. He wants that bowl to always be enticing to him, to always be filled with mixed wine. Duguid, Longman, and others suggest "navel" includes or is perhaps a euphemism for "parts south," the center of male sexual satisfaction.

6. The description of her belly as a mound of wheat may refer to its natural and gentle protrusion, its softness (if threshed and winnowed wheat), and its color. The image of it being surrounded with lilies may hark back to 6:2-3 where sexual intimacy is depicted as the man gathering lilies and grazing among the lilies. If so, it refers to the sexual stimulation and fulfillment available in proximity to the belly (her breasts and pubic area).

7. He continues moving his gaze upward to her breasts. As in 4:5, they are beautiful and symmetrical, like twin fawns. Her neck is slender, elegant, and attractive, like an ivory tower. Her eyes are deep, clear, and reflective or shining like the water in the cisterns in Heshbon, which presumably were located near the gate of Bath-Rabbim. Her nose is straight like the famous tower of Lebanon and provides a bearing of strength and confidence as does the tower that faces Damascus, the home of the Arameans, Israel's great enemy.

8. Her head crowns her appearance, completes her beauty, as Mount Carmel crowns the surrounding area. In addition to her facial features, her hair is like purple cloth, a garment fit for royalty. It is so lovely that it could hold a king captive.

9. In verse 6 he extols her beauty generally and the pleasure she provides him. He then says she has the stature of a palm tree, probably meaning she is tall and slender. Her breasts are represented as two clusters of dates. Duguid notes (p. 146), "In ancient iconography, date

palms were often pictured with a pair of date clusters symmetrically on either side of the palm (Barbiero 2011:392)."

10. The man declares his intention to lay hold of her breasts and his anticipation of the delight of doing so, as well as his anticipation of the delight of smelling her sweet breath and kissing her deeply and passionately. In 9b the woman breaks in and finishes his statement about kissing her, about enjoying her mouth (palate) like the best wine.

#### D. Renewed response (7:9b-10)

**Woman:** <sup>9b</sup> . . . *flowing smoothly for my love, gliding past the lips of sleepers.* <sup>10</sup> *I am my love's, and his desire is for me.*

1. The woman finishes the man's sentence with her own expression of desire for the passionate kissing he mentioned with the implied sexual intimacy goes with that. Though many emend the MT here based on the LXX and read "past lips and teeth," I think the MT suggests that the passionate kisses lead to sexual intimacy, perhaps repeatedly, which results in the lovers going to sleep. So the "wine" of passionate kisses glides past the lips of those who consequently end up sleeping through exhaustion.

2. The woman then reflects contentedly that she belongs to her love. He "owns" her in the sense he fully possesses her love, loyalty, and body – as she "owns" him (6:3). Here instead of saying he is hers, she says his desire is for her, the implication being he desires her alone. Theirs is a bond of true intimacy.

#### E. Consummation (7:11 – 8:4)

**Woman (cont.):** <sup>11</sup> *Come, my love, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night among the henna bushes.* <sup>12</sup> *Let us rise early [to go] to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has budded, if their blossoms have opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give my caresses to you.* <sup>13</sup> *The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and over our door is every delicacy, both new and old, [which] I have treasured up for you, my love.* <sup>8:1</sup> *Oh that you were my brother, who nursed at my mother's breasts. If I found you outside, I could kiss you – surely none would despise me.* <sup>2</sup> *I would lead you and bring you to the house of my mother who taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranate.* <sup>3</sup> *May his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me!* <sup>4</sup> *I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*

1. In 2:10-16 the woman declined her love's premature invitation to go away with him into the sensually stimulating springtime countryside for fear of the temptation of that situation. As a married couple, it is now time to fully enjoy such sexual exploration. She invites her love to go with her for a night of lovemaking in the countryside, having first risen early to confirm the romantic state of the environment. She tells him that there, in the countryside, she will give her sexual caresses to him, meaning they will make love.

