

# OpenTheo

## December 24th: Song of Songs 1 & Luke 22:1-38

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Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! The Last Supper.

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## Transcript

Song of Songs, Chapter 1. The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine. Your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out, therefore virgins love you.

Draw me after you, let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you.

We will extol your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you. I am very dark, but lovely.

O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me, because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me.

They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept. Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon, for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your

companions? If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents. I compare you, my love, to a mare among pharaohs' chariots.

Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver. While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi. Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful, your eyes are doves.

Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful. Our couch is green, the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine. The Song of Songs is exceptional, as its very name suggests.

Most notably, its primary subject matter, the erotic love of a man and a woman, has led some to question its inclusion in the canon. On account of its subject matter, Robert Alter refers to it as the most consistently secular of all biblical texts, whereas even the Book of Esther, which famously makes no explicit reference to the Lord, can readily be related to the covenantal existence of the people of Israel. Song of Songs has much less obvious a grounding or a setting in Israel's covenantal life.

It is a book that is pervaded with metaphor and symbolism, of a creativity, intensity and arresting strangeness that stylistically sets it apart from others. Alter observes that, whereas most imagery in scripture is conventional imagery, the imagery of the song is startlingly innovative, something that is rarely seen elsewhere. Perhaps only the Book of Revelation rivals the Song of Song for the breadth of the differences between fundamental interpretive approaches that have been taken to it.

Some interpreters, such as Tremper Longman, argue that the original song should be understood purely as love poetry. Indeed, some readers have handled its imagery as akin to a frosted glass of euphemism, to be torn down so that we can reflect more directly upon the sex acts that it obscures. However, for many in church history it has been understood as the highest of all allegories, written for such a purpose.

Rabbi Akiva famously referred to the Song of Songs as the Holy of Holies of the Writings, an assessment shared by many Christian interpreters of the song. Even the language of the song is noteworthy, with a greater density of unique words, hapax legomena, and unusual terms than any other book of scripture. It seems exotic, strange, foreign, and often forbidding to many of its readers.

Many readers of the song may find themselves struck by its florid and startling imagery and metaphors. Within it we see hair compared to flocks of goats, teeth to sheep, and

breasts to fawns. While the exact import of some of these metaphors may escape us, their rhetorical form is important.

Michael Fox has argued that these arresting metaphors depend for their full meaning, not only on the extent of the common ground, but also on the metaphoric distance between image and referent, that is, the degree of unexpectedness or incongruity between the juxtaposed elements and the magnitude of the dissonance of surprise it produces. According to Fox, a greater metaphoric distance then serves to excite desire and aesthetic pleasure. Within the rhetoric of the song we witness the establishment of an expansive and playful distance.

The contemporary reader may be amused by the comparison of the Shulamite's waist with a heap of wheat encircled with lilies in chapter 7, verse 2. The distance between the two metaphoric terms would seem to preclude their meaningful connection. However, such metaphors do not depend upon a straightforward sensory connection between the two terms, nor do the metaphors function as euphemistic substitutions to be decoded. Rather, the metaphors serve to create daring associations, associations that elicit the imagination's engagement, exposing the fecundity and plenitude of meaning.

The heap of wheat is associated with abundance and with sustenance, with fertility and vitality. It also invites the hearer to explore the possibility of a relationship with the various other connections of wheat in the scriptures, such as the sexual associations of grain and wheat that we see in places like Ruth chapter 3. The temple is a site of wheat in the threshing floor in 1 Chronicles chapter 21. The lily, which appears several times within the song, suggests beauty, but also evokes all of the garden imagery of the song and obliquely gestures towards the broader biblical use of garden imagery in connection with the tristing places of Eden and the temple, where lilies also appeared.

The chosen medium of the song is the veil of language. Veils simultaneously allow us to draw near, but also maintain separation and difference. They deny immediate access, presenting us with desire as a reality that entails the radical play of presence and absence.

This should be contrasted with pornographic material, which seeks to rip away the veils. The circumlocutory character of erotic writing in the Song of Songs directs our mind around the sexual act in a way that excites wonder. Its startling metaphors, such as those already mentioned, are characteristic of a rhetoric of desire, which relates seemingly distant terms in order to slow us down and allow us to savour the erotic dance of presence and absence, of the delight of memory and the longing of anticipation.

