

Song of Songs 5:9 - 8:4

After a short interval the story continues in a rather startling manner. For this time the “daughters of Jerusalem” do answer her.

Is this the first time they speak? No, their voices have been heard before this. In 1:8 they told her, “If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep.” Later they said, “How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others, that you charge us so?” Is there a hint of mockery in the words “most beautiful of women”? Is her lover so special? Why does she, a country girl, make so much of him?

Well, she can tell them and she enjoys doing so! Her beloved! She will gladly describe her boyfriend. But, can what follows be called a description? When he described her in chapter four, he compared her to a flock of goats, a flock of sheep just shorn, a scarlet ribbon, halves of a pomegranate, the tower of David, and two fawns. By means of comparison, he described, among other things, her eyes, her hair, and her teeth, and we can picture the young woman before us.

When she describes him, she too uses comparisons: eyes like doves and cheeks like beds of spice. This type of description is now familiar to us. But verse 10 is different, “My lover is radiant and ruddy.” This translation is not altogether accurate. It suggests something that finds no ground in the Hebrew word. We also find it in Isaiah 18:4 as “shimmering heat” and in Jeremiah 4:11 as “a scorching wind.” She cannot mean the skin colour of the young man, who would be healthy looking. This description would be more fitting for a work of art, one exegete has remarked. It approaches the superhuman. And it is but a beginning.

“His head is purest gold.” Gold fits a statue, a fine sculpture; but this song teaches about the mutual love of two living people, beings of flesh and blood, with souls and emotions. When she speaks of his wavy locks, black as a raven, and of his eyes, cheeks and lips, she comes closer to nature, and we see before us a real Israelite, a strikingly Jewish man.

Will the girl now remain with her feet on solid ground? No, she soars even higher in her descriptions, continuing with the “beds of spice”. “His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires.” It is difficult to fully appreciate these lovely but lifeless images from the shop of the sculptor. Are not the natural comparisons more fitting and beautiful? Must love not be natural and real?

By verse 15 she is not to be held in check anymore: “His legs are pillars of marble, set on bases of fine gold.” She chooses the word “bases” over the word “feet”. This is no longer a man, but a statue. “His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars.” This tells the reader that he is a big man. The comparison to Lebanon and its cedars is a return to reality. But it can be seen, also in verse 15, that she meant all these to be comparisons.

Verse 16 returns to a comparison made earlier in 1:2, "His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely." The reader is reminded of the kisses of her boyfriend, for which she greatly longed.

It can be concluded that he is still a man, fortunately. But he is someone who makes her ecstatic. Is she attempting to express her appreciation for her boyfriend? A famous author said the following about this: "A sculpture is a piece of nature seen through an individual's perspective."

"This is my lover, and this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem." The presence of these young women must certainly be taken into account. Being used to the great Solomon, they place doubt on the value of her beloved: "How is your beloved better than others?" She must answer them. Has she said too much? Has she not made herself a laughingstock in their eyes? Moreover, is it right for her to exaggerate like that? This was touched on earlier.

Does the love for her boyfriend not take the place which the Lord should have in her life? Does the Lord not warn us in Matthew 10:37, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me"? Indeed. In the context of that chapter a clear choice has to be made, between family members on the one hand, and the Lord on the other hand.

But the introduction has already noted that love to God, love to the neighbour, and love to one's own husband or wife indicate affections which cannot be compared, even though the same verb is used in every instance. Love to God is different in nature than to one's parents or family, and they both differ from love between a husband and wife. Matthew 15:5 is also in the Bible! It is also wrong to dishonour one's father or mother, much less one's spouse, with the pretext of making a sacrifice to the Lord.

It is again time for the "daughters of Jerusalem" to speak. When we read chapter 6:1, we gain the impression that they think differently now: "Where has your lover gone, most beautiful of women? Which way did your lover turn, that we may look for him with you?"

But that is not necessary, for she knows where he is. He is in his garden. Is this a real garden? No, she is referring to herself, just as in 4:16. Her beloved is already with her. "I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies." Her wish is already fulfilled. She is certain about him. Now they are together, close together...

The author allows the reader to feel the slowly rising tension in the words he gives the young man to speak. What he described from a distance (4:1ff) seems more difficult from nearby. He wants to describe her with words which must outdo the image from that chapter. She is with him now. What hinders him?

Again he starts off: "You are beautiful, my darling". With that one word "beautiful", her whole being and what she means to him is pictured. The endearment "my darling" describes her from head to toe, but depicts first of all her soul, her heart.

