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December 28th: Song of Songs 5 & Luke 23:1-25

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The Bridegroom's unanswered knock at the door. Jesus before Pilate and Herod.

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Transcript

Song of Songs, Chapter 5 I came to my garden, my sister, my bride. I gathered my myrrh with my spice. I ate my honeycomb with my honey.

I drank my wine with my milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love. I slept, but my heart was awake.

A sound, my beloved is knocking. Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one. For my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.

I had put off my garment. How could I put it on? I had bathed my feet. How could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me.

I rose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh on the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke.

I sought him, but found him not. I called him, but he gave no answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city.

They beat me. They bruised me. They took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls.

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love. 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? My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold.

His locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs.

His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires.

His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.

This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. 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 Cheryl Exum observes, the bride's short summons and the bridegroom's short response are bound together by catchwords which intertwine the two together.

This is the knot of love at the centre 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, The Song of Songs, Richard Davidson argues, has two great paralleled panels, nested within in chiasmic bookends. In chapter 5 verses 2-8 we have a very similar narrative to that of chapter 3 verses 1-5. 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 signal 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 8-17 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 bedchambers, 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 as 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 three the bride woke to find the bridegroom absent and went out to seek him, here in chapter five 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-judgement 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 chapter 3 verse 29.

In what is perhaps the most important instance of this motif, in Matthew chapter 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 blaison. 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 blaison 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 holy, 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 wassif of the bridegroom here concerning Christ? Luke chapter 23 verses 1 to 25.

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king. And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so.

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no guilt in this man. But they

were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place. When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt, and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people, and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us.

Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him. But they all cried out together, Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas, a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder.

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, Crucify, crucify him. A third time he said to them, Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death.

I will therefore punish and release him. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will. Luke 23 begins with the assembly of the elders after their hearing, delivering Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. They accuse Jesus of forbidding paying tribute to Caesar, and of calling himself the Christ, or a king.

Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him. The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim seen from a Gentile perspective. Perhaps we should understand Pilate's question to Jesus as one that has a sarcastic tone.

You are the king of the Jews? And Jesus' response to the question is also an edgy one. You are saying it. One could imagine such an answer antagonising Pilate.

But Pilate seems to know what is going on, and he openly declares that he finds no guilt in Jesus. But the leaders of the people are even more insistent in response. They claim that he stirs up the people throughout the land, which is ironic because that's exactly what they have been doing.

When Pilate discovers that Jesus is a Galilean, he sends him to Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time. This isn't because Pilate is suggesting that Jesus isn't in his jurisdiction. Rather, he sends him to Herod because Herod, governing in Galilee, might have more insight into the Galilean aspect of the case.

He would also relieve Pilate of some of the pressure and responsibility of judgement in the matter. It is quite clear to Pilate that there is more to the situation than the leaders of the people are saying, so he's probably very glad to relieve himself of some of the responsibility of the judgement. Herod, for his part, was very eager to meet Jesus.

He had been speculating who Jesus was back in chapter 9, verse 7-9. Now Herod the Tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things? And he sought to see him.

Herod questions Jesus at great length, but Jesus gives Herod no reply, as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. However, the chief priests and the scribes are all the time loudly accusing him throughout the hearing. Herod and his men end up mocking Jesus, the impression being given that they were influenced by the religious leaders.

Jesus is dressed in a gorgeous or shining robe, maybe an ironic parody of the Transfiguration or some other sort of kingly enthronement. Herod is caught up in the spirit of the mob, he ridicules Jesus with his own soldiers. And Luke makes a passing statement here that Herod and Pilate became friends that day, whereas formerly they had been at odds with each other.

The rulers of this earth are united by their opposition to the Lord's Christ, as the apostles declare in their prayer in Acts chapter 4, verses 26-28. The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

There is something further going on here, I think, about human psychology that is important, something explored in great detail in the work of René Girard. Scapegoating unites people by a common enemy, and as a result can relieve or dissolve old

antagonisms. Christ forms not just the unity of his people, but a sort of shadowy satanic unity in opposition to him.

All the kings of the earth are gathered together, with the rulers, against Christ. That's what gives them their new unity. When Jesus is sent back to him, Pilate gathers the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and declares that neither he nor Herod found anything deserving of death in Jesus.

He expresses his intention merely to punish, and then to release Jesus. But the priests, the rulers and the people all cry out to do away with Jesus, and to release Barabbas to them. Throughout the trial it is clear that the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews are the instigators and the drivers of everything.

They are the ones that are pushing things ahead, the ones that take the great responsibility for what has happened. Were it not for them, Jesus would not have been crucified. However, they successfully get the crowd on their side, and end up cowering Pilate into submission.

The reference to Barabbas seems to assume what is mentioned in the other Gospels about the custom of Pilate at the time of the feast, and Pilate is clearly rolling the dice here. He sees that he has an angry crowd, and the Jewish leaders against him, and doesn't want unrest. Barabbas serves as a foil for Jesus, he's a murderous insurrectionist, yet they prefer him over Jesus.

And this is revealing, because if they truly cared about the sedition that they claimed to be delivering Jesus to Pilate for, Barabbas is precisely the sort of person they wouldn't want to go free. And so in choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true Messiah and Prince of Peace. This choice in embryo was the larger choice that Israel made, a choice that ultimately led to its destruction in AD 70.

Pilate tries again to calm them down, and to release Jesus, but now they insist that he be crucified, and he tries a third and last time, stating that he found nothing in him deserving of death. But the crowd gets even more vehement. The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the descriptions that we find elsewhere used of demon possessed persons.

They're in a sort of demonic frenzy at this point. And the driving force within much of the narrative is the power and the violence of the mob, and the leaders who whip them up. Nothing proves capable of withstanding this power.

Even Pilate, who desires to release Jesus, is unable to resist it, and ultimately surrenders to it, and is absorbed into it. The mob will not be pacified without a victim, and Pilate is prepared to use someone such as Barabbas as a conveniently guilty scapegoat, upon which the fury of the crowd could be expended. But for the crowd, only Jesus would do.

More than any other writer, René Girard has explored the dynamics whereby a victim can act as a sort of lightning rod for the violence of society. The energy of the mob is like a social avalanche. It catches people up into it, and it crushes all that would stand in its way.

And those who are caught up in it are in the grip of a greater power. They are unaware of what they're truly doing. The behaviour of the crowd in the period of the betrayals, the trials, and the crucifixion of Christ is akin to that of a possessed person.

The many individuals within the crowd fuse into a sort of single entity and actor, driven by a violent frenzy that none within it could truly withstand or understand. That sort of social contagion is an intoxicating and a powerful force. It gives a sense of unity, purpose, and an intoxicating sense of morality.

And all ends up bowing before its impulses. Principles of justice are abandoned. They fall by the wayside.

The governor entirely capitulates. He tries to reason and then to bargain with the mob, but he completely fails. And the result is that Jesus is put to death with the full sanction of Rome, but a sanction that has been wrested from Pilate on account of his fear of the crowd.

Pilate ends up underwriting mob justice, instigated by the religious leaders, who are envious of Jesus. It might be worth contrasting the unity of the mob with the unity of the church. The unity of the church is of a completely different spirit, literally, to the unity of the mob.

And the unity of the mob is characterised by violence, but the unity of the spirit is characterised by a witness to peace. A question to consider. What are some of the roles played by the crowd in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts?