

The Song of the Lamb

Introduction:

Most of the introductory remarks are gleaned from *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary The Song of Solomon* by G. Lloyd Carr.

From *Nelson's Bible Dictionary* we copy the following outline of the book:

- I. The Beginning of Love 1:1-5:1**
 - A. Falling in Love 1:1-3:5
 - 1. Bride's Longing for Affection 1:1-8
 - 2. Expressions of Mutual Love 1:9-2:7
 - 3. Visit of the King to the Bride's Home 2:8-17
 - 4. Bride's Dream of Separation 3:1-5
 - B. United in Love 3:6-5:1
 - 1. Wedding Procession 3:6-11
 - 2. Bride's Beauty Is Praised 4:1-15
 - 3. The Marriage Is Consummated 4:16-5:1
- II. Broadening of Love 5:2-8:14**
 - A. Struggling in Love 5:2-7:10
 - 1. Bride's Second Dream of Separation 5:2-7
 - 2. Bridegroom's Handsomeness Is Praised 5:8-6:3
 - 3. Bride's Beauty Is Praised 6:4-7:10
 - B. Growing in Love 7:11-8:14
 - 1. Bride's Desire to Visit Her Home 7:11-8:4

A very interesting outline as the one given in Dr. Richard C. Moulton's *A Suite of Seven Idylls*, as quoted in Sidlow Baxter's book *Exploring the Book*. Baxter writes that the word "Idyll" comes from the Greek *eidullion*, which means "little picture." Moulton sees the Song of Solomon as a poem that reminisces about the events that took place in the past. It was written in retrospect. This approach solves a lot of questions about the moral implications of some passages since the couple has been married for some time when the poem is written.

This is his outline:

A Suite of Seven Idylls

- 1. The Royal Wedding Lived Over Again. (1:1 - 2:7)
- 2. The Bride's Courtship Reminiscences. (2:8 - 3:5)
- 3. The Occasion of the Betrothal Recalled. (3:6 - 5:1)
- 4. The Bride's Troubled Dream Related. (5:2 - 6:3)
- 5. The King's meditation on His Bride. (6:4 - 7:10)
- 6. The Bride Longs to see Her Old Home. (7:2 - 8:4)
- 7. The Renewal of Love at Lebanon. (8:5 - 8:14)

Moulton's interpretation is based upon his view of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. This view pre-supposes that the Holy Spirit would not include anything in the Canon that would be morally

objectionable. Whether this does justice to the text and if it reads more into the book than the poem actually says, is another question. We will have to look at that question later on.

In the Introduction of Carr's commentary he says: "Among the books of the Bible, the Song of Solomon is one of the smallest, most difficult, yet one of the most popular with both Jews and Christians. Over the centuries hundreds of books and commentaries have been written and unnumbered sermons preached on these 117 verses. The book has attracted the attention of some of the best intellects and spiritual minds of the believing community, and, in spite of its apparent simplicity, poses a great number of major interpretative difficulties."

The Tyndale Commentary gives a lengthy introduction to the book before entering into the analysis of the text. This introduction is important since it conditions the reader for the interpretation of the text. We will not go into all the details in which the commentator goes, but some of his points should be mentioned here.

I. The place of the song in the Holy Scripture

Of a general nature is the understanding as to where the Song of Solomon fits into the Holy Scriptures. In the Hebrew Bible the Song of Solomon is part of the third section; the *Kethubim* or Writings. It was part of the *Megilloth*, or "Five Scrolls" which were read at specific festivals. This section included, beside the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.

II. The role of Solomon in the book

The Tyndale Commentary says: "The traditional title 'The Song of Solomon' reflects the idea that the famous Hebrew king Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba was the author of the Song.That a love song like this one should be attributed or dedicated to Solomon is not surprising. His vast harem and many wives were a byword in Israel. I Kings 11:1-3 remarks on 700 wives and 300 concubines, and probably does not include other liaisons such as that which Ethiopian tradition ascribes to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. (I Kings 10:1-13). Among Solomon's wives was the daughter of Pharaoh of Egypt. That union is thought by some to be the specific occasion celebrated in the Song of Solomon. Be that as it may, Solomon does appear several times in the Song, and, in addition to the commentary on the specific verses (1:1,5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11,12), a general statement is necessary."

The commentary continues by saying: "These can be understood best as general or generic statements that have no precise reference to Solomon as a real person involved in the action of the poem. The king, with all his wealth and splendour, is introduced here only as a symbol of the class of society for which the desire is the same as possession. Money is no object - what they want, they get." "Solomon's name is introduced here in what has been called a 'literary fiction': if the Song is simply love poetry, the 'great lover' in Israel would naturally appear in the poem whether or not he really had anything to do with it. Similarly, Don Juan would conjure up the same picture in later love poetry."

The above reflects not necessarily the opinion of Dr. Carr, but is a compilation of other opinions. Later, in the analysis of the text we will reflect upon the problem of Solomon's role in the poem.

III. The interpretation of the Song.

The Tyndale Commentary gives four kinds of possible interpretations of the book:

- a. Allegory
- b. Typology
- c. Drama
- d. Natural

We will have to have a closer look at these four ways of looking at the text before we actually look at the text ourselves. We will probably find that none of the above will completely satisfy our understanding and that there are traces of truth in each of them which should apply.

- a. Allegory.

The definition of an allegory is “to say one thing but mean something else.” To use the allegorical method of interpretation for the Song of Solomon means to ignore any historical or factual information given in the text. Tyndale’s commentary says: “Those commentators who allegorize the Song ignore the male/female relationship so vividly described in the poem, and interpret the whole book in terms of God’s dealing with Israel or Christ’s personal relationship with his Church.”

The commentary proceeds to state that none of the elements of an allegory are present in the Song. “The places are real places -En-gedi, Lebanon, Tirzah, etc. The people are real people - Solomon, the shepherd, the watchmen, the city-girls, and the lover and his beloved, even though no names are attached to them. The overall impression in the poem is one of the ebb and flow of the relationship and a kind of cyclic repetition of themes and ideas.”

The reason why believers throughout the centuries have tended to allegorize the Song is because the erotic and, probably, sexual relations described in it are so blatantly unspiritual. Ever since the fall we are unable to understand that God created a physical body that would be able to express spiritual realities. God never meant love to be a merely physical attraction, but He did not leave the physical out of the picture either. To separate the physical, the emotional and spiritual and put them in different boxes is a sign of our sinful brokenness. But we are running ahead of our study.

b. Typology

According to the Tyndale Commentary the difference between Allegory and Typology is as follows: “Whereas allegory denies or ignores the historicity or factualness of the Old Testament account and imposes a deeper, hidden or spiritual meaning on the text, typology recognizes the validity of the Old Testament account in its own right, but then finds in that account a clear, parallel link with some event or teaching in the New Testament which the Old Testament account foreshadows.”

The writer goes on to say: “The typical interpretation does not provide a ‘different’ meaning that replaces the one the text appears to present, but gives an *added dimension* to the sense already present in the text. ... The key to understanding the nature of typology is the doctrine of the unity of Scripture. The New Testament is the fulfillment and culmination of the Old.”

Having said this, the writer rejects this approach to the text for his own interpretation of the Song. I find this hard to understand. Paul states clearly that the love relationship between husband and wife, of which sexual relationship is a part, is an image of the relationship of Christ with the Church. Quoting Gen. 2:24 he says: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church.”¹

Denying the typical interpretation of the book has serious consequences. It means that we accept the fact that a human marriage relationship, with all that it involves, has meaning in itself, that there is no spiritual dimension in love and sex, that any human relationship without God is valuable in its own right. Treating the Song of Solomon purely as a love poem, as Dr. Carr does, may help to understand what the writer of this Song wanted to express when he wrote about the lovers, but it doesn’t take into account that the Holy Spirit is the actual author of this book and that He wants to tell us more than just what we read on the pages of the book.

I do not mean to suggest that the lovers were conscious of the fact that they were acting out a spiritual reality. Very few people who are in love and who have sexual relations with one another go beyond the thrill of the experience of the moment and most have no understanding what they are actually doing. But this doesn’t mean that what they are doing has no deeper meaning. Man is very short-sighted and he hardly ever understands what God wants him to be. But this does not diminish God’s plan with man or deducts from the value of the role he plays in this world.

c. Drama

This approach to the book holds the view that the poem was, originally, a piece that was acted out for a specific occasion. The Tyndale Commentary says: “As early as AD 250, Origen declared that the Song was ‘a marriage-song which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama.’” The commentary continues to quote Aristotle, who said that the essence of a drama is that it has a beginning, a middle and an end, that it should be a self-contained and a self-consistent unit and that it must show elements of progression in the story, development of theme and character and some sort of conflict and resolution. It is obvious that, although

¹ Eph 5:31-32

there are elements of conflict and resolution there is, as the commentary correctly, concludes scarcely any development or progression in the story. Carr concludes: "The Song, as it now stands, is unactable."

d. Natural

The commentary adopts the view that the Song should be interpreted in a "natural" or literal way. We quote: "This approach interprets the Song as what it appears naturally to be - a series of poems which speak clearly and explicitly of the feelings, desires, concerns, hopes and fears of two young lovers - without any need to allegorize or typologize or dramatize to escape the clear erotic elements present in the text."

The definition sounds enticing, but my objection is that it condemns people who disagree as ones holding "unnatural" views. It is obvious that the Song of Solomon is a compilation of poems celebrating the "being in love" of two young people, a boy and a girl. And we may presume that it was the first intent of the author to convey the miracle of erotic love. But the problem remains that if erotic love is a self-contained entity, without any reference to other realities, it is meaningless. Everything in life that cannot be seen in relationship with God is meaningless, because God is the meaning of all of creation. There is a fine line between spiritualizing and seeing the spiritual dimensions of a book.

