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Song of Songs: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

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 covenant existence of the people of Israel, Song of Songs has much less obvious a grounding or a setting in Israel's covenant 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 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 hero 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 and 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 place 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 verotic 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, But in the act of love we are not merely ourselves, we are also representatives. It is here no impoverishment but an enrichment to be aware that forces older and less personal than we work through us.

In us all the masculinity and femininity of the world, all that is assailable and responsive, are momentarily focused. The man does play the sky father and the woman the earth mother, he does play form and she matter. But we must give full value to the word play.

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 Medeus' race. 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's so close that it's 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 recognized 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 to 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? 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.

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 recognize 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 recognize 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. They gave a dinner for him there.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. 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 of 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 is 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.

Edmay 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. 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 Keel identifies the lily as a water lily or lotus of the plains, a symbol of regeneration and return to youth. There are clearly sexual allusions 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 veiling, 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. 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 lowness 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. 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 is 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 convey 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. 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, 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.

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. 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 vigor and his great desire to be at her side.

In 2 Samuel 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.

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.

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, 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 love-making, 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. 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? The song of songs plays out through time, and it's interplacated between presence and absence, between experience and longing. In chapter 2, 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 3 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 lore 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. 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 agonizing.

The interplay of presence and absence in time is illustrated, as Sheryl 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 counter-example. 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.

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 discrete hook-ups, 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 hook-up is little more than an advertisement's jingle. As in a musical piece, each note can be transformed or reconstituted by what follows it, 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 recognise 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. 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 labour with you. There she who bore you was in labour.

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 contrasts 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. Throughout the song, love is described in ways that evoke the renewal of youth and a return to childhood.

Peter Lighthouse 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, Lighthouse maintains, would be to miss important themes in the song. He writes, Contact with the bride is like a new birth for the lover, a return to childhood vigour and self-forgetful delight.

It is not a Freudian return to the womb, but it is a return to childlikeness. 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. 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.

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 rotteness 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.

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 labour.

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 collide 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. 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 Sinai, 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 recognize 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. 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, And it is a simple fact, anyone can observe it at a man's bathing place, that nudity emphasizes 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 emphasized. You could almost say they put on nakedness as a ceremonial robe, or as the costume for a charade.

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? Few things are more confusing and amusing to those less familiar with the Song of Songs than the peculiar comparisons that it draws. 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 shore ewes, 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. 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 recognize 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 accede 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 recognize the mysterious ways in which our existence is in profound continuity and unity with that of the rest of the natural order. 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 splendor, 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 recognize 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.

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, 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.

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. 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 pastureland, 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. 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, 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. 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.

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 Myr 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. 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. 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 marvelous 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. 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 center 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. 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? The heart of the great structure of the song of songs is found in chapter 4, verse 16, and chapter 5, verse 1. In chapter 4, verse 16, the bride invites the bridegroom into his garden, and in the very first verse of this chapter, the bridegroom responds to her invitation, entering into the garden of the bride and enjoying its fruits.

As Terrell Exum observes, the bride's short sermons and the bridegroom's short response are bound together by catchwords, which intertwine the two together. This is the knot of love at the center of it all, and the symmetry of invitation and acceptance portrays in miniature the truth that pervades and unites the whole song. The bride had spoken of herself as the bridegroom's garden in verse 16 of chapter 4, and the repetition of my eight times in his response to her answers to her loving surrender to him.

Exum perceptively observes the uncertainty of timing throughout the song, as past, present, and future constantly interpenetrate each other. For this reason, it shouldn't surprise us that commentators differ on whether to understand the coming of the bridegroom as past, present, or future. In love, time itself seems to take on a different character.

Youth is renewed, and memory, longing, expectancy, and enjoyment become entangled. Exum writes, Since in the song the distinction between the anticipation and enjoyment of sexual union is constantly blurred, there is no point in arguing over whether the couple has enjoyed, is enjoying, or will enjoy a sexual banquet. Through both the blurring of temporal distinctions and the indirection of language, sexual union is simultaneously anticipated, deferred, and enjoyed.

