

Solomon and the Shulamite

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Song 1:1 - 2:7

King Solomon

I would like to begin a meditation on one of the most difficult books of the Bible to interpret. The book is the Song of Solomon and I have before me the passage beginning with chapter 1 and going on to chapter 2:7. Before beginning an exposition of the passage in question, it would be well perhaps to give a few introductory remarks to the book as a whole.

The writer of the Song is King Solomon and we are told that altogether he wrote one thousand and five songs (1 Ki. 4:32), but clearly it is this one that is the choicest of them all, for it is the Song of Songs. Solomon was, of course, the son of David and Bathsheba and he succeeded to the Kingdom of Israel upon the death of his father. We are told in First Kings that God gave him very much understanding and largeness of heart, and that his wisdom exceeded that of all the wise men of the East. He also spoke three thousand proverbs and his understanding of trees and the animal kingdom was very great (1 Ki. 4:29-34).

Participants in the narrative

Although the composition is one song, it is divided into a number of lyrics or canticles and this latter expression is another name for the book. It is in the main a dialogue between two lovers and the language used is so delicate and intimate that it has aroused the criticism of many, some even contending that it is not really a part of Holy Scripture. I myself once heard a sincere Christian state that in his estimation it was an ordinary love song.

Almost all commentators are agreed that the male lover is the bridegroom and the female character his future bride. There are other participants in the narrative such as the daughters of Jerusalem and the watchman of the city, but their comments are little more than interjections or questions and do not really add anything to the main theme of the Song.

One difficulty in the interpretation is that it is sometimes hard to distinguish who the different speakers are; different writers attribute some words to

the bridegroom, whilst others maintain that they are said by the bride. The difficulty of the interpretation already referred to leads to the questions: "Who is the bridegroom?" and, "Who is the bride?" I will not attempt to answer these authoritatively, but perhaps I might say what the chief commentators are disposed to teach. I think that I would be right in saying that the greater number insist that the bridegroom is Solomon himself, the writer of the Song. But whether he is referring to a real experience, or simply allowing the Holy Spirit to guide him in his composition I would not like to affirm. His name is mentioned seven times, in Song 1, 3 and 8. But it is always used by a third party and not by the bridegroom himself, or it is simply used for the purpose of demonstrating ownership.

In support of a good understanding of the Song, it must be said that the language used by both bridegroom and bride is most majestic and savours of royalty. Additionally, many subjects are referred to which could only be applied to a royal personage or, at very least, some high dignitary. For instance we read of "the banqueting house", the Shulamite speaks of the King sitting at his table, and the bridegroom himself compares his beloved to an enclosed garden — perhaps having in mind his own private garden which would be part of his royal estate. And those who do not subscribe to this understanding of the bridegroom still remind us of Solomon's own marital background. We are told that he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Ki. 11:3), and even in the Song itself we have reference to "threescore queens and fourscore concubines and virgins without number".

The bridegroom is a type of Christ, and Solomon's reputation would hardly be fitting for such a role. But then again it must be remembered that there are many men in the Old Testament who, without doubt, are types of Christ but who sadly failed in their private lives. Moses and David may be cited as examples.

The alternative contention is that the bridegroom is a young shepherd, who has fallen in love with an attractive shepherdess and she with him, and moreover her love is maintained even though King Solomon seeks to attract her to himself. That she is a shepherdess is clearly stated in the first chapter, but the opposers of this interpretation maintain that Solomon would not have composed a poem which is in essence

simply a love story with little or no spiritual interpretation, and that it would then have been encompassed in the Holy Scriptures.

Christ as the Bridegroom

But whatever interpretation is put as to the two main characters in this Song, it is generally recognised that the discourse between them is a revelation of the love of Christ for His bride and the reciprocal affection that He receives from her. Just as there are two Jerusalems, the one an earthly city and the other a heavenly as mentioned in Hebrews 12:22, so there are two brides: the one a Jewish bride (cf. Hos. 2:19), and the other a heavenly bride, the Lamb's wife as described in Revelation 19:7.

The Song of Solomon is essentially a Jewish Scripture; both the names Solomon and Shulamite have their origin in the Jewish word 'shalom', which means peace. During the period of the Great Tribulation when the nation of Israel will be undergoing extreme persecution but still remaining in unbelief, there will be a small company who will realise that the One who was despised and rejected two thousand years before was indeed the Messiah. They will go forth and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom; and it is this remnant company that will comprise the earthly bride of Christ. It is the affectionate relationship between Christ and this earthly bride that is reflected in the Song of Songs. But nevertheless the expressions of love here exchanged between the bridegroom and the bride may also, without doubt, be largely applied to Christ and His heavenly bride, and it is such a spiritual consideration of the chapters of this book that will surely bring the greatest profit. Let us then proceed with our examination of the first section.