In a different way than in 4:1, he continues: "You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem". It is a fact that a city is often pictured as a daughter, a young maiden, for example, "the Virgin daughter of Zion", and "Virgin daughter of Babylon" (Isaiah 37:22, 47:1). The words "maiden" or "virgin" mean that the city is politically free, unhindered, not dependent on other powers, which have her in their power.

However, the young man does not compare a city with a young woman, but a young woman with a city. A city has walls. It is difficult for a stranger to gain entrance. Yes, but is her boyfriend a stranger? No, but neither is he her husband, having unhindered access to all the hiding places in the city. Nevertheless, he may see her from nearby, and is reminded strongly of Tirzah, the lovely capital city of the northern kingdom, and of Jerusalem, the charming city which is also "majestic as troops with banners."

There it is again, that aspect of her appearance which is fear-inspiring, both discouraging and attracting at the same time. We are reminded of 4:8 and 9, which typifies the cities as well as the girl. Habakkuk 1:7 teaches that this is real: the word "dreadful" is used, regarding the invading troops of the Chaldeans. It may not be altogether that bad, but he had better beware!

In describing his girlfriend's particular features, he begins with the eyes. He has to look her in the eyes. He almost pleads with her not to look at him, for "they overwhelm me." A man cannot stand it when a girl looks at him. It makes him bashful. Anyone who has ever fallen in love knows this is so. What follows in verses 5b-7 has been heard before, in verses 4:1b-3. The lips and mouth are carefully omitted as a very sensitive zone.

When two lovers have this type of discussion, and the one (usually the man) does not know how to express himself, he will begin to speak about a third person in order to save the situation. "Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number." This must refer to the royal harem. The king is Solomon, and as in chapters 1 and 3, this points to him. The same happens in 8:11. The author needs a background character. It is not necessary to dispute numbers (e.g. in relation to 1 Kings 11:3); the point is clear. There are many women connected with Solomon, even if these numbers are correct and those of 1 Kings 11 somewhat high.

The young man is now in better form. "But my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her." She is "unique, the only" one. That is not much, when one reflects on how little the poor had in those days. One exegete points here to 2 Samuel 12:3, the parable told by Nathan about the poor man: "but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb". With it he felt rich; it was everything he had. That is similar to the place of the young woman from the Song of Songs with her impoverished mother.

Again we see the social thread that runs through the book. The girl comes from a lower class family. Despite this, members of such a family can have a good, rich life if there is a cordial atmosphere in the home. Then they are as rich as a king! She is "the favorite of the one who bore her." The Hebrew word, however, speaks of "pure", and this is worth considering. How seriously should this be taken? This point must not be weakened by

an orthodox theory about sin, for this woman too was undoubtedly a sinner. However, this overshoots the mark. It says “pure” and it points out something in the woman’s character that must have been visible. Think for a moment of what is said about the man Job in Job 1:1. In his Word the Lord mentions “the righteous.” We can be glad that there are such people in this sinful world. The young man is happy to be able to say this of his beloved. She is not “pure” only when he is near. No, she is like that all the time! She was raised that way.

One exegete of the Song of Songs is hereby reminded of the “immaculate conception”. This is understandable to some extent, although we do not believe in Mary’s immaculate conception. Let the reader not think this is an allegory. But Mary was a simple girl from Nazareth and Scripture calls her “righteous.” The words “The maidens saw her, and called her blessed; the queens and concubines praised her” are reminiscent of the Magnificat (Luke 1:49). Is this a far stretch?

The daughters of Jerusalem have already begun to think differently about her boyfriend. Who knows what can happen in Solomon’s extensive harem? If it were the aim of the young man, her boyfriend, to mislead Jerusalem with her harem women, such boasting would be annoying. But when faith speaks out its appreciation for God’s good gift of a unique, pure, perfect girl – and happily there are such – it is only right that the reader agrees, reads on, and follows him in his high flight: “Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession” and “terrible as an army with banners?” [RSV] It seems that the boyfriend is still speaking, but according to some, v. 9 ends with a colon, in which case the queens and concubines would be speaking here. Is that possible? Who knows? What matters is that, be it ever so difficult to find the right words, it is expressed here. The pure love of a young man and woman is not afraid of such extremes.

From verse eight onwards, he speaks of her in the third person: no longer “you”, but “she” and “her.” Is she no longer there? Has she silently withdrawn?