The Song of Songs, Richard Davidson argues, has two great paralleled panels nested within chiasmic bookends. In chapter 5 verses 2 to 8, we have a very similar narrative to that of chapter 3 verses 1 to 5. 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 went 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. Seeing the similarities in detail and wider structure that signals such parallels, we should beware of letting our attention slip, perhaps thinking that, since there is a parallel, we have heard all that we need to hear already. In recognizing the existence of parallel panels, our attention should be more keenly focused, picking up on not merely the similarities but also the differences.

Such parallels invite us to juxtapose the two panels, to read them in conversation with each other. The way that the woman is treated by the watchmen stands out here, as does the conversation with the daughters of Jerusalem that follows. However, the most prominent difference is the fact that, although in the first narrative she finds her lover,

on this occasion she is initially unsuccessful.

Exum includes chapter 2, verses 8 to 17 in the parallel, noting the focus on the sound or voice of the bridegroom and his address to his dove. 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.

Davidson's structural ordering has, I believe, the stronger case, but the connections between these two addresses should also be noted. Many commentators read both of the two episodes as descriptions of dreams, or at least this one. The bride is sleeping, but her heart is awake.

Whether or not we believe that the narrations are dreams, we should not miss their dreamlike character and indeed the dreamlike features of the song more generally. At several points in the song, We are in the night time and in bed chambers, the time and the place of dreams. The bride sleeps and is awakened, the strange, florid and surreal imagery, the rapidly shifting scenes, the intoxication of bliss, the distortions and compressions of time, the movements from night to day and then back again, the lowered sense of identity in the face of the strange, the wild flights of imagination, the uncertainty of where reality ends and fantasy begins, the plays of presence and absence, the bridegroom, will of the wisp-like, appears and then vanishes like the wind, all recall nothing so much as an intense sequence of dreams.

In the time of dreaming, our consciousness is transformed from that of our waking states, our minds grasp upon reality's slips, and our internal world assumes foreign and strange aspects as we lose the ability to impose order upon it. The suppressed desires, longings, sorrows, and deeper passions of our flesh often reveal themselves most fully in the nocturnal guise of dreams. The enchanted time between waking and sleeping is, in many respects, the time most fitting for love, as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* well illustrates.

However we answer the question of whether the song is a dream or not, its dreamlike character is clearly eminently suited to its subject matter of erotic love. That we should ask the question, is it just a dream? is likely more the point than is the answer to that question. The woman was first formed out of the side of the man while he was in a deep sleep, and the man's first experience of awakening from such a deep sleep, presumably somewhat dazed and trying to get to grips with reality again, was to see his new bride.

While in chapter 3 the bride woke to find the bridegroom absent and went out to seek him, here in chapter 5 he seeks her, knocking on her door, but she, not wanting to get dressed again or to get her feet dirty, is initially reluctant to let him in. When she does get up to answer, having prepared herself for him with fragrant oils, he is no longer there and she is distraught. Potential erotic overtones and double entendres in this passage are not hard to hear, but the song is characteristically very delicate and indirect in

presenting the sexual interactions between the couple.

Any attempt to tear away the veil of language, to look directly at the act itself, would be an obscene violation, even though that veil reveals even in its act of concealing. Besides, such a tearing away of the veil would not disclose the act itself, as the sexual relation between the couple is inherently poetic and analogical, a play of meanings and reality that cannot be pornographically collapsed into a mere crude physical deed. The absence of the bridegroom is painful to the woman and she rushes outside to try to find him, but is confronted by the watchman who manhandle her and take away her veil.

This episode is a troubling one, which commentators deal with in various ways. Perhaps the watchman think that she, in her state of incomplete dress, is a hollet. Others turn to allegory.

Robert Jensen suggests that we see the rebukes of the prophets to Israel in her failure to respond to the invitations of her lord. Michael Fishbane recalls us to the dreamlike character of the scene. The actions of the watchman are a public shaming of a compromised woman, but in the dreamlike state, their public action evokes her self-judgment at her failure to respond to the bridegroom.