We should always remember that Inspiration of the Scriptures means that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Bible. If the Song of Solomon is incorporated in the Canon of Scripture it is because it is inspired. And the Holy Spirit has a way to pack more than one truth in words. The clearest example is Caiaphas' prophecy in John 11:49-52. Addressing the Sanhedrin he said: "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." John comments on this with the words: "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one." Obviously, Caiaphas and the Holy Spirit used the same words, but they did not mean the same thing.

Now, I am not saying that we should not read the Song initially and primarily as a literal love song. The Holy Spirit, clearly, assigns a God-given, role to erotic feelings. But having those feelings is part of our being human and being human is part of God's plan. And God is Spirit. So this romance would have no meaning if it had no spiritual dimensions.

Dr. Carr does say some beautiful things, though, in his introduction to the text. We quote: "In one sense, the Song is an extended commentary on the creation story - an expansion of the first recorded love-song in history. 'Then the man said, "This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "Woman,"' for she was taken out of Man.'" (Gn. 2:23). The author of Genesis draws the obvious conclusion from this: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.' (Gn. 2:24f.). The fulfillment of the creative act is unity, support, and an openness before each other and God."

He goes on to say: "the Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. this is a fact that has not always been sufficiently stressed. The Song therefore, is didactic and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. and it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is."

IV. The poetry of the Song.

The Song is written in the Hebrew language as poetry, which means that it uses parallelism as a figure of speech. It is generally understood that Hebrew poetry does not follow a pattern of rhyme and rhythm but of parallel thoughts. The problem is, of course, that nobody can know at this point in time what the poetry sounded like in the time it was written. So we cannot be sure that there was no rhyme or rhythm as we know it now. The parallelism, however, remains clear. Dr. Carr defines parallelism as "thought rhyme" rather than "word rhyme." We quote from his commentary: "This thought rhyme may involve the repetition of an idea (e.g. Song 2:8b, 'leaping upon the mountain,/bounding over the hills'); the reversal or antithesis of an idea in a consecutive line (e.g. Song 1:6c, 'they made me keeper of the vineyard;/but, my own vineyard I have not kept!'); or the addition of a derived idea in the second part (e.g. Song 2:6, 'O that his left hand were under my head,/and that his right hand embraced me!'). There are many variations on these basic patterns, but the essential elements are present throughout." The commentary proceeds to compare into detail the similarity between the Song and other ancient love poetry. There is an interesting paragraph about the vocabulary of the Song. Again, we quote: "Although the Song is a relatively short book of only 117 verses, it

has an unusual large number of uncommon words. Of the approximately 470 different Hebrew words it contains - a very high number for such a small book - 47 occur only in the Song (some only once) and nowhere else in the Old Testament. Of the words which do appear in other part of the Old Testament, 51 occur five times or less, 45 occur between six and ten times, and an additional 27 between eleven and twenty times, leaving about 300 common words in the Song. There is widespread distribution of these less common words. All but eighteen verses scattered through the Song have at least one of these unusual words, several have six or seven such words. Fifty verses contain at least one word not used outside the Song, and an additional twelve verses contain words which occur not more than three times in the whole Old Testament. In other words, more than one third of the words in the Song occur so infrequently that there is little context from which accurate meanings can be deduced, and two thirds of the verses of the Song have uncommon words."

This makes for a highly interesting situation. It seems to indicate that the author was no common poet, but a person with an unusually rich vocabulary. It is said that Shakespeare used more words than most of the people of his time. The Song of Solomon must have been written by an Old Testament Shakespeare. This seems to indicate a person who had the riches of Solomon. The Song of Solomon could very well be what it claims to be: "The Song of Solomon."

The commentary continues to give a group of words which are found in the Song and which are common to Near East love poetry. "The lovers rendezvous in gardens or parks, bedrooms, fields, orchards, vineyards, or secluded valleys. They use imagery from nature, particularly plants or animals, to describe each other, or to set a mood for their love, e.g., figs, apples, lilies, pomegranates, raisins, wheat, brambles, nuts, cedar, vines, palm trees, raven, mare, foxes, gazelle, goats, lions, fawns, doves, leopards, ewes and sheep."

Farther down the commentator remarks: "But of considerable interest in the Song is the omission of certain common words and ideas. As noted above there is a strong religious element in the love poetry from Egypt and Mesopotamia, with the gods and goddesses, their priests and priestesses, playing major roles in much of the literature, while the Song of Solomon does not even mention God." "Even more striking is the omission from the Song of *all* the major religious words in the Old Testament vocabulary. Incredible as it seems, none of the following appears in the Song: the divines names LORD (either Yahweh or Adonai; but cf. 8:6), Baal (except in the place-name Baal-hamon, 8:11), El, Elohim or their compounds, Glory, Sea (*yam*, one of the major gods in the Canaanite cult); words associated with the worship celebration in Israel: ark (of the covenant), high place, throne, mercy-seat, temple sanctuary, tabernacle, or congregation; cult words: ram, ox, bull, altar, offering, atone, make atonement, use divination, celebrate a feast, bury or burial place basic theological terms which are frequent elsewhere in the Old Testament but omitted from the Song; evil, faithful, truth, covenant, bless, honour, sin, wisdom, grace, loving-kindness (mercy), law, statue, be clean, be unclean (ritually), fear (of the LORD), deliver, glory, commandment, justice, prophet or prophecy, to vow, save, do wrong, iniquity " etc.

According to the Tyndale Commentary most contemporary commentators do not accept the Song as a single composition but, rather, as a compilation of poems. But Dr. Carr remarks that there is "an inner cohesiveness around a central theme of the lovers' mutual longing and surrender." He then proceeds to ask the two questions: How is the book constructed? And, Who are the characters in the story? There appears to be no consensus on the division of the book. There are as many outlines as translations or commentaries. The outline followed by the Tyndale Commentary is already given above. It is based on two observations:

"1. The clause: 'Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.' (NIV) occurs in 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4 as a kind of refrain that concludes three of the five sections. The other two conclude with a common theme of consummation: 5:1b 'East, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers' and 8:14 'Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stand on the spice laden mountains' (both NIV).

2. Each of the sections begins with one or both of the ideas of arousal (2:10; 8:5) or the arrival of one of the lovers and the invitation of the other (1:2; 2:8, 10; 3:6; 5:2; 8:5f). The repeating cycle of invitation, exhilaration and warning lends structure to the whole poem."

Some commentators see the Song as an *apologia* for pure monogamous love, or a description of the stages in the lovers' relationship. But the question remains as to whether the whole tone of the Song is "morally correct." On commentator, Gollwitzer, goes to another extreme in his interpretation. We quote from the Tyndale Commentary: "Interpreters, in an effort to keep the Song from being considered immoral, regarded it as the dialogue of a married couple, an extolling of married love. But there is nothing in the text to suggest that the two lovers are husband and wife. On the contrary, it is because they are not married that they long for a place where they can sleep together without being disturbed (7:12 - 8:2). Setting aside the reference to the 'bride' in 4:8 - 5:1 as being 'only a term of endearment equivalent to "sweetheart"', he

concludes: "There is no way around it. These two people are simply in love with each other, and are planning to sleep together without anyone's permission, without the benefit of marriage license or church ceremony. And *that* is in the Bible!" Mr. Gollwitzer seems to have a tendency to insert symbols of moral correctness of our time into Biblical times. The fact that there is no mention of a marriage license or church ceremony in a book written over two millennia ago does not, necessarily, imply licentiousness. While not agreeing with all the implications of Gollwitzer's position, Dr. Carr says: "His argument is essentially correct. The Song is an affirmation of human sexuality *per se*."

One of the questions asked often in regard to this book is: "Who is who?" We quote again from the Tyndale commentary: "The 'daughters of Jerusalem' are variously identified as the women of Solomon's harem, the companions of the girl, or the onlookers from the general population. The girl is usually identified as a country girl from Shunem, a small agricultural village in Lower Galilee ('Return O Shulammitte' 6:13), who is the beloved bride(-to-be?) of the 'lover'. Some commentators suggest she is one of Solomon's many wives, perhaps even the Egyptian princess described in I Kings 3:1; 7:8. It is with the male character(s) the greatest divergence of opinion occurs. One common view is that there are two men here: King Solomon, his lechery not satisfied by his huge harem (1 Ki. 11:3), who attempts to add yet one more, the Shulammitte, to that number; and the girl's shepherd-lover from Galilee, to whom she remains faithful against all blandishments of Solomon, and with whom she is ultimately reunited. Other interpreters see Solomon as the sole male in the poem and treat the Song as a nuptial poem celebrating a royal wedding. Still others identify only the shepherd-lover in the poem and understand the Song as a celebration of the love he shared with his beloved."

Another question is the intent of the author. What is the purpose of the Song? Three answers are given:

- a. The Song is a cultic ritual, either in the context of Israel's religion or in connection with some heathen fertility rite. We could hardly accept this view and adhere to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures at the same time.
- b. The Song is a didactic poem, to be interpreted as an allegory or type of the relationship between God and man. Evidently, many Israelites interpreted the Song that way, since it was part of the reading of Scripture during the Passover celebration.
- c. The Song is a celebration. The question is: a celebration of what? The Tyndale Commentary quotes Rabbi Aqiba: "He who trills his voice in chanting the Song of Songs in the banquet house and treats it as a sort of song [Heb. *zimir*, not *sir* as in Song 1:1] has no part in the world to come." The Commentary goes on to say: "The Song is explicitly erotic in much of its imagery, and makes no apology for such an emphasis. For the ancient Hebrew, sexuality was one of the facts of life to be enjoyed (*cf.* Pr. 5:15:21), but approved only within the confines of an established marital relationship."

