

Song of Songs 2: 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: 25 December 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 2. I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women. As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.

His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure 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.

The voice of my beloved. Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice.

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.

[1:12] 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. Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.

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 opening section of the Song of Songs runs from chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 7, the antiphonal voices of the woman and her lover exchanging declarations of their love for each other. In the antiphonal, dialogical, or even liturgical character of these verses, the relationship between the two is deepened through the loving exchanges between them. In verses 8 to 17 of chapter 2, the lover comes.

[2:14] Commentators who adopt an allegorical reading of the text often hear the exodus in the background of this section, the Lord's answer to the longing of his people for his coming and deliverance.

Allegorical readings of the text are, we have argued, justified for several reasons, and rather than presuming that such readings do violence to the text, we can recognise ways in which they are attentive and responsive to the text itself.

As Robert Jensen notes, for instance, considering the fact that there was ancient Near Eastern love poetry between pagan gods and goddesses, it doesn't seem unreasonable to recognise the possibility of such love poetry being used concerning the relationship between the Lord and his people.

In advancing such readings, we should also be encouraged by recognition of the ways in which the New Testament itself reads the song. For instance, in chapter 1 verse 12 we read, While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

In John chapter 12 verses 2 to 3, we find one of John's more subtle allusions to the song. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

[3:20] Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance, the perfume.

The effect of such an allusion is to strengthen the marital imagery of the gospel of John more broadly, marital imagery that is, if anything, even more pronounced in the book of Revelation. Jesus is the bridegroom, and several of his interactions with women in the gospel are framed in ways designed to be reminiscent of the Song of Songs.

Jesus is the greater son of David. He's the one whom Israel longs for as its bridegroom Messiah. Read in the manner that John seems to invite us to, The song is a song of longing, anticipation, and desire.

It's a song of eschatological expectation. Come, Lord Jesus. The opening line of chapter 2 has sometimes been understood as the words of the bridegroom by Christian interpreters, though seemingly not by Jewish ones.

Yet it is better understood as the words of the bride. Ed May Kingsmill questions the common translation Rose of Sharon, arguing that it should rather be understood as Bud of the Plain, the bud likely referring to the lily in an earlier stage of its growth.

[4 : 30] She has not yet opened up and fully flowered, something that will occur over the course of the song. There are several appearances of lilies within the book, this being the first. Athmar Kiel identifies the lily as a water lily, or lotus of the plains, a symbol of regeneration and return to youth.

There are clearly sexual illusions in the imagery of the opening flower that promises rejuvenation and renewal of life. The hearer and interpreter of the song needs to recognise the presence of such imagery without thinking that its meaning is best conveyed by stripping away the veils of illusion and jettisoning the multifaceted connotations, such as the youth and beauty of the bride or the promise of rejuvenation that she holds out to the bridegroom.

The sexual imagery of the song is delicate and indirect, and were we to attempt always to get behind it, to escape its mediation and its failing, our readings would fundamentally betray and misunderstand it.

In their loving exchange of expressions of endearment, the bridegroom and the bride take up each other's words and respond in kind. The bride compared herself to a lily of the valleys, beautiful yet young and in a humble situation.

The bridegroom takes the imagery that she has used in comparing herself to a lily and employs it to express how much she surpasses all who surround her. Then, in answer to him, the bride speaks of the superlative character of the bridegroom himself with another comparison drawn from nature.

[5 : 55] As she exceeds all the women as a lily exceeds brambles, so he exceeds the great trees of the forest, like a delightful fruit tree exceeds the other trees. As Michael Fishbane notes, the identity of this tree has been called into question by historical botanists, who argue that cultivated apple trees were not present in the region, and that what apple trees might have been present had bitter and unpleasant fruit, which clearly wouldn't work for the comparison here.

Many suggest that the apricot tree might be in view instead. Marvin Pope observes the presence of apple tree imagery in Sumerian sacred marriage mythology, and Kingsmill and others question the claims of those who deny the presence of cultivated apples in the region.

If the apple tree were a familiar symbol from foreign poetry, it might also have been employed as an exotic image. If the bride is the lotus in the low valley, perhaps we are to see an implicit contrast in status being drawn between the height of the tree and the lowliness of the lily.

The bride rejoices in the king for the shade and the fruit that he provides. He gives her shelter, and she finds sustenance in his love. The bride continues her speech in verse 4, describing the bridegroom bringing her into his banqueting house, or his house of wine.

