

FLAME OF LOVE
Reflections On the Song of Songs

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Therefore give to Christ your Bridegroom all that you are and all that you have and are capable of, and do so with a free and a generous heart. He will then give you in return all that he is and all that lies in his power. Never will you have seen a more joyful day than that. He will open for you his glorious and loving heart and the inmost part of his soul, all full of glory, grace, joy, and faithfulness. There you will find your joy and will grow and increase in heartfelt affection.

John Ruusbroec¹

¹ John Ruusbroec, "A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness," trans. James A. Wiseman, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p188.

Introduction

The first question that strikes one who begins reading the Song of Songs is, “What is this doing in the Bible?” It is openly sensual. It makes no reference to God or to his love. It is hard to make sense of, with its bouncing dialogue and picturesque but obscure images. It is an understatement to say that the Song of Songs is difficult to read and even more difficult to interpret.

Yet, this first question is the primary question: What *is* it doing in the Bible? What does the Divine Author of the Scriptures want us to see in it and feel from it? Is it central to the message of the Bible or a quaint antidote? A Rabbi teaching at the same time John, the Apostle of Love, was writing his letters, said, “In the entire world there is nothing equal to the day on which the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is most holy.”² The Rabbis and their followers treasured this book as a story of the love which The Lord has for his people Israel.³ It invites Christian readers as well to revel in love, both the love which a man and a woman can share in full intimacy and the love which Christ has for us.

Over the centuries of Christian reading there have been four major methods of interpreting this book: Allegory, Typology, Drama, and Natural or Grammatical-Historical⁴. The allegorical method was normal for most Bible teaching in the Christian church in the second and third centuries, with

² Rabbi Aqiba (d. 135), *Mishnah*, Yadayim 3:5, quoted by G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984, p70.

³ See Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI:Eerdmans, 2001). p. 24.

⁴ I am indebted to G. Lloyd Carr for these categories and synopses.

Origen (AD 185-254) its best known advocate.⁵ In this method any historical meaning is ignored (not necessarily denied) and the reader/interpreter looks for a spiritual meaning in the words (often considered a deeper or hidden meaning) which are then applied deliberately to the contemporary audience and situation. The Holy Spirit continues to use this method with both individuals and Christian communities to increase devotion to Christ and to give guidance in specific situations.

The typological method “recognizes the validity of the Old Testament account in its own right, but then finds in that account a clear, parallel link with some event or teaching in the New Testament which the Old Testament account foreshadows.”⁶ In this method the Song is taken as a type of the love which Christ has for the church, the bride, and, by extension, for each believer. Each description in the text is interpreted to explain the nature of the love Christ has and that which the beloved can have. The typological method is used in the New Testament itself several times to apply Old Testament prophecies to Jesus (e.g. the book of Hebrews) and to find in the history of Israel a pattern of the church (e.g. Gal. 4), and locating “types” of experiences of the church’s and the Christian’s life in the Scriptures can bring encouragement and faith for the journey.

Some commentators interpret the Song of Songs as drama. While there are segments of dramas in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps. 24, a procession, Ps. 136, a liturgy), this would be the only case where drama is used to interpret an entire text. Commentators using this method see the Song as a

⁵ (Origen) quickly passes over the “literal” level of the Song because, as he puts it, “these things seem to me to afford no profit to the reader as far as the story goes; for do they maintain any continuous narrative such as we find in the other Scripture stories. It is necessary, therefore, rather to give them all a spiritual meaning.” Longman, p. 29.

⁶ Carr, p.24.

script for a drama to be acted or sung at some festive occasion or religious celebration. The church has historically found drama an effective way of inspiring believers and challenging unbelievers (e.g. Passion Plays at Easter time), and presenting the Song of Songs as a drama could be beautiful and compelling. However, it would be very challenging.⁷

The natural or grammatical-historical method “interprets the Song as what it appears naturally to be – a series of poems which speak clearly and explicitly of the feelings, desires, concerns, hopes and fears of two young lovers.”⁸ This is the method preferred by most modern commentators for all of Scripture,⁹ and it tries to do justice to the text as it stands. By this approach readers of the Bible have been disciplined to seek first the intention of the author of the Scripture and to ask, How does the Holy Spirit want to apply this to life now. A difficulty with the natural interpretation of the Song of Songs is fitting all the passages together and making a coherent whole.¹⁰ The natural method can describe the images and probable settings and give explanations for the passages (of which there are many possibilities), but it is weak in applying the text to present day life. The very complexity of the Song seems to ask for a more artistic or mystical interpretation.

Methods of interpretation have always been connected with the world views of the age which emphasized them. The allegorical method gained its popularity in the age of Greek

⁷ “Considerable experience in theatrical production and direction has persuaded me that the Song, as it now stands, is unactable. It would be virtually impossible to stage effectively without major rewriting, and it lacks the dramatic impact to hold an audience.” Carr, p34.

⁸ Carr, p34.

⁹ It is fair to say that the literal/natural approach to interpretation has replaced the allegorical approach as the standard way of understanding the intention of the poem. Longman, p. 29.

¹⁰ We will admit to literary dynamics that cause us to see an overall coherence to the book, but not a strict narrative unity. Longman, p. 43.

mythology and the “modern” (for the time) philosophical reinterpretation of these stories. The grammatical-historical method came to ascendancy during the period of the Enlightenment, when education and science were considered primary. The post-modern age in which we live today is characterized by combining views, by dialogue between competing methods and a willingness to let conflicts stand. In my reflections on the Song of Songs I am influenced by this latter approach. I hold to the priority of grammatical-historical interpretations of Biblical texts, and I depend on the work of commentators who apply this to the Song of Songs. Yet, the Song seems to me clearly to be a mystical work trying to inspire us with images and lyrics. As one modern commentator notes, “The Song is lyric poetry that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet(s) via the characters of his artistic creation with the intention of evoking those thoughts and feelings in the heart and mind of the reader.”¹¹ To see and hear its message we must “see” the drama unfolding and “feel” the sensations of the participants. Using the whims of allegory can help us catch these sensations. That this book is in the Holy Scripture, which all speaks of Christ, (John 5:39, Lk. 24:27, Heb. 1:2) directs us to indeed make application of it to him and to find in it a type of his relationship with the church, the bride of the consummation of all things, Rev. 21:2. Carr himself, who advocates the natural interpretation concludes, “However, I also think that in terms of the Biblical analogy the Song could be used to illustrate the relation of Christ to his church. The marriage bond is used in Scripture as a pattern of Christ and the church. If the Song portrays marital love and relationship on the highest levels of exercise and devotion, then surely it may be used to exemplify what is transcendently true in the bond that exists between Christ and the church.”¹²

¹¹ Longman, p. 48.

