Still Got It

Song of Solomon 2:3-6 & 4:1-7

Dr. Pierre Cannings

I. Her Delight 2:3-6

a. Tree v. 3

i. Tree - "The other men are dangerous, like the inhospitable forest that was the haunt of wild animals in ancient Israel" She views Solomon as safe and completely trustworthy.

ii. An argument against the sexual angle being present is 2:3 is that she is said to delight to "sit," not lie down, in his shade (Estes, 319). The point of the extension of the comparison seems to be closer to viewing him almost like an oasis in the burning sun of the region. Not only is the protection of the shade of the tree to be found there, but also the refreshment of the fruit of the tree. In addition, none of the immediately preceding context (1:15–2:2) is explicitly sexual, thus making it unlikely that the images in 2:3 should be taken in that manner.

iii. and she responds that he compares to other men as the apple tree to the trees of a forest. The point of comparison is of course that the apple tree bears delicious fruit but that forest trees do not.

iv. In short, classical evidence for the association of apples with women and sexuality is fairly strong; the woman's claim that the man is to her like an apple tree is in keeping with this motif. She speaks of taking pleasure in his shade and his fruit and abiding with him.

v. He is "like an apple tree," that is, protective ("shade") and pleasurable ("his fruit").

b. Banquet Hall v.4

i. Banquet Hall- House of Wine

1. Since Solomon owned the vineyard the Shulammite's family leased and worked (8:11–12), he could simply tell them he was going to use the facility, paying them (generously, no doubt) for whatever was used/consumed, while inviting them to attend his (perhaps spontaneous) public proclamation of his love for her.
2. If a wedding banquet is in view here, the "house of wine" is on one level the banquet and on another level the anticipated love play. In the Song, wine often connotes or is associated with lovemaking, especially kisses (1:2, 4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:3
3. Such interpretations, however, are misguided. It is clear from v. 6 that she is in his embrace; in vv. 4–5 she describes her experience in a series of comparisons. The "house of wine" is, as Fox

indicates, simply any building where wine is drunk. As a metaphor it means that he is bringing her to pleasures that are almost intoxicating, and the experience causes her to swoon (v. 5c). His intention (rather than “banner

ii. Banner -
    1. However, as king, there is no reason why a “banner” would be out of place in such figurative imagery. In fact, for Solomon to openly proclaim his love for the young woman in such a group setting would be quite a bit like the public display of a banner.

c. Lovesick v.5
    i. In what sense has love wounded the woman or made her ill, and why does she ask that they lay her on raisin cakes and apples? Scholars often take this text to mean simply that she is flushed with excitement over love and that she needs raisin cakes and apples to restore her strength. Also, many interpreters point out that these foods probably were thought to have an aphrodisiac quality.
    ii. On the other hand, lying down has sexual implications, and sweetmeats such as raisins and apples probably connote love play. Lying down in these foods also betokens luxuriant extravagance. Her request is thus an appeal for both strength and for affection, but it suggests a paradise setting.
    iii. It is better to take this as mental pain produced by profound anxiety and conflict. The solution to her anxiety, here metaphorically described as lying down in a bed of raisins or apples, is the affection of her beloved. It is his affection that will enable her to overcome her internal conflict. She has already described her lover as an apple tree in Song 2:3; it is hardly an interpretive leap to take “apples” here to refer to his affection.
    iv. In either case, the object of her desire is not real fruit but his love.) As in 2:3 she associates the pleasures he gives with various fruits

d. Embrace v.6
    i. The verb סמך in the *qal* means “to rest upon, support, lean against.” In Gen 27:37 It is probable that the *piʿel* of סמך (used only here) means, “make (me) to rest upon”
    ii. Here in the Song, the right-hand-left-hand dyad only implies affection and support, not genital stimulation.
    iii. This verse answers the request of the previous verse. The man lets her rest upon his left arm while he caresses her with his right hand. He sustains her with tender affection; his love is the raisins and apples upon which she rests

II. His Delight 4:1-5 The Beautiful Details

a. Beautiful Face 1-3
   i. Beautiful
      1. song seem harsh and unnatural to the modern reader because we take them in too literal a sense. He is not describing so much how *she looks* but how *he feels* when he looks at her. Aspects of the woman's beauty provoke profound emotional responses.
      2. There is also a clear effect around 4:1–7. The initial words are "you are beautiful." Verse 7 goes so far as to say "All of you is beautiful." As with all such effects, everything between the beginning and ending statements is colored by them. In this case, these verses are focused on the flawless physical beauty of the Shulammite, as expressed in Solomon's words.
   ii. Eyes
   iii. Hair
   iv. Teeth
      1. The fact that every one has a twin means that no teeth are missing. The root תאם with the sense to "double" or "have a twin" appears in Exod 26:24 and 36:29 The woman has all of her teeth! This may seem like a rather droll bit of praise to the modern, Western reader, but we live in an age of highly sophisticated dentistry and orthodontics. Until very recently, a beautiful, healthy smile with no missing teeth was hardly something people could take for granted. The fact that the teeth are like shorn lambs that come up from washing obviously implies that they are clean and white. Although data on קצב is scarce, 2 Kgs 6:6 is fairly strong evidence that the rare root קצב means to "cut off," or with reference to sheep, "shorn."
   v. Lips
      1. The idea that her lips are "like a scarlet thread" is not particularly attractive to us, since it seems to imply that she has thin lips. This is certainly not the point. The obvious visual link between the metaphor and the lips is the color red, a feature still regarded as attractive for women's lips in many cultures
   vi. Temples –
      1. He has already spoken of the redness of her lips, and the point here seems to be that she has a youthful glow. Also, the interior of a pomegranate connotes sweetness and sensual pleasure.
      2.

b. Beautiful Neck v.4
   i. The military language employed to describe the "tower of David" indicates that the main point of comparison is not that her neck is long

and slender, like a high tower (notwithstanding the fact that Egyptians considered long necks attractive).

ii. There is a kind of beauty associated with military hardware, but it is a beauty that connotes strength. Applied to walls and towers, this language connotes impregnability. The man's adoration of the woman arises in part from the fact that he cannot take her at will. He speaks tenderly to her, hoping that she will give him willingly what he cannot take by force. Furthermore, his words imply respect for how she deports herself and possesses her beauty. She is not weak in her beauty but strong.

c. Beautiful Breast v.5
    i. Rather, it seems that the comparison is another example of how gazelles in the Song connote playfulness, energy, and sexuality
d. Flawless v.7
    i. This verse concludes the *waṣf* with a summation that fairly says everything the man wants to get across: the woman is absolutely flawless

Commentary Studies
2:3-6

Commentary

3 The final subsection (**a′** [2:3–7]) of the first major section (**A** [1:1–2:7]) of the Song of Songs beautifully mirrors the initial subsection (**a** [1:1–7]), its chiastic pairing. As the young woman is initially heard to express her desire to kiss the young king, whom she admires greatly (1:2–3), and go with him to his chambers (1:4), again she speaks of him with tremendous admiration in 2:3. This time, however, she is brought by him to the "house of wine" (2:4a). Also, in the first part of the section, she still expresses mixed feelings about her beauty (1:5–6), while, by 2:4–5, she has become assured enough in his love (2:4b) that she is unselfconsciously "lovesick" (2:5). Finally, in both subsections, the daughters of Jerusalem are her sounding board (1:5; 2:7).

The young woman's words in 2:3 are clearly in direct response to the young king's words in 2:2, though her comparison is not as stark. He likened her there to a "lily among the thorns," getting across to her that, in his eyes, she was so beautiful that all other beautiful women were ugly in comparison. Her comparison of him to a tree is more difficult to understand, but, as will be seen, they are quite striking when unpacked.

