Song of Songs 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 3 On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares.

I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they were about in the city. Have you seen him whom my soul loves?

Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived 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. What is that, coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant?

Behold, it is the litter of Solomon. Around it are sixty 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.

[1:06] King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple. Its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem.

Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart. Song of Songs plays out through time, and its interplays between presence and absence, between experience and longing.

In chapter two, the man had come to the woman, calling her out into the springtime, when their love could join in the freedom and the renewal of the life of the natural world. That chapter ended with the ambiguous words of the woman, seemingly both summoning and sending away the man, in a paradoxical statement that well illustrates the tensions and interplays that characterise the song more generally.

Chapter three begins with the woman in her bed, distraught as her lover is absent from her side, and nowhere to be found. The passing of times, the movement from day to night, or from winter to spring, and the corresponding movements of the characters between states, waking and sleeping, absence from and presence to each other, longing for each other, and delighting in each other, winter dormancy and springtime play, is integral to the song's portrayal of love.

More generally, time is something that comes into prominence within the wisdom literature, whereas the material of the law generally focuses upon perennial principles. In the wisdom literature, we see the development of things over time, from their first incipients to their full harvest.

[2:40] We are taught the importance of timing. There is, the preacher teaches, a season for everything, and a time for every matter under heaven. The wise man discerns the times, and acts accordingly.

Things are beautiful in their time, and seasonality is part of the goodness of God's world. The waking woman at the opening of chapter 3 experiences a painful season of absence from her lover, one that drives her diligently, and indeed desperately, to seek him out, acting in a manner that might appear unfitting of a respectable young woman, wandering the streets of the city at night, where she might easily be mistaken for a prostitute.

The city setting here contrasts with the natural setting of the preceding chapter. A similar scene appears in the closely parallel frame in chapter 5 verses 2 to 8, where the lover knocks at her door while she is sleeping, and thrilling to open up to him, she is dismayed to find, upon opening the door, that he has gone.

Then, once again, she wanders the city, where she is beaten by the watchman. Love never fully possesses its object, and in the absence of the lover, this reality is painfully experienced.

While the lover is present, there can be a longing for even deeper union with them, but when they depart, especially when that departure is sudden and unexpected, the absence can be agonising.

[3:56] The interplay of presence and absence in time is illustrated, as Cheryl Exum observes, in the way in which both of these things are rendered immediate in the narration, with a slippage between past and present.

The chapter begins with narration of the past, but by verse 4 in Exum's words, the present seems almost imperceptibly to have overtaken the narrated past. It is easy to think of time merely in terms of a succession of discrete moments.

Henri Bergson challenges this way of thinking about time, presenting music as a counterexample. When listening to a melody, we perceive the melody as a whole, not just as a succession of detached tones.

If a note is held for too long, the musical piece as a whole can falter and fail. When listening to a musical piece, each moment is interpenetrated by retentions of the preceding notes and movements of the piece, and by anticipations of what is yet to come.

Even though we might think them absent from the present moment, what we think of as present is inescapably constituted by the traces of the past and the future that are shot through it. The piano key that a toddler strikes in play could not be more different than that same key struck by a musician near the resolution of a great symphony.

[5:09] Although the same key is being struck, it is not the same note that is being sounded. The note sounded by the toddler is likely just a random addition to the cacophony characteristic of his raucous play.

But the note purposefully sounded by the musician is penetrated by all of the tension and retention of that which precedes it, and by the anticipation and longing for resolution that propels the music forward.

So it is with the experience of love. When, after her run-in with the watchman, the woman finally finds her man, his recent absence powerfully colours her renewed experience of his presence.

Like music, our experience of love's delight is profoundly constituted by time, not least by the presence and openness of the past in memory and recollection. Our society, which often teaches us to think of love in terms of random and discreet hookups, can miss the beauty of a love that brings to it the united weight and anticipation of a whole life that's lived together as a grand shared symphony.

When compared to such a symphony, the random hookup is little more than an advertisement's jingle. As in a musical piece, each note can be transformed or reconstituted by what follows it.