¹² Carr, p.23. See also Longman, p.67: “Read within the context of the canon, the Song has a clear and obvious relevance to the divine-human relationship.”

The commentaries I have read *all* interpreted the book according to the author's prejudices. It is not only the allegorists who read into the book personal or special meanings. Those who take a natural approach do so as well, as every reading will demonstrate. I realize that my reflections do the same. They are what I see in the Song from my own experience and my challenges are how I feel the church needs to respond. Yet, every reader of this unique book will do this. The Song of Songs is a deeply intimate book. Reading it is a very personal experience, and so applying it will also be very individual and personal.

What follows is neither a commentary nor an interpretation. I leave much unsaid which the book communicates, and these different methods of interpretation can help a reader understand its meaning. I am recording reflections which rise up in me while meditating on this book, while letting its song sing in my soul. The Song of Songs has brought romance and passion to my love relationship with Jesus, and with persons, special persons. I invite you to let my reflections stir your own and to yield to the embrace of his arm (2:6), to respond to his voice saying, "Arise, come, my darling, my beautiful one" (2:13), and reply in your own urgent song, "Take me away with you—let us hurry!" (1:4).

At chapter and verse indicators I give my suggestions of the meaning and my reflections. I use bullet marks to set off challenges to myself and the church which the text provokes. I follow the NIV¹³ text and divisions.

¹³ New International Version, ©1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society.

Comment on text

1:1 *The Song of Songs which is Solomon's*¹⁴

Solomon is the type of the royal son; the one “who will build a house” for the Name of the Lord (2 Sam. 7:13); the figure of the True King who “in his days the righteous will flourish” and “prosperity will abound till the moon is no more,” etc. (Ps. 72¹⁵). Solomon represents splendor, wisdom, peace, and the honor of the whole earth (the testimony in the visit of the Queen of Sheba). He is the most eligible groom, the most desirable one. “In her eyes, he is a king, the best and most powerful male in her life, worthy of the highest honor.”¹⁶

Solomon is the name at whose mention all other suitors are thrust aside; the one for whom no extravagance of preparation would be too much. Pursuit of him – and it will be pursuit, not just hoping to be noticed – calls up pride in the Beloved that she is worthy, yet also grants the humility of full submission, ready to abandon gladly all self-priorities for whatever he chooses.

Jesus is the Holy Groom of whom this is ultimately true, whom we truly desire. Yet, using Solomon as the “Lover” in the Song stirs up the giddy feelings which bubble on top of desire. The name Solomon lets our own feelings be real and part of the story.

1:1 *The Song of Songs*

How can this can be the greatest song in the Bible, when there are so many wonderful ones, including, “Worthy is the Lamb” (Rev. 5:12). The other songs are praise/worship to God for his deeds, his worth, his glory. In these he delights. This is a ballad of love between Jesus the Royal One and the bride, his chosen one (1:4, “we will praise your love” indicates

¹⁴ While Solomon may be the author of the Song, most scholars take the name as an ascription. See Longman, pp. 2-7.

¹⁵ Psalm 72 describes Solomon's reign as a type of Christ's reign.

¹⁶ Longman, p. 92.

the author's purpose). So, the song which includes the elect, us, which incorporates her/our story and love is more pleasing to God than unending praise.

To lose ourselves in praise of God, in worship, in holiness, in service, is the greatest thing we can do. Yet even more fulfilling to him and to us is to sing the duet of love, in the music of which we feel not only his love of us but our love of him. This comes not from our doing but from an inner spring (4:12) released by his love which is more feeling than acting, more being than doing.

- Where do we worship in a duet with our Divine Lover? Where is the church which even aspires to? When do we practice the Song of Songs?

The Beloved Speaks

1:2 , *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*

Many ancient writers identify "the kiss of his mouth" with the word of Christ.¹⁷ I connect it with the kiss of life by

¹⁷ E.g. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons on the Song of Songs, 2.I.2:

The good men of those days could say, "Of what use to me are the words the prophets have uttered" Rather, let him who is beautiful beyond the children of men (Ps. 44:3) kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. I am no longer content with what Moses says, for he sounds to me like someone who cannot speak well (Ex. 4:10). Isaiah is a "man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). Jeremiah is a child who does not know how to speak (Jer. 1:6). All the prophets are empty to me.

But he, he of whom they speak, let him speak to me. Let *him* kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. Let him not speak to me in them or through them. for they are "a watery darkness, a dense cloud" (Ps. 17:12). But let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, whose gracious presence and eloquence of wonderful teaching causes a "spring of living water" to well up in me to eternal life (Jn. 4:14). Shall I not find that a richer grace is poured out upon me from him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness more than all

the Creator (Gen. 2:7): Face touching face, tender expression of affection, invitation toward union¹⁸. “The motif is the invitation for intimacy expressed in the form of a wish.”¹⁹ This is not the Lover’s action, for we do not see an actual kiss, but the Beloved’s desire. She wants not simply a relationship but intimacy.²⁰

This is a startling opening to a ballad.²¹ It implies that something has preceded. These two have seen each other before. (I see 1:12 as such a reference) There has been a passing in the way, a meeting, an introduction, something. It is so with each pair of lovers: somewhere there has been a brief yet compelling encounter. If this is allowed to incubate in her dreams it will, when the opportunity comes, burst out in just such an exclamation.