Deep difference in playful relation excites desire. The song is one filled with desire and longing, connected with both memory and anticipation. The song is fittingly a song.

The Song of Songs, the medium of song as St Augustine recognised, is peculiarly suited

to the expression of love. Replete as the song is with scents, sights, tastes, sounds and sensations, it captures the rich sensory character of love. The song is filled with images drawn from fruitful gardens, majestic edifices, from armies, from agriculture, the flora and fauna of the wild countryside or from banqueting tables.

For the lovers and the song, the world is charged and transfigured by their love and desire for each other. The beloved is encountered in the garb of the world and the world is known by the eyes of the lover. What is the song about? Most immediately the song is about erotic love, about the desire between a man and a woman.

Readings that perceive more within the song need not deny this fact in order to do so. In our ascent to higher readings of the song, however, we are also following invitations from the text itself. To those who might argue that the song is about mere sexual relations, part of our response must be that there is no such thing as mere sexual relations.

In treating the subject of Eros in his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis wrote, Of course, neither plays a part in the sense of being a hypocrite, but each plays a part or role in, well, in something which is comparable to a mystery play or ritual at one extreme and to a mask or even a charade at the other. If Lewis is right, sexual relations themselves cannot be mere sexual relations. They always relate us to greater realities.

The literal sense of the Song of Songs as love poetry should be taken with the utmost seriousness and not effaced by any allegorical and other meanings. Any more developed readings must be related to this more immediate and initial one. A second consideration must be the fact that the song is part of the biblical canon.

This fact alone should inform our reading of it, encouraging us to relate it to the other canonical material that surrounds it. This consideration might be strengthened by a third, which is the way that the song is used elsewhere in scripture, most particularly in the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, where Christ is presented as the divine bridegroom, using imagery drawn from the Song of Songs. This is clearly related to the way that marital union functions in both Old and New Testament as a metaphor for the relationship between the Lord and his people.

Throughout the history of the Church, a fourth consideration, Christians have followed John in reading the Song in allegorical ways. Christians have not been alone in this. There is a strong Jewish tradition of reading the Song allegorically too.

Arriving at an allegorical reading of the Song need not involve an extreme and unwarranted leap, as there are convenient stepping stones by which we could reasonably do so. Solomon's role in the Song connects the figure of the lover with the figure of the king, although many commentators dispute the identification of Solomon and the lover. This is not a novel association.

Throughout the books of Samuel, for instance, the king is presented as the lover of the people, and there is important metaphorical traffic between the king's relationship with women and his relationship with the people. In the books of Samuel, kings are romantic figures, whose deeds of daring do are the subject of maiden songs, who are remarkable for their dominant physical appearance or their beauty, and who elicit the profound love of their people. Solomon's relationships with women clearly have political import, as he forms a marriage treaty with Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter, or as the Queen of Sheba comes from afar to witness the wisdom and wealth of Solomon for herself.

The king was also the covenantal son of the Lord, representing the Lord's own relationship with his people. From a reading of the Song that sees, beyond the immediate literal sense of the erotic relationship between a man and a woman, a reference to the king's relationship with his people, it isn't hard to make some further steps. First, to a connection with the figure of the Davidic Messiah, the greater son of David than Solomon, and his relationship with his people.

And second, to a connection with the Lord's relationship with Israel his bride, that second connection being reinforced for Christians by the first. Christians have long read the Song of Songs as a song that is, in its highest referent, about Christ and his church. Different levels of meaning must always be held alongside each other.

The Song of Songs teaches us about human love, but does so in part by helping us to recognise that the love of a man and a woman relates to something greater than it. It also teaches us about Christ's love for his church, but appoints human erotic love as a tutor in that lesson. The Song of Songs is connected with Solomon.

There are various ways to understand this association with Solomon. It might be attributed to Solomon as a work of his own composition, the common traditional understanding. We have poetry from Solomon elsewhere in scripture, in Psalms 72 and 127, and are told that he composed 1005 songs in 1 Kings 4, verse 32.

However, the association with Solomon might also be understood as concerning the fact that it is about Solomon, or alternatively dedicated to him. The Song is predominantly dated to the post-exilic period, centuries after the time of Solomon, principally on account of its vocabulary and grammar, which advocates of this dating maintain, uses words drawn from Greek and Persian. This position, however, is far from universally held.