This is the most difficult part of the book, and calls for special qualities, if not arduous exertion, on the part of the interpreter. It is difficult, because one verse - 6:12 - is deemed untranslatable. What also makes it challenging is that the young man uses daring language, verging on the riské.

Most of all, it is difficult to find out who is speaking here. Verse 12 begs the question: what is going on here? By verse 13, it is unclear as to what kind of company she is in.

Backtracking to verse 11, we read, “I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley, to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom.” In many commentaries we read that this is the young man, the “groom”, speaking. Prof. Aalders writes that 1) there is nothing in the content which makes us think of the bride, 2) there is no clear indication that the subject or speaker has changed, and 3) going to the garden reminds us of 5:1 and 6:2. These are arguments which can be considered, but they are not convincing. The first two points seem to be correct, but do not help with

clarifying the text. Prof. Aalders himself admits that nothing can be derived from verse 12.

When exegeting a text, especially of difficult passages, it is very important to begin by clearly defining the text (a coherent whole of verses). That has been done by the Swedish scholar, Gillis Gerleman, to whom I am much indebted. He begins by isolating 6:4-7 and 6:8-10 as two instances of metaphorical verse, in which the young man outlines the good points of his girlfriend, and sings the praises of her beauty.

Prof. Gerleman sees two literary units; however, it simplifies matters to see them as one. For he goes on to isolate 7:1-6 as another collection of metaphorical verse.

Chapter 6:11-13 must be looked at as well. Does 6:13 belong at the beginning of the following chapter? This is not likely. In 7:1, the young man addresses his girlfriend, but in 6:13, he speaks to a group of people, probably to a company of men, who in verse 13 encourage a young woman (likely the girlfriend) to dance. To connect 6:13 with 7:1, we must answer the question of who is speaking, the group in 6:13? Some have thought so, which raises several questions e.g. can these statements be imitated or are they objectionable? To put it differently, does Scripture here have normative authority (i.e. because it is in the Bible, we may speak like that) or only historic authority (i.e. it was said like that at the time, but we may not speak like that, for it is not chaste!)?

About this connection of 6:13 with 7:1, Prof. Gerleman makes the following critical comment, that the metaphorical segments of the Song (4:1, 6:4) are never introduced in such a manner. To get a proper perspective on verse 13, verse 12 is intended to prepare us for the situation – even though it seems to defy interpretation. That could well be the key to understanding the “royal chariots” of verse 12.

However, who, then, is the one who did not realize what was happening and, in an unguarded moment, saw himself or herself placed in the chariot? That must be the same individual as from verse 11, which points to the young woman. The boyfriend may have been intended here, but then it is not clear how the second going down is related to the first in verse 2. Is he not already in his garden? Or is “the grove of nut trees” (the word occurs only once) something completely different? In conclusion, it seems best to take the verses 11-13 as a unit.

Who is speaking here? It is not always the same person. The verses 11 and 12 include the word “I”, but verse 13 indicates a company (of men) around that person, the Shulammite woman. It seems that the Shulammite is the woman who in verse 11 goes for a walk in the nut grove. During that walk she is disturbed, and becomes confused by what happens next. What has happened to me? Where am I? Where are they taking me?”

The question arises here: what is meant by the “royal chariots”? The Hebrew word is actually *Amminnadab*. That can be seen as a proper name, which is unknown to us, but must have been familiar to the first readers of the book. They would have known instantly whom the author meant.

Since this name is not mentioned in the Old Testament, we must look across the Israelite borders. Could this be an Egyptian motif? It may very well be. There was at one time a Prince Mehi, a character from Egyptian love literature, a sort of Don Juan, who would drive around in a carriage with his friends. He was known for seducing girls, and would sometimes abduct them in order to have a “good time.” This company of womanizers had their own vocabulary, which included the word “Shulammite.” The young woman is now encouraged to perform a dance for these “gentlemen”, which she refuses. She does not like these men: “Why do you gaze on the Shulammite?” We could interpret this as: she is not a dance girl of Mahanaim, an army dance girl who traveled with soldiers. With these words, Amminadab and his company must be content.

Continuing into chapter seven, verse one seems to deal with a new subject. The voice is not that of Amminadab and company, but it is the voice of her boyfriend. She must have told her lover what had happened, and he does not seem to blame her! She could not help it, it happened that quickly.

She must have told him, for he begins to tie in with what has gone before. Why else would he begin with her feet? Dancing and feet are two things that go together. Is dancing not the rhythmic movement of feet to the beat of music? Is that not what Amminadab’s company wanted of her, to dance for them?