What kind of tree does she have in mind? The most common translation (e.g., NAS[1]B, NI[2]V) is "apple tree." The problem with that rendering is that there is no proof that apple trees had been introduced to Israel in the OT era (e.g., Estes, 316, Fox, 107), if anywhere in the entire AN[3]E (Carr, 89). According to Carr (and so in the HCS[4]B), the apricot is the better option: "The apricot, although not native to Palestine, was grown there from Old Testament times and may have been introduced early enough to be the fruit in question" (Carr, 89).

Estes is probably correct in his understanding of the Shulammite's comparison of the young king with the other young men: "The other men are dangerous, like the inhospitable forest that was the haunt of wild animals in ancient Israel" (Estes, 318). She views Solomon as safe and completely trustworthy.

There is nothing in the rest of the verse that requires a sexual understanding, at least not in the context of the early portion of the Song. The Shulammite is still figuratively referred to as a virgin on her wedding night (4:12). An argument against the sexual angle being present is 2:3 is that she is said to delight to "sit," not lie down, in his shade (Estes, 319). The point of the extension of the comparison seems to be closer to viewing him almost like an oasis in the burning sun of the region. Not only is the protection of the shade of the tree to be found there, but also the refreshment of the fruit of the tree. In addition, none of the immediately preceding context (1:15–2:2) is explicitly sexual, thus making it unlikely that the images in 2:3 should be taken in that manner.

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[1]NASB New American Standard Bible
[2]NIV New International Version
[3]ANE Ancient Near East(ern)
[4]HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible

4 Verse 4 describes the arrival of the couple at a location that is called, literally, "the house of wine." What is meant by this phrase? There is no exact parallel wording elsewhere in the OT.[1952] The closest phraseology is "the house of wine drinking" (HCS[6]B) in Esth 7:8, and, literally, "the drinking house" (Eccl 7:2; Jer 16:8). Of these three passages, the Esther passage certainly refers to a specific location, as the definite article verifies in Song 2:4 (Longman 2001, 112–13). The other two are most naturally taken that way. This is important to observe, given that commentators like Longman and Hess see the location angle as fading into the background, being secondary here to the poetic inference of being sexually "intoxicated" with each other (Longman 2001, 113). If the location angle is maintained as a primary aspect, though, as seems more likely, "the house of wine" could be a banquet hall, though it would not be a wedding banquet at this point in the Song.[1973] However, given the earlier mention of "vineyards" (1:6) related to her family, it is quite possible that "the house of wine" is referring to a structure located very near her home, whether its normal daily purpose was the making, storage or consumption of wine—or all three.[1984] Support for this view is the extended string of images related to the countyside of Israel in 1:16–2:2, with "cedars" and "the forest" specifically most naturally referring to northern Israel and Lebanon, her home area (see 4:8, 11, 15). Further, if a case can be made for a sequential relationship between sections **A** (1:1–2:7) and **B** (2:8–17), the latter passage is set at her home.

If "the house of wine" is taken to mean a location related to the vineyards where the beautiful young woman worked when she was younger (1:6), there would be irony with regard to the fact that she had previously expressed her anger at being forced to work in the vineyards in the blazing sun, but now is involved in at least an impromptu celebration of Solomon's love for her at that very same location.

A question that might arise here is, given her family's apparent limited financial means, how could they afford to pay for such a celebration? This is a point at which the mirroring relationship between the A (1:1–2:7) and A′ (8:5–14) sections is illuminating. Since Solomon owned the vineyard the Shulammite's family leased and worked (8:11–12), he could simply tell them he was going to use the facility, paying them (generously, no doubt) for whatever was used/consumed, while inviting them to attend his (perhaps spontaneous) public proclamation of his love for her.

The wording in the second part of Song 2:4 has been subject to considerable difference in scholarly opinion. For example, Pope, leaning on an Akkadian cognate, renders דִּגְלֹו as "his intention" (Pope, 375–77); Gordis, drawing on a second Akkadian cognate, translates "his glance."[1995] The presumed problem with the traditional rendering of "his banner" has more to do with the military coloring of the term in its only other OT usage, in Numbers, where it refers to tribal banners in the wilderness (Num 1:52; 2:2, 3, 10, 17, 18, 25, 31, 34; 10:14, 18, 22, 25).

[5192] This absence opened the door for Pope, 375, to suggest linkage to the fertility cult of "wine" to "women" and "song."

[6] HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible

[7193] As suggested by Garrett 2004, 150, though he also sees lovemaking as the wider meaning of the verse.

[8194] As suggested by Carr, 90–91.

[9195] Robert Gordis, "The Root *dgl* in the Song of Songs," *JBL* 88 (1969): 203–4.

However, as king, there is no reason why a "banner" would be out of place in such figurative imagery. In fact, for Solomon to openly proclaim his love for the young woman in such a group setting would be quite a bit like the public display of a banner.

5 It appears that Solomon's (likely first) public proclamation of his love for the young woman caused her to be overcome with emotion and desire. Although her request for sustenance (i.e., "raisin cakes" and "apricots") does not, in this context, obviously infer anything other than that she felt weak and realized she needed to eat (Murphy, 137), the food in question here has been taken as an aphrodisiac.[19106] The obvious weakness of such a view is the plural verbal forms in the verse, indicating that she addressing multiple hearers—most likely the daughters of Jerusalem, who are specifically addressed in 2:7.[19117] Directly related to that observation is the young woman's reference to the cultural taboo against public displays of affection by lovers (8:1). Thus, with the daughters of Jerusalem present to hear her words in 2:5, the setting of her request for food would not be sexual.

6 The Shulammite's desire in 2:6 is a further stage of her initially stated desire, which was for the young king to kiss her in 1:2.[19128] Her previous candor about her feelings for him, apparently either in the presence of—or at least close proximity to—the daughters of Jerusalem in 1:2–4a, prepares the reader for what takes place in 2:5–7. The verb translated "embrace" in 2:6b is clearly employed in a sexual context in Prov 5:20 (also written by Solomon). Thus it seems the young woman is admitting here that, with the growth of their love, "she has to contend with powerful sexual desires and drives that could easily overwhelm her better judgment and moral virtue" (Estes, 322).

It is not insignificant that the exact wording in Song 2:6 is repeated in 8:3. Further, the wording in 8:4 is quite similar to 2:7 (see comments below), but compressed by not including "by the gazelles or the does of the field." Both 2:6–7 and 8:3–4 are found at major breaking points in the structure of the Song: 2:6–7 at the transition from **A** (1:1–2:7) to **B** (2:8–17); 8:3–4 between **B′** (7:11–8:4) and **A′** (8:5–14).[13]

3 The woman begins by continuing the antiphonal series: the man has said she compares to other women as a lotus compares to brambles, and she responds that he compares to other men as the apple tree to the trees of a forest. The point of comparison is of course that the apple tree bears delicious fruit but that forest trees do not.

[10196] So. e.g., Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Festin erotique et tendresse cannibalique dans le Cantigue des Cantiques," *SR* 24 (1995): 132.

[11197] There are no textual cluse as to how—or why—the daughters of Jerusalem would be present at such a celebration being held at a considerable geographical distance from Jerusalem.

[12198] Estes, 321, makes a good case for the optative sense in 2:6.

[13] A. Boyd Luter, *Song of Songs* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), So 2:3–6.

A number of scholars argue that the edible apple was unknown in ancient Israel and contend that the תפוח was an apricot (especially Fox, *Song of Songs*, 107, but other suggestions include the orange and even the lemon). The apple was known in ancient Mesopotamia (von Soden, *Ancient Orient*, 102–3). Also, the ancient Greeks and Romans knew and enjoyed the apple. It is certainly conceivable that the ancient Israelites knew the apple as well. The apple tree probably originates from the area between the Caspian and Black Seas; it was brought to the New World by immigrants. L. Walker notes that the apricot was a late import from China but that later use of תפוח associates it with the making of sauce and cider, which also suggests the meaning "apple" (*NIDOTT*[14]*E* §9515). The word is rendered as "apple" in both LX[15]X (μῆλον) and Vg[16]. (*malum*).