- This is the pop which lets the geyser of emotion in desire rush forth. Bless God for those who force such pops, for they give release to others to open the tap of their own desire and affection. Such ejaculations cannot be designed, but they can be welcomed, and joined.

1:2, *for your love is more delightful than wine*

his companions, if will deign to kiss me with the kiss of his mouth (Ps. 44:8)?

¹⁸ Even though mouth to mouth kissing is not a strong way of expressing affection in the culture of the Old Testament, the sensuous quality of the book invites an understanding of intimacy.

¹⁹ Longman, p. 91.

²⁰ “She is confessing at this stage that the ordinary or elementary relationship can no longer satisfy her heart and that she craves that direct expression of His love for herself which is not possessed by another – in other words, she wants to go much further than the ordinary believer.” Watchman Nee, *Song of Songs* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1965), p. 17.

²¹ Bernard calls it a “beginning without a beginning.” Longman, p. 89.

The love which the Beloved tastes is a thing of the senses, just as wine activates nostrils, lips, tongue, mouth, throat, chest, and warmth throughout all the body, and does so in pure delight. This love is to be experienced sensuously, in body as well as soul and spirit. It is sens-a-tional: better than wine.

- There are believers who say, “I don’t feel anything,” from the love of God. This is disappointing for such persons, but it is not the state to which they are doomed. We are built to feel love, not just affirm it. To these I say, Do not condemn yourselves, nor give up, but watch for the presence and motions of Jesus the Lover, listen for his song of love which he is singing into your heart, hum along as much of the song as you hear, however faintly, and hope. Release of emotion will come.

Love’s feelings are not one-way. They arise in the meeting of intimacy. So, offer love – to Christ and to others – to open your senses to feel his response.

1:3, *Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out*

The name of her Lover rushes upon the Beloved with the pungent stirring of senses of spilled perfume. It overwhelms capacity to receive and compels an undisciplined response, like the two women in the Gospels who spilled perfume over Jesus. So sensitive is the heart of this love in the Beloved, in us, that just the name of the Lover evokes an uncontrolled desire for him, for their love.

1:4, *Take me away with you—let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers*

The rush of love seeks an action. The climax of love is consummation, and the will surges toward this. Every lover in this first rush wants to be carried away, to indulge the bliss of this rush. The church cries it in, “Maranatha!”²² Lord come,” and this is a true longing of the heart.

Yet, everyone who has loved knows that this plea is deceptive when premature. To rush is to miss the bouquet of the wine, the slow indulgence of the perfume. It does not allow the fullness of love to linger and so take deeper root.

“Take me away” must be felt, and gushed. But blessed is the Lover who does not heed this plea. This comes from the freshness and enthusiasm of first love. It is good, and it is good that it be not realized. This is the first tension we find in the Song, a form which the author uses to accent the development of love between the two lovers. The tension introduced here is that of love’s desire for immediate consummation set against the deeper pleasure of delayed fulfillment.

- Can you trust your Divine Lover to hear your urging to “take me away” with pleasure, and to resist it? Then you can openly beg, “Hurry” for he will not hurry, until it is time.

Friends

As the virgins are important to prepare for the coming of the Bridegroom (Matt. 25), so friends are important for the full experience of being the bride. But friends who can only dream of being brides themselves, without real hope of it, will sometimes aid and sometimes wound.²³

²² “Maranatha” is a cry of hope and desire from the earliest days of the church, loosed shortly after Christ’s ascension. Yet, in the wisdom of his love the Lord has delayed his response.

²³ Longman describes them as “city girls, young and naïve, inexperienced in matters of love.” p. 16.

The Beloved Speaks

1:5-6, *Dark am I, yet lovely*

The Lover's reserve about taking her away, for this did not happen, (and I insert a period of time here) causes the Beloved to look at herself not with the blush of infatuation but with the discernment of dedication. She accepts her beauty and acknowledges neglect (because of a concern about serving the law²⁴?). Hers is a simple, non self-condemning acknowledgement. She is confident that she is loved (see. v.7), so she can be aware of her flaw without shame.

This is a beloved in the carelessness of brash love. It is fun to be in such love and fun to see it in another, but it will not remain so. The Lover will see to that.

- Still, here is permission for you and for the church to admit neglect without shame. The Beloved may have been forced by the law ("brothers"²⁵) to disregard her own soul, yet she has the courage to recognize her identity.

This is the way to passionate loving; not by self abasement and fawning gratitude, but by courageous acceptance of the Lover's love.

1:7, *Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock*

Bold, brash, assertive love. This wins passion!²⁶

- The Lover of the bride, the church, wants such love. Does she dare to give it?

²⁴ The "brothers" in the Song carry the role of protectors and disciplinarians: the role of the Law in bringing the believer to faith in Christ, Gal. 3:24.

²⁵ The brothers thus represent the control of sexuality and societal norms. Longman, p. 17.

²⁶ For another demonstration of this assertiveness see Ruth 3.

Why should I be like a veiled woman ...

A veil here represents not modesty but the attire of a prostitute. The Beloved will not waste her desire on other lovers, will not gratify her heart with hired affection.

This confidence is not from anything the Beloved is, except that she is loved and knows it. Boldness from humility. Confidence from knowing his acceptance. Freedom released by feeling his delight in her. This can be learned, from watching another: this Beloved.

1:8 **Friends**

Even this direct question (v. 7) the Lover has not answered. He has just gone on. The chorus encourages the Beloved to go after him – which is just what the Lover wants. He is being hard-to-get so she will grow in her own love, deepen in it, mature in it.

- Here is introduced one of the themes of the Song of Songs: the Lover absenting himself. It is also the second form of tension in the ballad: the Lover coming near, then drawing away.²⁷ When the Lord Jesus seems far away, believers often cry louder to him to come, or search desperately for what flaw in themselves has driven him away. Here we see a different motive in the Lover: to entice a pursuing love.²⁸ This is what passion does, and the Song of Songs is a picture of passionate love, an invitation to believers to risk this themselves.

²⁷ We get a pattern that we have seen and will see repeated numerous times in the Song: absence and longing lead to search and discovery, which results in intimacy and joy. Longman, p. 129.