A woman is womanly to the tips of her toes, from head to toe. This picture, in which the girl is shown from her feet up, shows keen observation skills: he sees her feet in the sandals, which partly cover and partly reveal the feet. The sandal accentuates and fascinates. Rightfully the exegetes point here to the book of Judith 16:11. At that time, even as today, shoemakers knew how to make use of this.

Did the young man perhaps take this “prince’s daughter” (Hebrew: *batnadib*) from Amminadab’s circles? This is unknown. From her feet he looks up to her legs. Again the reader may wonder what there is to admire. Is it the rhythm? The Greek word *rhythmoi* could point in this direction, although it can also refer to beauty. They are compared to jewels, which may seem like a strange comparison. Are the jewels meant to describe the legs or the mastery behind the creation of the legs? One could think of the mastery of the smith on the one hand, and of God the Creator, who gave a particular form to the female leg on the other hand. Or do the jewels perhaps refer to an adornment for the neck? Dictionaries are unclear on this, and on the basis of Proverbs 25:12, this cannot be ascertained. Perhaps among the ornaments of that time there were some which suggested the idea by their form.

It is helpful to refer to the comments on 4:5. Even covered by clothing, the lines our Creator gave the female legs and hips can be clearly seen and admired.

The same can be said in connection with verse two, “Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies.” The Hebrew word does indeed refer to the navel. Ezekiel 16:4 calls it a “cord not cut.” But a “rounded goblet” does not sound like the end of the umbilical cord, but rather like the entire region around the navel. The author extends the thought by making an allusion to wine, which

may not be lacking here. M. A. van den Oudenrijn's commentary does not coincide with this interpretation. He writes:

The word that we render with *lap* actually means *secret*; it is a euphemism for *pudendum muliebre*¹. The wine mentioned here, *mezeg*, is a euphemism for *semen virile*². This Hebrew terminology compares favourably with the *wasf*³ of Arabic love literature.

"Your waist is a mound of wheat." Does this comparison emphasize form or colour? It is most likely the form. In seeking an image, a pile of threshed grain on the threshing floor came first in his thoughts. We should not try to read more into what he says. Lilies are ornaments used by the author to come into the right atmosphere. The same has been done before, in 4:5, referring to the "twin fawns." Who is not mollified by seeing these animals? It is a caressing form of speech. To create that impression, both breasts contribute. The Bible does not say any more here, and therefore this is all that will be mentioned. It is a song of metaphors, but who can picture her body without the emotions being stirred? So it was done by the pen of the poet. If one makes a clumsy attempt to give form to one's thoughts, one can think of this and learn from it.

The description continues. Above the breasts is the soaring neck, which is compared with a tower. Again we see something of power in the comparison. That feature too should not be missed from the picture. This is not an object of lust, but a girl, a woman, a person. In fact, a personality appears before us. This is not someone to play games with, unless it is her friend caressing her, but then it is play in which she is a full-fledged partner. When the eyes are compared with "the pools of Heshbon," that could refer to the shine of the still water (Aalders); this is again the friendly aspect. What about the nose? "Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus." It points to strangers, whom she passes with her head lifted high, ignoring their unwanted advances.

That is how others, including her boyfriend, see her; he cannot permit himself everything yet. Proudly she lifts her head. "Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel." That speaks for itself, but the last part of the text is not so clear: "Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses."⁴ But there is another way. The word translated as "tresses" (and this is likely what is meant) indicates the threads of a fabric. Those threads are tied to the weaver's beam. The comparison is then to the shine or strength of her hair, for this is meant by those threads. Her hair has a beautiful shine; strength is hidden there. We think of Samson whose hair was tied to a weaver's beam, and who played a game with the secret of his strength. The girl in our book is not Samson, nor even a man. But she is strong. She has personality! At the same time she is gracious, attractive, and sweet.

¹ This is a Latin term for the vulva.

² Male seed.

³ The *wasf* is a Arabic poetic genre in which the author portrays favored features of a person in the guise of the strength or beauty of the surrounding world.

⁴In RSV the translation reads "your flowing locks are like purple, a king is held captive in the tresses." To this Prof. Ohmann comments: Although Aalders admits that it seems strange at first sight that her hair is compared with purple, he writes that "the impression will vanish when we know that purple was most appreciated when it was like the colour of clotting blood. This could be true, although the comparison does not need to be with the colour (see main text).