I. The Beginning of Love 1:1-5:1

A. Falling in Love 1:1-3:5

- 1** *Solomon's Song of Songs.*
- 2** *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth-- for your love is more delightful than wine.*
- 3** *Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you!*
- 4** *Take me away with you-- let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers. We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine. How right they are to adore you!*
- 5** *Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon.*
- 6** *Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.*
- 7** *Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?*
- 8** *If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds.*

Title:

The title *Solomon's Song of Songs*, first of all, seems to indicate Solomon as the author of the poem, or the collection of poems. There is something very illusive in this little book in the same way as the book of Ecclesiastes carries a message that is hard to define. Both books are attributed to Solomon, the wisest king who ever lived on earth. Both books share the same elusiveness, although their themes are almost completely opposite. Ecclesiastes describes the vanity of life, the Song extols love as the essence of all things. But in both books it is very difficult to pin down what the author is really saying. Their eloquence seems to be more in what they are not saying than in what we read. This common denominator leads me to accept that both were written by the same man and that this person was supremely intelligent. Solomon fits the picture perfectly. He wrote two poems: Ecclesiastes in a minor key and Song of Songs in a major.

The title *Song of Songs* is typical Hebrew. The Hebrew language expresses superlatives by repeating the words. Other examples are *The Holy of Holies*, *Lord of Lords*, *King of kings*. The Living Bible translates the title as: "This song of songs, more wonderful than any other, was composed by King Solomon." The poem extols love as the highest value in life. The apostle Paul agrees. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (I Cor. 13:13). Solomon seems to say that not only divine love (agape) but also erotic love falls into this category. Or that erotic love is a physical expression of a spiritual value.

Love, as it expresses itself in physical attraction between the two sexes is, in itself elusive. Falling in love is an inexpressible phenomenon. It is overwhelming and intoxicating.

Our problem in attributing this poem to Solomon is the testimony of his life. The great king can hardly be taken as a model of the purity of marital love. I King 11:1,2 tells us: "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter-- Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, 'You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.' Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love." The word that best characterizes Solomon's life is extravagance. He was not only the wisest man who ever lived, he went also overboard in all other things. If the king did write the Song of Songs, the fact that he loved one thousand women doesn't make him an expert on the topic. To the contrary, it would completely disqualify him to even talk about the subject. Yet, he did write about it in a supreme and unparalleled way.

If we except the thesis that this song was written at the occasion of his first marriage, the one with Pharaoh's daughter, we sanitize the Song from immoral implications. The subject of the poem, however, is not Pharaoh's daughter but a Shulammitte shepherd girl.

The beauty of love lies in its exclusiveness. Love does not increase in value as the number of its objects increases. The more the worse, not the better. And the poem deals with exclusive love. For a lover there is only one person in the world.

If we take love as described in this book as a type of Christ's love for us individually, which is a valid application of the text, we spoil the picture if we bring Solomon's polygamy into it. Paul uses the image of the marriage relationship to illustrate the bond between Christ and the Church, as we have seen above.² But we also believe that there is a personal bond of love between Christ and us personally. The fact that the Church is the Bride of Christ does not cancel out our individuality. So we face the paradoxical issue that there could be such a things as polygamy on a spiritual level. Jesus Christ is to me what He is to all the members of the church and yet He loves me exclusively. But when we look at polygamy on an earthly level we feel repulsion. Paul says: "This is a profound mystery.!" It is even more profound than what Paul intended to say. How can Solomon's sinful liaisons be an image of a beautiful spiritual reality? There are things that are bad within the human context which are perfect in relationship to God. Polygamy is one of them. For man it is a sin to be egocentric; for God it is not, because He is the center of all ego.

Saying all this makes me feel as if I have spoiled the beauty of this book. I feel as if I lost the key to it. We have to approach the book as if it was written by a man who only loved once, otherwise we cannot zoom in to its message. Zooming in means to avoid looking at the peripherals in order to get a clearer look at the center. If we accept the Song of Songs as written by Solomon, we do have to remember also that

² Eph. 5:31,32

Solomon was an image of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was a flawed image, but an image non the less. Speaking about Himself, Jesus says: "Now one greater than Solomon is here."³

One strange feature of the poem is that the text goes back and forth between intimate personal exchanges and public statements. The second verse reads: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth-- for your love is more delightful than wine." Some translations try to avoid that apparent problem by directing all the exchanges to the lover. The RSV reads: "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine." And the rendering of the Living Bible goes as follows: "Kiss me again and again, for your love is sweeter than wine." But this is not a literal rendering of the Hebrew text. This becomes clearer when "the daughters of Jerusalem" are brought into the picture. (1:5; 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16; 6:4; 8:4). Of course, a love poem is meant to be read by others but, usually, those others do not become part of the poem. Here exclusiveness becomes public. We feel ourselves drawn into that which is most private and intimate.

The view on sexual intimacy has changed from age to age. In my own life time I have seen the pendulum swing from Victorian silence about the subject to vulgar explicitness. One would wish that the pendulum would remain in the center instead of going from one extreme to another, but that would mean stopping the clock. We feel that the mystery is too great to be made public domain. In the Song of Songs sexuality is mentioned explicitly, but at the same time the mystery is preserved. That is part of the glory of this poem.

The Tyndale Commentary says here: "The shift from *kiss me to his mouth to your love* appears awkward to us, but such a sequence of shifting pronouns is a common phenomenon in biblical poetry (e.g. Am. 4:1; Mi. 7:19; cf. Song 4:2; 7:6), and is also known in Phoenician and Ugaritic."

The Song opens with a kiss. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." We relate to the world in which we live through our five senses. The sense of touch is one of them. Books could be filled with the subject of touching and being touched. There are more emotions loaded in a touch than in any other of our sensual functions. The touch between human beings can transmit a world of feelings. Our handshake is a vague expression of that which is meant to be an ultimate relationship. But being touched by lips surpasses all other forms of touching. A kiss sets the body and soul aflame. It can be one of the greatest and most thrilling experiences in life. It is a foretaste of eternity. Man became a living soul when God kissed him on the mouth.

From Tyndale again: "The NEB *smother me with kisses* takes this as an intensive construction, and accurately reflects the sense of the Hebrew." So the rendering of TLB "Kiss me again and again, for your love is sweeter than wine," is basically correct. The girl's plea is passionate. She is wildly in love.

"Your love" in the phrase "for your love is more delightful than wine" is in the plural in Hebrew. Dr. Carr says: "That has caused considerable discussion in the commentaries." He quotes several other Old Testament references in which the plural forms are used, such as Prov. 7:18; Ezek. 16:8; 23:17 and says: "It is obvious from the context of the Proverbs and Ezekiel passages that the term means 'love-making' with physically erotic connotations, rather than 'love' in some abstract idea. The translation 'love-making' or 'caresses' fits best in the Song passages listed."

The picture is much more graphic than we would normally care for. If the opening verses of the Song of Songs were depicted on the television screen, I would turn it off! We can exclaim here, like Gollwitzer above: "And *that* is in the Bible!" And we have to say, "yes, it is!"

It may be highly erotic, but it is not pornographic. If we would, therefor take this out of the context of a bond of marriage, we would not be able to accept it as the inspired Word of God. The fact that the deepest intimacy is made public here, is not intended to arouse lustful tendencies for sin. God wants us to know the richness of a total relationship as expressed in the intercourse between husband and wife. He wants us to realize that in this relationship we act out the spiritual reality of life with Him in Jesus Christ. Sin has made it very hard for us to transfer the concept of the excitement and fulfillment of sex to the spiritual realm of our relationship with the Lord. Yet, I firmly believe, this is the message we get. And half has not yet been told. The bond of marriage is only a vague picture of the reality. If we could experience the excitement of heaven in our present condition, it would blow us to pieces.

One point that has to be stated before we continue is that, in our relationship with Jesus we are the female partner. The church is His bride. C. S. Lewis has said that God is so masculine that everything in

³ Matt 12:42

creation is feminine compared to Him. That is why only the unity between husband and wife depicts the heavenly reality. All other relationships are perversions, strongly condemned by the Song.

Vs. 2 add: "For your love is more delightful than wine." Wine conveys the idea of intoxication; a joy beyond description. Wine is mentioned seven times in this book.⁴ The Bible draws a parallel between joy that is the result of wine drinking and spiritual delight.

David says in Ps. 4:7, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound."

Jacob, in his prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, mentions wine, both as a symbol of joy and of suffering. We read in Gen. 49:10,11 - "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes."

Wine was part of the daily sacrifice in the tabernacle and the temple. "This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering."⁵

Ps. 104:14,15 gives some legitimacy to the use of wine by placing it among the blessings God has bestowed upon man. "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-- bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

And Isaiah uses it as part of the image of the free offer of salvation in Isaiah 55:1, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

Jesus celebrated the Passover by making the cup of wine a sacrament, representing His death on the cross. "He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

And, finally, Paul compares the joy of drinking to the joy of the Holy Spirit in his warning in Eph. 5:18, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

This comparison of wine with blood and with a joy that carries beyond reason shows is what God means life to be. Blood stands for life in the Bible. Lev. 17:11 says: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." And Ps. 16:11 links life to joy by saying: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." The Song of Songs binds life, love and joy together. Life on the highest plane is a life of joy and love. This is the trinity of mysteries that God wants us to possess. Love is the key to the mystery. As the German poet Goethe has said: "Shouting for joy to high Heaven, or being sad unto death; only the soul that loves is happy."⁶ The apostle Paul catches this vision in his Song of Love, which is the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians.

