

Song of Songs 1:1 - 2:7

It is an almost impossible task to divide the Song of Songs in a satisfactory manner. That is understandable, since it is like trying to segment dating into phases.

Life, and especially the love relationship, is too unruly to be pressed into a pattern. Yet there is a pattern that can be seen by reading the Song of Songs. There are repeated charges which the young woman directs to the daughters of Jerusalem, and these return like a refrain (2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4). They mark important moments in the relationship, although they cannot be said to mark the different phases. This method of division is not altogether satisfactory, yet, for the sake of clarity, we will follow it.

Throughout the book we notice a great longing, a passion as can be known only by two people in love. It is the God of Scripture who allows and even compels this passion to be known. As we begin to read the book we may repeat the words the Lord spoke to Moses, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Of course we do this figuratively, but it is important to emphasize that we must be in the right frame of mind to read a book like this. As family and individuals, we may pray for this, and also that we may be spared from what is not wholesome in this regard. Throughout the ages, but especially in our day, unholy words about love may keep us from reading the book. That is a pity, for much can be enjoyed by those who understand.

Chapter 1:2 introduces us to the main characters. The young woman makes herself and her boyfriend known to us.

The woman is not a bride. They have not yet reached that stage. A bride and her groom would be side by side on such a day. But these two are not yet together. This is apparent in the way she makes her desire known.

For what does she long? A kiss? Or more kisses? In order to know more about people who have the custom of greeting one another with a kiss, we can read through an encyclopedia of the Bible. The custom of kissing differs from country to country. In western countries it has been subject to fashion fads in the last decades, although it remains a matter of personal taste in how far one wants to go along with the pattern.

We will not deal with this now, since it is the kisses of her loved one for which this young woman longs. It is a very personal matter; the kisses of her loved one are different from any other – through them he gives his love, himself. That is why his mouth is mentioned here. According to the Hebrew language, the mouth represents the whole person. In the same way, the Israelite speaks of "my heart" or "my kidneys" when speaking of himself or herself. "Mouth" also alludes to the touching of the lips of two people who are very close together. It is a meeting of two faces, two eyes, and two souls.

The young woman longs for more than a fleeting touch. We must see her and her boyfriend as a betrothed couple. Along with the kisses, love is tasted, and is more precious than wine. The reference to wine as a comparison teaches us that the spontaneous utterances of love are enjoyed, and may be enjoyed.

In verse three, she suddenly speaks to him as though he is now close to her. Here we see the liberty of the author of the book and his manner of catching the reader's attention. She no longer speaks wishfully, but declares. She smells his perfume. Whatever the scent, it is good, for it is *his* fragrance. This is indeed subjective, but that is how it often works between lovers. From the "perfume poured out" (if that is the correct interpretation) to the name of the beloved person himself, there is but a small step.

This appearance, she adds in the same breath, is such that the maidens cannot help but love him. Of course, this does not mean that her beloved is carrying on an affair with all of the virgins. That would go against the grain of the book! He is not available to all, but is admired by all. The admiration of the other girls strengthens her in the conviction that she has made the right choice. She measures her choice by the attitude of the other girls.

He is for her alone! Therefore she wants to be alone with him. "Take me away with you – let us hurry!" In her imagination she sees herself drawn by her king into his private chambers. The wish becomes reality. Now they are together. Thus she speaks about herself in the plural form: "We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine."

"How right they are to adore you!" The same is said here as in the conclusion of verse three. The word "right" shows clearly a measure and confirms once more what we said about verse three, that she has made no mistake.

It is remarkable that, even though dating and marriage are the business of two people, not to be interfered with by others, nevertheless this young woman thinks much of the opinion of others. The intention is to show how highly she thinks of her beloved.

Verse five helps us to know her better. She introduces herself. She is an ordinary young woman from the country, who in verse 5a uses no imagery. "Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem." The word "yet" has also been translated as "therefore". The debate between these two words has caused quite an uproar in our day, a time when discrimination is almost a mortal sin. We can only be baffled by such a degree of stupidity, for we are not dealing with the black race here, but with the suntanned skin of this young Jewish woman, which was not seen as ladylike in the higher social classes.