²⁸ It is a fact that the Spirit leaves us from time to time, in order that we may seek him more instantly. Bernard of Clairvoux, Sermons on the Song of Songs, #17, trans. Michael Casey, O.C.S.O.

Dialogue between the lovers

1:9-17, *I liken you, my darling ...*

She has captured his attention! By her persistence she has turned his head and held his gaze. He is transfixed. He sees her strength (“a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh”), her clear-eyed stature (“your cheeks ... your neck”), her humility (“Your eyes are doves”). Now he attends to her plea (“our bed is verdant” = ready) and joins it (“The beams of our house ...”). Now he can respond to her maturing love, and he does so freely²⁹.

- We are embarrassed to think this way in a religious context, and even more so to read this in church. Yet, here it is as a picture of the intimacy which our Divine Lover desires with us, with the church. So, how can we invite and enter into such an exchange – in church?

The Song of Songs is an expression of love unhindered by proprieties, unrestricted by correctness. It is honest and fresh in its expression of the lovers’ feelings. The Lover’s way of developing love in the Beloved is not by instruction or correction, but by a delicate rhythm of closeness and distance and by deliberate enducements with words and silences.

These are the ways of lovers, of poetry, symbol, and mystery – not thorough explanation by tutors.³⁰

²⁹ It is not clear whether this verse is spoken by the Lover (as I suggest, following the NIV) or by the Beloved.

³⁰ However, poets relish this intentional ambiguity that results in an emotional richness. ... Indeed, the Song presents us with perhaps the largest concentration of imagery anywhere in the Bible, and its images are also among the most suggestive and, at times, enigmatic. Longman, p. 10,12.

The Beloved Speaks

1:12, *While the king was at his table ...*

Was this the time when she first attracted his attention? Does she here, in the song, remind him of this moment? She was pursuing him while he is pursuing her. This love story is not one-way. Both the Lover and the Beloved are noticing, hoping, and pursuing.

- This is an invitation, a reminder, to readers, that we who know we have been and are being pursued by the Divine Lover can and must give attention to our pursuit of him. The memory of our glances in his direction before we knew his true love of us are sweet to him, and should be also to us. The tentative ways we hinted for his attention are part of what won him, and we can celebrate these together, just like two lovers sharing, “Do you remember when you ____, and I ____?”

1:13-14, *My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh ...*

She continues to invite his attention. Now it is she who is perfume. Now it is she holding the memory of him as precious ornaments. She reminds him of how dear he is to her. She still has her boldness, softened with sweetness. This is the development of love in the Beloved.

2:1-3, *I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys*

Knowing herself loved, hearing herself praised, the Beloved enjoys her own beauty, now more sincerely than in 1:5-6, and is free to delight in her Lover.

The lovers allow themselves to indulge the feelings of being the only one in the life of the other and of being disconnected from others – disconnected by being so enthralled with their love and with each other.

- Lovers do this, lolling in nothing but the company of each other. Singly and corporately we need this: opportunity for just the pleasure of Jesus' presence, his company, without directed motions. Some motions, astutely and delicately placed, can draw out the emotions that are rising ("her fruit is sweet to my taste") such as a simple song, a dance, a liturgy, etc.

This is the stage of the pleasure of love itself. It is a mini phase within the cycle of maturing love, occurring again and again. A sensitive beloved, and leader, will sense its coming and enter into it.

2:4-6, He has taken me to the banquet hall

The private trysting place is left behind. Now the Lover, carefully nurturing love in the Beloved, brings her into a chamber, private but not secret. The banquet hall is a place of sealing and celebrating the bond of commitment between them. He is ready to assure her of his intentions.

- There are "banquet hall" moments in the development of our love with Jesus: baptism, a healing touch, a spiritual high point. These act as seals securing our assurance of his love and as sweet memories of giving love to him. The album of our hearts should preserve them.

His banner over me is love

The whole relationship is about love. It is not to make a treaty of security for the future; not to strengthen ties between families or peoples; not about power nor connections for success. The joy and security of the Beloved is that she is taken in by and because of love alone.

She can empty herself of anxiety and abandon herself to his embrace, his care for her heart. She can let herself go in his embrace.

- For the believer and the church this can come in worship, in the quiet of the Eucharist, in meditation, and other simple touches. And it must come.

2:7, *Do not arouse or awaken love*

Now she knows that love in its due season is best, is worth waiting for. She has some wisdom, gained through the slow course of the Lover's approach to their relationship.

- Where are the mature beloved's in the church who will speak patience to seekers and young brides of Christ? Where does the church give recognition and opportunity to virgins who have disciplined their chastity into fervent absorption in Christ's love?

2:8-13, *Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains*

Again time has passed, the season has changed. He who gave her his pledge went away, leaving her to bask in her hope, to increase in her longing, to be strengthened in her anticipation.

- Which Jesus our Divine Lover does, for the believer and the church. How little we recognize it. How easily we fall into pinning instead of holding open heart and shutter of the window where we daily watch for his return.

She is inside, learning contentment in her own soul now that she has been promised his love. She has stopped working in the vineyards and tending her flocks. She has accepted her place: betrothed, and is nurturing her soul in her Lover.

Ever watchful, she sees him coming, in strength and joy, with a power which would make her fearful if she had not been strengthening her heart in hope. He does not crash the door and sweep her up and away. He halts at the window and speaks, inviting her to come out.

2:10, *My Lover spoke and said to me*

The author uses the style of presenting some speeches not as direct dialogue but as memory or musings. This pulls the reader's own emotions more into the drama.

Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me

Because she waited, she gets to hear him call her with names of sweetness and affection. By staying behind the window, not pushing here and there to claim some evidence of his presence, some token of his activity, she wins the gift of his tender voice.

2:11, *The winter is past; the rains are over and gone*

She has had enough time in confinement. She is ready for his invitation to come out into the freedom of love's expressions.

- Winter and rains, which feel restrictive, are necessary to hold us in contemplation³¹. The church must recognize and affirm seasons of stillness, of no activity, in which the heart of a believer can grow large in anticipation.