I know that Solomon speaks about erotic love, but we have to remember throughout the reading of this hymn that erotic love is an aspect of the whole complex of love. Divine love is a combination of agape, eros, phileo and the other. The fact that, as human beings, we experience and express love imperfectly and partially, does not mean that love itself is less than perfect. God is love.

After having carried us off with the intoxication of a kiss, the girl proceeds to say: "Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you!" (vs. 3). She goes from one sensual experience to another. The nose follows the mouth. The perfume is what we smell.

We have to remember that "name" stands for character in the Bible. The Name of God is the character of God and people we given names, not just as appellations, but as identifications; that is to express their identity. So the perfume in this verse is not what is applied to the skin, but what is under the skin, inside. The girl loves the boy, not only because he is handsome but because of the beauty of his character. Real beauty is inside.

⁴ 1:2,4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:2,9; 8:2

⁵ Ex. 29:38-40

⁶ "Himmelhoch jauchent, zum Tode betrübt,
Glücklich allein ist die Seele die liebt."

If a character that is flawed by sin can be beautiful and attractive, how much more the character of the only perfect human being who ever lived on earth: our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why we believe that, although this Song deals with love between two flawed human beings, it points in the direction of the perfect relationship of which marriage is a vague expression. One day the Song of Solomon will be the Song of Songs, the Song of the Lamb.

Some of the sacrifices that were brought in the Old Testament rituals were called “an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” The expression is used seventeen times in the book of Leviticus. Paul, again, expresses this so beautifully in II Cor. 2:15-16 when he says: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.” It is what is inside of us that makes us smell bad or good.

This idea underlies also Peter’s words in I Pet. 3:1-4 when he says: “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.”

The difference between the city of Babylon and the New Jerusalem, the harlot and the bride of Christ, in the book of Revelation is that the prostitute is covered with jewels on the outside, but the bride of Christ has inner glory. Rev. 17:4 reads: “The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. But in Rev. 21:10-11 we read that “the Holy City, Jerusalem, [that is the bride of the Lamb] shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”

It may seem strange to us that the girl continues with: “No wonder the maidens love you!” The KJV translates it with: “therefore do the virgins love thee.” The Tyndale Commentary says: “*Maidens* are unmarried young women of marriageable age. The word itself does not necessarily mean ‘virgin’ (that is sexually inexperienced), but the common Old Testament position on pre-marital sexual purity is clear (cf. Dt.22:13-29). Every ‘maiden’ (*’almah*) is assumed to be virgin and virtuous until she is proven not to be. In 6:8, the only other use of this word in the Song, the ‘maidens’ are distinguished as a separate group from the ‘queens and concubines.’” So, this reference to other girls points in the direction of the common infatuations girls have had for boys throughout the centuries, not to illicit relationships the young man might have had. The fact that, out of all the maidens the Shulammitte is the chosen one adds considerably to the excitement she feels about her beloved. She knows she is unique.

Girls can be silly by falling in love with a handsome young man. But the object of the girl’s love here is pictured as a perfect human being. Such a man does not exist on earth. It is only because love is blind that the feelings that are describe here can flow. Yet, the lover here is pictured as perfect, not because the girl is blind, but because the object of her love *is* perfect. We can dismiss this as poetical exaggeration, but we lose something if we do this. Just as God has put eternity in the heart of every man⁷, so every man has a picture of perfection in his mind. We may never have seen perfection, but we would know it if we saw it. Deep down we know that man is created in the image of God and that he should be perfect. The only perfect man who ever lived is our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why many of the pictures in this poem are applied to Christ in Christians hymns.

Vs. 4 leads us into a problem which is crucial to the interpretation of the whole book. “Take me away with you-- let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers. We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine. How right they are to adore you!” There is the urgency that is spurred by love and at the same time there is a lack of privacy in that the plural form is continued to be used.

The interpretation of the word “king” leads to various interpretations of the Song. The Tyndale Commentary says: “This section is a key one in the various dramatic theories of interpretation of the Song. It is one of five places in the Song where the word kings is used (1:4, 12; 3:9, 11; 7:5). Those who see three main characters in the Song, the beloved, the lover and King Solomon, understand this section to be a plea for the lover to hurry to save her from the king who has already taken her (against her will) into his bedroom. If there are only two characters in the poem (Solomon and his new bride), this is her acknowledgment that the consummation of the marriage is at hand. Such a view, however, has difficulty with the shift to the third person here from the cohortative in the first colon.”

⁷ "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men." (Eccl. 3:11)

Evidently, it is impossible to be sure whether the passage really deals with Solomon or not. It could very well be that Solomon is drawn into the picture as a comparison. The love between the girl and the boy is “fit for a king.” The use of the plural in “We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine. How right they are to adore you!” could mean that the girl speaks for womanhood. Her joy, delight and praise is the praise of all women for a man such as he. It is an acknowledgment that God has put desire in a woman’s heart that can only be fulfilled by the perfect lover. And, as we said before in quoting C. S. Lewis, we are all female in comparison with God’s character. Only He can satisfy the desire that He has created in us. The consummation the girls longs for is more than mere sexual intercourse. It is the fulfillment of what she is meant to be; of what we are all meant to be.

In vs. 5-7 we read about, what the Tyndale Commentary calls “The girl’s shy uncertainty.” The “daughters of Jerusalem” are brought into the picture at this point. We find this group of young girls or virgins seven times in this book. The other references are 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16 and 8:4. They are always addressed by the girl. They may be seen as the audience or as a chorus the form the decor for the various scenes described. Jesus uses the title when he addressed the women on His way to the cross. “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.” (Luke 23:28). Bach uses this particular group of women beautifully in his oratorio The Saint Matthew Passion. In the context in which Jesus uses the title those women represent the whole nation of Israel. They are God’s people. It could very well be that they play the same role in the Song here and that they stand for that section of mankind that has surrendered to the will of God.

“Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon.” Evidently the girl stands out from the crowd by the color of her skin. Some commentators suppose that she was a black girl, that is from Negroid descent. The rendering of the NIV “Dark am I,” brings out the emphatic way in which the words are used. The Tyndale Commentary remarks that the expression “I am” is rather unusual because, normally, the first person is indicated in the verb ending instead of by the use of the first person singular pronoun.

The girl is, evidently, conscious of the fact that she is different from her peers by the color of her skin. The following verses that explain the reason for her deep tan suggest that she is a common working girl, who does not possess the refinement of the other girls. She compares herself to the tents of Kedar, the tents that are covered with the black goat hair skin of the nomadic tribes. TLB draws a line between the tents of Kedar and the tent curtains of Solomon by assigning the first part of the sentence to the girl and the second part to Solomon. “The Girl: ‘I am dark but beautiful, O girls of Jerusalem, tanned as the dark tents of Kedar.’ King Solomon: ‘But lovely as the silken tents of Solomon!’”

It takes courage to stand out from the crowd. The fact that the girl is different from other girls would put her under a good bit of pressure. It is much easier to be fashionable. Yet it is the difference that attracts her lover to her. Of the other girls there may be thirteen in a dozen. *She* is unique.

Unfortunately, her uniqueness is a result of neglect. She had spent too many hours in the sun, not because she wanted to, but because she was forced into it by her brothers. Vs. 6 reads: “Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother’s sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.” The vineyard is, obviously, more than a piece of garden ground where grapes were grown. It stands for human life and personality. Later in the poem the girl’s private life is compared to a garden. “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain. You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon. Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad. Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.”⁸ That image probably refers to her virginity and the consummation of the marriage.

So, the point the girl wants to make is that her brothers did not allow her to live her own life. In our day and age, were it is fashionable to search for one’s identity and where invasions of privacy are viewed as emotional abuse, this image is very powerful and relevant. It tells us that a lack of love and respect, such as the brothers of the girl demonstrated, leads to a sense of loss of identity. We only know who we are when we are loved. As the girl starts to experience this love she realizes what had gone wrong in her life. In Ezek. 17:3-10 God compares the nation of Israel to a vine.

The use of this image reaches its climax in Jesus’ words in John 15:1-8, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear

⁸ Song 4:12, 15-16

fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Immediately following these words Jesus speaks about love. The two are linked together there, as well as in the Song of Solomon. A human life will only be fruitful and meaningful as it experiences love; love on a human level, but ultimately the love of God.

So, the girl comes to the one she loves and who loves her with her scorched life and she starts to experience immediate healing. She starts to feel good about herself and her self image improves, to use those ugly modern terms. When I express myself sarcastically it is because of the fad of the search for identity that permeates of our day, not because there is no reality behind it. Outside of the love of God we are being used and abused, not only by our "brothers" but by the devil. We only become ourselves as we surrender ourselves to the Lord.

Vs. 7 reads: "Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?"

The next picture has the same pastoral character as the first one, but it is more idyllic. We move from the vineyard to the pasture. This is poetry to the highest degree. We should look beyond the image of the shepherd and the sheep in the same way as we must do in Psalm 23:1-2, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters," is not about sheep and shepherds but about God and man. So it is in this poem. The grazing flock gives color and rest and at the same time is speaks about a job. What the girls is asking is, "What are you doing today? Where will you be?" TLB brings this out quite well by saying: "Tell me, O one I love, where are you leading your flock today? Where will you be at noon? For I will come and join you there instead of wandering like a vagabond among the flocks of your companions."

The Hymn writer Joseph Sevain wrote the beautiful hymn: *O Thou, in Whose Presence my Soul takes Delight*.⁹ This hymn is based, at least partly, upon this verse. The 2nd and 3rd stanza read:

Where dost Thou, dear Shepherd resort with They sheep,
To feed them in pastures of love?
Say, why in the valley of death should I weep, Or alone in the wilderness rove?

Oh, Why should I wander, an alien from Thee,
Or cry in the desert for bread?
My foes will rejoice when my sorrows they see.
And smile at the tears I have shed?

