

Song of Songs 3:6 - 5:8

After the charge of 3:5 a new section begins. But, some will ask, what distinguishes what now follows with what has been read until now? Is this a correct conclusion to this segment of the book? Also, does this third segment continue to the next charge in 5:8? It is difficult to give a satisfactory answer to these questions. In 5:8 the “daughters of Jerusalem” are enticed to ask another question. When they receive an answer, they have another question which shows a change in the view of these “daughters”, which the young woman again answers. At the same time, the situation changes unexpectedly in 6:13, and both lovers are led to an unknown climax of ecstasy, which takes them to the brink of marriage. The speed of their emotions can no longer be checked. It is therefore less complex to pause at 5:8.

“Who is this coming up from the desert?” The name of a specific person is now looked for, and it is mentioned three times: Solomon! A palanquin, an enclosed carriage, appears, carrying a person within: Solomon. The famous king is hidden from view.

Chapter 3:6-11 is not about two lovers who describe and marvel about each other, as in 1:9-2:3. This passage is entirely about the description of objects. That surely is very objective and matter-of-fact, even distant. Therefore it is unlikely that Solomon is the beloved man in this book. The king does not play a major role, but is on the sidelines. It can also be said that he acts as a point of reference, someone who is included to help set the stage; he is part of the scenery. The author uses him to show a more concise message, that of natural, artless love. It is not that Solomon plays a doubtful role, for instance, as a deceiver, as is claimed by the three figure hypothesis (see Outline 4). Solomon is not seen here as evil. On the other hand, he is far from being an ideal character.

Why is it that the author has Solomon coming from the desert? Some would explain this as an Egyptian religious phenomenon, a celebration whereby a procession would go through the wilderness. For Egyptians, the concept of “wilderness” is associated with death. However, such an influence of pagan ideas is not suggested during Solomon’s reign over Israel. Whatever Solomon’s deviations from the truth in later years, the text does not imply anything in that direction. That there are Egyptian influences in the Song of Songs as *literature* is a different matter, although that is primarily regarding the character of love poetry.

It seems more accurate to view the word “desert” from the perspective of the “daughters of Jerusalem.” The meaning of the Hebrew word *midbar* may then be extended from “desert” to “steppe” or even “field”: everything that is not characteristic of Jerusalem. It is likely that Solomon is returning from a trip which took him outside the city.

The “column of smoke” is not the result of a catastrophe, as in Joel 2:30, but of burning incense, as indicated in verse six and following. “Look! It is Solomon’s carriage, escorted by sixty warriors.” Such an escort is impressive, accompanying him as a show of homage,

but also for his protection. The author pays much attention to the equipment of these men. Does this group perhaps travel by night? It would seem so from the last lines of verse eight. But with reference to the nighttime wanderings of the young woman, Solomon is not somebody to take hold of and bring to the house of one's mother, unless he went incognito among his people at midnight, like the caliph Haroen ar-Rasjied in Bagdad.

In verses nine and ten the author describes the carriage in more detail. He uses the unusual word *appiryôn*. It is likely borrowed from ancient Indian (Sanskrit: *paryanka*), a word that is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. It must have been a sight to behold. The material from which the posts, base, and seat were made was precious and something very special for that time. But – and here the author touches a subjective chord in the objective summary – best of all is the inside work, “its interior lovingly inlaid by the daughters of Jerusalem.”

Just as in 1898 the people of Amsterdam gave a golden coach to Queen Wilhelmina, so the women and girls of Jerusalem surprised King Solomon with this palanquin. They must have loved him very much! According to one translation, materials with emblems of love formed the walls. If that is correct, their gift shows how much they loved him who bore “the crown.” The crown refers here to the groom's wreath, which his mother made for him. That too shows love. But where is his bride? Surprisingly, we hear nothing about her. But the “daughters of Jerusalem” have plenty to see, and the girl counsels them not to miss anything. It almost seems that she is making fun of the sight: not of the office of the king – he is not wearing the crown as a sign of royal dignity here – but of all his relationships to the ladies, who excel each other in bestowing gifts. Beautiful to see, but... this is not the pinnacle of beauty, nor of love. “Where is she who is loved by the king?” we asked again.