³¹ Contemplation is letting the truth within you permeate your understanding. It is not learning more, but taking fully in what you have learned and heard.

The Lover Speaks

2:14-15, *in the hiding places on the mountainside*

She has hidden herself, has secreted herself alone not for protection, but to learn the secrets of her own love.

- Where do we allow believers to hide themselves? When do we teach them to do so? Where are the hiding places away from the stimulation of business, activities, and people? These should not be escapes to recover but sanctuaries for reflection.

Show me your face, let me hear your voice

The Lover beckons her out; with gentle intimacy he calls. He asks for her expressions of tender affection, he who has voiced his own.

Catch for us the foxes, the little foxe

While she has been withdrawn “little foxes” of distractions have played in the vineyard (which she tended?) He does not reprimand her for allowing this. He just says, now is the time to catch them. It seems more like a game – “catch them for us” – than a discipline. For her, it is much easier now to do so, and as for him, he shows little concern for the damage they have done.

- When we allow and encourage maiden-withdrawal, though we see many “foxes” menacing her life and her vineyard of responsibility, can we have the patience to wait for her lover to say, “Now is the time”?

The Beloved Speaks

2:16-17, *My lover is mine and I am his*

The Beloved knows even more deeply that she is loved. She is aware of her Lover browsing among the lilies, where she is (v1), searching for her.

But, now she can practice discipline. She can wait “Until the day breaks,” when they will be free to have their love in open fullness. She can release her lover to gallop his joy and preparation in the fresh dawn of his promise. She knows he will come, in contrast to her desperate plea in 1:4.

- The security of knowing the Lover at this depth – gained through the maturing process – gives the Beloved peace and freedom to watch him go elsewhere, do something apart from her, while she waits.

We must talk about Jesus turning away at dawn as well as about his eager search for us. Only beloveds who have heard his sweet voice and answered with their own can do so. We must know who they are and let them share.

3:1-5

The Beloved’s immaturity is exposed again. She retreats from the liberty of strong love’s security into the desperation of trying to hold onto her Lover. I see four elements of possessiveness in the Beloved here, which show that she is not yet ready to be a spouse. However, I commend her passion and her pursuit of the Lover “all night long.” Even this retreat is part of her growth in love.

- 1) “on my bed I looked for him.” She had released him into his freedom (2:16-17), but now wants him confined to her bed.
- 2) She looks for him in the city. It is in the fields and forests that she had found him before. The city represents structure, limits, boundaries. It is not the place where the Lover bounds in freedom.

This is another tension in the ballad: the freedom the fields and hills give to love vs. the discipline afforded in the city.³²

- 3) She asks the watchmen. It is not their job to watch for the bridegroom, but to guard against disruption and threat. They cannot know where is One who is free.
- 4) Finding him, she takes him to her mother's bed chamber. This is not the verdant intimate place of 1:16-17, but the old love place of the previous generation.³³
[Note: although the Lover lives in the open fields and mountains, he lets himself be found in the city, in places other than his true dwelling.]

3:5, *Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires*

The refrain of one wounded by haste in grasping love and lover.

- We do this. We move from the open places of the fields, where the relationship is unpredictable, unstructured, uplifted by the expanse of the open land, into a predictable form, one which we can control or where we can have controllers. We also try to pull our Lover into the place/form which gave us comfort, joy, etc., before. He condescends to be found, but he will not be bound.

³² The country, as opposed to the city, is a place of private intimacy in the Song. Longman, p. 108.

³³ Another view is given by Longman: "Now, at least to us, the mother's bedroom is not necessarily the most romantic of places, but in the world of the Song it is a place associated with intimacies." Longman, p. 130.

3:6-11, *Who is this coming up from the desert?*

Another shift of scene. The Lover has left (escaped?) the hold (attempted) of the Beloved and gone away. Now when she sees him, she recognizes his remote splendor. This is not a simple shepherd whom she can play with her wiles. This is the royal, mighty king.

3:11, *the day of his wedding*

This is not the wedding of the love which the Beloved awaits³⁴. It is a commemoration of the Lover's ascension to the throne. [This is a possible reference to the marriage alliance Solomon made with a daughter of Pharaoh, I Ki. 3:1.]

- Jesus lets us see him in remote splendor, inaccessible, pushing us into a more intense, determined longing, undeterred even by another "wife". However, we can ourselves, in such an encounter, give up the pursuit of intimacy to settle for one's own marriage of convenience (i.e. our idolatry).

³⁴ The use of the wedding image here is not clear in the context of the whole Song. If we make it imply that the Bride is pursuing a married man, we press the metaphor too far.

Rapture's Refrain

4:1-5:1

Interspersed through this ballad of the development of love, with the stumbling and pain which marks this, is the refrain of rapture. This refrain is the clear, cool stream which bubbles steadily through the hearts of the lovers as they make their way up the mountain of maturing love. It sings itself, more than either one of them fitting it in its "proper place" in the narrative – just like rapture bursting forth from a lover without regard for propriety.

The Lover extols the beauty of his Beloved, expressing the delight he feels in beholding her. The descriptions are a poem to be enjoyed, not analyzed.

4:1-7, *All beautiful ... There is no flaw in you*

His picture is idealized by his love, as is every true lover's.

- So does Jesus, our Divine Lover, see us, idealized into the image of perfection to which his love is bringing us, Eph. 5:25-27. In him this is not the "blindness of infatuation" but the clear perception of how the bride will appear when her preparation by his love is complete.

4:8, ... *descend*

She has looked for him in the city, in the institutional forms. He searches her out in the mountains, in "the clefts of the rock" (2:14), in the places of recluse, of hiding, where she enters her desires and the despair of not having what she desires.

- This is demonstrated in the life of the church by the ones who went into solitary, wild places to nurture

their love, their desire for God³⁵. The need to flee from religious activities which sometimes flares within us may not be from rebellion but from this need to reclaim the desperation of our love.