As mentioned above, the apple was quite significant in Greco-Roman literature. It is especially associated with women (or goddesses) and sexuality. According to (Pseudo) Apollodorus, *Library* 2.173, Eris ("strife") offered the prize of an apple in the beauty contest between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite and so ultimately provoked the Trojan wars. In the tale of Atalanta and Melanion (more commonly known as Hippomenes), the athletic virgin Atalanta issued the challenge that she, wearing full armor, would race any man who desired to marry her. If she won, the man would die on the spot, but if he won, he could marry her. After many had died in the attempt, Melanion succeeded by throwing in front of her the golden apples of the Hesperides that Aphrodite had given him, which she could not resist stooping to pick up (*Library* 1.401). Another myth tells how Earth presented Zeus with the golden apples of the Hesperides after his marriage to Hera. The Hesperides (nymphs) and a dragon guarded these apples at the western end of the world; Herakles' eleventh labor was to fetch them (*Library* 1.221). Pausanias, in his guide to Greece (2.10.5), describes an image to Aphrodite in which the goddess holds an apple in her hand. The figure of the apple also appears on a number of extant vases. For example, an early classical vase from Attica (catalogue London D 6) depicts a girl (or nymph) picking apples from a tree. A red figure vase from Campania, about 450 B.C.E. (Boston 01.8083), depicts three women at a festival of Dionysius, and the central woman holds an apple. Artwork on other vases reflects the fact that the apple had sexual implications.

In short, classical evidence for the association of apples with women and sexuality is fairly strong; the woman's claim that the man is to her like an apple tree is in keeping with this motif. She speaks of taking pleasure in his shade and his fruit and abiding with him. As in the myth of Atalanta and Melanion, she is the virgin who finds the apples to be irresistible.

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[14]*NIDOTTE New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Ed. W.A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI, 1997.

[15]LXX Septuagint

[16]Vg. Vulgate

4 As stated in *Note* 4.[17]a., in this context ודגלו might have the meaning, "his intention." The more common Hebrew meaning of דגל, "banner," cannot be excluded, however. Later in the Song, the woman as a virgin is a walled city (6:4) and is surrounded by guards. The man has not conquered the city but has come to her in peace and has been freely admitted (see, e.g., Song 8:10). Understood in light of this metaphor, the line "his banner toward me is love" becomes comprehensible; the man is a "king" who comes as an ally and not an enemy. He has approached her in peace and not to conquer. "His banner toward me is love" is a veiled anticipation of the metaphor of the woman as a walled city that the man takes without combat or violence.

He has brought her to the "house of wine" with the intent to give her his love. Interpreters have understood the phrase בית היין, "house of wine," in a wide range of ways—as a banqueting hall, as a symposium, or as an arbor where one drinks and makes love. If a wedding banquet is in view here, the "house of wine" is on one level the banquet and on another level the anticipated love play. In the Song, wine often connotes or is associated with lovemaking, especially kisses (1:2, 4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:3 [E[18]T 2], 10 [E[19]T 9]; 8:2).

5 The verb סמך in the *qal* means "to rest upon, support, lean against." In Gen 27:37, ודגן ותירש סמכתיו means, "with grain and wine I supported him," and thus many conclude that here the word means to "refresh" or "feed." On the other hand, the phrase וסמכת את־ידך עליו means, "and lay your hand on him" (Num 27:18), indicating that the primary meaning of סמך is that one thing is leaning or resting on another (other examples include Exod 29:10, 15, 19; Lev 1:4; 3:2, 8). It is best to understand Gen 27:37 as a metaphorical use of סמך, analogous to the English word *support* used with the meaning "provide the necessities of life for someone." סמך is also used metaphorically to mean "rely upon" (e.g., 2 Chr 32:8 [*nipʿal*]). But in English one would not use "I supported him" to mean "(in the course of a meal) I served him food," and we may doubt that the Hebrew סמך should be so understood here. It is probable that the *piʿel* of סמך (used only here) means, "make (me) to rest upon" rather than "feed me."

The verb רפד appears three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Job 41:22 (E[20]T 41:30) we have תחתיו חדודי חרש ירפד חרוץ עלי־טיט, "Beneath him are jagged potsherds; he stretches out [like] a sledge over mud," in the description of Leviathan (using *qal* stem of רפד). A *piʿel* form appears in Job 17:13, "If I spread out [רפדתי] my bed in darkness." From these two examples, it appears that the *qal* has the intransitive or middle meaning, "to spread oneself out" or "stretch oneself out," whereas the *piʿel* has the transitive meaning, "to spread something out." The *piʿel*

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[17]4.a Although דגל can mean "banner" (notwithstanding Murphy, 132), the phrase "his banner toward me is love" strikes many as an odd metaphor in this context, where the terms are not military but are derived from the gardens and vineyards. One might, therefore, follow Gordis (81–82) and Pope (376) in reading this as a cognate to the Akkadian *diglu*, "wish, intention." Gordis (*JBL* 88 [1969] 203–4) also suggests that it means "And his glance upon me is loving." But a good case for "banner" can be made from the use of the root דגל in Song 5:10; 6:4, 10, where it means something like "marked with a banner." There may be deliberate ambiguity here; see Comment on v 4.

[18]ET English translation

[19]ET English translation

[20]ET English translation

example here (רפדוני) thus could mean, “Spread me out,” but it is probably more appropriate to give it the translation, “stretch me out.” The word never connotes giving someone food.

The verb חלה means to be hurt or in pain. The source of the hurt may be an illness (1 Sam 19:14; 1 Kgs 14:1, 5; 17:17), weariness (Isa 57:10), or an injury or wound (2 Kgs 1:2; 2 Chr 22:6). It is often used for illness, and one could translate this as “lovesick.” However, to the modern reader this implies adolescent pining, and there is more to it than that. In what sense has love wounded the woman or made her ill, and why does she ask that they lay her on raisin cakes and apples? Scholars often take this text to mean simply that she is flushed with excitement over love and that she needs raisin cakes and apples to restore her strength. Also, many interpreters point out that these foods probably were thought to have an aphrodisiac quality.

The image of lying on a bed of raisins and apples has layers of meaning. Lying down implies rest for someone who is weary or ill, and the eating of food gives strength to such persons. On the other hand, lying down has sexual implications, and sweetmeats such as raisins and apples probably connote love play. Lying down in these foods also betokens luxuriant extravagance. Her request is thus an appeal for both strength and for affection, but it suggests a paradise setting. She needs this because she is “wounded by love.” The real question, then, concerns the significance of her sickness.

Her lovesickness does reflect her deep desire for her lover, but it is not a desire for an absent lover or grief over unrequited love. It is, rather, a conflicted desire. חלה, “wounded,” implies real illness or impairment; it is unlikely that the term here means only that she is overly excited or flushed from overstimulation. Similarly, there is more here than adolescent pining; the language implies real suffering that the reader is to empathize with rather than smile at. It is better to take this as mental pain produced by profound anxiety and conflict. The solution to her anxiety, here metaphorically described as lying down in a bed of raisins or apples, is the affection of her beloved. It is his affection that will enable her to overcome her internal conflict. She has already described her lover as an apple tree in Song 2:3; it is hardly an interpretive leap to take “apples” here to refer to his affection.

6 The dyad “right hand” and “left hand” also appears in the Sumerian love poetry, but the usage there is more erotic. In one of the Sumerian songs, the woman asks the man to place his left hand at her head and his right hand at her nakedness, that is, her genitals (*C*[21]*S* 1:541). Here in the Song, the right-hand-left-hand dyad only implies affection and support, not genital stimulation.