2. Mandrakes were considered an aphrodisiac in the Ancient Near East (e.g., Gen. 30:14-16), so the statement about them sending out their fragrance indicates the couple is eager for sexual intimacy. The woman implies in v. 13 that their tryst in the countryside will involve both old and new pleasures, things she has kept for him. She is "steaming" her husband up.

3. At 8:1, the scene shifts from the country to the city. Her desire for him is so great that she can barely stand the social restriction on public displays of sexual affection, even between married couples. (This would be of no concern in the privacy of the countryside.) If he were her brother, she could kiss him in public and no one would complain because that was socially acceptable. Of course, she could not kiss her brother in a sexual way, as she would kiss her husband, but she is just expressing her desire to be able to kiss him on the streets.

4. Having begun with the public kisses she fantasizes she could enjoy, she leads her love into her mother's house where she gives herself to him sexually; this is the spiced wine and nectar of her pomegranate. And lest there be any question about her desire and intentions, v. 3 makes express her longing for his sexual embrace. Her "mother's house" has sexual connotations because it is a place of privacy and security and the place of the previous generation's romantic liaison.

5. In v. 4 the woman again declares that the power of love, including the sexual attraction that is part of it, is so great it is unwise to "rev it up" before it can be satisfied. If it is so great that even in marriage it produces frustration through the social restriction against public displays of affection, one can imagine the difficulty and hardship it will produce if allowed to reach a boil without the satisfaction and release available in the bond of marriage.

## VII. Epilogue (8:5-14)

### A. The overwhelming power of love (8:5-7)

**Daughters of Jerusalem:** <sup>5</sup> *Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her love?*

**Woman:** *Under the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you was in labor.* <sup>6</sup> *Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, jealousy as fierce as Sheol. Its flames are flames of fire, a mighty flame.* <sup>7</sup> *Many waters cannot extinguish love, rivers cannot sweep it away. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.*

1. The bond of marriage is depicted in the image of the woman approaching the city leaning on her love. There is no longer any distance between the couple; they are connected.

2. In v. 5b the woman speaks to her husband of their lovemaking, saying she "awakened" him under the apple tree, meaning sexually aroused him. It is the same word in the repeated warnings to the daughters of Jerusalem no to stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

3. She says the sexual intimacy in which they engaged under the apple tree was the same act (the location standing for the act) through which his mother (and every other mother for that matter) had conceived, which conception resulted in his birth. The point seems to be that

their sexual relationship in marriage, as exciting and enjoyable as it is, goes beyond their pleasure and is tied to the great blessing of children and the continuance of the family line.

4. In v. 6 the woman expresses her desire to be a seal on the man's heart and arm. Seals were marks of ownership and personal identification, so the woman is telling the man she wants to own his heart and his actions. She wants first place in his life in terms of human relationships, a devotion and commitment that is shared with no other. That is the essence of the marriage bond.

5. She wants that supremacy because that is the nature of spousal love. It holds one to another with a strength that is comparable to the strength with which death holds its victims. And the jealousy which comes with it guards its object with a fierceness that is comparable to how Sheol, the realm of the dead, guards its inhabitants. Longman observes (p. 211-212):

There are two relationships described in the Bible where jealousy is a potentially appropriate reaction: the divine-human relationship and the marriage relationship. These are the only two relationships that are considered exclusive. Humans can have only one God. If they worship another, it triggers God's jealousy. God's jealousy is an energy that tries to rescue the relationship. Similarly, a man and a woman can have only one spouse. If there is a threat to that relationship, then jealousy is a proper emotion. All this is because so much hangs on the integrity of the relationship. It is so basic, so deep, that it stirs strong emotions and passions.

6. Love is a force like a mighty flame in that it is intense and consuming. (The last clause in v. 6 could be rendered "a flame of Yahweh." If that is correct, it refers to God as the one who put this capacity within mankind.) Though it is analogous to a fire, no water can extinguish it, and it is so tenacious that no overflowing river can sweep it away. In the words of Huey Lewis, "That's the power of love."