4:9-11 Refrain resumed

The Lover is carried away in his love. Oh what joy to sense this in Jesus' love of us!
How abandoned to joy he is by our presence, our worship.
This is how he receives our attention, our expressions of love.
When a beloved senses this, she could not talk about her flaws nor assault him with requests. She would only express her impatience for consummation.

4:12-5:1, *You are a garden locked up*

The one who had neglected her own vineyard (1:6) is a delicate garden of spices. The one who feels dry and weathered, "darkened by the sun" (1:6) is a spring, a fountain, a flowing well. These treasures, kept for the pleasure of the Lover, are hidden in her. She has not seen them, but he does. He tastes the sweetness and smells the fragrance, even before it is released.

His love and attention will call up the blossoms and open the flow of water. By his love and wooing will the gifts within her be released.

Emboldened by her lover's words and enchanted by the prospect he portrays she yields to the release and opens herself to the Lover. Her beckoning is her happy response to his wooing. He comes. They drink the sweetness of love.³⁶

³⁵ The early Desert Fathers and Mothers, later anchorites, and some monastic orders, male and female.

³⁶ 4:16 & 5:1 are the exact middle of the Hebrew text, with 111 lines to either end. In the form of Hebrew poetry this indicates that they are the climax. Ref. Carr, p127.

- Jesus, our Lover, looks into the walled-in garden of his Beloved, each believer and the church. He sees the treasures secreted away there, and he is singing the song of revelation to lift them to the light, to release their fragrance to the winds.

Is the bride responding, “Awake,” or is she laboring in the vineyards for others, tending the flocks which will be food for others? Can she offer not her labors but her soul to her Lover?

Jesus’ words to us do seem too beautiful to believe. Yet, it is not in confidence of our beauty but in wonder at his love and insight that we yield.

This takes courage.

This comes from love.

5:2-8, *I am faint with love*

The Beloved has not yet fully released herself into the love of the Lover. She still holds some control, some privacy, some reserve where she can be within herself alone.

Alone again she sleeps, but her desire stays awake. He comes near from being once again away, and calls her. Her reserve holds her back in a brief hesitation, “I have settled into my ways; shall I take him into here also?” In spite of his bold assertion (v4), she holds back a bit longer, and when she does yield and opens, he is gone.

Now she feels her true desire: not to have her place of privacy, her remnant of control, but him, “My heart sank.” (v6), “I am faint with love” (v8).

Pressed forward by her desire she goes out to look for him – in the city. He is not there (but in the fields, v2). Again she encounters the guardians of the order, whom the Lover has circumvented in both his coming and his going. This time they sense her stronger ardor and are incensed by it. They beat her, attack her tender love. They take away her cloak, expose her

as foolish and shameful.³⁷ “For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt.” Ps. 69:26

- Those who are “faint with love,” who are passionate in their love for Jesus and dare to show it will often encounter attacks by those who feel offended by their demonstrative love.

Now her love has gained supremacy over fear and hesitation. No longer does she pine, questioning the experience of love “too soon,” but calls on her friends to search for her Lover and tell him of her desire, and her readiness.

Hesitation cannot be defeated by the will. It lives deeper within than will, and it shows before will can act. The battle against it must be won by yielding to the love of the Lover. Desire alone will drown hesitation and propel into the abandonment to love.

- Does it help love or hinder it to provide house and cities, structures wherein we can critique love in the name of supporting it? When the Beloved wandered free she was more open with her love than in the “safe” confines of the accepted forms. The pressure of protecting so easily turns into abuse! Here is a challenge for the church: to aid in nurturing believers’ love without taming the wildness which love requires. (It is also the challenge to every parent.)

Yet, for the Beloved, even the abuse only clarified and intensified her desire.

³⁷ Those who were the watchmen of the Lord, far from covering her from public reproach, now began to expose her and thus to broadcast her supposed failure. They were the very ones who treated her roughly and unjustly by taking away her covering, thus putting her to open shame and chagrin. Nee, p. 108.

Rapture's Refrain II

5:9-16, *How is your beloved better?*

Now, now that the bride has abandoned her reserve and accepted her desire and need for her Lover – not just her delight, thrill, excitement, but the knowledge that her fulfillment is in him, now the author can let her desire be expressed in adoration.

She sees his power and majesty, his purity and clarity, his gentleness and sweetness, his strength and beauty. “He is altogether lovely.” (cf. John’s vision of Jesus in Rev. 1:12-17)

She sees him for who he is, not as he first appeared in her eyes. Then it was his effect on her which attracted her, the feelings which he inspired in her – like all lovers in their first encounters. Now she is enthralled just with who he is in himself.

This is the maturing of love. It is not directed; cannot be taught, nor even imparted by example. It must grow from within. The Lover incites it by his coming near and drawing back. The Beloved discovers it through the pursuit of him and the trials she experiences.

How wise and loving are the mysterious ways of the Lover that they lead her/us into mature love

5:16, *This is my Lover. This is my friend*

Now the Beloved can say, “This one, this magnificent, perfect, glorious one, he is the one who loves me, who has allowed me to be his friend.” This is humility yet satisfaction, awe yet familiarity, love without attachment (possessiveness).

➤ When does the Bride, the church, present this expression of honor and love for Christ along with confident expression of her own beauty? Where do we let ourselves feel both? As possibilities, I experience it in these:

- in the silence following wonderful worship

- in the tired gratitude after a time of sacrificial service to the poor and needy, in which the touch of Jesus was felt by the recipients
- in the breathless grip of truth declared powerfully in preaching
- in the hushed wonder at seeing a child giving grace to a suffering person

Preparation, training, and labor make opportunity for this, but they do not cause or create it. It happens when the beloved is ready, alert, sensitive – and the Lover reveals himself.

6:1-3, *Where is he?*

The author lets the friends ask the question which reveals the Beloved's matured, satisfied heart: "Where has your lover gone?" She answers, "My Lover has gone down to his garden," and she is the garden (4:12, 16). She is content to have him there. Love is now matured to have her lover without clinging (as she did in 1:4, 3:4), and without the protective distance of admiration (as in 3:11).

"I am my Lover's and my Lover is mine." This is love settled, accepted, trusted.