The scene of the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom and the failure of one who should have been ready for him should be familiar to readers of the New Testament. In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the bridegroom who comes and goes in surprising and unpredictable ways, the one for whose advent we must always be prepared and expectant. Matthew 9, verse 15 And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

John the Baptist describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom, who rejoices at the sound of the bridegroom's voice and arrival in John 3, verse 29. In what is perhaps the most important instance of this motif, in Matthew 25, verses 1 to 13, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the sudden arrival of the delayed bridegroom reveals the unpreparedness of the foolish virgins, as they are asleep when his voice is heard. As one final example of the use of this motif in the New Testament, in Revelation chapter 3, verse 20, Christ the bridegroom declares in his letter to the Laodiceans, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me. In such passages we see some of the important ways in which the motifs of the song were later used to speak of the longing, expectancy, and readiness that should be characteristic of our relationship with our heavenly bridegroom. Having failed to find her lover and been mistreated by the watchman, the bride turns to address the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem, asking them to tell her bridegroom, if they find him, that she is lovesick.

In the daughters of Jerusalem's response, they ask her to express the supposedly surpassing character of her beloved. What sets him apart from other delightful young men? The bride's response to the daughters of Jerusalem takes the form of another wasif or blazon. Davidson suggests that we parallel this with the description of Solomon's palanquin in chapter 3, verses 6 to 11, although this is one of the places where his proposed structure might appear somewhat weaker.

However, there are some important shared details to note, such as the comparison of Solomon's countenance to cedars of Lebanon, as his carriage is also formed of such cedars. Solomon's legs are set on bases of gold, much as the bottom of his palanquin. These two passages are the only two in the book with references to pillars.

Here the wasif or blazon moves down the body of the bridegroom, from his head to his feet. The bridegroom has a radiant complexion and is ruddy like his father David. We should here observe that the word for my beloved, Dodi, used throughout the song, is closely related to the word David, as if every time that the woman spoke of her man in this way, she was saying, my David.

The messianic significance of this should not be missed. This is the greater David that is being awaited. While the woman is chiefly described with garden and natural imagery, here the man is chiefly described using architectural imagery.

The temple, of course, was a garden structure, a marriage of architecture and horticulture, anticipating the garden city of the New Jerusalem. This is fitting for the nuptial house of the Lord and his bride, the people. As Peter Lighthouse notes, much of the imagery used for the man here should recall the temple.

He writes, More the sequence of the description is not only head to foot, but also roughly follows the pattern of the temple. 1. Head of gold, pure gold, holy of holies, especially the Ark. 2. Eyes like doves, keeping in mind the linkage of doves and flame, and eyes with lamps.

3. Cheeks with herbs and spices, incense and incense altar. 4. Lips like lilies, the lily shape of the capitals on the two pillars, and the lily design of sea and water basins. 5. Legs like pillars of alabaster, the structural supports of the temple.

6. Form like lebanon, like cedars, cedar wood interior of the temple. 7. Mouth full of sweetness, this could be the opening of the temple, or possibly the altar, where Yahweh's bread is kept. This seems right to me, although it seems more likely that the mouth has reference to the holy of holies from which the voice of the Lord comes.

The temple, besides being a microcosm of the world, is also a macrocosm of the human body. For this reason, it should not be at all surprising to see the way that the New Testament speaks of bodies, whether Christ's personal body, the body of his church, or

the body of the individual believer, as temples. Once again, the imagery here addresses many different senses, scent, sight, taste and touch.

In describing his eyes as doves, she recalls his description of her eyes using similar imagery. The lover's beautiful and mysterious eyes exchange messages of endearment with each other. His lips drip myrrh, providing pleasure to her with his kisses, and perhaps also with his delightful words.