Love is a feast in which the parties delight in the tastes and scents of the other. Wine connotes rest, celebration, relaxation and delight, and clusters of imagery surrounding grapes, wine and drinking are among the most favoured within the song, as they are so apt for speaking of the character of love.

[7 : 28] The term translated banner in verse 4 is another familiar one that has been disputed, some seeing the image of love as a banner raised over someone as nonsensical. Yet elsewhere in the song, the same term is used for armies' banners, as it is for the standards of Israel and its tribes in Numbers chapters 2 and 10.

As Kiel observes, the images on such banners and standards conveyed the mission of a unit or symbols of their deity. As the bride comes under the shelter and protection of the bridegroom and into his feasting hall, his banner over her declares his loving purpose.

A bridegroom who raises such a banner over his beloved is also by implication a mighty man, able to guard and to empower her. Here the woman describes herself as lovesick, asking for her lover to revive and refresh her with raisins and apples.

Lovesickness is a recurring theme within the song, being used to characterise the bride in particular. Cheryl Exum writes very helpfully about the way that the man and the woman of the song and their love for each other are presented to us, presented in ways that contrast them and don't just connect them.

Describing the woman, she writes, She expresses her desire and explores her feelings for him and his for her through stories, stories in which she and he both play roles as themselves or in fantasy guises.

[8 : 46] However, she writes of the man, The man does not tell stories. His way of talking about love is to look at her and tell her what he sees and how it affects him. She writes further, The man constructs the woman, creates a picture of her for us through the gaze.

We follow his gaze as he progressively builds up a metaphorical picture of her, bit by bit, until she materialises before us. The woman constructs the man primarily through the voice.

She quotes him speaking to her, but he never quotes her. Exum proceeds to describe the differences between the ways that the love of the two lovers is described. She writes, The difference is subtle, for both feel wondrously overwhelmed by the other.

The woman speaks about herself, about being in love and how she experiences it. I am faint with love, or I am lovesick. Her condition, lovesickness, is a malady to which lovers are prone, a state of intense longing that feeds on love and leaves one languid and in need of the sustenance only love can bring.

She goes on, The woman tells others, the women of Jerusalem, what love does to her. The man speaks to the woman about what she does to him. She sums up the difference.

[9 : 55] He is awestruck. She is lovesick. In verse 6, the bride imagines the bridegroom fondling her, in a description for which we can find far more sexually explicit parallels in Sumerian sacred marriage poetry.

The unity of the Song of Songs can be seen in part through its use of repeated refrains. Roland Murphy identifies a few key refrains that recur at various points in the song. The first of these key refrains is this verse, His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me.

This refrain is largely repeated in verse 3 of chapter 8. A second refrain is in the verse that follows, I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

This is present in verse 7 here and again in chapter 8 verse 4, two refrains being repeated in two sets of successive verses. However, the adjuration refrain is also found in chapter 3 verse 5.

Murphy also sees a, Who is this refrain? What he terms the possession refrain, My beloved is mine and I am his. And finally, Until the day breathes and the shadows flee.

[11 : 00] The repetition of these refrains serves to connect the song together. It also weakens the arguments of those who see the song as merely a loose connection of different poems. Robert Alden argues that the song has a strong chiasmic structure, drawing attention to repeated phrases and details on either side of it.

However, Richard Davidson argues for a modified chiasmic structure, with two parallel panels on either side of the central verses of 4 verse 16 and 5 verse 1, bookended by chiasmic structures in chapter 1 and 2, and from chapter 7 verse 11 to the end of chapter 8.

His proposed macro structure for the book depends much more upon the repeated refrains, and, to my mind, convincingly demonstrates the robust integrity and unity of the song.

The bride here speaks of love as a force of its own, that must be handled with wisdom, neither prematurely excited nor excessively delayed. Like music with which it shares such a strong affinity, love requires good timing, just as the silences between notes in a piece of music are not empty but charged and filled with tension, anticipation, recollection and release.

So love, as depicted in the song, takes its time. It requires knowing the right time for love, and experiences through its taking of time the longing and desire of memory or expectancy.

[12 : 21] These are things that the unmusical hurrying of love to its consummation may never truly know. A truly fulfilling resolution requires time and tension. Verses 8 to 14 are still the words of the bride, although within verses 10 to 14 she quotes the words of the lover to her.

