

Song of Songs 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Song of Songs, Chapter 6. Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine. He grazes among the lilies. You are beautiful as Terza, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing. All of them bear twins. Not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed. The queens and concubines also, and they praised her. Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners? 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. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince. Return, return, O Shulamite, return, return, that we may look upon you.

Why should you look upon the Shulamite, as upon a dance before two armies? In Song of Songs, chapter 5, in a dreamlike passage, the bride failed to open the door to her beloved, and when she looked for him, he had gone. She was beaten by the watchmen of the city and asked the daughters of Jerusalem for help finding her beloved, as she was sick with love. The daughters had responded, 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? In response, the bride gave a wasif, or blazon, describing the incomparable bridegroom from his head to his toe to the daughters of Jerusalem. While initially seeming sceptical, after the wasif, the daughters of Jerusalem wished to join the bride in her search. One of the features of love, as it is depicted in the song, is the desire to share it with third parties. The lovers want others to see what they see in each other, and to share in their joy. Throughout the song, third parties are present, and the love of the couple is recounted to them and witnessed by them. The song is not the song of one voice and of one person's love.

Both lovers sing to each other, about each other, and in unison with each other. Yet the song isn't even a song merely of two voices and their private sharing of their love. They continually testify of their love to a wider audience, an audience that has its own voices. As constant witness to the couple's love for each other, the community frees the couple to be who they are for each other. Unlike the common romantic image of the couple who are absorbed in each other's gaze to the exclusion of the entire world, the couple in the song are continually relating their love to a broader public. Unlike the voyeuristic third party of the pornographic, the song's viewer is also interlocutor, guest or friend, involved in a relation enduring through the mediation of time. The lovers also desire and delight in each other as those who find a place and identity and praise in wider society. The bride desires her bridegroom as one who occupies a particular place in society. Solomon is the one surrounded by the valiant men of Israel, the one crowned as the king of Israel. Much as the lovers constantly relate their love to a society beyond them, so their desire is aroused by the perception of their beloved as one with public glory and honour. The mediation of the society expands the movements of love, self-gift and desire.

In their union, the couple wish to relate themselves to a wider public. Their union is discourse-creating and meaning-producing. It's a bond that projects itself out into the world. In their union, a fountain is opened up, producing a stream of life that will flow out beyond them to others. When the Lord first created the woman for the man, he did not create her only as one to share a face-to-face, I-thou relationship with him, but also in order that they might live and act side by side, creating a world and a society together. While marriage has at its heart an intimate private bond, a bond that even has the dreamlike character of another place and time, that bond has the most profound public consequences and naturally projects itself into a common history and community, especially in the bearing of children. Children are the primary, but by no means the only, third parties with whom couples share their love for each other. From the perspective of the third party, love can also be a source of great joy. The couple are rejuvenated in love, but that renewal is not exclusive to them. Those who celebrate their love can share in their joy and experience renewal for themselves as they rejoice with them. While it might provoke envy in some, most find vicarious delight in witnessing a young and beautiful couple and their love for each other. Perhaps there are few better examples of this phenomenon than royal weddings, as the joy of a couple in each other can transfix entire nations and represent a symbol of hope for a whole people's life and future. Over the course of the song, the place of the daughters of Jerusalem changes. While they are initially addressed by the bride on various occasions, in this broader scene in the book, they become more active as speakers and participants.

In the opening verse of this chapter, they offer to seek the bridegroom with the bride. By now, they recognise the once despised bride's surpassing appearance, referring to her as most beautiful among women. And their willingness to seek the bridegroom makes them active participants in and supporters of the couple's love. Besides officiants, alongside a bride and bridegroom at a wedding, one typically finds a best man and groomsman, bridesmaids and a maid of honour, the father of the bride and the other parents, and a witness in congregation. All these parties have their own share in the couple's joy and the joy of the occasion. In scriptural uses of marital metaphors for Christ and the church and wedding images, there are many examples of such third parties. The father of the bridegroom who gives the wedding feast for his son, the friend of the bridegroom, the wedding guests who are supposed to attend in spotless attire, the mothers of the bride in the bridegroom, the virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom upon his arrival, etc. The eschatological wedding is depicted in scripture as an event of cosmic joy to which all are invited and in which meaning all are implicated. As love is brought to its fullest flowering, it brings more and more people into its orbit. As the bride asks the daughters of Jerusalem, who on another level of symbolism are the cities of Israel depicted as bridesmaids surrounding the bride of Zion, to help her to find her beloved, we might expect that chapter 6 would recount that search, especially as it begins with further questions directed to the bride from the daughters of Jerusalem to assist them in the search for him. Yet we are surprised to discover that the beloved does not seem to be lost after all, as the bride declares that he has gone down to his garden, returning to the imagery at the heart of the song in chapter 4 verse 16 and 5 verse 1. In fact, she is not separated from him, rather she is enjoying the most intimate relationship with him. He is grazing among the lilies, familiar imagery used to describe his taking of delight in her. Here the refrain from chapter 2 verse 16 is repeated, My beloved is mine, and I am his. He grazes among the lilies. The inseparable bond between the two lovers, comparable to the bond described in the covenant formula, I will be your God and you will be my people, prevents any final division of the lovers. How do we understand the strange narrative shift here? The impression the song gives us is that, as the bride lovingly described her beloved, the beloved appeared to her sight once more. Many of the themes of this passage are explored in the