In the comparison of his lips with lilies, she applies imagery typically applied to her, to him. Exum writes, The man grazes among, or on the lilies, feasting on the pleasures the woman's body offers. Here, in a striking transposition of images, the lips with which he grazes on the lilies are compared to lilies, on which, when she kisses him, she will be grazing.

The question of the daughters of Jerusalem to the woman calls forth from her a loving portrayal of the man in whom is her heart's delight. Indeed, when the daughters of Jerusalem offer the bride their aid in seeking the bridegroom in chapter 6, verse 1, we discover that she has already found him. The very act of extolling the bridegroom leads to her rediscovery of him.

A question to consider, where might we find parallels to the bride's wasif of the bridegroom here, concerning Christ? 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 recognize 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 honor, 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 and 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. 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 Gospel of John, where Mary Magdalene seeks desperately for the man that she loves, an 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 richest 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. 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 bale. 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 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. Now the bridegroom is also surrounded by sixty queens, eighty concubines, and all the maidens of the royal court.

Yet, even in such a regal, glorious, and 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.

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 splendor 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

Edmaide Kingsmill are among those who argue that it is most likely the woman, while Michael Fishbane and Arthmar Kiel understand it to be the speech of the man. Dwayne 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 Kiel 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, Kiel 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.

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 recognised was part of a strategic play for the kingdom. Kiel notes the possibility of an allusion, 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? In chapter 6 verses 4-10, the bridegroom described the bride's beauty. Now after a brief interlude, he resumes his theme with a further wasif or blazon, describing her features from her feet to her head.

Some commentators imagine this passage is the description of the woman while she is dancing. We should note the reversal of the order of the wasif from those of chapter 4 verses 1-5 and 6 verses 4-10, perhaps in keeping with the progressive elevation of the

figure of the bride over the course of the song. She is now presented as if a great palm tree, at whose base the man stands in awe, looking up to its glorious fruit far above him.

The image here seems to be a more intimate one, as she is no longer veiled, and the movement up the entirety of her body, and the description of parts of her body that might not otherwise be seen, such as the navel, and perhaps this term is intended as a euphemism, and belly, perhaps suggest that she is naked before him. As Cheryl Exum observes, the man is also now no longer merely a marvelling observer in the wasif, he is a participant, preparing to climb the palm tree that he describes. Richard Davidson suggests that we read chapter 6 verses 13-7 verse 9 as the parallel to chapter 4 verses 8-15.

In these two passages, both of which praise the bride, he argues that there is a special attention given to place names. In both of them the man speaks of being captivated by her, and in both places the man describes her in terms of metaphors drawn from a garden and its trees and their fruits. The flowing of the water in the woman's garden in the first passage parallels with the flowing of the wine in her mouth.

Perhaps the eight different spices in chapter 4 can be related to the eight different body parts mentioned here. These two passages represent the end of their two respective panels within the larger structure. In keeping with the ways in which her metaphorical stature is presented as having grown, the woman is here spoken of as a noble daughter, a daughter of a prince.

In the preceding chapter she was depicted as the Shulamite, a woman whose name implies her to be a fitting counterpart for Solomon. Throughout the song we have references to grapes, vineyards, vines and wine. Such imagery is well suited to describing the rest, delight, relaxation and even intoxication that the lovers find in each other.

In this passage her navel and mouth offer fine wine and her breasts are likened to clusters of the vine. Many commentators, reasonably doubting whether the navel is to be likened to a bowl with mixed wine, suspect that this is a euphemism. Imagery is often attracted to one sex over the other, and the likening of the belly to a heap of wheat contrasts with the hardness of the body of the man as it is described in the wasif given by the woman.

Once again, a heap of wheat is imagery drawn from the land, from agriculture and horticulture, perhaps also connoting fertility. The description of her breasts as thorns is the same as the image used by the bridegroom in chapter 4 verse 5, likely an image resulting in part from her previous comparison of him to a gazelle grazing among the lilies on the Cleft Mountains. Her neck, previously compared to the Tower of David, is here likened to an ivory tower.