This is the third and last time he describes her in this way. He is exhausted. He is under the spell of her beauty. This can be seen in the following passage. Chapter 7:6-9 is the most intimate part of the Song of Songs. They speak of feelings which are hard to put into words. How amazing that these words have been entrusted to paper, not in a love letter, but in the Bible. Yet it is not really to be marveled at, for the Bible touches on all aspects of life, including love. The point is not to find fault with the two lovers, but to see, as distant witnesses of their happiness, how good it is. Therefore it is unnecessary to make comments on this. "How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, 'I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit.' May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine."

Then she interrupts him; she has tasted his longings and felt his strong desire for her. She responds to him with dear words and fervent kisses.

There is contact, intimate contact, and it goes from mouth to mouth. They go no further than this. The Song of Songs does not mention the private parts by name, for it is a book about lovers, of people before they are married. That becomes more clear all the time. In the climax of their association the pinnacle has been reached.

When they have reached the highest point, a beautiful but critical moment, she takes the lead tactfully and assures him of her faithfulness: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me." Genesis 3:14 is similar to this. There it was the woman who desired the man. In that connection, she had to wait to see how he would deal with her; it is a context marked by the curse. Here it is the boy who is drawn to his girl with a strong desire. That is good. And it remains good, for she is a lovable yet inwardly strong girl, who knows how to lead the current of his emotions.

After having been together intimately, it is time for a stroll: "Come my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom – there I will give you my love." The Hebrew word *kofer* is translated as "villages." Another possible translation is "henna bushes." Because of the plural form, both are possible. But because the first is rarely used in the Hebrew, the second translation "henna bushes" is preferred. The reader should not be offended by the phrase "spend the night". Aalders states that this expression can have a wider meaning such as "resting" or "sojourning." It is used figuratively; they do not spend the night together.

The scene is reminiscent of 2:10. There he attempted to persuade her to accompany him for a walk, but she did not go. Now she invites him. The phrase "there will I give you my love" (v.12) is connected to a wedding by some exegetes. A marriage would open the way to physically giving love.

However, this is reading too much into it. In the first place, these two are not reaching for what is not yet theirs, even though they are preparing themselves for the situation. In the second place, nothing points here to a wedding day with all the ceremony that comes with

it. A bride and groom would be the center of the festivities, surrounded by guests. This young man and woman are alone together and go for a walk.

The mandrakes could have played a superstitious role in those days. Because of their sweet smell they were supposed to have a secret power. But the love between these two is so strong that they do not need to be stimulated. The picture has no sexual connotations. The young woman mentions the house of her mother. Already before this, during the night, she has taken him to the house of her mother, her parental home. She makes the proposal so enticing – “at our door is every delicacy” – that he is not able to resist the temptation.

Chapter eight continues, “If only you were to me like a brother, who was nursed at my mother’s breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me.” If the reader is not persuaded that these two are not yet bride and groom, this line is quite convincing. The word “brother” is not meant in the way we use it in the church, but simply as ‘child of the same parents, brought up in the same family, and living under the same roof’. It would not be strange for her to kiss her brother on the street. If he were her brother, she would not have to arrange secret meetings. Only a woman of ill repute would kiss a stranger in public.

“I would lead you and bring you to my mother’s house – she who has taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates.” Verse two is clear. Only the words “who has taught me” cause a problem. According to some, this is her mother who taught her everything. According to others, the words must be added to the following line, “you, who teaches me.” Although the latter could be defended on grammatical grounds, the first explanation is preferred, in comparison to 3:4: “to my mother’s house, to the room of the one who conceived me.” This seems to better fit the context of the book than that the boy should instruct the girl in the secret things of love. Is this why she took him along to the house of her mother?

The end of verse two undoubtedly hints at love: “I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates.” However, it is not likely that she offers him more than on former occasions, when they also used wine as a symbol of their love (1:2,4; 4:10; 7:9). Verse three pictures the two lovers as together intimately, but it does not refer to the wedding night. They do not speak of a wedding (M. A. Beek, p.194). It is a union, just as in 2:6, where the “left and right arms do what is expected of them.” (Beek, p. 195)

Just as in chapter two, this performance is now deepened by everything that has been discussed between the two of them since 5:8, and it leads to another charge to the daughters of Jerusalem. A plea for help, as in 5:8, is no longer part of it. The phrase “I charge you” is translated in the NASB as “I want you to swear.” This will hopefully convince the daughters of Jerusalem that this book points to a still more excellent way.