Song of Songs 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 December 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 5. I came to my garden, my sister, my bride. I gathered my myrrh with my spice. I ate my honeycomb with my honey. I drank my wine with my milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love. I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound. My beloved is knocking. Open to me, my sister, my love. My dove, my perfect one. For my head is wet with dew. My locks with the drops of the night. I had put off my garment. How could I put it on? I had bathed my feet. How could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I rose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh on the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not. I called him, but he gave no answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. They beat me. They bruised me. They took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls.

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love. What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us? My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold. His locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of
Jerusalem. The heart of the great structure of the Song of Songs is found in chapter 4 verse 16, and chapter 5 verse 1. In chapter 4 verse 16, the bride invites the bridegroom into his garden, and in the very first verse of this chapter, the bridegroom responds to her invitation, entering into the garden of the bride, and enjoying its fruits. As Cheryl Exum observes, the bride's short summons and the bridegroom's short response are bound together by catchwords, which intertwine the two together. This is the knot of love at the centre of it all, and the symmetry of invitation and acceptance portrays in miniature the truth that pervades and unites the whole song. The bride had spoken of herself as the bridegroom's garden in verse 16 of chapter 4, and the repetition of my eight times in his response to her answers to her loving surrender to him. Exum perceptively observes the uncertainty of timing throughout the song, as past, present and future constantly interpenetrate each other. For this reason, it shouldn't surprise us that commentators differ on whether to understand the coming of the bridegroom as past, present or future. In love, time itself seems to take on a different character.
Youth is renewed, and memory, longing, expectancy and enjoyment become entangled. Exum writes, Since in the song the distinction between the anticipation and enjoyment of sexual union is constantly blurred, there is no point in arguing over whether the couple has enjoyed, is enjoying, or will enjoy a sexual banquet. Through both the blurring of temporal distinctions and the indirection of language, sexual union is simultaneously anticipated, deferred and enjoyed.
The Song of Songs, Richard Davidson argues, has two great paralleled panels nested within chiastic bookends. In chapter 5 verses 2 to 8, we have a very similar narrative to that of chapter 3 verses 1 to 5.
[4:26] Seeing the similarities in detail and wider structure that signal such parallels, we should beware of letting our attention slip, perhaps thinking that, since there is a parallel, we have heard all that we need to hear already. In recognising the existence of parallel panels, our attention should be more keenly focused, picking up on not merely the similarities, but also the differences. Such

parallels invite us to juxtapose the two panels, to read them in conversation with each other. The way that the woman is treated by the watchman stands out here, as does the conversation with the daughters of Jerusalem that follows.

However, the most prominent difference is the fact that, although in the first narrative she finds her lover, on this occasion she is initially unsuccessful. Exum includes chapter 2 verses 8 to 17 in the parallel, noting the focus on the sound or voice of the bridegroom and his address to his dove.
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.
Davidson's structural ordering has, I believe, the stronger case, but the connections between these two addresses should also be noted. Many commentators read both of the two episodes as descriptions of dreams, or at least this one. The bride is sleeping, but her heart is awake.
Whether or not we believe that the narrations are dreams, we should not miss their dreamlike character, and indeed the dreamlike features of the song more generally. At several points in the song, we are in the night time and in bed chambers, the time and the place of dreams. The bride sleeps and is awakened, the strange, florid and surreal imagery, the rapidly shifting scenes, the intoxication of bliss, the distortions and compressions of time, the movements from night to day and then back again, the lowered sense of identity in the face of the strange, the wild flights of imagination, the uncertainty of where reality ends and fantasy begins, the plays of presence and absence, as the bridegroom, will of the wisp-like, appears and then vanishes like the wind, all recall nothing so much as an intense sequence of dreams.
[7:02] In the time of dreaming, our consciousness is transformed from that of our waking states. Our minds grasp upon reality's slips, and our internal world assumes foreign and strange aspects, as we lose the ability to impose order upon it.

The suppressed desires, longings, sorrows and deeper passions of our flesh often reveal themselves most fully in the nocturnal guise of dreams. The enchanted time between waking and sleeping is, in many respects, the time most fitting for love, as Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream well illustrates.
However we answer the question of whether the song is a dream or not, its dream-like character is clearly eminently suited to its subject matter of erotic love. That we should ask the question, is it just a dream, is likely more the point than is the answer to that question.
The woman was first formed out of the side of the man while he was in a deep sleep, and the man's first experience of awakening from such a deep sleep, presumably somewhat dazed and trying to get to grips with reality again, was to see his new bride.
While in chapter 3 the bride woke to find the bridegroom absent and went out to seek him, here in chapter 5 he seeks her, knocking on her door. But she, not wanting to get dressed again or to get her feet dirty, is initially reluctant to let him in.
[8:20] When she does get up to answer, having prepared herself for him with fragrant oils, he is no longer there, and she is distraught. Potential erotic overtones and double entendres in this passage are not hard to hear, but the song is characteristically very delicate and indirect in presenting the sexual interactions between the couple.