It is only in the last 40 or 50 years that our girls and women like to show a suntanned skin. More than half a century ago, in the 1930s, a wide-brimmed hat protected the white skin against the rays of the sun. It was not only because of a scarcity of textiles, but also through an urge for liberation, that the dress code changed rather dramatically since the Second World War. Bare arms and legs or feet, often disapproved of in the 1920s and 30s, became the mode of the day, and nobody frowned upon it.

The young woman of the Song of Songs came from the countryside, from low descent. Verse five contains no imagery. It is a simple fact. Exactly as it was with women and girls of some 60 years ago, a dark colour was not something to be proud of. But could she help it? She was the only daughter of her mother and had to reckon with older brothers, who had a considerable say in things at home. "My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards." They wanted their sister to join in with the work.

There was, therefore, little time – and this was meant as imagery – to look after her own vineyard. She is not speaking here of a garden, but of her own body. She is a quick-witted girl.

The “daughters of Jerusalem,” the ladies from the big city, whose skin was nice and white – we will meet them again in the book - look down on her, telling her that a dark skin is not sophisticated. But they must remember that dark can also be nice. The tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon are dark. How does she know this? Is it hearsay? Or is it the poet who makes her speak like that? That is possible.

However it may be, in what she discloses about herself, we are reminded of the end of the book. Chapter 8:8 tells us how her brothers used to talk about her: “We have a young sister, and her breasts are not yet grown. What shall we do for our sister for the day she is spoken for?”

We also learn to know her boyfriend better. She tenderly calls the young man “Him whom my soul loves” [RSV], a lovely expression. He is really just a boy who looks after the sheep, one who is at his best around the sheep. He is not really civilized, nothing to write home about, but merely a shepherd boy with his rough comrades. However, she likes him. She loves him. Where he is, there she wants to be. That is why she wants to know where his sheep are grazing at present, and where the flock rests when the day is hot. “Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?”

This translation poses a difficulty. But the Dutch translation of the Bible adds this in a footnote: “It was difficult for women to go far from home without being suspected of being a veiled woman, or prostitute. These women were recognized by the veil they wore (think of Tamar in Genesis 38:15).” Is this really what the text means? The RSV uses the wording “for why should I be like one who wanders beside the flocks of your companions?” (emphasis H.M.O.)

For support we refer to Roland de Vaux’s book *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*.¹ In a section about the liberty of these young people, he states,

Nevertheless, parental authority was not such as to leave no room for the feelings of the young couple. There were love marriages in Israel. The young man could make his preferences known (Genesis 34:4; Judges 14:2), or take his own decision without consulting his parents, and even against their wishes (Genesis 26:34-35). It was rarer for the girl to take the initiative, but we do read of Saul’s daughter Mikal falling in love with David (1 Samuel 18:20).

Actually, young people had ample opportunity for falling in love, and for expressing their feelings, for they were very free. 2 Maccabees 3:19, it is true, speaks of the young girls of Jerusalem being confined to the house, but this text refers to the Greek period and an exceptional state of affairs.

¹ de Vaux, Roland. *Ancient Israel. Vol. 1. Social Institutions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965. p. 30.

The veiling of women came even later. In ancient times young girls were not secluded and went out unveiled. They looked after the sheep (Genesis 29:6), drew the water (Genesis 24:13; 1 Samuel 9:11), went gleaning in the fields behind the reapers (Ruth 2:2ff.), and visited other people's houses (Genesis 34:1). They could talk with men without any embarrassment (Genesis 24:15-21; 29:11-12; 1 Samuel 9:11-13).

This freedom sometimes exposed girls to the violence of young men (Genesis 34:1,2), but the man who seduced a virgin was bound to marry his victim and to pay an enhanced mohar; and he forfeited the right to divorce her (Exodus 22:16; Deuteronomy 22:28-29).

This was a lengthy citation. But it seemed good to acquaint you with all the information about the love relationship of two young people in the Israel of old, which was compiled by de Vaux in his book. We must return to the veil, because in our book, something like a veil is mentioned where the beauty of the girl is described (4:1,3; 5:7; 6:7). But other than this, we can fully agree with him.

