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December 30th: Song of Songs 7 & Luke 23:50–24:12

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The Bride likened to a palm tree. The empty tomb.

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Transcript

Song of Songs, Chapter 7 How beautiful are your feet and sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies.

Your two breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Beth Rabim.

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like caramel, and your flowing locks are like purple. A king is held captive in the tresses.

How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.

It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved's,

and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages.

Let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

In chapter 6 verses 4 to 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 as 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 to 5 and 6 verses 4 to 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 Sheryl 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 to 7 verse 9 as the parallel to chapter 4 verses 8 to 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 fawns 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 labors 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 and orchard. 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. My beloved speaks and says to me arise my love my beautiful one and come away for behold 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 oh 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 chiastically paralleled with that one the woman calls to the man with a similar invitation. We might also note similarities between these verses in 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.

Luke chapter 23 verse 50 to chapter 24 verse 12. Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council a good and righteous man who had not consented to their decision and action and he was looking for the kingdom of God.

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of preparation and the Sabbath was beginning.

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week at early dawn they went to the tomb taking the spices they had prepared and they found a stone rolled away from the tomb but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this behold two men stood by them in dazzling apparel and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

And they remembered his words and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.

But Peter rose and ran to the tomb. Stooping and looking in he saw the linen cloths by themselves and he went home marvelling at what had happened. At the end of Luke chapter 23 we are introduced to Joseph of Arimathea.

He's a character we've never heard of before but he's a member of the council which is surprising considering the part that the council had just played in the condemnation of Jesus to his death. However Joseph had not consented to the council's decision. He is described as a good and righteous man who was looking for the kingdom of God.

This might recall the characterisation of figures such as Simeon at the beginning of the book of Luke. In chapter 2 verse 25, Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Joseph requests the body of Jesus which he takes down and wraps in linen garments and lays in the tomb.

We might perhaps think about the clothes of the high priest on the day of atonement where he wears linen garments for the ritual. But we might also think about the very beginning of the gospel where Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. There we also had a Joseph and a Mary.

The death and resurrection of Christ is a new birth event. There the sign given to the shepherds was that they would see the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes laying in a manger. Now the sign given to new shepherds will be seeing the linen garments laid to one side and the body removed.

There is also another fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 53 here. More specifically verse 9. He makes his grave with a rich man at his death. Jesus is buried in a way that shows honour to his body, not in a common criminal's grave.

It's cut into the rock like stones taken from a quarry. Maybe we should think of Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1. Jesus is the great stone that will become the chief cornerstone of the new temple, quarried from the rock as it were. The women were present at the cross.

They're present to see the burial, they know where the body has been placed, and they're present on the morning of resurrection. They are in many ways the heart of the faithful community at this point. While we can often focus upon the male disciples as the appointed leaders and guardians of the people of Christ, Luke gives a lot of attention to the women in the narrative, most notably Elizabeth and Mary, but even beyond that we can see the characters of the women coming to the foreground in the Gospel of Luke to a greater degree than in some of the other Gospels.

Luke will often have male-female pairings, such as Simeon and Anna in the temple. So it seems that Luke wants us to pay attention to the women as examples of faith, and perhaps one of the ways that we can learn from them is that even when faith seems to fail, there can remain the commitment of love, and that is the thing that really ties them to Christ at this point more than anything else. The resting of the women on the Sabbath parallels Jesus resting in the tomb on the Sabbath, while the start of the new chapter introduces the first day of a new creation.

Perhaps we might see the women's bringing spices and oils to the tomb and encountering angels as something of a parallel to Zachariah's performing of the rite of incense in the temple and encountering an angel at the beginning of the Gospel. The stone is rolled away, and Jesus' body is nowhere to be found. Two angels appear.

Why do you seek the living among the dead? The angels remind the women that Jesus had told them that he would rise way back in Galilee in Luke 9, verses 21-22, and he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. For the disciples, the period after the resurrection is going to be, in large measure, one of remembering what Jesus had taught them earlier, but which they had failed to grasp. It's like the end of a detective novel, where the mystery has been solved and suddenly the reader looks back and all of the clues fall into place, and they realise that it had to be this way, that the truth was there all the way along, and they just hadn't had the eyes to see it.

Had it occurred just by itself, the empty tomb would just have been a weird and random event. The resurrection is not a random miracle. The resurrection makes sense when it's read against the background of the Old Testament prophecies, when it's read against the background of Jesus' earlier statements.

It's that background that gives the resurrection its meaning. Yet the women arrive on the site of a mystery, an empty tomb and a rolled away stone, and then the two men appear and give them clues to start to figure it out. When this is seen against the backdrop of Jesus' ministry and his foretelling of it, it will start to make sense.

And importantly, understanding arises from memory. The women return to tell the eleven what has occurred. They have faith, but the men do not believe them, thinking that they are giving an unreliable account.

The names of the women are given to us at this point, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and there are other women with them. They are paralleled with the eleven apostles, it would seem that Peter was among them at this point, and the rest who were with them. The names of the women matter, not least because their personal eyewitness would support Luke's narrative.

For many years after these events, after the time of the writing of the gospel as well, people who read it could go and find people who are mentioned within it, who bore witness to specific events recorded within it. This would be of course nowhere more important than in reference to the resurrection accounts. Peter alone seems to take the message of the women with more seriousness, and he goes to the tomb and stoops and looks inside.

The linen cloths are lying by themselves. Perhaps this is like the high priest on the day of atonement. Jesus is leaving the linen garments behind and is clothed with the glorious garments of the resurrection.

A question to consider, what further connections can we see between the nativity and childhood accounts in the gospel of Luke and the accounts of the death and resurrection

of Christ?