The ivory likely connotes great value, grace and also fairness. The word for eyes is the same as that for springs, and the latter provide very natural and apt images with which to depict the former. Springs and pools can be mysterious, reflective and calming, captivating the viewer who seeks to look into their hidden depths.

Notably, the woman's eyes aren't merely likened to pools, but to very specific pools in Hechbon. In this and in the following verse, there are several geographic references to Hechbon, Lebanon, Damascus and Carmel, romantic or exotic places in or near the land. Such geographic allusion might seem distracting from and extraneous to the point of the comparison, yet this would be to misunderstand the point.

Reading such comparisons, we can easily fall into the error of believing that their sole purpose is that of describing a physical feature in a pleasant and poetic manner. In fact, both sides of the metaphor are the point. The metaphor creates a bond between two realities that might otherwise seem unrelated.

In these geographically freighted metaphors, the hearer should hear not only the woman being likened to the land, but the land being likened to a woman. The Lord delights in the land and in Zion like a lover delighting in the body of his beloved. The nose like a tower of Lebanon, looking toward Damascus, suggests a military confidence and power directed out towards potential threats, something perhaps comparable to an elegant nose by which the countenance of the woman confidently faces others.

Damascus was under Israelite control during the reigns of David and Solomon, something that might help us better to understand the reference at this point. Her head is compared to Carmel, which as Ed May Kingsmill observes, puns upon a word for scarlet. The presence of both purple and scarlet in association with her head might also connote not only royal but also temple themes, as purple and scarlet veiled the head of the temple in the Holy of Holies.

Her raven black hair, in which all these other colours can be seen, holds a king captive within it, her royal lover being an admirer fitting for her surpassing and regal beauty. At this point the lover speaks of the cumulative effect of all her features upon him, and his commitment to ascend her as a palm tree, laying hold of the clusters of the vine, and enjoying the intoxicating kisses of her mouth. Early in the song we are told of a love that is better than wine, and in chapter 2 verse 4 the bridegroom had brought the bride into his house of wine.

Here the bride herself is described as if she were her lover's true source of wine. In Genesis chapter 3 verse 16, as the Lord judged the woman for the sin of taking the forbidden fruit, she was told that her desire would be for her husband, but that he would rule over her. Similar language was used when the Lord told Cain that he needed to rule over sin, whose desire was for him, in chapter 4 verse 7. In Genesis the woman was judged with none reciprocation of her desire.

She would want her man for herself, desiring his heart and his strength, but she would be frustrated. Adam's sin had occurred in no small measure because he heeded the voice of his wife, and followed her rather than the voice of the Lord. In frustrating the desire of the woman with none reciprocation, the Lord curbed sin, preventing the man from just meekly following after his wife into iniquity.

However, much as the man would experience pain in the way that the earth frustrated his labours, so the woman would suffer as a result of her man's resistance to her. The Song of Songs is a book full of garden imagery, of the encounter of the woman and the man in the beautiful innocence of the walled vineyard. The woman, in the statement, I am my beloved's and his desire is for me, describes a restored reciprocation of love and desire, that marks something of a return to Eden. The woman gives herself to her man, and the man gives himself to his woman.

In chapter 2 verses 10 to 14, the man had called to the woman to come out and enjoy their love in the springtime. 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. 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. Now, in a passage chiasmatically paralleled with that one, the woman calls to the man, with a similar invitation. We might also note similarities between these verses and chapter 6 verse 11.

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. Her invitation to the man is to share in the manifold fruits of love, grapes, pomegranates and mandrakes, connoting the sensual pleasures of love, to be enjoyed in the walled garden. As Exum observes, mandrakes might pun upon the word for caresses, and also upon my beloved.

In the original garden, humanity was plunged into sin, as the woman offered the man the fruit that was forbidden. Now in a new garden, another woman is offering a new Adam her many fruits, and something of our now fallen world is being restored and reborn in their love. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we have recollections of the woman giving the fruit to the man in the garden? From the end of chapter 7 until the end of the book, here in Song of Songs chapter 8, it mirrors the first couple of chapters in chiasmatic structure, bookending all of the material between.