The young man does not speak about the carriage, but about the girl: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!” He says much about his girlfriend's beauty. The reader must not think only of outward appearances, nor is it fitting to go to the other extreme and speak disapprovingly about beauty. As has been mentioned already, a woman does not attract a man merely by her outward beauty (unless she is a prostitute), but with a body in which the soul expresses itself, with its own feelings, thoughts and desires. In the first detailed song of description the young man pictures his girl as one who cannot be improved upon. He thinks about Jerusalem and what it has to offer, but his love means much more to him.

All these comparisons seem somewhat strange and laughable to the modern reader. Only someone from the orient would express himself in this way. What young man talks to or about his girlfriend like this? It does not have to be with these same words. When a young man is touched by the appearance and character of a young woman, it will show from his choice of words. Love has its own language.

The beauty of these comparisons is that they are borrowed from nature, they are descriptive and objective. He must have been a good observer of nature. He could have been an artist's apprentice, for he has eyes for the beautiful, the gracious.

“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves.” Were Israelite women veiled? Yes, but not like the Islam women of today. They wore headgear that was open in front and covered only part of the face. When a woman or girl did not want to be seen, she could pull the head-gear or veil over the rest of her face and keep it together with her hands.

The young man knows the village girls so well that he can see their eyes through the veil, as it were. Those eyes are like doves, mirrors of the soul. As a portrait painter he paints her face for us to see. There is her hair, those descending waving locks, which remind him of “a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead.” Descending can also be seen as jumping down or skipping. The comparison suggests not only colour or form, but also movement. It is as of the locks that dance around her head and on her shoulders are alive.

In the generous use of comparisons, sheep also contribute to the picture. But are they not at a disadvantage to the much more mobile goats? Not at all! When such a flock passes in regular order, especially when they are washed before shearing time, looking clean and white, they are the obvious animals to typify teeth: nicely in a row, two by two, with not one missing. Even today, girls are proud of a row of snow-white teeth! When she laughs, she can proudly display her beautiful teeth!

That row of teeth is framed by her lips, and they are alive; they form a ribbon that playfully moves into the form of a smile. “Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon: your mouth is lovely.” This is the only time the Bible calls the mouth “speaking equipment.”

However, at this time the mouth is there only to look at. It does not need to say anything, for his portrait is not ready. There are still the temples (another translation is cheeks) which make him think of pomegranate halves. As the seeds which lie in the red pulp in the little squares in which the fruit is divided, so with his beloved the temples are divided by the squares in the veil.

He continues painting with the words: “Your neck is like the tower of David, built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors.” Shields and warriors sound warlike, and not feminine at all. After all, a woman is disarming, and the grace of her neck is not denied. And may not this young woman proudly lift her head? Has her boyfriend not compared her to a mare in front of Pharaoh’s wagon the first time he spoke of her? More often we will be confronted with warlike features in her appearance.

Now the painter completes the portrait. “Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.” Fawns and lilies function here as literary ornaments. A fawn suggests that which is soft and lovely, harmless and innocent. The lilies help fill the scenery. The author does nothing more than make suggestions. Most of it must be and can be guessed at. Girls and young women whose faces are partially hidden behind their veils will not uncover their breasts. That is not necessary. But even though they are covered up, they are able to give the woman that typical feminine profile.

The Bible calls it to our attention and why not? In itself this is nothing of which to be ashamed. Did not her Creator give them for an adornment? In that spirit of wonder – they are not yet married – the young man describes them. Then he stops his description. For how he has reached his goal. He cannot go any further, for it is too much for him.

Then he feels as if he is being taken to a far and strange country. “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh.” Where would this be? It cannot be found on a map. Rather, it is a land of wonders, of fairy tales, a motif we have seen before and will see more often in this book. This adds a romantic flavour to the Song of Songs.

He continues. “All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you.” Is this a conclusion of the artist when he looks at what he has made? But the Maker of this artwork is God. In all the work of creation of which the LORD said several times that “it was good”, words such as those of verse seven can be said by a young man of his girlfriend. It is reminiscent of paradise, and traces of that time remain even in a fallen world.

