

Song of Songs 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 8 O that you were like a brother to me who nursed at my mother's breasts! If I found you outside, I would kiss you, and none would despise me. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, she who used to teach me.

I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labour with you. There she who bore you was in labour. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For love is strong as death, jealousy as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he will be utterly despised. We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.

[1:06] What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? 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.

I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers. Then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace.

Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-Haman. He let out the vineyard to keepers.

Each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, my very own, is before me. You, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.

O you who dwell in the gardens, with companions listening for your voice, let me hear it. Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.

From the end of chapter 7 until the end of the book, here in Song of Songs, chapter 8, it mirrors the first couple of chapters in chiasmic structure, bookending all of the material between.

[2:04] The woman's invitation to the man in chapter 7, verses 12 to 14, mirrored the invitation that he gave to her in chapter 2, verses 10 to 14. Chapter 2 ended with the refrain, My beloved is mine, and I am his, and the concluding passages of the book open with the same refrain.

In chapter 8, we return to elements of chapter 1, verse 1 to 2, verse 7, albeit in mirrored order.

Verses 3 to 4 here repeat the refrains of chapter 2, verses 6 to 7.

His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. As Richard Davidson observes, there are several key terms and elements from chapter 1 and the beginning of the book here, which recur in chapter 8 in largely reverse order.

An apple tree, the terms love and house, a structure that's built with cedar, my breasts, silver, make haste, companions, keeper or keep, my own vineyard, and finally and fittingly, Solomon.

Collectively, these connecting threads tightly bind the opening of the book with its closing, and make a strong case for the unity of the text. The speeches of this section, like those of the beginning of the book, are generally shorter.

[3:19] It is also here that some of the greatest themes of the song emerge into clearest view. The chapter opens with a surprising wish, the woman expressing her desire that the man was like her brother from earliest infancy, the two of them bound together by the nursing body of her mother.

If he were such a brother, she could express the childlike affection of a sister to him in public with kisses, without attracting public disapproval. Much as we see in the man's expression, my sister, my bride, the wish of the woman here exhibits a desire to express her love for him in an even more public form, without social censure.

While many take this as evidence that their love is a secret, forbidden love, Daniel Estes differs. Rather, he argues, the issue was that public displays of intimacy between a husband and a wife

were not socially approved, whereas male and female relatives could enjoy non-erotic expressions of familial affection, as we see when Jacob kisses Rachel upon first meeting her, in Genesis chapter 29 verse 11.

While adopting a similar reading to Estes in this respect, Tremper Longman also sees evidence here that their love is still secret, rather than that of a married couple. The woman might want the secure union and kinship characteristic of siblings, in a more formal and public bond between the two.

While I have spoken of the bride and the bridegroom at many points, the exact character of the relationship between the couple is never entirely clear, even if we might feel that the weight of the evidence pushes in a particular direction.

[4 : 49] We might here reflect upon the similarities between the relationship between the lovers in the song in this respect, and the relationship between Christ and his church. Throughout the song, the bride's beloved is coming near to her and then slipping out of her grasp or vanishing.

Full consummation of their union seems to be deferred in various ways. While they have moments of profoundest intimacy, we still seem to fall short of a completely consummated and realised relationship, and the song ends on a note of desire and expectancy that awaits but does not yet receive fulfilment.

In our desire to know where the couple stand relative to each other, we are also hampered by the dreamlike character of much of the song, and the ways in which past, present and future, imagination and reality, desire and its realisation, are routinely tangled together and easily confused.

Perhaps we should imagine a cultural situation akin to that in the ill-fated relationship between Samson and his wife, where they were married but not yet cohabiting, the appearing and the vanishing of the lover resulting from this.

However we understand the situation between the couple, considering the ways that the song routinely celebrates the chastity of the bride and the fidelity of the bridegroom, its pervasive ethos is clearly one deeply congruent with the underlying values of marriage.

[6 : 08] In speaking of her desire that he was like a brother to her, the bride imagines a situation where they had shared her mother's breasts as infants. In chapter 3 verse 4, the woman had declared, Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves.