7. This ideal love, this mutual and exclusive bond of body and soul, cannot be bought; it is beyond any price. Indeed, anyone who treated it otherwise, who denigrated and trivialized it by trying to purchase it, rightfully would be scorned.

## B. The incomparable value of love (8:8-12)

**Brothers:** <sup>8</sup> *We have a little sister, and [as yet] she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?* <sup>9</sup> *If she is a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.*

**Woman:** <sup>10</sup> *I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace.* <sup>11</sup> *Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he gave the vineyard to keepers. Each one was to bring a thousand [shekels of] silver for its fruit.* <sup>12</sup> *My vineyard, my very own, is before me; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.*

1. The poem harks back to the woman's childhood before she was physically mature. Her brothers, who had an interest in and a responsibility for her sexual purity, contemplated what they would do for her once she was developed and betrothed. If she was a

wall in the sense of being impervious to assaults on her virginity, they would embellish her attractiveness. But if she was a door, meaning she was not committed to her virginity, they would take steps to protect her against that temptation. (Perhaps they wrongly perceived her as a door and for that reason forced her to work in the vineyard to diminish her beauty.)

2. The woman declares that she was in fact a wall, keeping out all premature assaults on her virginity, and that her breasts had grown to be a prominent feature. Then, in the proper context of marriage, she was in the eyes of her love as one who finds peace, meaning she surrendered herself to him and let him enter "the city."

3. She notes that Solomon has a large vineyard from which each keeper he assigned to it was to generate for him a profit of a thousand pieces of silver. She, on the other hand, has her own vineyard, her body (1:6), and she is content with her path, her sharing it with only her true love in an exclusive marriage (4:12, 16). She leaves Solomon to whatever benefit ("profit") he may reap from his harem – be it political, social, or sexual – and whatever he pays its attendants so as to maintain that benefit, the implication being that in treating marriage like a business arrangement he has missed its true blessing, the blessing that has been portrayed throughout the song. As Duguid notes (p. 118), "Solomon's tragic personal history is the exact opposite of the ideal held up in the Song."

### **C. The unending nature of love (8:13-14)**

**Man:** <sup>13</sup> *You who dwells in the gardens, companions are attentive to your voice. Let me hear [it].*

**Woman:** <sup>14</sup> *Break away, my love! Be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.*

1. In v. 13 the man refers to the woman (feminine singular participle) as dwelling in the gardens. Garrett notes (p. 265), "In the Song, the metaphor of the garden or of fruit regularly refers to sexual pleasures generally or to the woman's body specifically. Here, as the lady who inhabits the gardens, she is the domain of love." In other words, she is the one who shares sexual intimacy with him.

2. In saying that companions are attentive to her voice, the man is acknowledging how her words are valued by others. She is highly esteemed, no doubt in part because of her insight into love and marriage, but the man longs to hear her words for a deeper, more personal reason. He longs to hear them as her lover.

3. In the final verse, the woman calls him to break away from whatever is keeping him elsewhere that they may again enjoy one another. The invitation for him to be like a gazelle or young stag on the mountains of spices is an image of the delights of lovemaking. As I have said, the association of gazelles and deer with sexuality is documented in broader ancient Near Eastern culture. Mountain of myrrh and hill of frankincense in 4:6 refer to her breasts, and their sexual intimacy is spoken of in 4:16, 5:1, and 6:2 as his enjoying the spices of her garden.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

As I said in the introduction, Song of Songs speaks of the power and delight of young sexual attraction and extols the blessedness of that attraction culminating and being satisfied in marital exclusivity. The attraction and the enjoyment of one another, body and soul, in the context of marriage is a gift from God. Marriage is not intended to destroy desire and intimacy; it ideally enhances it. To the extent we miss that ideal, it is our loss.

All of this speaks analogically to the relationship God intends to have with us. That relationship is to reflect the joy, depth, excitement, intimacy, fulfillment, and exclusivity of the relationship depicted in Song of Songs. Uniting with God in Christ should not lead to a loss of zeal, joy, or intimacy. On the contrary, that is the context for deepening and enriching our relationship with him.