The work in the vineyard was hard labor. It was related to the curse Adam brought upon this earth. The girl had toiled in "the sweat of her brow." Shepherding sheep is not an image of the curse. The strenuous part of the job is overlooked for the sake of the atmosphere of peace and rest. David, in his painting of the 23rd Psalm said: "He restores my soul." There is a healing element in the picture. The restoration loves brings is expressed in a pastoral scene. The question: "Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday," is not just an inquiry into the man's time schedule, but a desire to share love and rest.

The part about the girl being veiled is considered by most commentators as a reference to the practice of girls of ill repute to keep the company of shepherds. The Tyndale Commentary says: "The girl seeks to avoid the scandal of appearing as a wandering harlot among the shepherds." I doubt that this is what the girl has in mind in the use of the verb "veiled." Being in love the way she is, the thought of the possibility of giving herself illicitly to someone else could hardly have entered her mind.

Prostitutes are not the only persons who wear veils. Most people do, although not in a physical way. The veil is just as much part of the shame of sin as the clothes we wear. It is embarrassing to be seen naked in the physical sense; it is unbearable to be found naked emotionally. Even people who love each other deeply

⁹ Hymns of Christian life no. 324

never open up completely for one another. We are too much a mystery to ourselves to be able to unveil all our secrets to another person. Only God can see through us. And since the love in this poem is a reflection of the perfect love of God for us and the love we will be able to demonstrate for Him in Heaven, the unveiling of the girl for the boy expresses this deep truth of perfect love.

The apostle Paul expresses this beautifully several times in his first epistles to the Corinthians. “But the man who loves God is known by God. ... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”¹⁰

There seems to be something strange in the advice to follow the tracks of the sheep, especially if there were other herds around. It sounds as if the shepherd boy is saying that his sheep are not the same as the others. They are special to him and he expects the girl to recognize their special features as well as he does. He would be able to look at the prints of the hoofs and recognize his herd.

This reminds us of Jesus words in John 10: “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”¹¹

If a shepherd is good to his sheep he will also be good to his fellowmen. I know people who love their pets more than their fellow human beings. But this is an abnormal tendency. I also know people who cannot stand pets. A healthy soul will love all God’s creatures, great and small. The way the lover invites the girl to be with him is an indication to her of his sweet character.

The girl is pictured as a shepherd girl herself. The advice of her lover is that she “graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds.” She is no longer the little slave girl in the vineyard. Goats are stubborn and obnoxious creatures, but young goats are among the cutest species of animals. They are not soft and fluffy like lambs, but playful and capricious. The girl is drawn into the pastoral picture in a sweet and frisky way. We have to remember that we are reading poetry. The couple may, in reality, be miles away from any kind of herd. But they express their feelings and emotions with pictures that evoke sentiments of peace, loving responsibility, tenderness and playfulness. A little goat, that jumps up at all fours and dances a capriccio for us shows us the joy of living. Joy and love complement each other.

2. Expressions of Mutual Love 1:9-2:7

1:9 *I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.*

10 *Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels.*

11 *We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver.*

12 *While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance.*

13 *My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts.*

14 *My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.*

15 *How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.*

16 *How handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant.*

17 *The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs.*

2:1 *I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.*

2 *Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens.*

3 *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.*

4 *He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love.*

5 *Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love.*

6 *His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me.*

¹⁰ I Cor 8:3; 13:12.

¹¹ John 10:3-5, 10-11, 14

7 *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.*

In vs. 9-11 the boy beholds the girl in ecstasy. He exclaims: “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh. Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver.” The comparison of the girl with one of the horses that draw Pharaoh’s chariot would not go over too well in our day and age. We do get the point, though, that the girl has beauty, strength and nobility in her bearing. Her body is compared to one of the masterpieces of God’s creation.

The Tyndale Commentary makes the following interesting observation here: “The comparison with *a mare of Pharaoh’s chariots* has produced a plethora of translations and interpretations. In the ancient Near East, Egyptian horses were the most desirable strains, and of course the royal steeds would be the best of the best. But the meaning of this text is usually missed. As Pope correctly notes, in ancient Egypt after the middle of the second millennium BC, mares were never used to draw chariots. Stallions, hitched in pairs, were the standard motive-power of both war-chariots and other royal vehicles. Yet the text here has the feminine singular *mare*. The preposition linked with *chariots* is better translated ‘among’ rather than as a possessive. These factors suggest that the comparison here underscores the girl’s attractiveness. A mare loose among the royal stallions would create intense excitement. This is the ultimate in sex appeal! Cf. 3:10; 6:12.”

It is this image that makes some commentators think that Solomon may have written this poem on the occasion of his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter. This marriage is mentioned in I Kings 3:1, “Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David.” She was, evidently, his first love. The fact that his future loves spoiled his character of a role model does not diminish the beauty of the poem he wrote.

There is no unity of interpretation regarding the ornaments or jewelry the lover wants to bestow upon his beloved. The NIV text says in vs. 10 “Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels.” TLB translates it with: “How lovely your cheeks are, with your hair falling down upon them! How stately your neck with that long string of jewels.” The Tyndale Commentary says: The precise nature of these decorations is unclear. NEB and ASV translate *plaited hair*, and the NIV reads *ear-rings*, while the others are more generally *jewels* or *ornaments*.” Evidently the root meaning of the word used is “one’s turn.” The Commentary continues: “In the context here, the ‘turnings’ could be either *braided* ‘turned’ hair that covered her cheeks, as the manes of the horses were sometimes twisted into fancy patterns, or the elaborately fashioned jewelry that covered her face, much as the bridle covered the cheeks of the horse. So, too, is her neck decorated with stringed jewels.”

As the above mentioned quote indicates, the text conveys the excitement of the lover when he sees the object of his love. Love is a multifaceted jewel. There is tenderness and sweetness, but also strength and excitement. Love implies sacrifice and death and, at the same time, life and vitality. Love is the divine in man and, at the same time, the animal.

The desire of the boy to decorate his beloved with jewels could be seen as the presentation of an engagement ring, like a marriage proposal in our time.

The last verses of this chapter, vs. 12 through 17, suggest a change of scene. For the second time the king is mentioned. Some commentators suggest that the place is the palace where the king reclines at his table. The NIV says: “While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance.” TLB renders it with: “The king lies on his bed, enchanted by the fragrance of my perfume.” The Tyndale Commentary remarks, however, that the practice of reclining at a table does not seem to have been used in Israel in the pre-exilic period. It is true that the last verses of this section suggest a bedroom. “And our bed is verdant. The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs.” But it seems to me that the girl is describing the rural setting in which they lie down on the grass under the trees. This is the way TLB renders it: “lying here upon the grass, shaded by the cedar trees and firs.” The reference to the king may be another poetical touch, although Solomon could still have said this himself.

The scene is heavy with erotic references. As the Tyndale Commentary remarks, this is reinforced by the reference the girl makes to three different perfumes: Nard, myrrh and the flowers of the henna plant. We quote from the commentary: “*Nard* ... was a very expensive perfume/ointment derived from a plant native to the Himalayan region of India. The scarcity, and hence the value of this exotic fragrance made it much in demand as a love-potion. *Myrrh* is a resinous gum gathered from a species of a South Arabian tree. It was used as a perfume in Canaan at least as early as the Ugaritic period. (17th - 14th centuries BC). Myrrh was a

major ingredient in the holy oil used in the tabernacle (Ex. 30:23-33), and was also traditionally associated with death and the embalming process (*cf.* Mt. 2:11; Mk. 15:23; Jn. 19:39). In liquid form it would be carried in small bottles like nard, but it was also used in solid form. The *henna* plant (AV *camphire*, mg. *cypress*) is a common Palestinian shrub. The leaves, when crushed, produce a bright orange-red to yellow dye often used to colour hair or finger nails. Here, however, the girl refers to the fragrant blossoms from the plant. *Cf.* 7:11. In all probability, she was not in actual possession of any of these items. Rather, they are similes that express her sweet feeling toward her lover. The lush oasis *En-gedi*, 'the place of the wild goats' about half-way down the western shore of the Dead Sea, has for millennia been a traveller's delight. The *vineyards* include grapes, but are not limited to them. All sorts of tropical and semi-tropical plants grow there. Historically, the major crops of the area were exotic spices and plants that were manufactured into cosmetics and perfumes. Just as in Song 1:9, where Pharaoh's horses were the best, so here, the produce from *En-gedi* is the best of the best. The girl returns her lover's compliments in terms of the best she knows."

In using the images the girl paints the picture of the intensity of love, as expressed in the love potion nard. There is also the element of death, as represented by the myrrh and then the color and scent of the henna blossom which speak of the fragrance and beauty of the relationship. The first picture shows the love as emanating from the girl. The other two refer to the presence of the boy who loves here.

Love is not just the excitement of sexual attraction to one another. The death theme that is woven into it by the use of myrrh-image gives it a basis of sacrifice. If a man loves his wife to death, that is, if he is willing to die for her, as Christ gave his life for His bride in order to save her, the woman has the security that makes love real. Without the myrrh the love of these two would be nothing but an egoistic desire to enjoy oneself. A man who love a woman for his own satisfaction does only love himself. The same can be said for the desire of the woman. Fulfillment is a by-product of sacrificial love. It is the sacrifice that makes love meaningful. Human love has only depth and meaning if it is modeled on the love of Christ. Nobody expressed this better than the apostle Paul in Eph. 5:21-25 where he says: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

The image of vs. 15 has puzzled the commentators. "How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves." TLB says: "How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful! Your eyes are soft as doves." The Tyndale Commentary remarks: "The exact point of the simile is obscure; most probably the comparison is to the deep smoke-gray colour with flashes of iridescence. Beautiful eyes were a hallmark of perfection in a woman (*cf.* Rachel and Leah, Gn. 29:17). Rabbinic tradition identifies beautiful eyes with a beautiful personality."