Verse eight begs the question: where are they traveling now? “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amana, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions’ dens and the mountain haunts of the leopards.”

In Outline 4 of the book it has already been noted that the name “bride” does not infer that a wedding has taken place. It is true that the word “bride” is connected to a wedding, and the young man does indeed think of the time when she will be his bride. But if this passage were about a real wedding, there would be much more evidence to point to it, which is not the case.

A young Israelite woman wanting to be married does not have to be asked to come from Lebanon, Amana or Senir. What is she doing so far away, on Lebanon, Senir with its forests, and Hermon (whose southern parts can be seen from Palestine), where lions and leopards make the area unsafe? Is the young woman in danger and must her lover now rescue her, as in the Middle Ages a maiden was saved by her valiant knight?

It is more likely that this is one of the motifs with which the author brings into words a love relationship with its exciting, breathtaking, critical moments. But more is coming.

Verse nine does not confront us with wild animals in the landscape; it is she herself who instigates fear in him. “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.” He honestly admits that she, a woman, has something that he, a man cannot cope with. That too is an aspect of love, seen here in the Bible and established by reality.

Love is ruled by almost supernatural powers. It may sound overdone, but love approaches the religious. It is only a point of similarity, but it is there. In religion, in his relationship to God the Lord, a man is filled with awe. In the love relationship between a

young man and his girlfriend, a man and his wife, he can be filled with emotion and feels different when they are together. The song has already indicated this. At times she is somewhat haughty and seems almost distant in her attitude. That is what makes her so attractive to him. It frightens, yet fascinates him.¹ At times the cause of this can be an adornment, an object such as a necklace. He who understands the wondrous ways of love does not fear such “deviations.” He knows they are not deviations, but are part of the game.

In the meantime, they like each other very much. She, who was distant in verse eight, felt threatened at first, but then became threatening. According to verse 10, she is again within his reach, so he can enjoy her. Verses 10 and 11 remind us of 1:2. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine.” He sings the praises of her love, for it is better than wine. He smells her perfume when she draws near to him and their lips touch in a kiss.

The young man continues to speak to the young woman in verses 12 and following. He speaks of her as though she were a garden. In this passage the garden is not the place where they meet; rather, she herself is that garden. A comparison is not made, but the atmosphere is very special. He feels as though he is in another world, where exotic plants blossom, such as are not found in Palestine.

A fountain belongs to the garden. “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.” Here the author of the book returns to a theme which can be discovered in 2:14 and somewhat in 4:9. It is the motif of a girl who is unapproachable.

Unapproachable for whom? The reader may think of the purity of the girl, in the sense that she is not available to other men, but only for that one young man who may enjoy her love. But we do not read of others in this passage. The two of them are alone together. So it is for him that she is a garden locked up, a fountain that is sealed. Yes, for this is merely the time of love and engagement.

Even this period, however, contains many surprises for two people who are getting to know each other. The garden theme continues. “Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits.” The Hebrew has the word *pardês*, that is, *paradise*. The lengthy description of “henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices,” serves to give an impression of the kind of garden this is. Arabia, India, and countries farther away are – by way of the things that grow there – included here, to create a true picture of the contents of the pleasant garden. In that garden she is “a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.” So ends (for now) the young man’s discourse.

His girlfriend answers him immediately, “Awake north wind and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad. Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.”

¹ Compare the distinction Rudolph Otto uses in his study on the History of Religion; Latin: *tremendum et fascinans*.

If he finds her so lovely and attractive, well... she is here for him. She, who said in 1:12, "my perfume spread its fragrance," now calls upon the winds to help her spread her fragrance. If she is a garden, then let him come to the garden and enjoy what is good. What is there to hold him back?

Her boyfriend replies: "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh..." The verbs are in the past tense: I have come into my garden, I have gathered, I have eaten, I have drunk, are acts that have just taken place, at this very moment. What does that mean?

It means this, that as two betrothed lovers, they are enjoying in each other's presence what already may be enjoyed. And that is not little, if they are truly rich and happy together! Although they must leave each other again and again, as is the case with an engaged couple, it will be good in the end. He must leave and she must return to her mother's house. She may be a dove in the clefts of a rock and a fenced-off garden for him, but that is not so bad. Lovers who are engaged know how far they can go.