Love and joy

Clearly the bride is the opening speaker in the dialogue, and immediately she expresses her affection for him and desires to be assured of his love: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2). The kiss is a well known demonstration of affection and is often given in parting as with Naomi and Orpah (Ruth 1:14), and David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:41); or upon reconciliation as was shown in the kiss of the father to the returning prodigal son (Luke 15:20).

In this case it may be that the bride and bridegroom had been parted for a little time, and she now desires to be reassured of his love. Note the reality and earnestness of her request: "Let *him* kiss *me*". She adds: "For thy love is better than wine". Wine in Scripture is often connected with joy, as in Judges 13 and Psalm 104:15. To us Christ's love is superior to all the joys of earth.

The worth of Christ

In verse 3 the bride confesses that his name (and Christ has many names), savours of the fragrance of ointments which are poured forth, not sealed up. In Isaiah 1:6 ointments are associated with healing, and so we have the thought of Christ both as Jesus the Saviour and the Anointed who is precious to us.

What a revelation it is when the soul discovers the infinite worth of Christ. At the supper in Bethany when He was anointed by Mary, the house was filled with the odour of the ointment (John 12:3). Even the attendant virgins — the pure in heart — are affected by the sweetness displayed, and they love him. To express it in New Testament words: "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Then her desire, and even her prayer, is: "Draw me". Her greatest wish is to be close to her beloved.

Active pursuit

Strange that she should use the *plural* pronoun in her next phrase: "...*we* will run after thee" (Song 1:4). The suggestion is that in her quest for her beloved she has companions. But note who she runs after. We might ask ourselves the question: "Who or what do we run after". Is it Christ or the world? We are reminded of Psalm 42: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God".

Notice here that the bridegroom is the King, and this would confirm the understanding that in the Song the bride is Israel. The Lord is never presented as the 'King of the Church', but as its Head. Now he has brought her into his chambers (v. 4), and she is alone with him. This is her proper place and there love flows unrestrainedly.

Understanding of self

Throughout the Song there is a progressive understanding of the person and the love of the bridegroom, and a consequent increased admiration and love for him. In the King's chambers the bride got an understanding of herself.

Job had to confess: "I am vile" (Job 40:4); Isaiah had to confess: "I am unclean" (Isa. 6:5). The Shulamite: "I am black ... as the tents of Kedar" (Song 1:5). Here is a reference to what she was by nature, but thankfully she could add: "but comely...as the curtains of Solomon" — those beautiful curtains which adorned the temple that Solomon had built. This latter is what she is by grace. In these verses she is addressing the daughters of Jerusalem and telling them that her blackness was caused by the sun — when she had been forced to be a worker in the vineyards and to endure the hardships

imposed upon her, even by her own family. From all of this she had found deliverance in the love of her soon to be husband.

This experience will no doubt have its fulfilment when the remnant of Israel will pass through such terrible persecution and oppression, during the period of Great Tribulation. But surely there is an application to the Christian believer today. The opposition of the world is a very real thing both before conversion and certainly after it. Satan will do all that he can to sever us from the company of the One who so dearly loves us and whom we in our hearts love. So in verse seven she earnestly pleads that she may take her place among his flock. Other flocks not under his care she had tried, but now she seeks him. Does not this show us that our Blessed Lord is even now our Good Shepherd?

Go forth

Immediately the Shepherd lover replies and bids her, the fairest among women, to go forth by the footsteps of the flock (Song 1:8). Notice that expression, "go forth". She had become separated from him, and now he tells her to go forth or rather come and join him, where he feeds his flock.

The word to us is surely this: if we have got away from Christ, if we are mingling with those of the world, let us immediately go forth to Him where He is feeding His sheep. As one of them, this is surely our place. For here we are feeding in the green pastures of the Word of God.

Pharaoh's steed

In verses 9-11, Solomon compares his beloved to a steed in one of Pharaoh's chariots. Perhaps this may be a reference to the energy, deportment and such like characteristics that would be shown in the Master's service. In Job 11:12 we find an animal of a very different character: "For vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass's colt". Man generally is like the wild ass, uncontrolled and going about his wild ways. Entirely different from Pharaoh's steed, which would have been bridled and brought under the control of his master.

Her cheeks are likened to precious jewels and her neck is adorned with a chain of gold. The beads of gold would remind us of divine righteousness and the studs of silver, of redemption. All this is what the bridegroom has bestowed upon his beloved and having done so, he now admires her.