The woman's invitation to the man in chapter 7 verses 12 to 14 mirrored the invitation that he gave to her in chapter 2 verses 10 to 14. Chapter 2 ended with the refrain, My beloved is mine, and I am his, and the concluding passages of the book open with the same refrain. In chapter 8 we return to elements of chapter 1 verse 1 to 2 verse 7, albeit

in mirrored order.

Verses 3 to 4 here repeat the refrains of chapter 2 verses 6 to 7. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. As Richard Davidson observes, there are several key terms and elements from chapter 1 and the beginning of the book here, which recur in chapter 8 in largely reverse order.

An apple tree, the terms love and house, a structure that's built with cedar, my breasts, silver, make haste, companions, keeper or keep, my own vineyard, and finally and fittingly, Solomon. Collectively, these connecting threads tightly bind the opening of the book with its closing and make a strong case for the unity of the text. The speeches of this section, like those of the beginning of the book, are generally shorter.

It is also here that some of the greatest themes of the song emerge into clearest view. The chapter opens with a surprising wish, the woman expressing her desire that the man was like her brother from earliest infancy, the two of them bound together by the nursing body of her mother. If he were such a brother, she could express the childlike affection of a sister to him in public with kisses, without attracting public disapproval.

Much as we see in the man's expression, my sister, my bride, the wish of the woman here exhibits a desire to express her love for him in an even more public form, without social censure. While many take this as evidence that their love is a secret, forbidden love, Daniel Estes differs. Rather, he argues, the issue was that public displays of intimacy between a husband and a wife were not socially approved, whereas male and female relatives could enjoy non-erotic expressions of familial affection, as we see when Jacob kisses Rachel upon first meeting her in Genesis 29, verse 11.

While adopting a similar reading to Estes in this respect, Tremper Longman also sees evidence here that their love is still secret, rather than that of a married couple. The woman might want the secure union and kinship characteristic of siblings, in a more formal and public bond between the two. While I have spoken of the bride and the bridegroom at many points, the exact character of the relationship between the couple is never entirely clear, even if we might feel that the weight of the evidence pushes in a particular direction.

We might here reflect upon the similarities between the relationship between the lovers in the song in this respect, and the relationship between Christ and his church. Throughout the song, the bride's beloved is coming near to her and then slipping out of her grasp or vanishing. Full consummation of their union seems to be deferred in various ways.

While they have moments of profoundest intimacy, we still seem to fall short of a completely consummated and realised relationship, and the song ends on a note of

desire and expectancy that awaits but does not yet receive fulfilment. In our desire to know where the couple stand relative to each other, we are also hampered by the dreamlike character of much of the song, and the ways in which past, present and future, imagination and reality, desire and its realisation are routinely tangled together and easily confused. Perhaps we should imagine a cultural situation akin to that in the ill-fated relationship between Samson and his wife, where they were married but not yet cohabiting, the appearing and vanishing of the lover resulting from this.

However we understand the situation between the couple, considering the ways that the song routinely celebrates the chastity of the bride and the fidelity of the bridegroom, its pervasive ethos is clearly one deeply congruent with the underlying values of marriage. In speaking of her desire that he was like a brother to her, the bride imagines a situation where they had shared her mother's breasts as infants. In chapter 3 verse 4, the woman had declared, 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. The prominence and the place enjoyed by the figures of the mothers of the lovers in the song is strange to many hearers, and certainly invites closer attention. Throughout the song to this point, breasts have been associated with erotic pleasures, yet now we see them connected with the nursing of infants.

In the comparison of the bond between lovers, as the man grazes among the lilies of the cleft mountains of the woman, and the bond between siblings who feed at their mother's breasts, a number of things might come into view. The woman's breasts are in both cases a site and source of union, as is her body more generally. The erotic and unitive meaning of the body is connected with the procreative meaning of the body.