What about their friends? Whoever they are, he wishes them the same on the path of love; to experience how good it is.

For they are not yet married! This is a sober statement in connection with 5:2. It is night yet again. She is alone in her bedroom. If he were married to her, he would be in the bedroom with her. In the orient one takes care to be inside before it is dark (read Judges 19:11ff). If he were to return from a trip that took longer than anticipated, he would let himself in.

That is not the case here. She is alone in her room, in her bed, but her heart is awake. The heart is the conscience; it is evidence that she is not dreaming, but wide awake, as in 3:1. We know with whom her thoughts are, with her boyfriend. It is now different than it was in 3:1. He is coming. He stops in front of her door and knocks: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one." If she is not mollified now, the fact that his hair is wet and heavy with dew will persuade her.

We must not start moralizing about indecency or about things we must refute, for then we have failed to understand this episode from the time of engagement. Scripture does not moralize here. No, the author, directed by the Holy Spirit, uses a well-known picture from oriental literature, where the young man pleads at the door of the girl's home.

Is that the way it is supposed to be? Yes, and in this is hidden a lesson. They test each other to see how far each is willing to go. He, who came with honourable intent to her house, wants to show how much he loves her, but she sends him away. Again we see the haughtiness, with which women have tested men throughout the ages.

Why does she not open the door? "I have put off my robe – must I put it on again?" This is the linen or woolen undergarment, with short sleeves, which reaches to the knees. It is too much work for her to put it back on. Even though she knows who it is, she wants him

to see her only when she is properly dressed. "I have washed my feet - must I soil them again?" In the east where they go barefoot only in times of mourning, but normally walk on sandals, they washed the feet before going to bed. Whatever we may think of the reasons she gives, whether they are mere excuses or that she is being careful to remain honourable, she is not about to satisfy her boyfriend's request.

"My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening." This is the little opening through which one could put a hand in order to move the bolt on the outside.

This is too much for her. "My heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock." The question can be asked, is the myrrh from him? Did he empty a bottle of myrrh over the bolt when he put his hand through the opening? But that is rather unlikely from one who comes from outside the city. She has her own perfume inside her apartment. It could be that the palms of her hands are wet with sweat, which mixed with the myrrh she had used to anoint herself. She rises. "I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer."

She goes back to the street, where she meets the night watchmen. This time things go wrong. "They smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me." [RSV] Should that have happened? We know from law books of that period that women who were seen veiled on the streets at night were prostitutes, attempting to lure simple men into their nets. The night watchmen were doing their duty, although we see them as very negative figures.

If it was not a dream, did this really happen? The author of the book does not mention names. It cannot be researched. At the same time it is true, as has already been mentioned, that there were many such enamoured couples. Therefore it could have happened in a situation of people driven by true love. So she leaves her bed at night to be with him. She even takes the risk of being flogged. Yet, as far as is known, she does not find her beloved, as in the former episode of 3:1-5. How must we see this?

She tells us herself in her third charge to the "daughters of Jerusalem." Where do they come from so suddenly? We should ask the author. As an artist, he has free reign concerning the contents of the book. He has them perform when and how he chooses. They must play their role in this poetic work, which is no drama or stage performance, but renders reality.

The "daughters of Jerusalem" represent certain circles in Israel, which can be met in the big city around the palace of the king. In all their admiration for the great King Solomon, they have forgotten what real love is. This is the third time the author brings them up. Each time the girl has spoken to them, but there has been no response. They just let her talk, and her charges go unheeded. We have now come to a point that she is fed up with them.

At this moment her position is weak. She has not found her friend, and may wonder whether he still likes her, if he is still faithful. But she does not ask the question. One thing alone rules her thoughts and has her in its power. She is sick, sick with love. It is a strong expression. But that is how it is with real love. One must feel it, for it cannot be expressed in words. One who is sick needs help from others. She seeks help in 2:5 and again now. Let the “daughters of Jerusalem” think about this and bring the message to her boyfriend.

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