Some date it from the time of Hezekiah, and many still hold the dominant traditional position of Solomonic authorship. Those arguing for this maintain that several features of the Song best fit the time of the reign of Solomon. References to places in the north and south of Israel make more sense in the time of the undivided kingdom.

The Song has similarities to other ancient Near Eastern literature of that and much earlier periods. The exotic items and the wealth described within the Song fit the period

of Solomon's reign well, not least given what we know of the trade routes at the time, and of later times, when they did not go through the same regions. Those arguing for this position also dispute the etymology of some of the terms that are claimed to be loanwords, and argue that certain others might have entered Hebrew much earlier than assumed.

Much as many Solomonic proverbs were compiled in later periods and added to, there is also the possibility that the Song had a period of oral transmission before it was written down, and that we have a more ancient Song from the time of Solomon, the language of which was changed at points over the centuries prior to its final canonical form, much as many of the older hymns that Christians sing have been modernised in parts over the years. In recent centuries, some commentators have read the Song as describing a love triangle, with the woman being pursued by both Solomon and a shepherd lover, whom she chooses over Solomon in the end. Yet this reading can be strained at many points, and the more traditional understanding of the characters remains the more persuasive.

The chief parties within the Song are the bride, the brigim, or Solomon, and the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem. Commentators differ on how to apportion the material to these various voices. They also differ on the degree to which this should be understood as a dramatic work.

The Song begins with the voice of the woman or the bride. There is presumably a narrative backdrop for her words, but we begin in medias res. She expresses the anticipation of love, in particular a desire for the intimacy of the beloved's kisses.

The intimacy of a kiss is seen in the sharing of breath, in a sort of mutual consumption. Lips are also the means of communication, and a kiss is a communication that is so close that it is mouth to mouth. We need not assume reading this that they have already shared such kisses, or had physical relations of any kind.

That would be to miss the imaginative role played by desire in such statements. The combination of imagery is also important to notice. The love and the kisses are connected with taste, the anointed oils with scent.

The name like oil poured out might be related to the smoothness of touch. Love here addresses all of the senses. While she does not seem to present them here as rivals to her love for Solomon, she expresses the way that the young women more generally delight in him.

He is pleasing and attractive to them. Later she will be joined by a chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem that she will speak with. Presumably we could associate these two groups.

In verse 4 she expresses her desire to be closer to Solomon, that he would bring her

nearer to himself, that she would have closer dealings with him. The final statements of verse 4 could either refer to the woman along with the other virgins, or as Daniel Estes notes, they could be plurals of the woman's own ecstasy, expressing her personal desire to rejoice in Solomon and his love. As she describes herself in verses 5 and 6, she seems to be someone of lower status, sunburnt from having been forced to work in the fields, while higher status women could be recognised by the fact that they did not have to go out in the heat of the sun to work.

Nevertheless, even though she has not been protected from the elements, she knows that she is beautiful, even though she is conscious that others might look down upon her. Some commentators have seen in her being forced to work in the heat of the day, an allegorical representation of the experience of Israel in Egypt. In verse 7 she once again expresses her desire to be nearer to Solomon, but this time to Solomon himself.

A point of contact between them is formed by the fact that they both shepherd flocks. And in Solomon's response in verse 8, he reinforces that point of connection, and also reassures her of her surpassing beauty. More explicit language of comparison comes in verse 9, as Solomon speaks of her as like a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.

As the chariots of Pharaoh will generally be pulled by stallions, perhaps we should see in this image a reference to the confusion into which she throws men on account of her attractiveness. In verse 10 he describes the way that her physical beauty is accentuated by adornment, with the chorus of the women in verse 11 committing themselves to make fitting ornaments for her. Verses 12-14 continue to describe the longing of the two parties for each other, particularly by means of scent.

While the king is eating at his couch, it is as if the evocative and intoxicating scent of the woman is summoning him. Meanwhile for the woman, it is as if Solomon is a scent held intimately close to her, always calling forth anticipation, longing and desire. The following verses and into the next chapter are short exchanges between the couple.

In verse 15 Solomon once again expresses her beauty. Her eyes are like doves, perhaps as messengers of love pass between them. The woman echoes and develops Solomon's words.

He too is beautiful and delightful. Whether or not Solomon takes up the words in verse 17, or their voices join together, perhaps they are expressing the fact that nature itself is the realm of their love. The grass is their couch and the wooded groves the house around them.