The explanation of de Vaux is complementary to a good understanding of the Song of Songs. As translation for 1:7 we chose "to wander". "Veiled" in its unfavourable meaning has no sense in the context, as we see it. In the countryside it must not have been very difficult to distinguish a girl from one's own village from an indecent woman. The intention of the last lines of verse seven must be that she preferred not to waste time roaming around and asking others about her boyfriend's whereabouts. It could be that her friends would have willingly helped her, but she would rather be spared their teasing.

But who is speaking in verse eight? The young man she loves? It is not likely. From the mouth of her boyfriend, the answer would sound evasive at the least, and even meaningless. That is what we call sending someone away "none the wiser." For nothing is said here that she does not already know. The author of the Song of Songs has others speaking here, likely the "daughters of Jerusalem" - for "most beautiful of women" (5:9, 6:1) is an expression from their vocabulary. It is almost like teasing, mockery. The girls from the city make fun of the young farmer's daughter from the country. They state the obvious: "Follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds," is showing the well known way. It is like saying, "That is where you should look for your friend." But in verse seven she made clear that this is where she would rather not be roaming around. She is not in love with just *any* shepherds boy, but only with the one who has the love of her heart, who just happens to be a shepherds boy. The young woman is well aware of their ridicule; the daughters of Jerusalem make her feel their contempt.

There is also a social aspect to the Song of Songs. Rural life is seen in contrast to life in the city. However, we must be careful that we do not give too much weight to the social aspect, as if that were the heart of the matter. The Bible does not teach us to think in terms of race discrimination (1:5,6); neither does the Bible make us think in terms of class discrimination. But between the lines we notice that there is some subtle friction between life in and outside of the city. Rural life has the privilege of being unaffected, uncomplicated. The people are rich in all their simplicity.

“Simplicity is a mark of truth.” This saying comes to mind when we read and re-read the book. Or “the simple are as rich as a king.” That refers to the young woman, with her friend, the shepherd, her king, who leads her into his apartments.

It is now time for the young man to come to the foreground, in order for us to know more about him. He does that by singing to her. It could be that some are astonished when they hear how he makes his feelings known to the girl. “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.” A mare! *What* is he thinking? Who compares his girlfriend to a horse? He, a shepherd? Israelites did not even keep horses!

To begin with the latter, Israel was indeed not a nation of horse breeders. King David did not even know what to do with them (2 Samuel 8:4). It was during the reign of Solomon that Israel began to keep horses. He imported the noble animal. Our shepherd boy must have come into contact with them outside of his village, or his village could have been near cities of chariots and horsemen so that he could have seen them parading. In any case he must have marveled when he saw them perform – these animals foreign to Israel. As far as we know, not the mares but only stallions pulled Pharaoh’s wagons. For a mare to pull a chariot was unusual. What does the shepherd’s comparison mean? That the one mare is worth more than all those stallions? Some take it as far as to relate it to a story from Egyptian history, about a mare which the enemy released among the stallions of Pharaoh, bringing them into great confusion.

It seems a more plausible explanation that the young man was touched by the similarity of his girlfriend and the mare; just as the horse proudly tossed up her head, so the young woman proudly tossed her head. This was then accentuated by ornaments and strings of beads on both sides of her cheeks, as it was with a horse’s bridle. Ornaments accentuated her beauty. It may be done that way. Natural grace may be enhanced. The Bible is clear about that (Genesis 24:22,30,47,53).

There is a great difference with Isaiah’s condemnation of the women of Jerusalem for their finery (Isaiah 3:16ff) and prophecies that the Lord would take it from them. But in that context, the ornaments witnessed of the sin of those who wore them, whose hearts were not upright before the Lord, who together with their husbands enriched themselves by taking from the poor. (Note: the whole problem of make-up and the clothing of women and girls is touched on here. God looks at the heart of the bearer of all that finery. 1 Peter 3:3 and 4 points in that direction.) In this case there is nothing wrong with it. Therefore the boyfriend dares to make her “earrings of gold, studded with silver.”

Then the author of the book leaves the two together: “While the king was at his table.” They must be having a meal. She is present at the royal table, and takes care to be noticed: “my perfume spread its fragrance.” It was the custom for the guests to wash and anoint themselves, and to adorn themselves with flowers. She has her own perfume.