This verse answers the request of the previous verse. The man lets her rest upon his left arm while he caresses her with his right hand. He sustains her with tender affection; his love is the raisins and apples upon which she rests. As described in *Form/Structure/Setting* above, however, it seems to be bound to strophe 6 rather than to strophe 5. The declaration that the girls should not awaken love (Song 2:7) before the right time is closely related to this verse.[22]

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[21]*CS The Context of Scripture*. Ed. W. W. Hallo. Leiden, 1997.

[22] Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, vol. 23B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 2004), 149–152.

2:3 Again she answers in kind (v. 3a) but then extends the praise of his love into vv. 3b–6, gives her first admonition to the Jerusalem girls (v. 7), and announces his arrival (vv. 8–10a). He is "like an apple[2238] tree," that is, protective ("shade") and pleasurable ("his fruit").

2:4–6 "Banquet hall" is literally "house of wine."[2249] Frequently taken to refer to some special location (a banquet hall, tavern, or shrine), it is often drawn into the debate concerning the original setting of the Song. For some it is the location of a wedding celebration, whereas for others it indicates that the Song deals with sacred fertility rites. The reference to "raisins"[3250] is taken by some to support the latter notion (cf. Hos 3:1).[3261]

Such interpretations, however, are misguided. It is clear from v. 6 that she is in his embrace; in vv. 4–5 she describes her experience in a series of comparisons. The "house of wine" is, as Fox indicates, simply any building where wine is drunk.[3272] As a metaphor it means that he is bringing her to pleasures that are almost intoxicating, and the experience causes her to swoon (v. 5c). His intention (rather than "banner" [v. 4][3283]) toward her is love, and she yearns for his love, as implied in, "I have the love-sickness."[3294] As in the Egyptian material, one who yearns for the love of another often describes himself or herself as sick.

She asks to be placed on a bed of raisins and other fruits. (The translations "strengthen" and "refresh" are possible, but an alternative interpretation, "to lay someone down on a bed," has

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[2328] There is some doubt about whether תַּפּוּחַ is actually the apple. Fox (*Song*, 107) notes that the wild apple is neither palatable nor indigenous to Palestine and that the cultivated apple is recent. He suggests that this is the apricot. See also G. L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 89.

[2429] בֵּית הַיָּיִן.

[2530] The meaning of אֲשִׁישׁוֹת is uncertain, but "raisin cakes" appears probable. Cf. Pope, *Song*, 380.

[2631] Cf. Pope, *Song*, 375–77.

[2732] Fox, *Song*, 108.

[2833] There is no doubt that דֶּגֶל can mean "banner," but it is almost impossible to ascertain what the metaphor "his banner over me is love" may mean. Several scholars, therefore, connect the word with Akkadian *diglu*, "wish, intention," which fits the present context well. See Gordis, *Song*, 81–2, and Pope, *Song*, 376.

[2934] This interpretation of כִּי־חוֹלַת אַהֲבָה אָנִי is more suitable than, "I am faint with love," which is periphrastic.

equal if not greater probability [v. 5].[3305] In either case, the object of her desire is not real fruit but his love.) As in 2:3 she associates the pleasures he gives with various fruits.[31]

Commentary Studies
4:1-7

Comment

1 The metaphor of the woman's eyes being doves is difficult to unpack; see Comment on 1:15. In this verse, however, it seems that the point of comparison is that her eyes are partially hidden behind a veil, much as a dove hides in the cleft of a rock (see Song 2:14 and Jer 48:28). He finds the way her eyes seem to be hiding behind her veil to be very alluring.

The idiom מבעד לצמתך, "behind your veil," appears here and at 4:3 and 6:7. The meaning of צמה as "veil" is open to question. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the compound preposition מן + בעד + ל (מבעד ל) also occurs only in these verses, and צמה occurs elsewhere only at Isa 47:2. G. Gerleman (144) suggests that LX[32]X σιώπησις, "silence" or "taciturnity," has misread the verb as צמת, "to destroy, to silence," here. The Vulgate is equally obscure (see Note 4:1.a[33].). Some translate צמה as "locks (of hair)," but evidence supporting this is inadequate. The sixteenth-century Spanish Hebraist Luis de León argued that Jerome was using a euphemistic paraphrase, because צמה actually refers to female pudenda (J. Barr, "Luis de León," 231–33). This interpretation is possible in light of Isa 47:2, a taunt of the "virgin

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[3035] See Fox, *Song*, 108–9. The word סמך means "to lay, rest, or support." Only here does it appear in the piel stem, and the meaning "to cause to lie down" is reasonable. On the other hand, the meaning "to sustain" in the sense of providing food is attested in the qal stem of Gen 27:37. The parallel verb רפד, however, means "to spread out" (piel stem) and is found in Job 17:13, "If I spread out my bed." Thus רַפְּדוּנִי בַּתַּפּוּחִים would mean "Spread me out on apricots." On balance the meaning "to lay (someone) on a bed" seems probable for the verbs. Whichever meaning is preferred, however, the concept is metaphorical—the man's love is likened to delicious fruit—and not literal. The plural imperatives are addressed to no one in particular but are exclamatory.

[31] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 391–392.

[32]LXX Septuagint

[33]4:1.a. For MT מבעד לצמתך, "from beyond your veil" (see Comment), LXX has σιώπησις, "silence" or "taciturnity," for צמה, "veil," in the very peculiar phrase, ἐκτὸς τῆς σιωπήσεώς σου, "beyond your taciturnity." Vg. *absque eo quod intrinsecus latet*, "besides what lies hidden within." σ΄ κάλυμμα, "veil."

daughter of Babylon," where גלי צמתך could be taken to mean "expose your pudenda" rather than "take off your veil." The first clause of Isa 47:3 is תגל ערותך, "your nakedness will be exposed." But it is almost impossible to make sense of the line עיניך יונים מבעד לצמתך, "your eyes are doves behind your," in the Song with this interpretation of the word צמה. Pope (457) observes that Symmachus has κάλυμμα, "veil," here and that in Aramaic verbs from the root צמם are used of veiling the face. Hence, the translation "veil" is retained here.

Her hair, which may be dark and wavy, reminds him of a flock of goats leaping down the side of a mountain. The root גלשׁ only appears here and again in precisely the same phrase at Song 6:5. Its meaning is uncertain. The versions are of little help and differ in their interpretations (see Note 4:1.b[34].). Pope (459–60) observes that two suggestions have been made from cognate languages. An apparently foreign word in the Egyptian text Papyrus Lansing, verso 1, 9, *kꜣ-pꜣ-šw*, seems to mean "skip." On the other hand, a Ugaritic fragment (2001.1.5) contains the phrase *wtglṯ thmt*, which might be taken to mean, "and the abyss was roiled." Given the minimal state of our information, it is probably best to take גלשׁ here to mean that the flock is skipping down the mountain and so from a distance resembles a turbulent, sensual mass of hair. (See *HALO*[35]*T* גלשׁ.) For a shepherd people, this would have been high praise, and the compliment connotes vitality in the woman.

In addition, the praise of the woman is particularized in that the goats are leaping down "Mount Gilead." The location of Mount Gilead is unknown. It may be not a single mountain but the ridges in the Transjordan opposite Samaria. Judg 7:3 does refer to מהר הגלעד, "the mountain of the Gilead," but a number of scholars regard that text as suspect and emend to "Mount Gilboa" or render the phrase as "Mount Galud." Interpreted as "Galud," it would refer to Ain Jalud, to the west of the Jordan and south of Jezreel (cf. *ISB*[36]*E* 2:470, "Gilead, Mount"). Here in the Song, however, there is no intrinsic reason to doubt the text. Probably מהר גלעד is either the slopes of Gilead generally or is a name attached to some specific site in Gilead that is now lost to us.

It is noteworthy that the man often praises the woman in terms of the places, flora, and fauna of the Levant. Elsewhere, he compares her features to a tower that David built (4:4), to Lebanon (4:11), to Tirzah and Jerusalem (6:4), to the pools of Heshbon (7:4), and to Carmel (7:5). The text abounds in references to goats, to sheep that have just been shorn, to gazelles feeding, and to vineyards, local flowers, and fruits.

