

# OpenTheo

## December 26th: Song of Songs 3 & Luke 22:39-53

December 25, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

Solomon's palanquin coming from the wilderness. Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share)).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

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

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

Have you seen him whom my soul loves? Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? Behold, it is the litter of Solomon. Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by

night. King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon.

He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple. Its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

The Song of Songs plays out through time, and its interplays 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 law generally focuses upon perennial principles.

In the wisdom literature we see the development of things over time, from their first incipients to their full harvest. 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 paralleled 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, missed 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. 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 vigor 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 is more that Isaac died with his mother and received 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, an 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 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 laver. The tabernacle was surrounded by the twelve tribes in military array, and Solomon's couch likewise, presumably with twelve groups of five men. Frankincense and myrrh were used in the incense and anointing oil, and the ascending column of smoke recalls both the pillar of cloud by which the Lord led the people, and the smoke ascending from both the sacrifices on the altar and the incense in the tabernacle.

The palanquin coming up from the wilderness is a place where the man and the woman can lie together in sumptuous surroundings. The tabernacle was the palanquin for the Lord and his bride Israel, where the Lord whose glory inhabited it communed with his people. 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 recognise a very important point here. If we can ascend the ladder of allegory upward, working from the king and his lover to the king and the nation, to the Messiah and his

bride to Christ and the Church, we can also make a corresponding descent. Each couple, no matter how humble, can experience in the clumsy delight of their love some ennobling connection with realities that far transcend them.

C.S. Lewis writes, Some will think it strange I should find an element of ritual or masquerade in that action which is often regarded as the most real, the most unmasked and the sheerly genuine we ever do. Are we not our true selves when naked? In a sense, no. The word naked was originally a past participle.

The naked man was the man who had undergone a process of naking, that is, of stripping or peeling. He used the verb of nuts and fruit. Time out of mind, the naked man has seemed to our ancestors not the natural but the abnormal man, not the man who has abstained from dressing but the man who has been for some reason undressed.

And it is a simple fact, anyone can observe it at a man's bathing place, that nudity emphasises common humanity and soft pedals what is individual. In that way, we are more ourselves when clothed. By nudity the lovers cease to be solely John and Mary, the universal he and she are emphasised.

You could almost say they put on nakedness as a ceremonial robe or as the costume for a charade. 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? Luke 22, verses 39-53 And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the mount of Olives. And the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not enter into temptation.

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.

And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly. And his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow.

And he said to them, Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation. While he was still speaking, there came a crowd. And the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them.

He drew near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss? And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they

said, Lord, shall we strike with the sword? And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, No more of this.

And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come out against him, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour and the power of darkness.

Moving into the latter part of Luke chapter 22, Jesus goes out to the Mount of Olives. Once again, this continues Jesus' pattern of movement between the Temple Mount of the City and the Mount of Olives. This recalls also David leaving Jerusalem during the coup of Absalom in 2 Samuel chapter 15-16.

Now Jesus is departing Jerusalem like David. In 2 Samuel chapter 15-16 we can see some of these verses that remind us of the story of Christ. Then David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, Arise and let us flee, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom.

Go quickly, lest he overtake us quickly, and bring down ruin on us and strike the city with the edge of the sword. And the king went out, and all the people after him. And they halted at the last house.

And all the land wept aloud, as all the people passed by. And the king crossed the brook of Kidron, and all the people passed on toward the wilderness. But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered.

And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went. And it was told David, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom. And David said, O Lord, please turn the council of Ahithophel into foolishness.

As it was for David his father, the Mount of Olives is a place of mourning, weeping and agony for Jesus. His trusted friend Judas is conspiring with his enemies, as David's friend Ahithophel conspired with his. When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Zeba the servant of Mephibosheth met him with a couple of donkeys saddled bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine.

And the king said to Zeba, Why have you brought these? Zeba answered, The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink. Like David was ministered to by Zeba, Jesus is ministered to by the angel. When King David came to Behorim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gerar.

And as he came he cursed continually, and he threw stones at David, and at all the



servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. David was assaulted by Shimei, and a crowd led by the traitor Judas comes out to assault Jesus.

Shimei throws stones, and Jesus prays at a stone's throw away from the disciples. Then Abishai the son of Zeruah said to the king, Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head. But the king said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, Curse David, who then shall say, Why have you done so? And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, Behold, my own son seeks my life.

How much more may this benjaminite? Leave him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. David's right hand man Abishai wants to strike Shimei, but David prevents him. Like David, Jesus prevents his disciples from striking out at the crowd.