I held him and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house and into the chamber of her who conceived me. The prominence and the place enjoyed by the figures of the mothers of the lovers in the song is strange to many hearers and certainly invites closer attention. Throughout the song to this point, breasts have been associated with erotic pleasures, yet now we see them connected with the nursing of infants. In the comparison of the bond between lovers, as the man grazes among the lilies of the cleft mountains of the woman, and the bond between siblings who feed at their mother's breasts, a number of things might come into view.

The woman's breasts are in both cases a site and source of union, as is her body more generally. The erotic and unitive meaning of the body is connected with the procreative meaning of the body. The infant child enjoys a one-flesh union with his mother, initially in the womb, but later experienced at the breast, a one-flesh union that provides the natural basis for other familial bonds.

[7 : 22] The lovers also know a one-flesh union with each other, as the bride opens her walled garden to the bridegroom and he delights in its fruits. In the desire to share the mother and to bring him to the house of her mother, there is some sort of wish to bring things full circle, not in a reversion to a past childhood, but in the recognition of a rebirth.

In love there is a reopening to the world in the play of a new childhood. A man leaves his father and his mother and is joined to his wife and the two become one-flesh. This break is also a sort of return to the body of the woman, so that a new one-flesh bond could be formed in the place of the old one. Her lover might not have shared with her at her mother's breasts, but he returns with her to her mother's house, where he can drink the spiced wine and the juice of her pomegranate that she offers. The promise of a return to the innocence and play of childhood is one that can require a corresponding death in the loving surrender or gift of oneself.

There is no place for the emotional and other prophylactics that people employ to frustrate the inherent reality of sexual union here. In chapter 3 verse 6 we read, What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant?

After the repeated refrains of verses 3 and 4, a similar question is asked in verse 5. Here we see that the ones coming up from the wilderness are the couple together. We should probably imagine the scene of Solomon's palanquin again, but with the bride leaning upon her bridegroom within it, the people of the city gathering to see the approaching royal spectacle.

[8 : 59] Just as the bride returned to her mother, there is a return to the mother of the bridegroom and to earlier infancy here, under the apple tree. Once again there is a sort of rebirth. In the same place where he first came into the world, the love that promises his rebirth was awakened.

Perhaps the awakening under the apple tree resolves the theme of the repeated refrain that makes its final appearance in the preceding verse, of not stirring or awakening love until it pleases.

Now the bride is fully ready, the sleeping bridegroom can finally be awoken, and their union can be fully realised. Peter Lighthouse suggests a connection with Adam's deep sleep during the time of Eve's building here.

Having connected love to birth and rebirth, verses 6 and 7, the only really directly didactic verses of the song, speak of love's connection with death, emphasising a lesson that must be drawn from the song as a whole.

The bride calls for the bridegroom to place her like a seal or mark of ownership and identity upon his heart and arm. With such a seal on his heart, his heart would be utterly committed to her and could not betray that commitment without betraying itself.

[10 : 07] As she was placed like a seal on his arm, his strength would thereafter have to be exercised for her. As a great power, love is compared to, contrasted with, and opposed to that of death.

Throughout the song, the lovers have been awakened by and called back by the love of each other. Love has brought them a sort of rebirth. As a power and as a force, love is the match of death. It is enduring and unyielding. It is fierce in its intensity, its strength being compared to the very flame of the Lord. Jealousy is an integral part of true love. A jealous love is, in the words of the hymn, a love that will not let me go.

Such a love cannot be overcome. Even the great forces of chaos arrayed against it. The mighty waters of the abyssal deep could not drown it. Love cannot be bought.

No price can be put upon it. At this point, the song is making claims about reality itself. Claims about reality that are witnessed to in the vows of lovers. In such vows, they promise always to love each other, never to let each other go, never to permit anything to come in the way of their love.

[11 : 11] In this, we hear a yearning for something transcendent, something that ultimately finds its grounds in God himself. Once again, the love of the lovers in the song constantly gestures towards something greater.

Ultimately, the love of the Lord for his people. A love that reached down to the very pit of Sheol and brought his people back up. The concluding verses of this chapter, and of the song more generally, can be confusing.

Many commentators imagine that the brothers of the bride are speaking at this point. While they were mentioned back in chapter one, they've had no speaking role, so it seems strange for them to enter the conversation at this point.

Perhaps the voice here is that of the daughters of Jerusalem, preparing a young sister in the years before she is of marriageable age. Many have thought that the little sister is the bride herself.