[6:18] So past, present and future interpenetrate and can be transformed by each other. We can think about this in a negative form, when betrayal occurs in a relationship, all of the past memories can become curdled.

What promised to be the symphony of a shared life has been destroyed. Here, the lover's absence strikes a jarring note, which might threaten to destroy the entire melody of their love, unless somehow they can overcome the apparent discord, including the jarring note within their shared melody.

Once this has been done, however, the melody will have a different quality than that which it would have had, had that initially jarring note never been sounded. Grasping hold of her man all the tighter, the woman will not let go of him until she has brought him into her mother's house.

In addition to the strong similarities with the parallel frame of chapter 5, verses 2 to 8, in the macro structure of the song that Richard Davidson identifies, we also might recognize shared elements with chapter 8, verses 2 to 5.

I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, she who used to teach me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me.

[7:28] I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you.

There your mother was in labor with you. There she who bore you was in labor. As in this section in chapter 3, in chapter 8, the woman expresses a desire to return to the houses of their mothers, where they were conceived, born and raised.

She leads her man back to her mother's house. In both places, we have successive repeated refrains. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

And who is that coming up from the wilderness? Such parallels invite us to consider the sections alongside each other, observing both the similarities and the contrast between them. Perhaps the most surprising common element is the desire to return to the mother's house.

Indeed, in chapter 8, the woman expresses a desire to return to the houses of both of their mothers. The singling out of the mothers, rather than the fathers or the parents as a pair, and the heightened associations with earliest childhood are noteworthy.

[8:34] Throughout the song, love is described in ways that evoke the renewal of youth and a return to childhood. Peter Lightheart remarks upon the way that the song stands out from the rest of the scriptures in speaking about sex principally in terms of the mutual delight of the man and the woman, seemingly having little to say about procreation and children.

Yet this, Lightheart maintains, would be to miss important themes in the song. He writes, This is why it seems the Bible shows us sexual love as a response to death.

Isaac is comforted after his mother's death when the servant returns with Rebecca, and Judah, less honourably, seeks renewal after his wife's death by visiting a prostitute. This is not, or not primarily, about children as a blow against devouring death.

It's more that Isaac died with his mother and receives new life from his wife. The lily or lotus to which the woman compares herself was, as Othmar Kiel argues, a symbol of regeneration and rejuvenation in the ancient Near East.

In the later image of the bride as a vine or palm tree, she appears as a sort of tree of life. And in the imagery of the return to the house of the mother, indeed to the very places of the conception and birth of the lovers, we are again seeing this notion of a return to earliest childhood in a later season of life.

[10:00] It is the woman in particular, both as lover and as mother, who is symbolically associated with this promise of restoration to youth, restoration of youth. The repeated refrain of the adjuration not to awaken love until it pleases, which we also find in chapter 2 verse 7 and 8 verse 4, is not here, as it is in those places, preceded by a description of the lover's embrace.

However, once again, it reminds the hearer of the importance of timing in love, of the importance of giving love its needed time, taking time, and then, when it is ready, seizing the time.

By punctuating the flow of the narrative with such an address to the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem, the hearer is cautioned against rushing to consummation prematurely and instructed in the importance of attending to love's proper, delicate unfolding.

Reading such a passage allegorically, hearers might recognize Israel's painful experiences of the Lord's absence on account of her sin. Gregory of Nyssa saw in the bedchamber the heart that meditates upon and communes with the Lord.

Theodoret of Cyrus wrote that the Christian ventures forth into the streets of the scriptures and petitions the watchmen of the city, the prophets and apostles, until she finds her lover and seeks renewed communion with him in the house of her mother, enjoying fellowship with Christ in the heavenly Jerusalem or the church.

[11:19] In verse 6, there is a surprising shift in and apparent interruption in the narrative as the scene jumps from the woman taking her lover to her mother's house to the appearance of Solomon's glorious palanquin or carried litter coming up from the wilderness.

Roland Murphy identified the opening question as a refrain shared in common with chapter 8 verse 5 when we are once again asked to identify something or someone coming up from the wilderness, on that occasion the woman leaning upon her beloved.