In John's Gospel we learn that the one who strikes out at the ear of the high priest's servant was Peter. Jesus warns the disciples to pray that they might not enter into temptation. This is one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

In Luke chapter 4 Jesus was led by the Spirit into temptation, into the testing of the wilderness. Temptation is the place where people are tested to their limits and maybe beyond. The time of temptation is the time when Satan, for instance, will try to sift Peter like wheat.

Jesus has not long before delivered the Olivet Discourse where he warned the disciples of a time of great testing that was coming in that generation and of the imperative of keeping awake. In this story the expected time of testing is coming in a more immediate and concentrated form, with Jesus taking the time of testing upon himself so that his disciples do not. This is one of the ways in which the story of the Gospels can be seen as a story of substitutionary atonement.

Jesus is the shepherd who takes the blows upon himself while the sheep are scattered but saved from destruction. The time of temptation is coming, but Jesus bears it instead of the disciples, while interceding for them that they be protected from it. He warns them that they would be delivered up by friends and relatives in the coming testing that would come upon the land, and he is about to be delivered up by his close friend.

He prays for the removal of the cup, that if possible there be some way that he should be saved his fate. However, he submits to the will of the Lord. The cup is an image of divine judgment that we encounter on several occasions in the Old Testament.

Isaiah 51, verse 17, Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 15 to 18, Thus the Lord, the

God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day. Ezekiel chapter 23, verses 31 to 34, You have gone the way of your sister, therefore I will give her cup into your hand. Thus says the Lord God, You shall drink your sister's cup that is deep and large, you shall be laughed at and held in derision, for it contains much, you will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, a cup of horror and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria, you shall drink it and drain it out, and gnaw at its shards, and tear your breasts, for I have spoken, declares the Lord God.

Habakkuk chapter 2, verses 16, You will have your fill of shame instead of glory, drink yourself, and show your uncircumcision, the cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory. Zechariah chapter 12, verses 2, Behold I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples, the siege of Jerusalem will also be against Judah. In the book of Revelation cup imagery reappears, Jerusalem and the worshippers of the beast will be made to drink the cup for their sins.

Revelation chapter 14, verses 9 to 11, And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, If anyone worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead, or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. Chapter 16, verses 19, The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. And chapter 18, verses 6, Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds, mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, being presented with the decision to stick to the course that his father had set for him, and to which he had committed himself, the course all his human instinct would recall from, or to abandon it for the easy route that Satan placed before him. Here again he submits himself to the will of his father, rather than the inclinations of his human nature. Here he provides an example of faithful prayer for those who face such temptation.

He is ministered to by an angel, as he was after his temptation in Mark's account. He struggles in prayer, in great agony. It might be worth observing that Luke describes

much more the agony of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane than he does the agony of the crucifixion.

This in many ways is the heart of the struggle, the place where the battle is most pitched. This is where the power of Satan's case is being pressed upon him, and where he must wrestle against it with every single sinew of his being. His sweat becomes like great drops of blood, the agony of one in the most extreme exertion, one wrestling in the darkness, and faithfully submitting himself to the terrible will of God.

By contrast, the disciples have fallen asleep, failing in the basic charge of wakefulness that he gave in the Olivet Discourse. Soon after, Judas arrives with the mob. Judas is one of the twelve, a fact that is stressed even though we already knew it, we are to feel the sting of betrayal once more.

Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, much as Joab, the son of Zeruah did in 2 Samuel 20 verses 9-10. And Joab said to Amasa, Is it well with you, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him, but Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab's hand, so Joab struck him with it in the stomach and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died. Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri.

If Peter is like Abishai the son of Zeruah, Judas is like Joab the son of Zeruah. One of those who was with Jesus, identified as Peter elsewhere, strikes the high priest's servant's ear. But Jesus heals the servant.

Even when Jesus is most under assault he expresses his grace and his compassion. Jesus points out to those who take him that they could have taken him any time in the temple, but this serves their need to arrest him by stealth, to ensure that the crowds don't get worked up. The scriptures also must be fulfilled in this way.

Remember the reference to Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 in the instruction that Jesus gave to his disciples to bring swords with them. That verse declares, Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Being taken by a mob, as if he were with a group of bandits, Jesus is numbered with the transgressors. A question to consider. Luke's Gospel foregrounds the theme of prayer and presents us, in an especially pronounced way, with Jesus as a man of prayer.

How does Jesus' prayer in the garden connect with his earlier teaching upon prayer, and how does it develop from it?