That eyes are the mirrors of the soul is common knowledge. I cannot see doves, either when they are flying around or when they are cooing to one another, without getting excited about their grace and beauty. More than any other member of the human body, the eye expresses feeling and emotions. Both light and darkness are expressed by the eye. I take the image to mean that the boy recognizes in the girl the charming beauty of her character.

The dove in the Bible is a symbol of peace. It was the dove from Noah's ark that became the symbol of peace when it brought the olive branch back to Noah as a token of the renewal of the earth.¹² Jesus advises His disciples to be "as innocent as doves."¹³

This scene of mutual admiration takes place in the open, where the two are lying in the grass under a tree. "And our bed is verdant. The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs." Although the image is suggestive and erotic, yet the atmosphere is pure and lovely. The desire for consummation of a marriage is obviously there. But it doesn't seem there is more than a desire here. The picture painted is one of pure intense love for one another, not of an illicit relationship. It is the glow and excitement of courtship. The bed is not the real bed yet and the ceiling is the ceiling of their dream house.

It is not clear whether the first part of the second chapter still play at the same place. The mention of the trees and flowers would suggest this. Tradition puts the words: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the

¹² Gen 8:11, "When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth."

¹³ Matt. 10:16

valleys,” in the mouth of the boy. Spiritualizing them, they are applied to the Lord Jesus. TLB attributes them to the girl. The Tyndale Commentary says: “The traditional translation *rose of Sharon* (*asphodel*, NEB) is not really satisfactory. Nor are the ancient versions much help, most of them simply using some broad generic term. Some species of wild rose probably grew in Palestine in Old Testament times, but the word so translated here is derived from a Hebrew verb, ‘to form bulbs’. Certainly the rose bush produces bulbous fruit, the hips, but the general consensus is that the plant described here is one of the bulb family. Crocus, narcissus, iris, daffodil are the usual candidates. *Sharon*, or more correctly *the Sharon*, is the low coastal plain stretching south from Mount Carmel. In ancient times it was a swampy area, due to the presence of impermeable kurkar ridges running parallel to the shore, which trapped the run-off from the Samaritan hills. The combination of low sandy hills and the swampy lowlands produced heavy vegetation. Various types of wild flowers were abundant in the area. *The lily of the valleys* is not our common white, bell-shaped plant of that name. The word may be derived from the root for ‘six’ i.e. six-leaved or six-petaled flower; but more likely it is cognate with the Egyptian and Akkadian words for the lotus or water lily, and may refer to any similarly shaped flower that grew along the fertile, watered *valleys* (Hebrew plural).”

When the girl compares herself with a rose of Sharon or a lily of the valley, she does not extol her unique beauty but rather the commonness of it. She is only a wild flower is any flower at all. The boy retorts with a comparison that lifts her up above her surrounding: “Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens.” The lily among the thorns is like a blessing among the curses. Thorns are an expression of the curse man brought upon this world by breaking off his relationship with God. God had said to Adam: “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce *thorns* and *thistles* for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.”¹⁴ Wild flowers are a reminder of God’s grace in a fallen world. They are perfection in a surrounding of death and corruption. Such is the love of these two young people. “Love is as strong as death,” as ch. 8:6 says. Actually it is stronger because it conquers death.

Although this does not fit in the dialogue here, it is hard not to think of Jesus’ crown of thorns in this context. He was crowned with the symbol of the curse when He died because He loved more than anyone else ever loved.

The girl steps up the imagery by moving from wild flowers to trees and from lesser value to greater value. In vs. 3 she says: “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.” The grass may be their bed and the cedars the beams of their bedroom, the real enjoyment of love is expressed in this image. The translation “apple tree” is questioned by the Tyndale Commentary. The meaning of the word in the original is uncertain. The NEB translates it with *apricot*.

The image conveys sensations of joy and love. It has a suggestion of erotic pleasure. In ch. 7:8 the boy tells the girl: “the fragrance of your breath [is] like apples.” Even stronger is the image in ch. 8:5, “Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth.” Love making and birth are connected to the image there. The prophet Joel announces judgment and the end of human joy by saying: “The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree-- all the trees of the field-- are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.”¹⁵

So, whatever the actual tree may have been, the meaning of the picture is clear. Love is like the enjoyment of eating a sweet, juicy fruit. Isn’t that the original meaning of the image? Eve fell into sin because she thought that the taste of the fruit would be sweet. In Gen. 3:6 we read: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.” The fact that Eve was tricked does not diminish the beauty of the image used here. Love is like a sweet fruit.

But the comparison goes beyond the enjoyment of love. The girl does not compare love to apples but her lover to an apple tree. Not the act or the enjoyment but the person is at the center of the picture. The boy is identified with love. He is love. Sin makes a distinction between making love and being love. God does not draw this line.

In reading this poem we should, continuously, bear in mind that it deals with the ideal situation: perfect love. All we know is imperfect relationships between flawed personalities. These lovers are perfect,

¹⁴ Gen. 3:17-18

¹⁵ Joel 1:12

not because they are perfect in each other eyes only and love is blind, but because they represent perfection. That makes supernatural light shine through these pages. That makes this poem “The Song of Songs.”

The scene doesn’t necessarily change in the fourth verse: “He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love.” The place remains probably the same. They are lying in the grass under the cedar trees. But the tasting of the fruit turns into a banquet. The commentators do not agree on the interpretation of the word “banner.” In the royal banquet hall banners would have been present. The simplest way to understand this picture seems to be that the girl is comparing their being together with a banquet and that she completes the picture by describing what can be seen in the hall of the palace. I see no problem with the “military overtones”, as Dr. Carr calls it.

The Tyndale Commentary says that the verbal form of the word used here can be translated as “to look with astonishment or admiration.” One translation reads: “His look upon me was in love.” This can be further interpreted as “His wish regarding me was love-making,” or “His intentions were to make love.” TLB uses the idea of “looking upon” but connects it to another subject by saying: “He brings me to the banquet hall, and everyone can see how much he loves me.” Since we are dealing with poetry, we have to remember that the purpose is to evoke emotion and atmosphere, not to describe a place. When the girl sees herself under the royal banner at the great table in the banquet hall, she is probably still lying under the tree with her lover.

The verse is often used as a chorus: He brought me to His banqueting table and His banner over me was love. The Tyndale Commentary remarks about this: “The practice of setting this verse to music and using it as a chorus celebrating the believer’s relationship with Christ is widespread in the contemporary church. It is no doubt well-intentioned and could be broadly defended on the grounds that the Song illustrates the relation of Christ to his church. But such an application runs into serious difficulty if the text is correctly understood. The crux in the interpretation is the meaning of *bet hayyayin* (*banqueting house; wine-garden*, NEB) and the meaning of the root “*dgl*” in the second colon. The *bet hayyayin* is literally ‘the house of wine’. This combination is found only here in the Old Testament. Idiomatically, the ‘house of wine’ could be the place where wine is grown (*i.e.* a vineyard), manufactured, stored or consumed. The frequent use of the outdoor motifs in the Song, particularly of the garden as a place for the lover’s rendezvous, suggests that the vineyard itself is what is intended here.” This interpretation accentuates the problem of the meaning of the banner. Where do we put it in the vineyard? The simplest way to understand the picture seems to be that the girl compares her being with the boy with a banquet in the palace.

The “raisins” and “apples” of vs. 5 make perfect sense in the context of the banqueting table. The rendering of TLB, “Oh, feed me with your love-- your ‘raisins’ and your ‘apples’-- for I am utterly lovesick,” seems to grasp the meaning perfectly. The girl is overwhelmed by her feelings. She has come to the point where she cannot stop.

There is in a love relationship a point of no return which, for a married couple ends in the consummation of sexual unity. For courting, unmarried people, this is the watershed. Either you wait, which takes strong moral restraint, or you cause irreparable damage. This seems to be the meaning of the exhortation the girl issues in vs. 7, “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.”

This verse, which occurs in the same form in 3:5 and in modified form in 8:4 has sent commentators scurrying in all directions. Some take the reference to the gazelles and does of the field as an oath. This has led to comparisons between the Song and pagan fertility rites, which we reject, of course.

Some commentators take it that the animals are brought into the picture because they are known for their sexual potency. The most logical explanation seems to me that the girl takes the animals as an example of behavior that would be wrong to follow. Humans should not act like animals in following their desire without any restraint. The “until it so desires” or “until it please,” (RSV), could, probably, be better rendered as “until the proper time.” In other words, sexual relations are a beautiful expression of love within the framework of marriage. Outside this framework they are sin. The Bible uses the words “adultery” and “fornication” for those relationships. There is a fine line between that which is perfect and that which is corrupt. The line is easily crossed and the traffic is one way only.

3. Visit of the King to the Bride’s Home. 2:8-17

2:8 *Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills.*
 9 *My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.*

- 10 *My lover spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.*
 11 *See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.*
 12 *Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves I heard in our land.*
 13 *The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."*
 14 *My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.*
 15 *Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.*
 16 *My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies.*
 17 *Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.*

There is an obvious change of scene in this section. The girl is at home and her lover comes to ask her to come outside. It is Spring in all its gorgeous beauty; Spring in nature and Spring in the hearts of these two young lovers. The outside world corresponds to the inside. New life is budding and blossoming both inside and out. A Spring Song is being sung outside and in. The newness of life and love fuse together in this sparkling poem.

The question is how much of this section is action and how much is imagination? This stanza may only be an expression of the girl's desire, not her actual experience. It could also be, as some suggest, that she reminisces here. This does not, however, diminish the freshness and beauty of the poem.

