

Song of Songs 2:8 - 3:5

What is new in this next section? In Outline 5, it was stated that we must not force divisions on a book like this. With a view to this, we must not force matters. That is not in keeping with the vitality of love, which has its ups and downs. Do not forget that the author of the book, for some unknown reason, put it in such an order.

After the intimate embrace at the beginning of the chapter, the two separate. Each goes to his or her own place of work. In verse eight, the girl has returned home, and is inside with her mother. But her boyfriend is not out of her thoughts. Far from it.

She hears a noise outside and looks out of the window. "Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains." He must be happy in order to do that; we people of the cool northern shores think that one must not be so demonstrative of feelings. Fortunately there are also couples who have been married for many years, and who dare to show their love for each other, a sign of a good relationship!

He is in that frame of mind when she sees him coming. It is not surprising, since he is on his way to see his girlfriend! Nature, which plays such a large role in our book, helps her to find words that capture the scene: "My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag." He is elated, prancing like an animal that excels in graceful movements and great speed.

How far does this comparison with animals extend? Does it include the following: "Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice"? Is she speaking here of the gazelle or the stag? Those who live at the edge of the forest can sometimes see a wild animal looking through the window with those mild, soft, innocent eyes.

But this is probably not meant here. What is possible to see from our modern homes with their low windows was not possible for houses in the ancient near east, as far as we know. It was difficult to look inside, from what we know through archaeology. Windows were put up high in the walls. These open places in the wall were somewhat protected from outside influences by wooden lattices, and could be closed by wooden blinds (2 Kings 13:17). However, that was in a royal palace. We are here in a humble home.

It is possible that the windows were not that high in the walls of these homes. Yet it would be somewhat impudent for a foreigner to go and stare inside. In our society this is punishable by law. On the other hand, the young woman inside is following his exploits with great attention and undisguised sympathy. The verb forms show that the beloved is the focus of the attention. An animal, whether gazelle or stag, does not look that way when it looks in through a window; rather, it is the young man from our song who looks inside for the one he loves. Does he see her?

In verse 10 he speaks to her. He does not yet plead to be let into the house, but he asks his girlfriend to come out. The weather is nice, and spring has arrived. "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and

gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.”

The Song of Songs is a book written for spring time. This is when the Jews celebrated *pesach*, the feast of Passover, and it is the time we celebrate Easter. Neither in Israel nor in the church was Easter ever a feast of nature. But this book often points to nature and the natural as something which clearly bears the mark of God the Creator. Christ's resurrection was also for the benefit of creation, which looks with great longing to the day of his appearance. In that sense we can say that the message of the book is not bound to the seasons, but does receive a particular brilliance in the season of spring.

A stroll on a lovely spring day. The winter is past, with its rains, days of cold weather, and snow. Spring time gives longer days and sunny skies. Flowers are seen in the fields. Early in the spring there are thousands of red, purple, violet, blue and white flowers, in practically every Israelite field, valley and forest. They are even seen in the dunes. Because they look so lovely, they are pre-eminently seen as spring flowers.

The time of singing has also arrived and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in the land. Turtle doves are migratory birds that can be found in Palestine already in early April. These doves play love games and seem to be very faithful to each other. Turtle doves correspond with the picture of spring and it is natural that this Biblical love song borrows its images from them.

“The fig tree forms its early fruit.” During winter the fig tree stands without leaves, but it bears fruit three times during Palestine's growing season, beginning in March. In April the buds at the end of the branches prepare to make new shoots. The first leaves sprout and the young fruits appear just underneath these buds: a sign that the winter has passed. These little fruits contain scarcely any juice, but are eaten for want of anything better.

“The blossoming vines spread their fragrance.” The vine from the Bible is well known and the young woman, the keeper of the vineyard, knows everything about vines: creepers which always look for support, winding over the ground or onto something. Early in the spring the leaves open and the yellow-green flowers emerge, hanging together in long clusters. In sunny places they give off their fragrance and honey which attracts the bees, another sign of spring! All through the ages and even today, this season has inspired song.

Spring is the ideal time for two young people whose love is awakening. Therefore he tells her, “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.” There is so much that is fair and beautiful, but one thing is lacking – her presence, her voice: “for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” Is this urgent plea not convincing? The portrait of new flowers, young fruit, and the voice of the turtledove reaches its crescendo in the appearance of the young woman who charms and whose voice enchants.

But where has she gone? “My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside.” The wild dove lives in rocky places and builds her nest in caves and clefts

of the rocks. It is an inaccessible nest, which the Bible often speaks of as a symbol of a safe place of refuge for the persecuted. But is the young woman being persecuted, that she must hide in a place like that? No, certainly not by her boyfriend. Her isolation is by choice. Does she not love him? Does she not understand how the one who truly loves her pleads with her to show herself? Yes, but this is only a moment in the life of these two lovers. She is testing him, by not being too accessible. She wants to be sure of him.

One commentary on the Song of Songs notes that this verse reminds us of the prayer of Moses in Exodus 33:18: "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.'" But is it not a far stretch to compare the glory of the Lord to that of the woman? It is true that there is an infinite difference between the two. Yet, on the basis of what is to follow in the book, there is a point of resemblance. It is this: both the sight of the LORD and the sight of the beloved fill the young man with reverence and fear, though in a very different manner. This is an essential aspect of the Song of Songs.