The infant child enjoys a flesh union with his mother, initially in the womb, but later experienced at the breast, a one flesh union that provides the natural basis for other familial bonds. The lovers also know a one flesh union with each other, as the bride opens her walled garden to the bridegroom, and he delights in its fruits. In the desire to share the mother, and to bring him to the house of her mother, there is some sort of wish to bring things full circle, not in a reversion to a past childhood, but in the recognition of a rebirth.

In love there is a reopening to the world in the play of a new childhood. A man leaves his father and his mother, and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh. This break is also a sort of return to the body of the woman, so that a new one flesh bond could be formed in the place of the old one.

Her lover might not have shared with her at her mother's breasts, but he returns with her to her mother's house, where he can drink the spiced wine and the juice of her pomegranate that she offers. The promise of a return to the innocence and play of

childhood is one that can require a corresponding death in the loving surrender or gift of oneself. There is no place for the emotional and other prophylactics that people employ to frustrate the inherent reality of sexual union here.

In chapter 3 verse 6 we read, 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? After the repeated refrains of verses 3 and 4, a similar question is asked in verse 5. Here we see that the ones coming up from the wilderness are the couple together. We should probably imagine the scene of Solomon's palanquin again, but with the bride leaning upon her bridegroom within it, the people of the city gathering to see the approaching royal spectacle. Just as the bride returned to her mother, there is a return to the mother of the bridegroom and to earlier infancy here, under the apple tree.

Once again, there is a sort of rebirth. In the same place where he first came into the world, the love that promises his rebirth was awakened. Perhaps the awakening under the apple tree resolves the theme of the repeated refrain that makes its final appearance in the preceding verse of not stirring or awakening love until it pleases.

Now the bride is fully ready, the sleeping bridegroom can finally be awoken and their union can be fully realised. Peter Lighthouse suggests a connection with Adam's deep sleep during the time of Eve's building here. Having connected love to birth and rebirth, verses 6 and 7, the only really directly didactic verses of the song, speak of love's connection with death, emphasising a lesson that must be drawn from the song as a whole.

The bride calls for the bridegroom to place her like a seal or mark of ownership and identity upon his heart and arm. With such a seal on his heart, his heart would be utterly committed to her and could not betray that commitment without betraying itself. As she was placed like a seal on his arm, his strength would thereafter have to be exercised for her.

As a great power, love is compared to, contrasted with and opposed to that of death. Throughout the song, the lovers have been awakened by and called back by the love of each other. Love has brought them a sort of rebirth.

As a power and force, love is the match of death. It is enduring and unyielding. It is fierce in its intensity, its strength being compared to the very flame of the Lord.

Jealousy is an integral part of true love. A jealous love is, in the words of the hymn, a love that will not let me go. Such a love cannot be overcome.

Even the great forces of chaos arrayed against it, the mighty waters of the abyssal deep could not drown it. Love cannot be bought. No price can be put upon it.

At this point, the song is making claims about reality itself, claims about reality that are

witnessed to in the vows of lovers. In such vows, they promise always to love each other, never to let each other go, never to permit anything to come in the way of their love. In this, we hear a yearning for something transcendent, something that ultimately finds its grounds in God himself.

Once again, the love of the lovers in the song constantly gestures towards something greater, ultimately the love of the Lord for his people, a love that reached down to the very pit of Sheol and brought his people back up. The concluding verses of this chapter and of the song more generally can be confusing. Many commentators imagine that the brothers of the bride are speaking at this point.

While they were mentioned back in chapter one, they've had no speaking role, so it seems strange for them to enter the conversation at this point. Perhaps the voice here is that of the daughters of Jerusalem, preparing a young sister in the years before she is of marriageable age. Many have thought that the little sister is the bride herself.

Exum helpfully recognises that there seem to be parallels between verses 8-10 and verses 11-12. In both cases, there are two stories that seem to be irrelevant, concerning the little sister and concerning Solomon's vineyard. In both cases, there's a contrast being set up.