The opening verses of this section depict sound and motion. There is excitement in the girl's exclamations: "listen!" "look!" The leaping and bounding, such as young animals do, suggest youth, life and joy. It is the playfulness of the gazelles and of young lovers.

We have a tendency to ascribe to God's love a solemnity and pomp that make it foreign to the reality of life. After all, Who invented Spring? Who gave young gazelles and young lovers the idea that they should jump up and down for joy? In his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis depicts the scene of Aslan's resurrection from the dead. He lets the Lion and the two girls who are with Him celebrate the event with a dance and a chase such as only kittens and kids can perform. Evidently, Lewis knew what real life and love were all about. Love is exciting because God's love is exciting. It is no accident that we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Spring. I am not inferring, of course, that we are correct about the date, but the person who first equated the new life of our Lord with the new life of nature after the season of death, understood something about God's nature.

Our text says: "See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone." In the setting of the Palestinian seasons this means that the rainy season is over and that nature is clothing itself in color and beauty. The more inclement our winter the prettier spring becomes.

We don't know how much the climate of our globe has changed since the flood. The garden of Eden must have had the beauty of all our present seasons combined into one. Moses may have accommodated the report of the fall of Adam and Eve to the conditions of the world he knew when he wrote: "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden *in the cool of the day*, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden."¹⁶ So, Solomon speaks about winter and spring as the people of his time knew it.

The wooing of the lover's voice is irresistible. The girl is inside her room and is, probably, lying on her bed. He peeks through the window and bids her to get up and come with him. The fact that the poem begins with the girl who sees the boy coming down the hills and the looking of the boy through the window to see the girl in bed, seems contradictory. She could not have seen him coming unless she would be looking out herself. This would indicate that she was in fact lying down and dreaming this sweet dream. But, what is the difference! There is nothing wrong with dreaming about love, especially if one knows to be loved. The anticipation of the joy to come makes the experience the richer. Heaven will become more heavenly as we dream about it on earth. Isn't this what Peter meant when he wrote: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible

¹⁶ Gen. 3:8

and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls?"¹⁷ It is God Who says to us: "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me." The love between the boy and the girl, the love the girl dreams about, is the reflection of God's eternal love for us. That is why Jeremiah says: "The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.'"¹⁸

In vs. 14 it is obviously the boy who speaks and says: "My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." There is a Rock Dove in Palestine that nestles preferably in sheltered ledges or caves, according to the Tyndale Commentary. The girl is compared to this bird, which is a pet name for her. She, probably, reminds her lover of the bird in the cleft of the rock, as she is hiding inside her room. She may have drawn the veil over her face. He want to draw her out and see her face. He wants to kiss the bride.

There is a parallel place in the Bible where God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock and hides His face from him. We read in Ex. 33:18-23 that Moses says to God: "'Now show me your glory.' And the LORD said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.' Then the LORD said, 'There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.'"

This spiritual reality was probably nowhere to be found in the girl's dream about her lover, but that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit didn't think of it when He inspired Solomon to write this. We are not spiritualizing the poem, but we just want to draw a line from the dream to reality. The boy wants to draw the girl out and see her face. He wants to know her and enter into the secrets of her life. God's glory is as much a mystery to us as it was to Moses. In Moses' experience God put a veil on Moses by covering him with His hand and Moses could look when God had passed. In the dream the boy wants the girl to come out of the cleft and take off her veil and show him her glory. In the Song of Songs God says to us: "I will show you My glory, if you show Me yours!" Our reaction is usually: "My glory? What glory?" We have so little idea what happens inside us when God touches our lives with His light. The darkness is gone, winter is past and it is spring time in our souls. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"¹⁹

Vs. 15 doesn't seem to fit into the idyll: "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom." The verse poses a problem for the interpreters. It is not obvious who is speaking; some think the girl, others the boy, and other again the bystanders. There seems to be the possibility of a word-play in Hebrew. The word for "foxes" which is "*su`al*" in Hebrew comes from a root *s`l* which also means "hollow" or "deep place", and the verbal root *hbl* can mean either "ruin, destroy," or "be pregnant, in travail" or "pledge."²⁰ This variety of possible interpretations has opened vistas of different opinions. Some believe that Solomon addresses a hunting party here, others see a plea by the girl for sexual relations and others the opposite. One commentator believes that the girl may be singing a ditty here.

The phrase "ruin the vineyards" has an obvious negative connotation and as such it should be accepted. If correct, this would be the second reference to the presence of undesirable tendencies in the poem. The first being: "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," in 1:7 and parallel verses. If the vineyard is a poetical image of virginity and not a place, the thrust of the two warnings could be the same, that is: not to let desire go without restrain because it would ruin the perfection the poem wants to depict. And since the first plea came from the girl, this one, probably, is uttered by her also. The vineyard can be ruined by little foxes. It doesn't take big beasts to ruin perfect conditions.

¹⁷ I Pet. 1:8,9.

¹⁸ Jer. 31:3

¹⁹ II Cor. 4:6; 5:17

²⁰ Tyndale Commentary 17 pg. 101.

Vs. 16 is the first mention of a re-occurring theme: "My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies." The words are repeated in different form in 6:3 and 7:10. A subtle change of attitude is expressed in the progression of thought. In 2:16 the girl presents herself as the prime possessor. In 6:3 she sees herself foremost as the object of his love but she has a claim on him also: "I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies." In 7:10 she is no longer the subject but the object: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me." The shades of difference express the progression of surrender in love. The word "browses" is translated "feeds [his flock]" in other translations. The text says literally, "He feeds among the lilies." This is probably meant in a metaphorical way. The Tyndale Commentary supposes that it suggests intimacy in the sense of "sharing kisses."

The progression of surrender in relation to God is best expressed by John the Baptist in John 3:30, where, talking about Jesus, he says: "He must become greater; I must become less." The secret of love is to be loved. As John says in I John 4:1019, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We love because he first loved us."

The above is, probably, still part of the girl's dream. She imagines her lover to be with her, but in reality he is not and she is longing for him. This is most clearly expressed in the last verse: "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills." The KJV uses the words "the mountains of Bether." TLB speaks of "the mountain of spices." The latter preserves the poetical tone, but whether it is a correct translation remains to be seen.

4. Bride's Dream of Separation 3:1-5

3:1 *All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him.*

2 *I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him.*

3 *The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. "Have you seen the one my heart loves?"*

4 *Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one my heart loves. I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me.*

5 *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.*

Chapter 3, obviously, starts with the girl waking up from the dream that was described so beautifully in the previous verses. The tone of the poem is very intense here. The way the NIV translates the first verse, the girl is in bed alone and wakes up from her dream. Other translations suggest that the boy had been with her but is no longer there.

- "Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer." (RSV).

- "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. (KJV).

- "The Girl: 'One night my lover was missing from my bed. I got up to look for him but couldn't find him.'" (TLB). The latter rendering is probably the most compromising because it suggests that the boy and the girl had been in the habit of sleeping together. It is true that in the Hebrew "night" is in the plural. But the rendering "All night long," as given by the NIV is quite acceptable. If we see the girl's reaction as a waking up from a sweet dream into the reality of her loneliness, the text becomes quite understandable. The Tyndale Commentary says: "The impact of the poetry is lost in most of the translations. Verse 2 ends with the anguished cry 'And I found him not.'" "

Separation of lovers is a form of death and death is the ultimate separation. Love is expressed in intimacy and intimacy is impossible when there is separation. Shakespeare may say that parting is sweet sorrow, but the French catch it better in the proverb: "Leaving is like dying a little."²¹

If this is so keenly felt on a human level, how much more should we experience separation from God. David expresses his thirst for God's presence in verses like, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with

²¹ Partir c'est mourrir un peu.

God?"²² And in John 14:16-18 Jesus reassures His disciples about the upcoming separation in, what has become the ultimate death ever died in this world, by saying: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

We live in a world where separation from God is the prevailing condition of mankind. Thirst for God, the desire to experience the love of God in an intimate relationship is at the base of all human actions and frustrations. Most people do not realize this, but that doesn't make it less true. God wants us to seek Him, so we can be found by Him. He assures us in Jer. 29:13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Bach uses the theme of this portion of Scripture in the opening Aria of the second part of the Saint Matthew Passion. Jesus has been arrested and is led away to be sentenced and crucified. The alto sings: "O, Where is my Jesus gone?"²³ and the choir of the daughters of Jerusalem answers her. This application goes, of course, beyond the thoughts expressed by the girl in these verses, but it is legitimate. After all, if separation is death, Jesus experienced the ultimate separation on the cross, where He cried: "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'-- which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"²⁴ He bore the anguish of us all.

We may smile at the girl's anguish in the poem, since it was only the dream of a person in love. But the girl did express reality more deeply than is apparent on the surface. Love, separation and death are common experiences of mankind. The dichotomy of life is apparent in the girl's awakening and her search. She knows that love should be presence. The one she loved should be with her; but he isn't. We all live in that tension of faith in and hope for what we cannot see, even if we do experience the love of God in our lives.

The anguish of the girl is lived against the back ground of a walled city where watchmen are on duty. In the previous chapter the girl and the boy were outside in the open field. They were not protected by city walls, but their love for one another made them feel safe. Here, the girl is actually much safer than before, but the absence of the one she loves makes her feel unsafe. Love is the ultimate protection.