6:4-9 **Rapture's Refrain III**

Again the Lover sings his rapture refrain, giving voice to his delight in his Beloved.

Now, the matured love in the Beloved has given her some power in the relationship. "Turn your eyes from me, they overwhelm me." (v5) Now he feels the pull of his affection, drawn by her love.

"my perfect one is unique" (v9). Now he experiences the sound pride of being accepted by one who is unique.

- It is a mystery beyond description (which would compromise the wonder to try) that Jesus could be affected in his self-concept by my love/our love. Yet, in some way he is. He responds to our loving as a human lover! We bless his soul with our love.

6:10, *Who is this?*

Is “this” the Lover – or the Beloved?

This question, without obvious answer in the ballad, is the high point of the Song, for me. It lifts me into great anticipation of the time when the answer will be revealed. See Rev. 21:2, 23.

Is it Jesus, coming forth in all his glory (Mt. 25:31)? Anticipation fills me with excitement and longing. Is it the Bride, the church, rising in the beauty in which she will be finally revealed (Rev. 21:2)? The promise has me on the front edge of hope.

6:11-12, *I went down ... to see*

The climax of engagement, the moment of climatic expectation, sends us immediately into a season of doubt: Are we really ready? Here the Lover goes “down” “to see”. He tests the maturity, the readiness of the garden. We are not told what he finds.

Somehow he is distracted by the need of his people, caught up in his duty as king.³⁸

- Is this a picture of Jesus delaying his Return for the Bride for the sake of the world, those still separate from him and needy?

³⁸ “Commentators are unanimous that this verse is the most difficult in the Song and one of the most difficult in the Old Testament to make sense of.” Carr, p152.

6:13, *Come back!*

The friends, these God-fearers who cannot come all the way into love of the Lover, of Jesus the Incarnate Human Son, feel the tension of the pause. They are not able to fully discern the Lover because of their unbelief, their weak love, so they grasp for the Bride, the church, in their anxiety.

Christ's answer is, "Why should you gaze on the church?" For the first time the Lover addresses the friends. Although he is enraptured by the Beloved's beauty, it is himself whom the friends should seek (6:1). It is the revelation of him that they should anticipate (6:10).

- Here is another challenge for the church, the Bride: to accept fully her own beauty and glory alongside Christ, yet always direct the attention of the world away from her and onto him. This is what a queen, the bride of the king, does, see Ps. 45. We do this clumsily!

7:1-9 **Rapture's Refrain IV**

Though delayed by the needs of his people, the Lover retains his desire for his Beloved and keeps the pleasure of their love alive in his heart and imagination (v6). He is sustained by the anticipation/promise of full enjoyment of their love (v8).

The Beloved Speaks

7:9-13, *there I will give you my love*

To this the Beloved responds with her own promise, her own relish of the indulgence of their love. She will give him her love and they will share it fully and freely. Now she can say simply, "I will give."³⁹ In the first half (to 4:16) she uses wiles and desire. Now she yields to simple, pure love. She has discovered the joy and liberty in just being loved. "To be

³⁹ Nee, p. 53.

able to say, 'His desire is toward me,' is at once the most delightful and satisfying of all spiritual experiences."⁴⁰

7:13, *at our door ...*

In his delay, the Beloved has been storing up "every delicacy." This is what mature, confident love does. It wastes no memory or dream. It gives up no preparation. Every unfulfilled desire it stores up; it does not discard them in despair or bitterness, but treasures them for the day when they can be given, enriched by the aging, generously to the King.

- Loving in the season of delay is a time of storing up treasures, delicacies, the gifts and hopes of one's heart. It is living now in the joy of giving from these stored delicacies to one's lover and experiencing now the sensations of them as he receives them, even though these will come in actuality only later.

⁴⁰ Nee, p. 136.

Chapter 8, the end without conclusion.

The Song of Songs does not resolve with a this-is-how-it-is-done message. It stays open, leaving the reader to explore and learn the ways of love for herself, himself. “The Song ends abruptly, leaving the reader begging for more. Again, that is the intention of the poet or the collector of the poems. His literary expression thus matches love itself, never satisfied with enough, but longing for more.”⁴¹

In the first half of the Song (to 4:15), the Beloved is self-oriented. She is feeling her passion, expressing her desires, and fighting for her right to love him, Solomon. In the second half she is more him-oriented. Her love is settled; she is secure to give; she is fighting for her place with him.

In chapter 8 the music of the Song returns to the themes of the opening⁴², now embellished with the strong, deep chords added in the middle sections. The excitement with mystery and tentativeness of the opening theme is not lost, but it is undergirded with notes of certainty, security and confidence. Her love will go on. This love will mature. She has gained the strength and won the relationship to be with him.

8:1-4, *If only ...*

But even so the Beloved is tempted by a lesser, “safer” love, where, “no one would despise me,” in the tame security of her mother’s house. She is resisting again: “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you, do not arouse or awaken love.”

Isn’t this typically the case with lovers?

Overwhelmed, feeling loss of control over self, unsure in the self-awareness of beauty which the lover has released, one pulls back, or at least considers doing so.

⁴¹ Longman, p. 222.

⁴² Note the return to themes of the beginning of the ballad: kiss, bring to mother’s house, apple trees, protective brothers, her own vineyard, hear your voice, “Do not arouse love”.

- And the same uncertainty attacks our love for Christ, our sense of self-clothed-in-glory, as pictured in Ps. 45 and Rev. 21. In the Song we see that this is normal, and we find the courage to press past it.

8:5, *Who is this coming ...?*

The cry of the friends startles her out of this self-conscious doubt. She is compelled to look again toward her Lover.

- Such a cry alerts friends: leaders, mentors, can utter to call us back to the freedom of our love for Jesus.

up from the desert

Only here in the Song do we see the image of the desert. The other locations pictured are lush: hills, gardens, orchards; or settled: house, cities. Yet, the desert also is a place for nurturing love, see Hos. 2. The desert is the place of (final?) purifying and preparing for single-hearted love. Having been taken into the desert, for to this difficult place the Lover also woos his Beloved (Hos. 2:14), the Beloved is now strengthened to come up leaning confidently on his arm.