Ernst Wendland makes a case for understanding Solomon's palanquin here as relating to the coming of the bride herself by virtue of the parallels with chapter 8. The crown with which Solomon was crowned by his mother on the day of his wedding is, he suggests, the bride herself.

In Proverbs chapter 12 verse 4, one of Solomon's own proverbs, we read, An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.

The fact that Solomon is crowned with the crown on the day of his wedding by his mother would further strengthen this case. In Psalm 45 verse 9, the queen stands at the right hand of the royal bride in the royal wedding.

[12:27] It seems best to me to read these verses as referring to the approach of a majestic procession with Solomon and his bride, its dust rising like perfumed smoke, surrounded by a company of the mightiest soldiers, five for each of the tribes, sunlight glinting on their dazzling armour.

The advent of the king and the queen is an awe-inspiring and glorious spectacle, and all of the city comes forth to witness them. As the palanquin is like a movable building with tent-like features, carried on the shoulders by men with poles, it shouldn't be difficult for us to see a vision of the tabernacle and temple here.

The wood of Lebanon is most famously used in Solomon's construction of the temple. The silver posts recall the use of silver in the hooks and fillets of the posts of the tabernacle. The interior of the whole of Solomon's temple was overlaid with gold, and in Exodus chapter 38 verse 8, the mirrors of the ministering women are used to form the basin of the bronze laver.

The tabernacle was surrounded by the twelve tribes in military array, and Solomon's couch likewise, presumably with twelve groups of five men. Frankincense and myrrh were used in the incense and anointing oil, and the ascending column of smoke recalls both the pillar of cloud by which the Lord led the people, and the smoke ascending from both the sacrifices on the altar and the incense in the tabernacle.

The palanquin coming up from the wilderness is a place where the man and the woman can lie together in sumptuous surroundings. The tabernacle was the palanquin for the Lord and his bride Israel, where the Lord, whose glory inhabited it, communed with his people.

[13:58] The coming of the palanquin from the wilderness recalls the exodus and the entry into the land. The Lord married Israel in the covenant at Sanii, taking the people under the loving protection of his wings.

The coming of the Lord to his land with his bride to reign in the city of Jerusalem in a glorious bridal possession is the great hope and longing expectation of the people. Exum is not persuaded that the figure here is Solomon himself.

Rather, she argues, the lover is being presented in a poetic fancy in a royal guise. The man, though much humbler in his origins, is imaginatively cast as the glorious and majestic lover King Solomon, and elsewhere is referred to as the king.

In the eyes of his adoring lover, that is what he is. We need not be convinced by Exum's fundamental claim about this not being Solomon to recognise a very important point here.

If we can ascend the ladder of allegory upward, working from the king and his lover to the king and the nation to the Messiah and his bride to Christ and the church, we can also make a corresponding descent.

[14:59] Each couple, no matter how humble, can experience in the clumsy delight of their love, some ennobling connection with realities that far transcend them. C.S. Lewis writes, Some will think it strange I should find an element of ritual or masquerade in that action, which is often regarded as the most real, the most unmasked, and sheerly genuine we ever do.

Are we not our true selves when naked? In a sense, no. The word naked was originally a past participle. The naked man was the man who had undergone a process of naking, that is, of stripping or peeling.

You used the verb of nuts and fruit. Time out of mind, the naked man has seemed to our ancestors not the natural, but the abnormal man, not the man who has abstained from dressing, but the man who has been for some reason undressed.

And it is a simple fact, anyone can observe it at a man's bathing place, that nudity emphasises common humanity and soft pedals what is individual. In that way, we are more ourselves when clothed.

By nudity, the lovers cease to be solely John and Mary, the universal he and she are emphasised. You could almost say they put on nakedness as a ceremonial robe or as the costume for a charade.

[16:13] The playful drama of the love between a man and a woman then, as Lewis appreciates, enables each party temporarily to see and experience themselves and the other differently. The man, though he be the poorest in the realm, is seen as if he were Solomon himself and his wife as if Solomon's radiant and regal queen.

A question to consider. How might the vision of the ascent of Solomon's palanquin from the wilderness be related to Christ and his people?