A question to consider, how might the book of Song of Songs serve as wisdom literature? Luke chapter 22 verses 1-38 Now the feast of unleavened bread drew near, which is called the Passover, and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was

of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them.

And they were glad and agreed to give him money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd. Then came the day of unleavened bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.

So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it. They said to him, Where will you have us prepare it? He said to them, Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters, and tell the master of the house, The teacher says to you, Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished.

Prepare it there. And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him.

And he said to them, I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to them, saying, This is my body, which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table.

For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed. And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

And he said to them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

For who is the greater, one who reclines at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you as my father assigned to me a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.

But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again,



strengthen your brothers. Peter said to him, Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death. Jesus said, I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day until you deny three times that you know me.

And he said to them, When I sent you out with no money bag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything? They said, Nothing. And he said to them, But now let the one who has a money bag take it, and likewise a knapsack, and let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me.

And he was numbered with the transgressors, for what is written about me has its fulfillment. And they said, Look, Lord, here are two swords. And he said to them, It is enough.

Luke chapter 22 opens by telling us that the Feast of Unleavened Bread is coming. The timing here is important. The Passover was the fourteenth of the month, and followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread.

This recalls the deliverance from Egypt. The Passover lamb, the death of the firstborn, and all these other events that were so important within Israel's history. It's important to consider that this was one of the pilgrim feasts.

In a few days' time, Jerusalem would be packed with pilgrims coming up for it, perhaps even a couple of hundred thousand. All of Israel's attention would be drawn towards Jerusalem for this week. And Jesus' death and resurrection then were occurring at a key time, when the attention of Israel and the gathering of Israel converged upon its capital.

The chief priests and the scribes were seeking to arrest Jesus and kill him. Jesus is clearly by this point a genuine threat to their power and their influence. He has a lot of support in the crowd, and he outwits them at every turn.

They don't want to capture and kill him during the feast, precisely because it would draw so much attention. At this point, Satan enters into Judas. I believe this is the only time we read of Satan himself entering into anyone.

In Acts 5, we're told that Satan has filled Ananias to sin against the Holy Spirit, but Judas seems to give a greater example of satanic possession. Satan's reappearance after a long absence is significant. Luke 4, verse 13 tells us that Satan departed until an opportune time.

And Judas, or Judah, is one of the twelve who sells Jesus into the hands of his enemies. Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob who sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. Also motivated by a desire for money.

The role of money in the transaction between Judas and the high priest should also remind us of all that Jesus has taught about money. The chief priests need to get Jesus

away from the multitude. The multitudes have a kind of herd-like quality.

They act as a unit, and they protect Jesus from assault. If we connect the description of the man with the water pitcher with the previous description of the triumphal entry and the finding of the cult, I think we can see that there is a connection. They are both described in a similar way.

Disciples are sent on a mission, an errand to a particular location. They are told what will befall them, who they will meet, and what the reaction will be. In 1 Samuel chapter 9, two men, Saul and his servant, go looking for donkeys.

They then encounter women, presumably with pitchers, going out to draw water. The women direct them to the site of a meal with the prophet in the high place. When Saul eats with the prophet Samuel in the high place, the kingdom is entrusted into his hands.

Maybe there is something similar taking place here. Indeed, in chapter 10 of 1 Samuel, there are three signs given to Saul. There is a sign where he meets men that tell him that the donkeys have been found.

There is a sign where he meets men with goats, a skin of wine, and bread. And then there is a sign when he meets the prophets, and the spirit comes upon him, and he becomes a new man. Arguably, all three of these signs are found at the end of the book of Luke.

The first one, the finding of the donkeys, is fulfilled in the errand before the triumphal entry. The second one, meeting the men with the goats, the skin of wine, and the bread, is fulfilled in the man bearing the water pitcher. He leads them to the site where they will celebrate the Passover, which will be celebrated with a lamb or a goat, and where Christ gives them bread and wine.

And then finally, they are told to wait in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from on high. That will be the spirit coming upon them so that they become new men, so that like Saul, they will be equipped to rule. Why is it a man carrying a water pitcher? First of all, this would stand out.

It's not typical a man would be carrying a water pitcher. It's interesting that this is not the first occasion in Scripture where there is a sign given involving someone carrying a water pitcher. This is the sign given to the servant of Abraham when he meets Rebekah.

