

Song of Songs 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 4 Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful. Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost its young. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely.

Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the Tower of David, built in rows of stone. On it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that graze among their lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. You are altogether beautiful, my love. There is no flaw in you. Come with me from Lebanon, my bride. Come with me from Lebanon. Depart from the peak of Amanah, from the peak of Sinia and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards.

[1:06] You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride. You have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride.

How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice. Your lips drip nectar, my bride. Honey and milk are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

A garden locked is my sister, my bride. A spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits. Henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all choice spices.

A garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come. O south wind, blow upon my garden.

Let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. Few things are more confusing and amusing to those less familiar with the Song of Songs than the peculiar comparisons that it draws.

[2:14] In the opening verses of chapter 4 alone, eyes are compared to doves, hair to goats leaping down a mountainside, teeth to a flock of sure news, and cheeks to pomegranates.

What is the hearer to make of such metaphors? In understanding the imagery of the Song, we shouldn't focus narrowly upon its visual aspects. Some in jest have attempted to draw a single portrait, a composite unifying the many images of the woman's various features, like assembling a photo fit.

Unsurprisingly, the resulting portraits look utterly bizarre and ridiculous. While there are visual aspects to the imagery of the Song, the imagery does much more than tell us what things look like. The metaphors of the Song aren't merely disposable means by which its author is telling us what the characters look like, the goal being that of giving us a sharper picture of them. Rather, the metaphors themselves have an ecstatic character, their purpose being that of allowing sparks to fly between things that might otherwise seem to have no relation.

They are playful, and even puckish, as if designed to employ another metaphor to stretch the elasticity of reference between the two terms of the metaphor to a point where it is almost on the verge of snapping, and yet holding it there.

[3:24] Rather than functioning in a narrow visual fashion, the imagery of the Song tends to conjure up arrays of associations, brought to the mind of the speaker by their beloved. Often there is some visual element, which may function as if it were the doorway, into a broader room of

delightful associations.

That visual element is seldom the focus, though. Perhaps the most important thing to recognise is the way that the lovers see all the variegated glory of the creation itself within each other, and by means of such exuberant metaphors, their love transfigures the entire world.

I have previously commented upon the way that the man and the woman in the act of love can exceed for a brief time their individuality, and enjoy some participation in higher and greater realities than themselves.

In comparing themselves and each other to creatures like doves and gazelles, and describing each other using metaphors drawn from gardens, armies, buildings, mountains, pastures, fruits, spices, vineyards, banquets, and the various flora and fauna of the land, the lovers discover something of the wonderful yet mysterious continuity between the beauty and awesomeness of nature and that of the human being.

The effect of such metaphors and imagery is often largely cumulative. Taken together, they invite us to recognise the mysterious ways in which our existence is in profound continuity and unity with that of the rest of the natural order.

[4 : 45] In the awe and delight that the lovers feel in each other's presence and embrace, they enter into a deeper awareness of the joy of creaturehood, and perceive the face of creation herself in all of her diverse splendour, in the countenance and body of the other.

In the contemporary world, it is easy to forget the creatureliness, animality, and earthliness of our humanity. We are creatures of technique and control, who seek to subdue nature and our bodies to our wills.

Yet our bodies, like the earth, have a mysterious life of their own, a life that often exceeds our understanding, but which can come into view in sexual relations. In such a context, the fact that our bodies are not just both I and it, internal and external, self and world, subject and object, but a living bridge between all of those terms, can become very apparent.

The metaphors, then, are an essential means by which this truth is expressed and experienced. The metaphors themselves, then, are part of the import of the song, helping us as its hearers to recognise truths about ourselves that we, as moderns, have generally forgotten.

They also help us to see the world itself differently, not just as an impersonal realm of generic resources to be extracted and exploited, but as a place bursting with life, wonder, and beauty.

[6 : 00] The creation is a place of delight and play, like a glorious and spirited shared dance, in which the entire cosmos and all of its creatures are caught up, and into which we are also beckoned.