2 The woman has all of her teeth! This may seem like a rather droll bit of praise to the modern, Western reader, but we live in an age of highly sophisticated dentistry and orthodontics. Until very recently, a beautiful, healthy smile with no missing teeth was hardly something people could take for granted. The fact that the teeth are like shorn lambs that come

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[34]4:1.b. For MT מבעד לצמתך, "from beyond your veil" (see Comment), LXX has σιώπησις, "silence" or "taciturnity," for צמה, "veil," in the very peculiar phrase, ἐκτὸς τῆς σιωπήσεώς σου, "beyond your taciturnity." Vg. *absque eo quod intrinsecus latet*, "besides what lies hidden within." σ΄ κάλυμμα, "veil."

[35]*HALOT* Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Trans. and ed. under supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–99.

[36]*ISBE International Standard Bible Enryclopedia*. Ed. G.W. Bromiley. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI, 1979–88).

up from washing obviously implies that they are clean and white. Although data on קצב is scarce, 2 Kgs 6:6 is fairly strong evidence that the rare root קצב means to "cut off," or with reference to sheep, "shorn."

The fact that every one has a twin means that no teeth are missing. The root תאם with the sense to "double" or "have a twin" appears in Exod 26:24 and 36:29 (in both cases the noun תוֹאָם) and in Song 6:6, which virtually repeats the present text. In this case, the *hipʿil* מַתְאִימוֹת cannot mean "bear twins," in which case three sheep would be in view (the mother and her twin lambs). Rather, it means to have a twin sibling or to be in pairs. One could take "twin" to refer to the correspondence of upper and lower teeth, but probably it means that each tooth on the right side of the face has a matching tooth on the left side. That is, for the upper right canine tooth there is a matching canine on the upper left, and so forth.

The adjective וְשַׁכֻּלָה would normally mean "childless" or refer to the bereavement suffered as the result of the death of one's children. The point here is that every lamb has a twin and not that every sheep has twin children. Note also the assonance in the words וְשַׁכֻּלָה, "bereft," and שֶׁכֻּלָּם, "which every one."

Shorn lambs leaping up from their washing connote vigor and health, just as a good smile is a sign of good health. The image of lambs at shearing time would have evoked deep feelings of appreciation for the joys of pastoral life in a people who knew this life well.

3 The idea that her lips are "like a scarlet thread" is not particularly attractive to us, since it seems to imply that she has thin lips. This is certainly not the point. The obvious visual link between the metaphor and the lips is the color red, a feature still regarded as attractive for women's lips in many cultures. For the reader of the biblical canon, it is noteworthy that the phrase חוט השני, "scarlet thread," is precisely the same as that used to describe the "scarlet thread" by which Rahab signaled to the Israelites which house was hers (Josh 2:18). Is it coincidence that Rahab, a prostitute, had such an item readily available in her home? Possibly; but a scarlet thread may have had some kind of sexual significance and thus have been a kind of trademark for prostitutes. Keel ([1994] 143) suggests that a prostitute would have attached the red cord to her door as a symbol of her profession. If so, the red cord may not have of itself signaled prostitution; it could have been a symbol for love (like the "heart" shape today) that was co-opted by prostitution. In any case, the point may be that the man sees her lips as an invitation to love.

"Your speech is lovely." Interpreters routinely take מדבר here to mean the "mouth as the organ of speech" on the basis of its pairing with שִׂפְתֹתַיִךְ, "your lips." It is more likely that מדבר here refers to speech itself rather than to the organ of speech. The Song frequently avoids parallelism that is fully redundant. Also, the adjective נאוה, "lovely," does not refer exclusively to visual beauty; see Ps 147:1, נאוה תהלה, "praise [to God] is lovely." Elsewhere in the Song the man sings of his delight in the sound of her voice (2:14). Fox (*Song of Songs*, 130) suggests that ומדבריך נאוה is a wordplay that could be heard to mean "and your wilderness is an oasis," meaning that even her blemishes are beautiful. But the man regards her as flawless (v 7), and it is at any rate unlikely that he would use "wilderness" to mean "blemish."

The noun רקה, "cheek," appears five times in the Bible, including here and a parallel text in Song 6:7, as well as in Judg 4:21–22; 5:26. The latter three texts all describe how Jael drove a tent peg through the temple of Sisera. The word probably refers to the side of the head, including what we would call the temple and the cheekbone. In describing her cheeks as halves

of pomegranates, he may mean one of two things. He could be saying that she has high cheek bones, analogous to how a pomegranate half bulges out on its rounded side. It is more likely, however, that he means that the parts of her cheeks that are visible above her veil have a pinkish color, like the interior of a split pomegranate. He has already spoken of the redness of her lips, and the point here seems to be that she has a youthful glow. Also, the interior of a pomegranate connotes sweetness and sensual pleasure.

4 The military language employed to describe the "tower of David" indicates that the main point of comparison is not that her neck is long and slender, like a high tower (notwithstanding the fact that Egyptians considered long necks attractive). Obviously there is a superficial resemblance between a tower and a neck, but height, delicacy, and proportion do not figure in the language here. Keel ([1994] 147) observes that ancient Near Eastern towers tended to be massive rather than slender. Also, not every tower is adorned with armaments as this one is.

The meaning of לתלפיות (a *hapax legomenon*) is uncertain. LX[37]X reads it as a proper name. Most treat it as a noun from the root *לפא, meaning "to lay in courses" (Gerleman 148). Thus בנוי לתלפיות is routinely translated "built in courses." BD[38]B has the conjectural "armory" and Crim (*B[39]T* 22 [1971] 74) the dubious interpretation "Your neck is like the tower of David, / round and smooth. // A thousand famous soldiers / surrender their shields to its beauty." The phrase "built in courses" may mean that it is built with ashlar—that is, with stone that could be precisely cut and thus tightly fitted together (cf. *HALO[40]T* תַּלְפִּיוֹת). Aesthetically, this makes for a more admirable tower, and it also probably had some military advantage, since a foe could not easily scale or pry apart the stones.

The word שׁלט appears seven times in the OT (2 Sam 8:7 [|| 1 Chr 18:7]; 2 Kgs 11:10 [|| 2 Chr 23:9]; Jer 51:11; Ezek 27:11; and here). It is usually translated "shield" (here in the Song it is paired with מגן). On the other hand, "shield" is not appropriate in Jer 51:11, where it seems to mean a "quiver (for arrows)," and only in the two texts in Samuel and Kings (with parallels) is "shield" likely. Fox (*Song of Songs*, 131) makes a good case that שׁלט simply means "military equipment." Ezek 27:11 has a most remarkable parallel to this text: "the Gammadim were in your towers. They hung their weapons on your walls [בְּמִגְדְּלוֹתַיִךְ הָיוּ שִׁלְטֵיהֶם תָּלוּ עַל־חוֹמוֹתַיִךְ] all around; they perfected your beauty." That text is a lament over Tyre, and the identity of the "Gammadim" is uncertain (Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 379, takes it to mean "watchmen"). It is clear, however, that the Gammadim are allies and defenders of the city who both adorned and protected the walls with their arsenal. Precise translation is not possible for שׁלט, but it definitely is military in nature.

Even if we assume that the shields and weaponry are in some sense metaphorical for necklaces and other jewelry worn about the neck, the martial connotation of depicting her neck in these terms cannot be set aside. The association of the neck and tower with David, Israel's great warrior king, enhances the military tone of the text. The language of Ezek 27:11 is very

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[37]LXX Septuagint

[38]BDB Brown, F., S. R Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.1907. Reprint, Peabody, MA, 1999.