[8 : 16] Gospel of John, where Mary Magdalene seeks desperately for the man that she loves. In imagery that should remind the reader of the song, in John's Gospel, Jesus is buried in a sealed and previously untouched tomb in a garden, filled with the richer spices. Mary, coming to the tomb in the darkness of the very early morning, finds the stone removed and the bridegroom nowhere to be found. Distraught, she tells others. Weeping in the garden after the others have left, she is addressed by one whom she initially presumed to be the gardener, and behold, it is Jesus. From that open garden and fountain will come forth the blessing of the spirit's spiced wind and the water that would renew the earth.

The bridegroom's voice re-enters in verse 4 as he praises the beauty of his bride. This passage parallels with that of chapter 4 verses 1 to 6 in the macro structure of the book, and it directly repeats several of its details. 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 the lilies.

Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of Myrrh and the hill of Frankincense. However, in the description of this chapter, the bride has become even more dazzling and radiant, as is evident in the elaboration of the earlier description in verses 8 to 10.

The praise of chapter 4 was the bridegroom's own praise of the bride. Now, however, he speaks of the way in which his voice has been joined by that of a mighty company of others. In chapter 3 verses 7 and 8, Solomon's palanquin was surrounded by the majesty of a mighty company of warriors. Around it are 60 mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night. Now the bridegroom is also surrounded by 60 queens, 80 concubines, and all the maidens of the royal court. Yet, even in such a regal, glorious, beautiful company, she is utterly incomparable and unique. She has always been the only one. She was like the only begotten child of her mother, the apple of her mother's eye. And now she is the one dove of her beloved. On the one hand, the bride is set in ever greater company. On the other, she is set apart from others all the more. In Proverbs chapter 31 verses 28 and 29, the praise of the virtuous woman is described. Her children rise up and call her blessed. Her husband also, and he praises her. Many women have done excellently, but you surpassed them all. In a comparable statement, the voices of all the women of the court are united in the praise of the bridegroom, extolling her dazzling radiance. They compare her to the beauty of the moon, the splendour of the sun, which one cannot bear to gaze upon, and the awesome glory of a great army, before whose manifest might and majesty all would surrender. Verses 11 to 13 are difficult to understand and interpret, especially verse 12, which has several textual issues. The speaker in verse 11 is unclear. Is it the man or is it the woman? Cheryl Exum and Ed May Kingsmill are among those who argue that it is most likely the woman, while Michael Fishbane and Arthmar Keel understand it to be the speech of the man. Duane Garrett suggests that we understand this as the woman's willing response to the man's invitation in chapter 2 verses 10 to 15. There he invited her out into the joy of the springtime, whereas Keel notes that the imagery of vines and pomegranates is more typically used of the woman. While most commentators understand the speaker of verses 11 and 12 to be the same, Keel argues for a shift from the man to the woman, and that verses 12 and 13 should be read as a unit. Transported by her desire, in a dreamlike state, she seemingly finds herself in a great procession of chariots, presumably with her beloved by her side.

[12 : 41] Seeing the woman radiant in such a glorious spectacle, verse 13 might describe the daughters of Jerusalem calling upon her to dance, so that they can see her beauty, or perhaps wanting her to turn back to face them after the procession has moved beyond them. They are rebuked, however. Such a sight belongs to the bridegroom alone. While they can share in the joy of the couple's love, their gaze can only venture so far before it is prevented from becoming intrusive by going further. The daughters of Jerusalem here describe the woman as the Shulamite. This name, some suggest, recalls the character of Abishag the Shunamite, the beautiful young woman who helped to keep the elderly David warm, yet without having relations with him. After David's death, Adonijah, his son, had sought to marry Abishag, which Solomon recognized was part of a strategic play for the kingdom. Keel notes the possibility of an illusion then, to a beautiful young woman from the country, who unsuspectingly becomes caught up in courtly intrigues. This verse is the only place where the title Shulamite occurs, and the most important connection, it seems to me, is between it and the name Solomon itself. Shulamite is like a female form of the name Solomon. The woman has become a glorious female counterpart to Solomon, reflecting his radiance in relationship with him. Something similar happens in the greater narrative of the scripture. In the book of Revelation, for instance, we begin with a vision of the glorious bridegroom, and end with one of the unveiling of the glorious bride, whose light is a reflection of the light of the Lamb himself. A question to consider, what are some of the ways that the couple's love is related to other parties in the song?