It is a realm to be understood by analogy and in relation with human beings. We see this in various ways in scripture, for instance, when the woman is treated as analogous to the moon and the man to the sun, or in statements that explore analogies between the body and the cosmos, as in Genesis chapter 49 verse 25, blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

There the breasts are associated with the heavens that give rain, and the womb with the mysterious watery deep from which life first arises. The metaphorical language of the song is fitting to its subject.

It playfully marries metaphorical terms, and invites us, as its hearer, to enter a frolicsome yet glorious dance of meaning, to see our own world and each other with eyes renewed and reopened to wonder.

It also insinuates a sort of erotic cosmology, in which the cosmos and its deepest motions is to be understood, less in terms of the dictates of impersonal laws, than according to the movements of love and desire.

[7 : 11] The song describes the man and the woman with different clusters of imagery. Even though there are points of overlap, the contrasts create differing impressions for the two parties. Cheryl Exum observes, The woman draws on images of hardness and solidity, as well as value to describe the firm, muscular body she treasures, rods of gold for his hands, an ivory bar for his torso, marble pillar on gold pedestals for his legs.

The man favours natural imagery, and images of tasty delicacies to be consumed to picture her as a bountiful source of erotic pleasures. The man's imagery of the woman is more vivid than hers of him, but hers is more relational than his.

The woman is more commonly depicted as within, while the man is without, roaming more freely than she does. He comes in to her, she goes out to him. Chapter 3 ended with the procession of Solomon's palanquin to the city.

Chapter 4 opens with Solomon's description of the woman. Such a description is called a wasif, or a blazon. The lover's description of his beloved moves down her body from her eyes, praising her beauty, describing her features and their effect upon him in a series of powerful images.

He begins, however, with an exclamation, Behold! He is astonished at and arrested by her beauty. While the wasif of chapter 7, verses 1 to 9 will ascend her body with awestruck gaze, like climbing a tall palm tree, moving from her feet to her hair, here he descends from her eyes to her breasts. [8 : 42] Her eyes are like doves, entrancing, lively, free and beautiful, bearing messages of love to him, even while mysteriously nested behind her diaphanous veil. Many of the images are surprisingly particular.

As Exum observes, her hair is not merely likened to a flock of goats, but to goats descending down a mountainside and down the mountainsides of Gilead in particular. To understand the imagery, we need to consider images in their totality.

Goats descending down the mountainside is an image, among other things, of movement, of flowing larks and wavy hair. But the image likely invites further comparisons and associations. Gilead has rich and blessed pasture land and is itself a place of remarkable natural beauty. Through this choice of metaphor, the man might be comparing the beauty of the land with the beauty of the woman and associating the blessed places of the land with the blessed places of her. Verse 2 presents us with an image of the evenness, whiteness and fullness of the woman's smile. But as Exum observes, the image is so elaborated that it soon overshadows its referent. We start off with shorn ewes that have come up from the washing. Then we discover that they all have twins and that none of the ewes have miscarried or lost their young.

[9 : 54] If the point of the metaphor were merely to convey that the woman had a beautiful smile, this would be a rather clumsy way to go about it. This should suggest to us that the sheep aren't just being used to help us to imagine the woman's teeth, but that they are important in their own right.

They strengthen the cumulative effect of the images in connecting the woman with the life and fertility of the land. The colours of the woman's face are striking. Her hair is black, her lips scarlet red, her teeth brilliant white, her cheeks are likened to inviting ripe pomegranate halves behind her veil.

Her neck is statuesque and is illustrated using a military and architectural image of a tower surrounded by warrior shields. The warrior shields might suggest that she is wearing a great necklace.

The connotations of the images are no less important. The tower is David's in particular, implying that the woman has a regal character and bearing. This is a woman who's fit to be a queen. The powerful tower surrounded by warrior shields also connotes military might. Later, when repeating many of his descriptions of her that he gives here in chapter 6, the parallel passage in the panel structure of the central chapters of the book, the lover will say in verses 4 and 5, The lover is conquered by the woman's beauty and the depiction of her neck as a mighty military tower conveys something of her power to overcome him by her glorious appearance.