Any attempt to tear away the veil of language, to look directly at the act itself, would be an obscene violation, even though that veil reveals even in its act of concealing.
Besides, such a tearing away of the veil would not disclose the act itself, as the sexual relation between the couple is inherently poetic and analogical, a play of meanings and reality that cannot be pornographically collapsed into a mere crude physical deed.
The absence of the bridegroom is painful to the woman, and she rushes outside to try to find him, but is confronted by the watchmen who manhandle her and take away her veil. This episode is a troubling one, which commentators deal with in various ways.
Perhaps the watchmen think that she, in her state of incomplete dress, is a harlot. Others turn to allegory. Robert Jensen suggests that we see the rebukes of the prophets to Israel in her failure to respond to the invitations of her lord.
[9:35] Michael Fishbane recalls us to the dreamlike character of the scene. The actions of the watchmen are a public shaming of a compromised woman, but in the dreamlike state, their public action evokes her self-judgment at her failure to respond to the bridegroom.

The scene of the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom and the failure of one who should have been ready for him should be familiar to readers of the New Testament. In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the bridegroom who comes and goes in surprising and unpredictable ways, the one for whose advent we must always be prepared and expectant.
Matthew 9, verse 15. And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.
John the Baptist describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom, who rejoices at the sound of the bridegroom's voice and arrival in John chapter 3, verse 29. In what is perhaps the most important instance of this motif, in Matthew chapter 25, verses 1 to 13, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the sudden arrival of the delayed bridegroom reveals the unpreparedness of the foolish virgins as they are asleep when his voice is heard.
As one final example of the use of this motif in the New Testament, in Revelation chapter 3, verse 20, Christ the bridegroom declares in his letter to the Laodiceans, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.
[10:59] If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. In such passages, we see some of the important ways in which the motifs of the song were later used to speak of the longing, expectancy, and readiness that should be characteristic of our relationship with our heavenly bridegroom.

Having failed to find her lover and been mistreated by the watchman, the bride turns to address the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem, asking them to tell her bridegroom, if they find him, that she is lovesick.
In the daughters of Jerusalem's response, they ask her to express the supposedly surpassing character of her beloved. What sets him apart from other delightful young men? The bride's response to the daughters of Jerusalem takes the form of another wasif or blazon.
Davidson suggests that we parallel this with the description of Solomon's palanquin in chapter 3, verses 6 to 11, although this is one of the places where his proposed structure might appear somewhat weaker.
However, there are some important shared details to note, such as the comparison of Solomon's countenance to cedars of Lebanon, as his carriage is also formed of such cedars. Solomon's legs are set on bases of gold, much as the bottom of his palanquin.
[12:12] These two passages are the only two in the book with references to pillars. Here the wasif or blazon moves down the body of the bridegroom, from his head to his feet. The bridegroom has a radiant complexion and is ruddy like his father David.

We should here observe that the word for my beloved, Dodie, used throughout the song, is closely related to the word David, as if every time that the woman spoke of her man in this way, she was saying, my David.
The messianic significance of this should not be missed. This is the greater David that is being awaited. While the woman is chiefly described with garden and natural imagery, here the man is chiefly described using architectural imagery.
The temple, of course, was a garden structure, a marriage of architecture and horticulture, anticipating the garden city of the New Jerusalem. This is fitting for the nuptial house of the Lord and his bride, the people.
As Peter Leithart notes, much of the imagery used for the man here should recall the temple. He writes, More, the sequence of the description is not only head to foot, but also roughly follows the pattern of the temple.
[13:18] One, head of gold, pure gold, holy of holies, especially the ark. Two, eyes like doves, keeping in mind the linkage of doves and flame, and eyes with lamps.

Three, cheeks with herbs and spices, incense and incense altar. Four, lips like lilies, the lily shape of the capitals on the two pillars and the lily design of sea and water basins.
Five, legs like pillars of alabaster, the structural supports of the temple. Six, form like Lebanon, like cedars, cedar wood interior of the temple. Seven, mouth full of sweetness.
This could be the opening of the temple, or possibly the altar, where Yahweh's bread is kept. This seems right to me, although it seems more likely that the mouth has reference to the holy of holies from which the voice of the Lord comes.

The temple, besides being a microcosm of the world, is also a macrocosm of the human body. For this reason, it should not be at all surprising to see the way that the New Testament speaks of bodies, whether Christ's personal body, the body of his church, or the body of the individual believer, as temples.
[14:25] Once again, the imagery here addresses many different senses. Scent, sight, taste, and touch. In describing his eyes as doves, she recalls his description of her eyes using similar imagery.

The lover's beautiful and mysterious eyes exchange messages of endearment with each other. His lips drip myrrh, providing pleasure to her with his kisses, and perhaps also with his delightful words. In the comparison of his lips with lilies, she applies imagery typically applied to her, to him. Exum writes, The man grazes among or on the lilies, feasting on the pleasures the woman's body offers. Here, in a striking transposition of images, the lips with which he grazes on the lilies are compared to lilies, on which, when she kisses him, she will be grazing. The question of the daughters of Jerusalem to the woman calls forth from her a loving portrayal of the man in whom is her heart's delight.
Indeed, when the daughters of Jerusalem offer the bride their aid in seeking the bridegroom in chapter 6, verse 1, we discover that she has already found him. The very act of extolling the bridegroom leads to her rediscovery of him.
[15:34] A question to consider. Where might we find parallels to the bride's wasif of the bridegroom here concerning Christ?