Verses 8 and 9 seem to speak of both the ornamentation and the defence of the little sister. The little sister has to be prepared to attract good suitors and repel bad ones. The image of a wall with ornamented battlements and a gloriously cedar-panelled door is fitting in the context.

Once again picking up a military imagery that has been applied to the bride, she likens herself to a mighty wall, with her breasts like great towers. Yet continuing the imagery of the glorious fortified city, she has surrendered and opened up to the bridegroom. She has found peace in his eyes.

Verses 11 and 12 are also difficult to understand. Again, it's unclear who is the speaker here. Back in chapter 1 verse 6, the woman said of herself, My mother's sons were angry with me.

They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept. There, and other points in the song, the vineyard seems to represent the woman herself. Our interpretation of these verses will depend in part upon whether we think that the lover of the song is Solomon himself, or whether, for instance, the lover occasionally masquerades as Solomon, and that here a contrast with Solomon is being drawn.

Many have connected the thousand here with Solomon's 300 wives and 700 concubines. The point being that Solomon is welcome to his thousand women because the speaker has or is the one vineyard that really matters. No amount of gold could buy that.

Following this interpretation, Robert Jensen writes, If we read the poem theologically, then it is the Lord who scorns Solomon as the lover does in the overt poem, and then Solomon is demoted from glory. Solomon becomes in the allegory a mere harem-keeping lord of this world, fit to be rebuked by the one faithful lord. Perhaps indeed Solomon is allegorically the lord of this world.

And two Israels appear, Israel as harem for the powers and principalities of this world, and Israel indissolubly and uniquely united to the one lord. Lighthouse raises another possibility, writing, If the temple is the vineyard, though, then the contrast is between the singular house belonging to Jerusalem, or to Yahweh, and the thousand vineyards that Solomon supports for the benefit of his thousand wives. We might also see a contrast here between different forms of owning.

Solomon has immense wealth and possessions, yet he cannot control them himself. He has to let out his vineyard to keepers. However, the vineyard of the woman is truly her own, and her own to give to another person who can enjoy it fully for himself.

Such a possession is one that even the greatest king cannot aspire beyond. In verse 13, the bridegroom addresses the bride, wanting to hear her voice, with other friends who are eagerly listening for her. Her response in verse 14, the last verse of the book, is very similar to chapter 2 verse 17, Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.

In the book's end, there is still some sense of absence, an open-endedness to desire. As Exum observes, the book opens in medias res, and it concludes without closure. At the end, love is still longing for completion.

There is also some sort of ambivalence to this verse, both a calling back and a sending away. The church has long recognized in this an analogy to its relationship to Christ. We know, according to the teaching of John's gospel, that it is good that Christ went away, and yet we long for his return.

Themes from the book of Song of Songs pervade the book of Revelation. The book begins with a vision of the glorious heavenly bridegroom, and from that we move to the end, where there is the revelation of the glorious bride, a wedding feast, and the consummation of all. And yet at the end of the book of Revelation, there is also a similar note of expectation.

With the promises of the rich fruits of the garden city in the background, the fruits of the bride of the church, the book and the Bible as a whole ends with this note of longing. He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming soon. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus. Is the book of Song of Songs about Christ and the church, or is it about human sexual love? Yes, both of these things. We might also add that it is about politics,

the relationship between the king and the people, and other issues besides those.

In Ephesians chapter 5 verses 31 and 32, the apostle Paul wrote, Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. From the very beginning, marriage always gestured towards something beyond it, towards some transcendent truth that we see in Christ and his relationship with his people.

The Song of Songs introduces us to a way of seeing the world, a way of seeing the relationship between man and wife that points towards something transcendent, without ever ceasing to be itself. In books such as the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, the promise of this vision is taken up and made more explicit. The church, as it has seen its bridegroom Christ within this text of Song of Songs, has not been seeing a mirage.

Christ is really here. But the promise of the book goes beyond that. The promise of the book is as we learn to see the world more generally in this way, we will be able to see glimpses of Christ and the church in our own relationships too.

A question to consider, where else in cosmic power?