[39]*BT The Bible Translator*

[40]*HALOT* Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Trans. and ed. under supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–99.

close to that of this verse. There is a kind of beauty associated with military hardware, but it is a beauty that connotes strength. Applied to walls and towers, this language connotes impregnability. The man's adoration of the woman arises in part from the fact that he cannot take her at will. He speaks tenderly to her, hoping that she will give him willingly what he cannot take by force. Furthermore, his words imply respect for how she deports herself and possesses her beauty. She is not weak in her beauty but strong.

5 There is obviously no visual resemblance between her breasts and twin fawns other than that both come in pairs. A number of scholars follow W. Rudolph (147), who contends that one can see only the rounded backs of the two fawns protruding above tall flowers as they feed, and that this accounts for the simile here. But as Keel ([1994] 150) points out, this does not work in the shorter version of the simile at Song 7:3. Nor do we need to imagine that the woman is wearing a wreath of flowers around her breasts (Fox, *Song of Songs*, 131). Rather, it seems that the comparison is another example of how gazelles in the Song connote playfulness, energy, and sexuality (e.g., Song 2:7, 9). The picture of fawns feeding among lotus flowers (so taking בשושנים) seems unnatural; the lotus is a water lily. Of course, the image need not be one of fawns standing *in* the water and *eating* water lilies; it is more likely that they are understood to be feeding on grass near the edge of ponds where lotuses grow. It is in this sense, standing on dry ground, that they are "among" the lotuses. Or, it may be that שושנים connotes both lilies and lotuses (see Comment on 2:1–2, 16 above). But the juxtaposition of lotuses and fawns is significant. Both connote beauty, sexuality, and life. The woman can compare the man's lips to lotuses (Song 5:13) and call herself a lotus (Song 2:1). For the man, her breasts are a focal point of her sexuality.

6 For the translation of עד שיפוח היום as "until the day comes to life," see Comment on 2:17 above.

Having described her breasts, the man abruptly breaks off from the description and declares his intentions. He is determined to get himself to "Myrrh Mountain" and "Incense Hill," and the meaning of his words is hardly obscure: the two hills are obviously her breasts. They are not literal mountains in Israel or elsewhere, nor are they simply the "make-believe world of love poetry" (Murphy, 159). Scholars sometimes cite the Cairo love songs to the effect that a man in his woman's arms imagines himself in the land of Punt, the domain of the gods (cf. Keel [1994] 152). In my view, the analogy to the Egyptian text here is overworked. "Myrrh Mountain" and "Incense Hill" are not the proper names of some mythological paradise like Punt or the Elysian Fields, nor are they literal hills in the terrain of Israel. They are a straightforward metaphor for breasts. In Song 7:7–8, the man does much the same thing he does here. In the course of a *waṣf* (praise of the woman), he comes to the woman's breasts and suddenly interrupts his description of her beauty and expresses a keen desire to enjoy her breasts; in 7:7 he says that they are like clusters in a palm tree, and in 7:8 he says that he will climb the tree and lay hold of those clusters. The breasts are here given the names "Myrrh Mountain" and "Incense Hill" obviously because their shape is mountainlike but also because they give exotic pleasure, much as spices do. In addition, the Israelite bride may have literally perfumed her breasts with myrrh and incense; in Song 1:13, the woman describes the man as a pouch of myrrh between her breasts, a metaphor that may reflect an actual bridal practice. In saying that he intends to get himself to these mountains "until the day comes to life and the shadows flee," the man means that he intends to make love to her all night long. The language of love is often hyperbolic.

7 This verse concludes the *waṣf* with a summation that fairly says everything the man wants to get across: the woman is absolutely flawless.[41]

The man's part here is divided into two sections, vv. 1–7,[8425] an admiration song, and vv. 8–15, which begin with an invitation but then move on to praise the pleasures of the woman's love. The metaphors of the admiration song seem harsh and unnatural to the modern reader because we take them in too literal a sense. He is not describing so much how *she looks* but how *he feels* when he looks at her. Aspects of the woman's beauty provoke profound emotional responses.

4:1 "Doves" convey a sense of gentleness and tenderness. Fox points out that the cooing of doves may also be implied. Her eyes "communicate."[8436] The veil[8447] both hides and enhances her beauty. It appears that the veil was worn by aristocratic women and not by peasants, which contradicts the portrait of her in 1:6.[8458] Concern for logical consistency in the imagery of the Song, however, is out of place. The figure of her hair being like a flock of goats skipping down[8469] Mount Gilead corresponds somewhat to the actual appearance of hair flowing down over a girl's shoulder, but the sense of vitality conveyed and the sustaining of the pastoral ambiance are equally important.

4:2 The obvious message here is that her teeth are white and none are missing. Again, however, the picture of a flock that is clean and healthy (not a single lamb has died) tells us that the woman projects a sense of vigor and purity.[9470]

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[41] Duane Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, vol. 23B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 2004), 188–192.

[4285] Note the inclusio formed by יָפָה רַעְיָתִי in vv. 1 and 7.

[4386] Fox, *Song*, 129.

[4487] צַמָּה is probably "veil" and not "locks," as the KJV has. (See Carr, *Song*, 114.)

[4588] See Fox, *Song*, 129.

[4689] The meaning of גלשׁ is not established. BDB lists the meaning "sit," which implies that the picture is of a herd in repose on a mountainside. Pope (*Song*, 459) lists possible Egyptian and Ugaritic cognates, however, that indicate it may mean "to skip" or "stream down."

[4790] Note also the wordplay in שֶׁכֻּלָּם … וְשָׁכֵלָה.

4:3 The mouth is attractive too.[9481] The "rosy glow" of her lips and cheeks[9492] is not merely beautiful but wholesome; "pomegranate" recalls earlier usages of fruit as sexual metaphor, and the sense of desirable to kiss may be implied.

4:4 Her neck is like the tower of David in that both are statuesque and cause feelings of admiration and wonder. He does not mean that her neck is outlandishly long.[9503] What is striking in this analogy is the military terminology. The picture of a tower of David, Israel's great warrior king, adorned with the shields and weapons[9514] of mighty men, cannot but convey a sense of unassailable strength.[9525] No man could "conquer" her, and her suitor is awed by the dignity she carries. Her love is a gift; it could never become plunder.

4:5 The portrayal of the breasts as a pair of fawns draws on the sense of tenderness that such delicate animals impart.[9536] Besides the obvious fact that there are two, no visual similarity is implied.

4:6–7 At the description of her breasts, the man breaks off from his admiration song and declares his intention to make love to her. His words echo her invitation in 2:17, where she spoke of loving until the break of day and where also the breasts were represented as mountains. His words in v. 6 could be translated, "I will get me to Myrrh Mountain and to Incense Hill!"[9547] The naming of two "mountains" is not coincidental after his reference to the two breasts in v. 5.

The determination of the man to enjoy the pleasures of the woman is restrained by the fact that he will not and in fact cannot seize those pleasures by force; she must freely give them. The

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[4891] The phrase וּמִדְבָּרֵיךְ נָאוֶה is surprising on two grounds. First is that it uses מִדְבָּר for "mouth" rather than the much more common פִּי, and second is that it is oddly prosaic. Carr (*Song*, 116) says that מִדְבָּר was chosen *causa metri*, but this is not satisfactory. Fox (*Song*, 130) demonstrates that this is wordplay that could be heard as, "Your wilderness is an oasis" (on the basis of the more common usage for מִדְבָּר, "wilderness"), meaning that even her blemishes only enhance her beauty. Also the use of מִדְבָּר may imply that the words she speaks (cf. דָּבָר "word") and not just the shape of her mouth move him.

[4992] רַקָּה probably is "cheek" or perhaps "brow" rather than "temple," which would be covered by hair anyway. See Carr, *Song*, 116; Fox, *Song*, 130; and Pope, *Song*, 464.

[5093] Notwithstanding the notion that Egyptians considered a long neck attractive.