Is she being obtrusive? Coquettish? No. This is permitted when it is meant only for one’s beloved. He is valued so much that he is compared with a sachet of myrrh between her breasts. That bundle is a little bag in which a woman or a man kept precious objects. She kept them at an intimate place: between her breasts, close to her heart.

As is the case here, an Israelite would not remain with his thoughts at this part of the body, however nicely created it may be, but looks behind it at the soul, the heart of the girl, the woman, who will give him her love. He rejoices in her love, and they express esteem in words. Consider “myrrh”, the most precious resin of that day; it comes from the myrrh tree, which originates in India. For even more emphasis she also mentions a “cluster of henna blossoms”, white and fragrant, coming from the henna shrub – in those days Engedi on the Dead Sea was famous for these.

This is how they are together. He looks at her: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.” She looks at him and says: “How handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming!”

Where are they? They are somewhere in a vineyard, a garden, a summerhouse, where the two can be together undisturbed. When they are together like this, they feel just like Solomon under his “cedar beams and his rafters of fir”.

We now go to chapter two, and they are still together. They may have moved apart some distance, because we hear the young woman talk about the two of them, and the young man talking about her. But no. That is the hand and liberty of the poet of this work of art. In verse one the woman begins, or rather, continues, for she has not yet finished, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” He then agrees with her, saying, “Like the lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens.”

The reader must understand that it is not the intention of the young man to see the other girls as nothing – thorns – but to see them as the backdrop against which he sees the one girl he loves. He seems to understand that such exaggeration does not bring him into conflict with the ninth commandment. For comparison’s sake, consider a marketplace – everyone claims they have the best wares! That is how love is. Though there may be many others just as beautiful, my beloved is the loveliest of them all.

She also rises to the occasion. “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men.” As a rule, one will find no apple trees in the woods, also not in Israel. This can be interpreted as in verse two: all the trees in the forest are of less value than that one apple tree. She likes the comparison with that apple tree so much that she has more to say about it. She wants to sit in the shadow of that tree. Another advantage of the tree is that it is a fruit tree, and the fruit is sweet. That indicates the love she receives.

But then she leaves the image of the tree and talks about him as a person, the man who has brought her to the banquet hall, likely a summer house or hut. “And his banner over me is love.” Do we understand? This cliché indicates there is a celebration going on. In the banquet hall, the feast of love is celebrated. The Bible is not a book unfamiliar with reality. In its choice of words and language it comes close to our lives. Take for instance verse five, “I am faint with love.” We can also say that we are “faint with longing.” But that is still the time of first love, of not being sure of each other. In our book they are past that stage.

But their love does keep that glow of enchantment, however. We see that in verse six: “His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me.” This is not vulgar. It is how things are when the two of them are together, the posture in which they can be seen. She leaning back, his left arm supporting her head, and his right arm around her waist. The reader should not laugh or joke about this, or see it in a dubious light. They are expressing their feelings which are not of the devil, but of God the Creator. She feels weak in his arms, faint with love.

It cannot be denied that the evil one may tempt someone in such moments. He is always ready to spoil what is beautiful, to taint what is pure. But that does not condemn rejoicing in love. We may thank the Lord, that as Creator, he helps us *in his Word* to bring this experience into words. Even though we live in a depraved world where everything is warped, mutual, natural love continues to be born. We use the word “natural” in the way Paul makes use of the word in Romans 1:26 and 27, in contrast to unnatural, that is, natural as it was in creation.

God’s name is not mentioned in this passage. But the word “charge” comes close. Think of the Catechism: “for a lawful oath is a calling upon God...” (Lord’s Day 37, Q&A 102). The young woman who is still speaking, faint with love, is aware of those who think differently: the “daughters of Jerusalem.” She tells them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.”

She does not directly call upon the name of the Lord, but she does charge in the name of does and gazelles; whose heart is not made tender when seeing these animals that symbolize simplicity and charm? In her oath, she indirectly involves her God, the Maker of these animals. She urges them not to be artificial or forced in love. Perhaps that is how it went in Jerusalem. That would be unfortunate. Real love will not be compelled, but is natural, spontaneous! Once again, be aware that nature is not great in itself, outside of God or away from God. Rather, nature is the work of our God and Creator.

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