The bride expresses her eager anticipation of her lover's swift arrival. Robert Alter remarks upon the characteristic poetic artistry illustrated in verses 8 and 9, as the song introduces a comparison beneath the verbal surface of the initial lines.

This is made explicit at the beginning of verse 9. My beloved is like a gazelle. The lover's bounding and leaping towards the beloved shows his vigour and his great desire to be at her side.

In 2 Samuel chapter 1 verse 19, Jonathan is called the gazelle of Israel, a word that can also mean beauty or honour, likely chosen in part for such connotations.

When her gazelle arrives, he calls to his bride to join him. It is the springtime. Winter is over with its rains. Flowers are starting to appear. Trees are being pruned.

[13:27] Birds are singing. Figs are starting to ripen. The vines to blossom and spread their fragrance. The world is coming back to life. Nature renewed in its youth. And the lovers should join in, participating in the delight, the liveliness and the play appropriate to the season.

Like someone trying to coax out a nervous bird, the lover beckons to her, addressing her as his dove, associated with love, beautiful in appearance, with a delightful song.

In a nicely balanced chiasm, he calls to her, Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely. The woman was already connected with the vineyard back in chapter 1 verse 6 and will again speak of herself in terms of the vineyard in chapter 8 verse 12.

Exum suggests that we understand the little foxes here as amorous young men in search of grapes from the vineyards of the young women. The image, she argues, may be more of a playful than a threatening one.

The young men are free to romp like little foxes in the vineyards of the young women who are less free to roam. These foxes need to be caught and brought home so that the vineyards aren't spoiled. We might also consider the story of Samson as a potentially illuminating background here.

[14:37] Samson is a mighty man and a lover of women. However, in his story, he has to deal with wild animals troubling the vineyards of Israel. He meets and kills a lion in the vineyards of Timna.

Later, he punishes the 30 Philistines who robbed him of his wife by binding 150 pairs of foxes together to destroy their fields, five for each one of the Philistines. An allegorical reading of this might perhaps see the vineyard of the bride Israel being threatened by troublesome enemies depicted as lusty foxes who would spoil it and spiritually compromise it.

The chapter ends with two of the repeated refrains of the song. Within the first, we can, as Exum observes, see a clear contrast between the wild foxes of verse 15 and the beloved, who does not run wild, but is committed to her to the exclusion of others, the two of them being bound together in mutual possession.

My beloved is mine and I am his. There is a very natural correspondence, of course, between this and the covenant formula. I will be your God and you will be my people. Some see the beloved here as akin to a shepherd grazing his flock among the lilies or the lotuses.

However, the beloved has just been compared to a gazelle and will again be compared to one in the following verse. In chapter 4 verse 5, another verse that occurs immediately before a refrain like that of verse 17, we read, Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies.

[16:00] It seems more likely to me, then, that the beloved is grazing himself rather than shepherding grazing sheep, but perhaps the imagery is intentionally designed to invite both readings. As she is earlier compared to a lily, the image here likely conveys intimacy and lovemaking, the beloved satisfying himself in her body, which is like a flower-strewn land.

The cleft mountains of verse 17 likely refer to her body in a way that evokes the beauty, mystery, wonder and fruitfulness of the earth herself. Timing continues to be important for the lovers, as we see in the words of the woman in verse 17, but the exact timing in view bewilders most commentators, as the expression used is ambiguous.

Exum takes this ambiguity seriously. The woman is both seemingly sending her lover away and summoning him to her. She notes that the words of the woman here are almost identical to the last words of the song, and that even in the verbal differences from this verse, the same intentional ambiguities seem to be present there.

Writing concerning these differences, she writes, These differences pull in opposite directions, foregrounding the dual impulses already at work in chapter 2 verse 17. The similarity between chapter 2 verse 17 and chapter 8 verse 14 invites us to look more closely at how, in its poetic unfolding, chapter 2 verse 8 to 17 might offer a clue to the meaning of the song as a whole.

Chapter 2 verse 8 to 17 ends as the song ends, with the woman seemingly sending her lover away and calling him to her in the same breath. It is followed in chapter 3 verses 1 to 5 by a second story in which the woman seeks and finds her lover.

[17:37] This pattern indicates that the paradoxical sending away and calling for or forth is a prelude to the lover's union, a union that throughout the song is simultaneously assured, deferred, and on a figurative level, enjoyed.

A question to consider, standing back from the imagery used in this chapter and looking at all of the images taken together, what collective effect does it have in characterising the love of the pair?