[5194] שֶׁלֶט is best taken to mean "military equipment" (see Fox, *Song*, 131). תַּלְפִּיוֹת is more difficult. It could mean "weaponry," but a better interpretation is "built in layers" from the root לפי. See Pope, *Song*, 467, and Gordis, *Song*, 86.

[5295] But a rather farfetched reading is found in K. R. Crim, " 'Your Neck Is Like the Tower of David' (The Meaning of a Simile in Song of Solomon 4:4)," *BT* 22 (1971): 70–74. He takes it to mean, "Your neck is like the tower of David, / round and smooth. / A thousand famous soldiers/surrender their shields to its beauty" (p. 74).

[5396] This sense is heightened by their feeding on lilies; cf. Fox, *Song*, 131. Contrary to Pope (*Song*, 470) this third colon need not be deleted.

[5497] No mountains of these names actually existed in ancient Israel. Myrrh and frankincense are not indigenous to Palestine. Similarly, the effort of Delitzsch (*Song*, 78) to link this to the temple mount is unwarranted.

second part of his song (vv. 8–15), therefore, is an appeal for her to give herself to him in sexual union.[55]

The kind of "extravagant poetic language" Solomon uses in Song 4:1–7 to describe the physical beauty of his new bride from her head to at least her breasts has been labeled a *wasf* by Near Eastern scholars, beginning with J. G. Wetzstein in the nineteenth century.[22561] A *wasf* is defined succinctly by Hess as "an Arabic love song in which the lover praises the physical attributes of his or her partner" (Hess, 31). There are also two other similar descriptive passages in the Song: 5:10–16, in which the Shulammite describes Solomon from head to legs; and 7:1–8, where Solomon starts with her feet and moves all the way to her head. In addition, there is a markedly different description—and comparison—by Solomon of his wife's beauty in 6:4–9. (See **Chart 19** for a comparison of these four passages.)

Chart 19: COMPARING THE LOVERS' DESCRIPTIONS OF EACH OTHER'S BODIES

Passage	*Person Speaking/Person Described*	*Movement of Description*	*Context*
4:1–7	Solomon, Shulammite	Eyes to breasts	Wedding night
5:10–16	Shulammite, Solomon	Head to legs, then lips	Second search
6:4–9	Solomon, Shulammite	Eyes to hair to teeth to cheek … to other women	After he is found
7:1–7	Solomon, Shulammite	feet to hair, then breasts	After "Dance of the *Mahanaim*"

There is also a clear inclusio* effect around 4:1–7. The initial words are "you are beautiful." Verse 7 goes so far as to say "All of you is beautiful." As with all such effects, everything between the beginning and ending statements is colored by them. In this case, these verses are focused on the flawless physical beauty of the Shulammite, as expressed in Solomon's words.

As noted above, at the beginning of the wedding night, the bride would still be wearing her veil. However, her new husband would have had a clear view of her eyes and her hair, the first

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[55] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 404–405.

[56221] See the excellent introductory article by George Schwab, "Wasf," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, 835–42.

aspects of her appearance that he mentions. As discussed in the comments on 1:15, the most likely meaning of her eyes being like "doves" is that they were captivating, based on the explicit explanatory wording in 6:5. The basis of the comparison of her hair to goats is the following: "Most Palestinian goats have long wavy black hair" (Carr, 114).

Mount Gilead is a high plateau that towers 3,500 feet in elevation above the Jordan River Valley (Carr, 115). Thus, the movement of a flock of such goats up to, or down from, the Gilead plateau would, from a distance, cause a similar visual effect to the shaking of a woman's mane of dark, wavy hair.

2 The figure in verse 2 shifts from a flock of black goats with long hair to a flock of recently shorn—and washed—white sheep. Essentially the same contrast was present between her very dark hair and her flashing white teeth as between the goats and the sheep. The inclusion of these words here implies that having white, attractive teeth, and having none missing, was an admirable—and possibly rare—thing in that culture, given the knowledge of oral hygiene. The point here, if nothing else, is that the Shulammite had a stunningly beautiful smile!

3 Solomon's description of the Shulammite's beauty continues with three aspects of her appearance that he could not actually see, because they were behind her veil. However, he is able to say what he does because all aspects of her face are burned into his mind and heart. He does not need to see them to paint a verbal picture of them.

The mention of her lips being "scarlet" may be her natural beauty, or it may refer to "a dye used as lip colouring in the ancient world" (Estes, 349). Murphy could be right that the reference to her "mouth" could be figuratively speaking of her voice (Murphy, 155). However, the context supports her actual mouth, as does the fact that the Shulammite does not speak on her wedding night until 4:16. At this point, Solomon's primary interest in her "mouth" is to kiss it, which he will do very soon (4:11)!

The Hebrew term translated "cheek" has also been commonly been rendered as her "brow" (HCS[57]B) or "temples" (NI[58]V). Given the reference to pomegranate, the skin of which is "blush-red" (Carr, 116), perhaps as colored by rouge, it makes the best sense to understand it as "cheek" here. Any sense that pomegranate is referred to as an aphrodisiac is completely unnecessary in spite of appeal to such usage in the ancient Near East (Estes, 350), given the long-term desire of both parties that had been bridled until this night.

4 Given the respect that Solomon had for his father, his comparing the neck of his new bride to the Tower of David must be taken as referring primarily to the dignity with which she carried herself, and thus to the integrity of her life. There may also be a strong hint of her elegance and regal bearing, long before she married into royalty. The remainder of the description is best taken as describing how further dignified her appearance was when she wore necklaces around her gorgeous neck (Longman 2001, 146).

5 As Solomon describes the beauty of his new wife's breasts, it is impossible to know whether she was still clothed, in which case he was commenting playfully on their symmetrical

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[57]HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible

[58]NIV New International Version

appearance beneath her wedding clothes (Carr, 118). At the least, two “fawns” feeding in a field would be playful.

Application and Devotional Implications

See the exposition outline and application suggestions at the end of the commentary on Song 4:7.

Selected Bibliography

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Young Husband’s Short Speech of Desire (4:6)

Original Text

6 עַד שֶׁיָּפ֤וּחַ הַיּוֹם֙ וְנָסוּ֣ הַצְּלָלִ֔ים אֵלֵ֖ךְ לִ֣י אֶל־הַ֣ר הַמֹּ֑ור וְאֶל־גִּבְעַ֖ת הַלְּבוֹנָֽה׃

Translation

6 (Lover)

Before the day blows (its breeze) and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
And the hill of frankincense.

Commentary

6 Solomon’s words shift from admiration of her beauty to desire to be with her, touching her sexually. Using the same words the Shulammite employed to postpone any possible sexual activity in Song 2:17 (Hess, 137; see the commentary on 2:17), Solomon poetically states his intention to make love to her before the morning breaks, no matter how much patience he would have to show because of her previous sexual inexperience. In light of the focus on her breasts in verse 5, as well as her stating that she slept with myrrh between her breasts in 1:13 (Hess, 137), Estes may be correct in concluding that the phrases “the mountain of myrrh” and “the hill of frankincense” are both referring to her breasts and that he is telling her how strongly he desires to caress and fondle them (Estes, 351). However, as stated above, it is at least as likely that the words refer to her most intimate physical charms.

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[59]*BT The Bible Translator*

An additional angle that should be mentioned here has to do with the parallel of mountain wording and imagery in 4:6 and 4:8. In verse 6, the imagery is used as Solomon states his desire for physical intimacy. In verse 8, he is appealing for emotional closeness with his new wife.[60]

Background

For Barth, Song of Songs vividly portrays the persistence of the divine grace in spite of all sin and corruption.

Barth brings out an important point. The freedom and openness with which the lovers express their desire for each other is in its own way as great an offense to religion dominated by law as is the Pauline gospel with its rejection of circumcision as being essential for entry into the church.