It is remarkable that in this context the author points out sin: "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom." This is written as a command. To whom is it directed? Or does it indicate an urgent necessity? This verse is intended figuratively. But because neither the foxes nor the vineyard are compared to anything, we must realize the very real damage foxes did to vineyards. In Palestine, foxes, particularly the young foxes, eat fruit and grapes. They also dig their burrows in vineyards, which makes the vines suffer.

We should not go too far in this analogy, as some do, thinking of the fox as a depraved person, and making a harem of the vineyard. Rather, it is better to focus on the point of comparison: the destroying work of the foxes as compared to something which can do damage to budding young love. This destructive force can come from outsiders who try to force their way between the couple. It could also be from within, from errors made by either one.

Now the girl speaks, and her pronouncement of verse 16 does the reader good. "My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies." She knows this for certain. This verse gives a hint of pastoral poetry, although this type of verse was not known in Israel.

Verse 17 brings us to the evening. The shadows lengthen and disappear. A cool breeze has sprung up late in the afternoon. The evening has come, and it is time to say farewell. But the image of a gazelle or a young stag, as she saw him that day, remains in her thoughts as he heads for... "the rugged hills."

The exegetes are not certain about what is meant here. One of them gives a hint. When we lay the love literature of Egypt side by side with this verse, we see a mysterious region of exotic smells, a kind of fairy tale. We should not exclude the influence of outside motifs. The Dutch translation [as well as the KJV] leaves the Hebrew wording as it was: "mountains of Bether." There are other possibilities as well, such as a village near Jerusalem, or even mountains that are divided, with clefts and crevices, as the Septuagint implies. Is it not logical that the young woman is longing for her friend to be with her or near her? Then the name Bether, rather than being the name of a village or place, could

refer to “the spice-laden mountains” of 8:14. This makes us think of her own environment, transformed by the presence of her friend into a beautiful garden, a fairy-tale garden.

Strangely, although she first drew back like a dove in the cleft of a rock and refused to go for a walk with him on that beautiful spring day, the young woman seems to have changed her mind. How must the reader see this? Is it a less favourable quality of her character? The author, who is free to make his characters perform in any way he thinks right, says no more about it. Is that why the verse about foxes receives a place here? The Song of Songs takes place on a sinful earth. Yet, the workings of love, in its changing moments of rejection and approach, is pictured by the hand of a master.

Earlier was mentioned the danger of glorifying or idolizing our fellow creatures, those whom we love better than any other, be it boy or girl, man or woman. That danger is real. But can anyone dare to claim that the Song of Songs tempts us to cross the limits between God and man? Certainly not. Indeed, the book uses powerful means to convince us of the almost supernatural wonder of the love relationship between a boy and his girlfriend, a man and his wife. Wherever they are together and happy, there is a house with rafters of fir, a banquet hall, a house of wine, or a fairy land with scented mountains. The couple finds happiness. This may be openly said on a sinful earth in the hearing of sinful people; it is written in God’s Word. That is how it is! The Song of Songs turns against sin, not violently but very definitely.

There is another scene, possibly during the same period. (But what is time in the Song of Songs?) “All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves.” It is night. The woman is alone. Could 3:5 be a dream? Some think it is, since a respectable woman would not be found on the streets by night. Furthermore, there is her senseless question to the watchmen, whether they had seen the one her soul loves - but they do not answer her. Then suddenly he appears and she takes hold of him, bringing him to the house of her mother, the chamber of her mother... This does not sound realistic, and has been interpreted to be a dream.

However, these verses make no mention of dreams, so this is not necessarily the solution to the difficulties this part of the Song creates.

But what then? Did it really happen? Keep in mind the explanation of the last part of chapter one, about the liberty of the author. The poet puts these words into the mouth of the young woman and makes her undertake these most unusual nocturnal wanderings. This scene can be seen as authentic in the same way that the characters are seen as authentic. Did the young man and woman truly exist? Their names and addresses are unknown. On the other hand, there have been hundreds like them. In these verses, the woman describes how far she would go to be with her loved one.

It is night and she lies awake, unable to sleep. That is annoying. Nothing makes a difference. She is filled with the events of the day. What could she do in such a situation? She rises and leaves her bed.

On a silly whim, she goes out into the street. The following lines show this. Her story deals with only one thing: where is my beloved? She thinks that others feel the way she does.

It is not likely that she meets many people in the dark night, except for those with something to do, such as the watchmen. They are on the city wall to raise the alarm in case of fire or other calamities. They also make rounds through the city to keep an eye on suspicious characters who do their deeds at night. The young woman, too, meets up with the night watchmen: a dangerous undertaking. The author conveys the woman's excitement. She does not tell the watchmen whom she is, nor does she reveal the name of her beloved. He is so important to her that she supposes others will know him.

It turns out well. "Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one my heart loves." The question can be asked, what was he doing in the street at that hour of the night? The author of the book does not clarify this, but focuses on the woman with her difficulties. Her sacrifice is rewarded. And how! "I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother's house." This verse makes it clear that they are not yet married. The reader must not become curious and ask if it is proper for her to take him to her home at night. No, the focus is entirely on the sacrifice she makes, the trouble she goes to in traveling this dangerous road at this unusual hour. Many readers will be reminded of stories from the war years or other difficult situations, when a girl would go through fire for her boyfriend's safety.

The power of love! With a renewed charge to the "daughters of Jerusalem" this girl makes clear to the young ladies in the city how deep natural, spontaneous love is rooted.

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