[11 : 24] The description of her breasts as two fawns, twins of a gazelle grazing among the lilies, is in keeping with the earlier images of her eyes, hair and teeth, but is nonetheless a strange one.

In chapter 2, verses 16 to 17, the woman said, My beloved is mine and I am his. He grazes among the lilies until the day breathes and the shadows flee. Turn, my beloved.

Be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains. The similarity between the language and imagery there and that which we find here, the repetition of the expression grazing among the lilies and the refrain until the day breathes and the shadows flee, invite us to read them alongside each other.

The lilies seem to represent the woman's body as a realm of erotic delights and given the ancient Near Eastern imagery, something that promises rejuvenation. The cleft mountains seem to be the same as the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense here, the scented breasts of the woman. In chapter 2, the man was the gazelle grazing among the lilies. Now the woman's breasts are described as two fawns doing so. Later, the man's lips, which graze among the lilies, are described as lilies themselves.

[12 : 32] Perhaps we are to see a sort of communication of imagery taking place here. As the lovers delight in each other's bodies, each of them starts to communicate some of their attributes to the parts of the body that most prominently delight in them or which they especially delight in.

As each lover experiences their body as delighted in by the other, their own body starts to bear lingering traces of the other's desire for them. They experience their body not just as their own, but also that of their lovers.

The woman's breasts are no longer just hers, but his, and his lips are hers. Having described her from her eyes to her breasts, the man declares the unified effect that she has upon him.

She is beautiful in every respect, without any flaw. Christians, hearing in this Christ's description of his bride, the church, must learn how to see her likewise, to recognize that even in the church's present sin and failure, Christ sees her in terms of what he is producing in her by his grace.

Earthly husbands should also follow the same example in the way that they regard their own wives. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

[13 : 54] Describing the power of her effect upon him, the man connects the woman with the awesome beauty of wild lands in which lions and leopards dwell and calls her forth to join him from her enchanting yet dangerous places.

He doesn't feel safe or in control around her. Addressing her for the first time as his sister and bride, he confesses that he has been utterly overcome by a single glance of her eyes, by the twinkle of a single jewel of her necklace.

More marvellous still is the effect that her love has upon him. For him, her love exceeds the delight even of the bounty of the land, its wine, spices, nectar, honey, milk, and the fragrances of its forests.

The bride is like a new Eden to him, a return to the dawn of the world, an enclosed garden spring with plentiful orchards of fruits and the rich and varied aromas of exotic spices.

As a lush pleasure garden, she is locked and sealed, having kept herself and not allowed her vineyard to be spoiled by wild creatures or other invasive parties. She remains a treasure to be unlocked, a secret to be revealed, a place where the lovers can enjoy exclusive and intimate communion with each other.

[15 : 01] The connection between the woman and the garden is an important one in biblical symbolism. While the man is formed outside of the garden and prior to its creation, the woman is formed within it and like the garden brings forth fruit.

Women are associated with springs, fountains, wells, and other water sources in scripture. The patriarchs typically meet their wives at wells. In Psalm 128, verse 3, the wife is likened to a fruitful vine and in the song she also compares herself to a vineyard.

She is the one from whom life and fullness will come forth. The man is like the gardener who must tend to, protect, and glorify the garden. In Revelation, when we see the glorious garden city of the New Jerusalem, she is identified as the bride herself.

In verse 16, the final verse of this chapter, we enter the very heart of the song. This verse and the first verse of chapter 5 together mark the centre of the structure of the song.

The woman here speaks herself for the first time in the chapter. In a series of imperatives, she calls upon the north and south winds to blow upon her garden, sending forth its spices, and to her lover, describing herself as his garden.

[16 : 11] She is opening herself up to him and offering him her choicest fruits as their love is finally consummated. A question to consider, where might we see temple imagery in this chapter?