The Bible, as Barth has well noted, has no illusions about the destructive power of lust—one could hardly find a better statement of this than Prov 7. Marriage and fidelity within marriage are everywhere set forth as the boundaries of sexuality. But Song of Songs, unlike Proverbs, is not a series of warnings on the dangers of sexuality and the need for chastity. It is instead a celebration of the joy and passion of love. Although it in no sense denies the tragedy of sin and the fall, Song of Songs does not go the way of Gnostic asceticism and legal religion and thus assert the creation itself to be an evil thing that must be suppressed, denied, and imprisoned (for that matter, neither does Proverbs).

The religion of the ascetic fears that if the joy of physical love is not condemned as an innate evil, the mind will forget spiritual things and instead plunge into ever deeper corruption. In the same way, it rejects the gospel of salvation by grace through faith on the grounds that it inevitably leads to more sinning "that grace may abound." In its attempt to build a wall around the human soul, legal religion only separates the sinner further from God and gives him or her a false hope of escaping the intermingled yearnings and lusts of the heart.

Biblical faith sees asceticism as it truly is, as both a denial of the goodness of God's creation and as an attempt to conceal the radical nature of human sin behind superficial obedience to the laws of religion. The man and woman of God should no more be slaves to sensuality than they should be gluttons, but the enjoyment of creation and the fulfillment of the drive toward one another is no sin. The united love of the man and woman in Song of Songs is, as Barth perceived, a fulfillment of the creation covenant and a reenactment of the love of the first man and the first woman. It is not a parable; but it is, for the believer, a part of the testimony of the power of grace over sin and the flesh.

The Song presents sexuality as a *good thing protected by marriage and not as an evil thing made permissible by marriage.* The latter attitude has been all too common in Christendom. As

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[60] A. Boyd Luter, *Song of Songs* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), So 4:1–6.

H. Gollwitzer has written, “No one church has done better than another; all have operated under the prejudice of a Neoplatonic hostility to the body and to sex.”[14614]

A neglected point in the study of Song of Songs is that it is not only the similarities but also the *differences* between the Song and ancient Egyptian, Canaanite, and Mesopotamian texts that bring out its meaning. It has already been noted that Song of Songs contains no aphrodisiac prayers for success in love. Also, contrary to the cultic and funerary interpretations, it has no allusions to love play among the gods. It never implies that the sexuality of the couple has any cultic or ritual significance or that their joining promotes the mythical powers of fertility in the renewal of nature.

Simply put, the act of sex is not a religious act. This may seem obvious enough to some, but ancient pagans would have by no means shared this view. The cults of the ancient world, from India to the Mediterranean, promoted sexuality as a ritual of religious devotion. Some medieval Jews also considered marital relations a duty on Sabbath eve.[14625] In the modern era recent theological perspectives (particularly radical feminist theology) have sought once again to merge religion and eroticism in a manner unknown in the West since pre-Christian paganism.[14636]

None of this, however, is implied in the Song. There the joy of love between man and woman is a wonderful but fleeting pleasure. It has no ritual powers. The effect of this is to make sexual love natural and in fact restrained because it is in its proper sphere. Sexuality falls into its greatest perversion and excess when it is mythologized and given cosmic significance. For evidence of this, one need look no further than the Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts.

It is in this light that we note that Song of Songs is not stark eroticism but is indeed a highly romantic book. The point is so obvious from the imagery and language of the book that it might be thought hardly worth mentioning, but it is often ignored. Note that the lovers speak to and of each other frequently and in great detail. They relish their pleasure in each other not only with physical action but with carefully composed words. Love is, above all, a matter of the mind and heart and should be declared.

The lesson for the reader is that he or she needs to speak often and openly of his or her joy in the beloved, the spouse. This is, for many lovers, a far more embarrassing revelation of the self than anything that is done with the body. But it is precisely here that the biblical ideal of love is present—in the uniting of the bodies and hearts of the husband and wife in a bond that is as strong as death. Many homes would be happier if men and women would simply *speak* of their love for one another a little more often.

Does the text promote monogamy? A number of scholars have argued that it nowhere refers to marriage; and they insist, in fact, that the couple is unmarried. Yet it is hard to imagine

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[61144] H. Gollwitzer, *Song of Love: A Biblical Understanding of Sex*, trans. K. Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 72.

[62145] Cf. Pope, *Song*, 158–79.

[63146] A programmatic text within this movement might be M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973). For an example of an explicit return to paganism within feminist theology, see C. P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), especially pp. 176–78 on the religious transcendence of sexuality.

anything more likely to blemish the romantic yearnings of the lovers for each other than the notion that they may have an "open relationship." "I belong to my lover and his desire is for me" (7:10), if it means anything at all, means that the two belong to each other exclusively. More than that, as demonstrated previously, there is adequate evidence to assert that the theme of the Song is the love felt between a man and a woman as they approach and experience their wedding. The ideal of marriage, exclusive love, is everywhere present.

In the same way, the text speaks against other forms of sexual behavior (homosexuality, etc.) not by decree but by example. The Song of Songs portrays how the sexual longings of man and woman ought to be fulfilled.

The romantic unity of man and woman naturally draws us to the question of whether there is also an equality between the man and woman in Song of Songs. Readers have observed that the real central figure of Song of Songs is the woman. She is the principal singer of the Song, and most of the man's lines are taken up in descriptions of her beauty.

For some, therefore, Song of Songs is a statement on behalf of the liberation of women and a beginning of the depatriarchalizing process of calling humanity back to the pristine equality of paradise. One must, however, voice several qualifications. First of all, Song of Songs never takes an advocacy stance regarding the place of women in society. It never implies that a differentiation of roles between the sexes is wrong or in need of change.

Second, it is not clear that the romance and tenderness of Song of Songs is enhanced by a feminist reading. The vigor of the man (e.g., 2:8–9; 3:7–9) and the loveliness and pleasures of the woman (7:6–8) are what endear them to each other. That is not to say that the woman is presented as a pampered hothouse flower (see 1:6), but then again the Bible never asserts this to be an ideal of womanhood (cf. Ruth; Prov 31:10–31). Masculinity and femininity are still distinct traits, however, and they serve to heighten rather than diminish affection between man and woman.

On the other hand, even though the Song of Songs has little to say in the areas of current sexual politics and can hardly be taken as an advocate of unisex roles, it does present man and woman as equal in love. That is, the mutual exchange of affection is not restrained on grounds that the passions of love are unbecoming to a woman or are the exclusive privilege of the man.

This open exchange, moreover, leads to an openness and mutuality in the whole life of the marriage relationship. As in Gen 2 there is a partnership and organic unity between man and woman.

Finally, one may ask if Song of Solomon preaches Christ. As argued earlier, the Song does not present us with an allegorical portrait of Christ and the church. It is Christocentric, however, in the same sense that practical teachings of Proverbs and Deuteronomy are Christocentric. Christ is both Lord over the created order and giver of life (Col 1:15–20; John 5:40). God originally pronounced the creation of man and woman "good" and decreed that their union should be the most profound of human relationships (Gen 1:27–31; 2:18–25), and Christ brings this aspect of mortal life to a realization of the creation ideal. Our sexuality and need for a partner is part of our humanity, and in Christ we are most fully and truly human.

It is in the sphere of a new covenant relationship with God in Christ, with transformed attitudes, Spirit-driven enablement, and the awareness of sins forgiven (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek

36:24–30) that husband and wife can find the union of openness and the fullness of blessing God intended (Gen 2:24–25).[64]

The Song of Songs is a song of love written during the Solomonic period. It is neither allegory, drama, hymn, history, nor ceremonial text. Rather, it is a song of love in two parts, the man's and the woman's, assisted by a chorus. Other representatives of the genre of love song are found from Egypt, ca. 1300–1100 B.C., and the Egyptian examples share many elements in common with the Song. The message is that the mutual pleasures of love are good and possible even in this fallen world. The Song is a testimony to the grace of God and a rejection of *both* asceticism and debauchery[65]

[64] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 376–380.
[65] Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 380.