Exum helpfully recognises that there seem to be parallels between verses 8 to 10 and verses 11 and 12. In both cases, there are two stories that seem to be irrelevant, concerning the little sister and concerning Solomon's vineyard.

[12 : 10] In both cases, there's a contrast being set up. Verses 8 and 9 seem to speak of both the ornamentation, and the defence of the little sister. The little sister has to be prepared to attract good suitors and repel bad ones.

The image of a wall with ornamented battlements, and a gloriously cedar-panelled door, is fitting in the context. Once again, picking up on military imagery that has been applied to the bride, she likens herself to a mighty wall, with her breasts like great towers.

Yet, continuing the imagery of the glorious fortified city, she has surrendered and opened up to the bridegroom. She's found peace in his eyes. Verses 11 and 12 are also difficult to understand.

Again, it's unclear who is the speaker here. Back in chapter 1 verse 6, the woman said of herself, My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own

vineyard I have not kept.

There, and to other points in the song, the vineyard seems to represent the woman herself. Our interpretation of these verses will depend in part upon whether we think that the lover of the song is Solomon himself, or whether, for instance, the lover occasionally masquerades as Solomon, and that here a contrast with Solomon is being drawn.

[13:21] Many have connected the thousand here with Solomon's 300 wives and 700 concubines. The point being that Solomon is welcome to his thousand women, because the speaker has or is the one vineyard that really matters.

No amount of gold could buy that. Following this interpretation, Robert Jensen writes, If we read the poem theologically, then it is the Lord who scorns Solomon as the lover does in the overt poem, and then Solomon is demoted from glory.

Solomon becomes in the allegory a mere harem-keeping lord of this world, fit to be rebuked by the one faithful lord. Perhaps indeed Solomon is allegorically the lord of this world.

And two Israels appear, Israel as harem for the powers and principalities of this world, and Israel indissolubly and uniquely united to the one lord. Lighthart raises another possibility, writing, If the temple is the vineyard though, then the contrast is between the singular house belonging to Jerusalem, or to Yahweh, and the thousand vineyards that Solomon supports for the benefit of his thousand wives.

We might also see a contrast here between different forms of owning. Solomon has immense wealth and possessions, yet he cannot control them himself. He has to let out his vineyard to keep us.

[14:32] However, the vineyard of the woman is truly her own, and her own to give to another person who can enjoy it fully for himself. Such a possession is one that even the greatest king cannot aspire beyond.

In verse 13, the bridegroom addresses the bride, wanting to hear her voice, with other friends who are eagerly listening for her. Her response in verse 14, the last verse of the book, is very similar to chapter 2, verse 17.

In the book's end, there is still some sense of absence, an open-endedness to desire.

As Exum observes, the book opens in *medius res*, and it concludes without closure. At the end, love is still longing for completion. There is also some sort of ambivalence to this verse.

Both are calling back and ascending away. The church has long recognised in this an analogy to its relationship to Christ. We know, according to the teaching of John's Gospel, that it is good that Christ went away, and yet we long for his return.

[15:35] Themes from the book of Song of Songs pervade the book of Revelation. The book begins with a vision of the glorious heavenly bridegroom, and from that was if we move to the end, where there is the revelation of the glorious bride, a wedding feast, and the consummation of all.

And yet at the end of the book of Revelation, there is also a similar note of expectation. With the promises of the rich fruits of the garden city in the background, the fruits of the bride of the church, the book and the Bible as a whole ends with this note of longing.

He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Is the book of Song of Songs about Christ and the church, or is it about human sexual love?

Yes, both of these things. We might also add that it is about politics, the relationship between the king and the people, and other issues besides those. In Ephesians chapter 5 verses 31 and 32, the apostle Paul wrote, Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. From the very beginning, marriage always gestured towards something beyond it, towards some transcendent truth that we see in Christ and his relationship with his people.

[16:52] The Song of Songs introduces us to a way of seeing the world, a way of seeing the relationship between man and wife, that points towards something transcendent, without ever ceasing to be itself.

In books such as the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, the promise of this vision is taken up and made more explicit. The church, as it has seen its bridegroom Christ within this text of Song of Songs, has not been seeing a mirage.