8:5-7, *Under the apple tree I roused you*

But she sees not simply the Lover, the man, she sees the one “I roused”; she sees him as touched by her love. Now she knows the strong bond of mature love. She knows that her loving is an active part in their love, forging the bond, along with his love, “Place me like a seal over your heart.”

for love is as strong as death

Love matured to this strength cannot be lost, will not fail, does not compromise. The Beloved has learned to trust not just his love, but *their* love, their mutual love.

- It is a love of such strength and assurance that our Divine Lover is leading us. It is into this “unyielding” bond that the mysterious, challenging ways he works is taking us.

8:8-12

Her friends (or brothers?) do not see her as she sees herself.⁴³ They see her as still immature. She protests, “I am a wall.” I am not who I was nor who you think I am. I have become mature in my love, and I have something worthwhile to give my Lover: “my own vineyard is mine to give.”

It is the effort of loving, - the effort of self-understanding, acceptance, desires, and the effort toward the one loved - seeking, suffering woundings, absorbing his withdrawals, giving love – which grounds her in the security of love and discovers the “mighty flame” of love (v6), “*like the very flame of the Lord*” (NIV, alternate reading of v.6).

8:13, *you who dwell in the gardens*

The desert is not her dwelling place, nor is the city. It is the gardens. This is the hope which keeps the Beloved singing. This is not just the fantasy hope of a romantic ballad, it is my hope, your hope, our hope.

8:14, *Come away my lover, and be ...*

Now she knows herself, loved and with power in loving. Now she knows her Lover with the freedom to let him be who he is. So, she can say, “Come,” instead of “turn away”

⁴³ The brothers represent societal restraint on the woman’s love, and the time appears to be right that that restraint be lifted. Longman, p. 216.

(2:17): “Come be yourself in the spice laden mountain,” ***which she is herself*** (4:14, 6:2, 7:13).

And this is just the beginning of love.

APPENDIX

... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:27

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelation 21:2

Is it sound biblical theology for an individual believer to think of herself/himself as a bride of Christ? Is it appropriate for individual Christians to take motivation and example for their relationship with Jesus from the Song of Songs?

Historical Precedent

The majority of modern Bible scholars take the natural/grammatical-historical method for interpreting the Song of Songs (see Introduction, p.5), relegating use of its message for an individual believer's relationship to Jesus to, at best, a tolerable application without foundation in the text. Yet, the belief that the book is primarily about just this, the relationship of the believer to Jesus, was the nearly universal method of interpretation in the church for 16 centuries. I cannot simply discount this history as ignorant, misguided, or prejudiced by the culture and say it is quaint but not valid. The fact that thousands of Christians over hundreds of years were nurtured in their relationship with Jesus – and I would argue that this nurture by the analogical method has had a stronger, healthier effect overall in the lives of believers than has the modern method's attempt to use the book as an example of healthy

human love – is an evidence which compels me to respect this centuries-long approach.

Place in the Canon

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,
John 5:39

The Song of Songs is included in “the Scriptures that testify about me.” I ask, why did the Holy Spirit put this book in the sacred Scriptures which Jesus came to fulfill (Matt. 5:17-18)? I do not need to see Jesus in every line of the Old Testament, nor do I believe every story in the Old Testament is an analogy of the church. Yet, everything in the Old Testament scriptures is given to reveal or demonstrate the ways of God which culminate in “the dwelling place of God (is) with men” in the Holy City (Rev. 21:3). The natural/grammatical-historical method describes the Song as love poetry describing the natural love of a woman and a man, and it is content to let it be a guide to human sexuality and love (which I find in their applications to be a stretch of the exegesis).

I am persuaded that the Holy Spirit kept the Song in the canon for a more grand, far-reaching, and deeper purpose than this. It *can* expand our picture of the bride who “made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7) and stir the coals of desire in believers who pursue the “better” way of sitting at the Lord’s feet listening to him (Lk. 10:38-42). It *does* give language to expressions of love for Jesus by believers, in songs and words. The Holy Spirit has and continues to use the Song to give music for the love in believers’ hearts. I am content in the conviction that this is his intent.

A believer or all believers?

The bride of Christ the Lamb is the church (Rev. 19:7-8, 21:1-22:5). The bride is the corporate body, all of the elect. She is not any one believer; she is all believers. No Christian can say, with biblical authority, "I am the bride of Christ." It is essential that all developments and applications of the bride metaphor be centered in this reality: the bride is all believers together, not one separately.

The beauty of the bride (Rev. 21:2) is the beauty of the whole church. The bride is made ready by the righteous acts of the *saints* (Rev. 19:7-8). The radiance of the bride is reflected by the church (Eph. 5:27 & 32). This making ready (Rev. 19:7) and this being made holy and blameless (Eph. 5:27) are the work of Christ the Divine Bridegroom upon the church as a whole. no single believer knows the full joy of the bride apart from her fellow believers. We are the bride together, not alone.

Yet, it is a valid use of Scripture to apply corporate truths to the faith experience of individuals. It is the church which is the elect, chosen "in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight, Eph. 1:4, a fundamental argument of the entire epistle to the Ephesians, yet it is very encouraging and appropriate to apply this truth to individual believers. (Another example is the common use of Romans 8:28-39, applied to the individual believer.) It is the church which is "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" 1 Pet. 2:9, yet it is appropriate to use this truth to encourage individual believers toward holiness (the intent of vv. 11-25).

It is by this standard that I support the use of the Song of Songs to encourage individual believers in their love of Jesus. What is true of the whole body is true of each part (1 Cor. 12:12-26). What any individual part experiences extends to the whole (v.26). Just as each believer must pursue holiness so that the whole body will be a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 1:13-25), each believer pursuing passionate love of Jesus intensifies

the love of the whole church, the bride, for him. The love of a believer is an expression of the church's love. Every believer who celebrates her/his position as the bride of Christ is beating the heart throb of the whole church of which he/she is a part.