

Song of Songs 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 7 How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Beth-Rabim.

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like caramel, and your flowing locks are like purple. A king is held captive in the tresses.

How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree, and lay hold of its fruit.

O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples. O may your mouth like the best wine. It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth.

[1:05] I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields, and lodge in the villages. Let us go out early to the vineyards, and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened, and the pomegranates are in bloom.

There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

In chapter 6, verses 4 to 10, the bridegroom described the bride's beauty. Now, after a brief interlude, he resumes his theme with a further wasif, or blazon, describing her features from her feet to her head.

Some commentators imagine this passage as the description of the woman while she is dancing. We should note the reversal of the order of the wasif from those of chapter 4, verses 1 to 5, and 6, verses 4 to 10.

Perhaps in keeping with the progressive elevation of the figure of the bride over the course of the song, she is now presented as if a great palm tree, at whose base the man stands in awe, looking up to its glorious fruit far above him.

[2:10] The image here seems to be a more intimate one, as she is no longer veiled, and the movement up the entirety of her body, and the description of parts of her body that might not otherwise be seen, such as the navel, and belly, perhaps suggests that she is naked before him.

As Cheryl Exum observes, the man is also now no longer merely a marvelling observer in the wasif. He is a participant, preparing to climb the palm tree that he describes. Richard Davidson suggests that we read chapter 6, verses 13 to 7, verse 9, as the parallel to chapter 4, verses 8 to 15.

In these two passages, both of which praise the bride, he argues that there is an especial attention given to place names. In both of them, the man speaks of being captivated by her, and in both places, the man describes her in terms of metaphors drawn from a garden and its trees and their fruits.

The flowing of the water in the woman's garden in the first passage parallels with the flowing of the wine in her mouth. Perhaps the eight different spices in chapter 4 can be related to the eight different body parts mentioned here.

These two passages represent the end of their two respective panels within the larger structure. In keeping with the ways in which her metaphorical stature is presented as having grown, the woman is here spoken of as a noble daughter, a daughter of a prince.

[3:30] In the preceding chapter, she was depicted as the Shulamite, a woman whose name implies her to be a fitting counterpart for Solomon. Throughout the song, we have references to grapes, vineyards, vines and wine.

Such imagery is well suited to describing the rest, delight, relaxation and even intoxication that the lovers find in each other. In this passage, her navel and mouth offer fine wine and her breasts are likened to clusters of the vine.

Many commentators, reasonably doubting whether the navel is to be likened to a bowl with mixed wine, suspect that this is a euphemism. Imagery is often attracted to one sex over the other, and the likening of the belly to a heap of wheat contrasts with the hardness of the body of the man, as it is described in the wasif given by the woman.

Once again, a heap of wheat is imagery drawn from the land, from agriculture and horticulture, perhaps also connoting fertility. The description of her breasts as fawns is the same as the image used by the bridegroom in chapter 4 verse 5, likely an image resulting in part from her previous comparison of him to a gazelle grazing among the lilies on the cleft mountains.

Her neck, previously compared to the Tower of David, is here likened to an ivory tower. The ivory likely connotes great value, grace, and also fairness. The word for eyes is the same as that for springs, and the latter provide very natural and apt images with which to depict the former.

[4 : 57] Springs and pools can be mysterious, reflective and calming, captivating the viewer who seeks to look into their hidden depths. Notably, the woman's eyes aren't merely likened to pools, but to very specific pools in Heshbon.

In this and in the following verse, there are several geographic references to Heshbon, Lebanon, Damascus and Carmel, romantic or exotic places in or near the land.

Such geographic allusion might seem distracting from and extraneous to the point of the comparison. Yet this would be to misunderstand the point. Reading such comparisons, we can easily fall into the error of believing that their sole purpose is that of describing a physical feature in a pleasant and poetic manner.

In fact, both sides of the metaphor are the point. The metaphor creates a bond between two realities that might otherwise seem unrelated. In these geographically freighted metaphors, the hearers should hear not only the woman being likened to the land, but the land being likened to a woman.

The Lord delights in the land and in Zion like a lover delighting in the body of his beloved. The nose like a tower of Lebanon, looking toward Damascus, suggests a military confidence and power directed out towards potential threats, something perhaps comparable to an elegant nose by which the countenance of the woman confidently faces others.

[6 : 18] Damascus was under Israelite control during the reigns of David and Solomon, something that might help us better to understand the reference at this point. Her head is compared to Carmel, which, as Edmay Kingsmill observes, puns upon a word for scarlet.

The presence of both purple and scarlet in association with her head might also connote not only royal, but also temple themes, as purple and scarlet veiled the head of the temple in the Holy of Holies.

Her raven black hair, in which all these other colours can be seen, holds a king captive within it, her royal lover being an admirer fitting for her surpassing and regal beauty. At this point, the lover speaks of the cumulative effect of all her features upon him and his commitment to ascend her as a palm tree, laying hold of the clusters of the vine and enjoying the intoxicating kisses of her mouth. Early in the song, we were told of a love that is better than wine, and in chapter 2, verse 4, the bridegroom had brought the bride into his house of wine. Here, the bride herself is described as if she were her lover's true source of wine.

In Genesis chapter 3, verse 16, as the Lord judged the woman for the sin of taking the forbidden fruit, she was told that her desire would be for her husband, but that he would rule over her.

[7 : 33] Similar language was used when the Lord told Cain that he needed to rule over sin, whose desire was for him, in chapter 4, verse 7. In Genesis, the woman was judged with none reciprocation of her desire.

She would want her man for herself, desiring his heart and his strength, but she would be frustrated. Adam's sin had occurred in no small measure because he heeded the voice of his wife and followed her rather than the voice of the Lord.

In frustrating the desire of the woman with none reciprocation, the Lord curbed sin, preventing the man from just meekly following after his wife into iniquity. However, much as the man would experience pain in the way that the earth frustrated his labours, so the woman would suffer as a result of her man's resistance to her.

The Song of Songs is a book full of garden imagery, of the encounter of the woman and the man in the beautiful innocence of the walled vineyard and orchard. The woman, in the statement, I am my beloved's and his desire is for me, describes a restored reciprocation of love and desire that marks something of a return to Eden.

The woman gives herself to her man, and the man gives himself to his woman. In chapter 2, verses 10 to 14, the man had called to the woman to come out and enjoy their love in the springtime.

[8 : 51] My beloved speaks and says to me, Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land.

The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom, they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

Now, in a passage chiastically paralleled with that one, the woman calls to the man with a similar invitation. We might also note similarities between these verses in chapter 6, verse 11.

I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Her invitation to the man is to share in the manifold fruits of love, grapes, pomegranates, and mandrakes, connoting the sensual pleasures of love to be enjoyed in the walled garden.

As Exum observes, mandrakes might pun upon the word for caresses, and also upon my beloved. In the original garden, humanity was plunged into sin as the woman offered the man the fruit that was forbidden.

[10 : 10] Now, in a new garden, another woman is offering a new Adam her many fruits, and something of our now fallen world is being restored and reborn in their love. A question to consider.

Where else in Scripture do we have recollections of the woman giving the fruit to the man in the garden? A question to consider.