The relationship between the king and his people was often described as a sort of marriage, and perhaps meeting a man with a water pitcher, presumably going out to the well, plays upon these themes. Remember again that the story of Saul in 1 Samuel chapter 9 began with him meeting women bearing water pitchers. However, whereas Saul was like the bridegroom meeting the bride for the first time, the disciples are like the bride meeting the bridegroom.

The man bearing the water pitcher will lead them to the place where they will celebrate the meal with the one who is the true bridegroom of Israel. Perhaps we should think here that Jesus is the new royal husband of Israel, and the Last Supper has subtle wedding feast overtones. There's a rising tension in this chapter.

The feast drew near in verse 1, then came the day in verse 7, and when the hour had come in verse 14. It's a rising tension. And the Passover meal with the disciples is connected with the Exodus.

In chapter 9 verse 31, Jesus had already spoken of his act in Jerusalem as his Exodus. Jesus is about to accomplish an Exodus, and he is about to establish a covenant, as a covenant was established at Sinai. Jesus and his disciples are eating a Passover meal, or at least a Passover associated meal.

It is essential that we notice that Jesus isn't just taking up physical food and drink, just regular bread and wine. He's taking elements that already bear great meaning. The meal is freighted with meaning and symbolism already, and Jesus takes up that pre-existing symbolism and relates it to himself.

In this case, that symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah. It's a broken and distributed and participated body. It's a self-communication in symbol.

It's interesting that the description of the meal here has two shared cups. We see one in verses 17 to 18, and then another in verse 20. There would have been four cups for the Passover meal.

And Jesus expresses an abstinence from eating the Passover and drinking the wine until they are fulfilled. The wine anticipates the kingdom, and maybe he's making some sort of Nazarite vow of abstinence here. The description of the wine as the new covenant in Christ's blood recalls the story of Exodus chapter 24, where the Sinai covenant had its blood of the covenant.

In verse 8 of that chapter, And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. Whereas Moses threw the blood upon the people, Jesus communicates the blood through a different symbol, which is the drinking of wine. He instructs them to do this in remembrance of him, or we could say as his memorial.

The purpose of a memorial like this is not primarily to remind us, but to present to God, to bring to his mind, as it were, the sacrifice of Jesus, to declare his death. And the fact that they are instructed to perform this again and again in the future, in remembrance of Christ, recalls the Passover at the first Exodus. The Passover there was instituted as an ongoing practice for Israel.

So Christ is instituting an ongoing practice here. Just as Old Testament deliverances were

always accompanied with memorials to recall them in feast, in celebration, in signs, or in some other way, so Jesus associates his death with an explanatory symbol, a symbol that continues the meaning and the force of the event as well, so that people can participate in the reality of his sacrifice. The meal is a covenant sealing meal.

It gives a share in the kingdom to those who participate in it. The twelve will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel, in verse 30. This might make us think back to the judgment upon the wicked vinedressers.

They will be replaced by the faithful servants, the twelve apostles. However, one of the people at the table will betray Christ. This looks back to Psalm 41, verse 9. But it's not long before they start talking about which of them will be greatest.

The kingdom that Jesus is giving to his disciples, however, operates quite differently from those of the Gentiles. The disciples still don't get this. There is authority in the church.

The ministers of the church are the ministers of Christ, representing his authority to his body. But that is exercised in the form of service, not for self-aggrandizement. Jesus' reference to being among his disciples as one who serves, as distinct from being one who sits at the table, might imply his washing of their feet in this scene.

Incidentally, Jesus serving his disciples by washing their feet, not explicitly mentioned here, but implied, casts light back upon the washing of his own feet in chapter 7, verse 36 and following. The sinful woman does for Jesus what he will later do for his disciples. Satan will tempt Peter three times to deny Jesus, and Peter will fail three times.

Yet Jesus prays for him, and he will be restored. There is a contrast between Judas and Peter here. Judas utterly apostatizes, but Peter is going to be restored.

Jesus also acts as a mediator here, interceding for Peter, so that Satan will not destroy him. After this point, the nature of their mission will change. They will need a money bag, sack and sword.

They will face a hostile reception. They can no longer rely upon hospitality being extended to them, and they won't have assurance of their safety. This need not be read as a statement that they had to buy actual swords at this point, but having swords would help them to fulfil biblical prophecy, as we see in verse 37.

Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors. A question to consider. What are some of the details of Luke's account of the Last Supper that stand out from the other Gospels?