At His table

In verses 12-14 the King is at his table, and his beloved is with him. In the family circle, meal times are the times when the family sit down together and there is a time of intercommunion one with another. So it appears to be here and the bride, in such circumstances, speaks of her love and appreciation of her beloved. Spikenard was a perfume and very costly, as we learn from John 12, where Mary anointed the feet of her Lord with such an ointment. Its preciousness seems to point to worship and praise.

Myrrh was produced by the puncturing of the bark of the plant and again used in the production of very sweet smelling perfume. It was also used in the preparation of the holy anointing oil used in connection with the priesthood. So it would speak to us not only of the suffering of Christ even unto death, depicted by the puncturing, but also of the perfection of His person and work shown forth by the perfume. It was an Oriental custom for a small bundle of myrrh to be carried in the bosom because of its sweet odour, and here I think we can see an application to ourselves. The bosom is the place of the most intimate affection and surely is the place that Christ should have with each one of us.

I think that this also is pertinent to the first clause of verse 14. Camphire is only mentioned in the whole of Scripture here and in Song 4:13, and it probably refers to the henna flower. It blooms amongst the vines in the vineyards and produces a very showy display. Here the vineyard mentioned is Engedi, and this was the place where David showed mercy to Saul (1 Sam. 24), and also that mentioned by Ezekiel in chapter 47 of his prophecy, where in a future day fish will be caught in abundance from the healed waters of the Dead Sea. It is difficult to divine the spiritual meaning of this verse, but it may refer to Christ risen — the glorious display of flowers, and the fact that we are raised with Him.

Solomon immediately responds to the Shulamite's expression of what he means to her, by twice repeating that she is fair, and then he adds that she has doves' eyes (Song 1:15). To think that this is what we, sinners but saved by grace, mean to the Lord Jesus is wonderful beyond comprehension, especially when we remember that the dove is the symbol of purity, faithful love and holiness. She responds by speaking of his beauty and she looks forward to her future rest. In the same way we look forward to our heavenly rest — the bed is green; in a house of cedar and fir — one that will not rot but last for ever.

Beauty of the bride

The Shulamite maiden, the bride to be, continues, in Song 2, by speaking of herself as the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley. This verse is taken by many to refer to Christ, but such an understanding is clearly

proved to be wrong by verse two when the bridegroom acknowledges her as such, but also enhances her beauty by declaring that she is a lily *among thorns*. We might ask ourselves: "How do we stand out as companions of Christ among all the thorns that surround us in this world?"

Attractions

In Song 2:3-7 the bride speaks out of her heart of him, who has become the one who has completely captured her affections. In verse three she speaks of five attractions which he provides:

- (1) "I sat down" — there we have rest;
- (2) "under his shadow" — there we have shelter;
- (3) "with great delight" — there we have full joy;
- (4) "his fruit" — there we have nourishment;
- (5) "was sweet to my taste" — there we have complete satisfaction in partaking of it.

Dear Christian friend, this is what our blessed Lord desires for us now. If we sit down resting under His shadow, of necessity we must stay close to Him. If we move away we shall soon find the heat of the world bearing down upon us. Here too we may reach out and accept from Him that food which will enrich our souls. He said to His Father: "I have given them (the disciples) thy word" (John 17:14). And we have it today, the Scripture of truth, by which we can feed upon Him and our souls can prosper. This is surely that which the true believer needs today. In this modern world we need to know the reality of fellowship with Him.

The banner of love

In Song 2:4 we have another metaphor. Now he has brought her into his banqueting house. Who is the "He"? None other than the eternal Son of God, the One who is all powerful, the supreme One. And He has stretched His banner, that which gives expression to His greatness, over us — and that banner is "love". It is a scene of glory and excellence, and it is the place of our eternal home as the bride of Christ. Here her love almost overwhelms her, for she is sick of it. This expression is not here used in the negative sense, as we sometimes use it, but rather the very opposite — I judge the meaning to be that she is sick, because of love.

At the banquet she seeks to be sustained, not exactly by flagons, but by cakes of raisins or grapes which speak of wine and joy; and to be comforted by apples, the very fruit of the tree referred to in Song 2:3, namely Christ Himself. How little do we realise the depths of the love wherewith He loved us, still loves us and ever will love us.

At rest

With these thoughts of her beloved, it would seem from Song 2:6-7 that she now rests, asleep in his loving embrace (for us: Christ's eternal loving embrace). And such is his care for her that Solomon charges the daughters of Jerusalem that nothing or no one should disturb her rest.

We have only been able to touch briefly on some of the sublime thoughts of both bridegroom and bride revealed in the opening stanza of this wonderful Song. A more detailed meditation upon these verses, comparing Scripture with Scripture to ascertain the underlying meaning of all the metaphors and allegories used will reveal much more of the blessed relationship that pertains between the two lovers.