We all live in a world that is not safe for humans. We try to compensate for this by building walls of protection: walls of financial security or any other kind of security. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews captures our sense of insecurity when he says: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"²⁵

The reason for the break-up of so many marriages is often that the woman does not experience the love of her husband as a wall of protection around her. Love is the only protection that makes us *feel* protected. It is the God Who loves us Who says: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

We read in vs. 3, "The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. 'Have you seen the one my heart loves?'" Dr. Carr remarks in the Tyndale Commentary that the girl's encounter with the watchmen of the city makes little sense, since those men could not be expected to know who she was talking about. Yet, the scene makes more sense than shows on the surface. The girl meets the men who are responsible for the safety of the city. She tells them that their protection is not enough. City walls are built by human hands and watchmen are paid salaries to keep their eyes open for danger. But they are unable to provide for what the girl needs in the depth of her soul. City Hall, nor any other human organization can keep us safe. We need supernatural protection.

Vs. 4 adds an interesting dimension to the action. We read: "Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one my heart loves. I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me." The reaction of the girl is similar to that of the women who saw Jesus on the day of His resurrection. There, too, are watchmen who guard the tomb. In Matt. 28:9 they meet Jesus Who says: "'Greetings,' They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him." And John 20:16-17 tells how Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Lord. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned toward

²² Ps. 42:1-2

²³ "Ach, Wo ist mein Jesus hin?"

²⁴ Matt 27:46

²⁵ Heb. 13:5,6

him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"' The girl had experienced the separation as death, but in a dream. The women at Jesus' tomb had gone through real separation and death. Both find the one they love and receive him back alive.

The girl brings her lover to her paternal home. "To my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me." Had her intend been on sexual intimacy, she would not have done so. The reference to the place establishes in a poetical way, a chain of life. The sexual reference is not to her own experience, but to that of her parents. It is the place where she was created, the place where she came into the world. The suggestion is that the fruit of the marriage she anticipates will be the birth of their own children. She sees herself as a link in the miracle chain of life. The picture she paints is more than one of mere enjoyment of intimacy with her lover; it is a picture of life. This is not the typical attitude of people in love. Young lovers tend to forget the consequences of their behavior. This girl is level-headed enough to realize that if she and her lover would have pre-marital sex it would spoil the reality of their love. This we understand from the following exhortation in vs. 5, "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires."²⁶

B. United in Love 3:6 - 5:1

1. Wedding Procession 3:6-11

- 6 *Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant?*
- 7 *Look! It is Solomon's carriage, escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel,*
- 8 *all of them wearing the sword, all experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night.*
- 9 *King Solomon made for himself the carriage; he made it of wood from Lebanon.*
- 10 *Its posts he made of silver, its base of gold. Its seat was upholstered with purple, its interior lovingly inlaid by the daughters of Jerusalem.*
- 11 *Come out, you daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon wearing the crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced.*

The Tyndale Commentary states that this unit is in many ways the heart of the Song. It proceeds to say: "These six verses pose one of the most difficult questions in the interpretation of the Song: how does this unit fit with the rest of the book? At first glance it seems to have nothing to do with the context: 3:4 records the girl's determination to take her lover to her own home; 4:1-7 is a detailed description of the physical charm of the bride. This section is a description of a procession with soldiers and one or more palanquin/chariot/sedan-chair conveyances, and a wedding celebration for King Solomon. What is the connection, if any?" A few pages later we find the very revealing remark: "According to the rabbinic materials, 'a bridegroom is compared to a king' and until the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70, 'crowns' were worn by ordinary brides and bridegrooms." Unfortunately, the commentary does not draw any conclusions of the lines it quotes.

Most of the problems the interpreters face seem to come from the fact that they try to analyze poetry as prose. If we take the above verses as an exalted comparison, such as is common to poetry, I see no difficulty in the coming of the boy to the girl as Solomon would send his royal carriage to fetch his bride.

The girl seems to add a divine element to her love relationship with the words: "Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant?" In the history of Israel the column of smoke and fire was the visible demonstration of the presence of God. It was the Shekina glory. We have seen before that love on a human level portrays the character of God. God is love and all human love is derived from Him.

When God created the earth there were no deserts. Deserts appeared after sin entered the world. Moses talked about "that vast and dreadful desert." In Deut. 1:19 we read: "Then, as the LORD our God commanded us, we set out from Horeb and went toward the hill country of the Amorites through all that vast and dreadful desert that you have seen, and so we reached Kadesh Barnea." It was God's glorious presence

²⁶ See the comment on 2:7

that kept people alive in a place of death. We could hardly imagine a more beautiful description of the girl's experience than this: in the dreadful desert of her life appears the column of smoke and fire that lights up her soul with love. It is like light that shines in the darkness.

Isaiah expresses this so beautifully when he says: "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God."²⁷ Such is God's salvation in the life a lost man.

The column of smoke is the smoke of a sacrifice of praise, such as was brought upon the gold altar in the temple. It was "perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant." It combined all the fragrance and beauty in the world.

For the Old Testament believer, worship was a feast of the five senses. His eyes saw the glory of the Lord. His ears heard the praise that was being sung. His tongue tastes the food that had been sacrificed. He touched the building where God was present and he smelled the fragrance of the incense. Perfume is the proof of the indefinable. Paul says: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ."²⁸ If God smells Christ in us, others will too.

The image the girl uses to depict the arrival of her lover contains elements of splendor, danger and protection. In ch. 1:11 the boy decorated his beloved with jewelry: "We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver." He did this, while lying next to her in the grass under the shadow of a tree. It was part of the "sweet nothings" lovers say to each other. Here, the girl carries her decoration even farther. She puts her lover in Solomon's carriage and surrounds him with a life guard. In modern terms we could say that the girl lets her fiancée drive up to her house in a Cadillac. It is the inner beauty that exteriorizes itself. In this world we go around in disguise. The image of God does not present itself to the eye as outward glory. When Jesus came to earth, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."²⁹ Only once did Jesus' divine glory shine through while He walked around on earth. In Mark 9:2-3 we read: "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them." The day will come when this glory will shine through our clothes also. "When he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed."³⁰

The girl clothes her lover with glory and makes him ride in Solomon's carriage, because she sees the beauty and splendor of his soul. This beauty is exteriorized by love. That is why God sees so much more in us than we see in ourselves.

The theme of protection from danger is heard in the mentioning of the body guard, the "sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel, all of them wearing the sword, all experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night." What the girl is saying is that she is not afraid of the dark when the one she loves is with her.

It sounds almost childish, but, maybe, we should be more afraid of the dark than we are. I believe that a child is afraid of the dark, where an adult is not, because a child sees more in the dark than an adult does. Physical darkness is an image of spiritual darkness, just as physical light portrays a spiritual reality. We should be afraid of the real darkness. That is, if we are outside the love of God. There is no fear in love, as John says in I John 4:18, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

The description of Solomon's carriage and of his coronation show that the girl is not giving us an account of a historical fact, but that she uses a poetic image. The Bible doesn't mention Solomon's carriage, although he must have used one. The only mention is found in I King 10:26 where we read: "Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem." The king must have gone overboard with his vehicles as he did in his marriage to his one thousand wives. Undoubtedly, the chariots mentioned above

²⁷ Isa. 35:1-2

²⁸ II Cor. 2:15

²⁹ Isa. 53:2

³⁰ II Thess 1:10 (RSV)

were vehicles of war. The girl does refer to an “armored car” in her description of her lover’s mode of transportation, but the carriage she describes is unique. It is not one of fourteen hundred, but one of a kind.

The love element is emphasized in the mentioning of the daughters of Jerusalem. The NIV credits them with the inlaid work of the carriage: “its interior lovingly inlaid by the daughters of Jerusalem.” The RSV says, basically, the same: “it was lovingly wrought within by the daughters of Jerusalem.” TLB renders it with the phrase: “the back is inlaid with these words: ‘With love from the girls of Jerusalem!’” But the KJV turns the meaning around by making Solomon the author and the daughters of Jerusalem the object of the decoration. We read: “the midst thereof being paved with love, for the daughters of Jerusalem.” Evidently, the Hebrew words allow different kinds of interpretation. The Tyndale Commentary says: “At Ugarit, samples of beds inlaid with erotic scenes have been found. Perhaps this is what is being described here.”

The girl brings her lover towards her in a carriage of love. The gold, silver and inlaid motives are not material things but spiritual and emotional experiences of love.

The crowning of the king is not a description of the actual coronation of Solomon either. It is true that Solomon’s mother interceded with David, which led to Solomon’s coronation, but he was crowned by the high priest. We read in I Kings 1:39, “Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, ‘Long live King Solomon!’” The Hebrew word for crown here means “diadem” or “wreath” like the decoration used at the Olympic games. The image probably refers to the boy’s natural grace and royal bearing. His mother brought him into this world as a boy who was destined to be the king of the girl’s life.

We could compare the scene to a modern marriage ceremony in which the bridegroom stands at the altar and sees his bride come into the church on the arm of her father. In Jewish weddings it was the groom who came to fetch his bride. But the thrill and joyful anticipation are the same.

2. Bride’s Beauty Is Praised 4:1-15

4:1 *How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead.*

2 *Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone.*

3 *Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate.*

4 *Your neck is like the tower of David, built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors.*

5 *Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.*

6 *Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense.*

7 *All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you.*

8 *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amanah, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions’ dens and the mountain haunts of the leopards.*

9 *You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.*

10 *How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!*

11 *Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon.*

12 *You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.*

13 *Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard,*

14 *nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices.*

15 *You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.*

With the exception of vs. 16 the speaker is obviously the boy, who sings the beauty of his bride. The way he describes her body, it sounds as if she stands naked before him. But her veil is mentioned in vs. 1, which means that she is fully dressed and decent. Vs. 12, “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.” should be read as a description of the girl’s virginity. Prov. 5:15-18 uses the same imagery to describe the enjoyment of sex relations within the marriage as opposed to adultery. We read there: “Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.”

So the description of the girl’s body is a poetical expression of the joyful anticipation of the marriage about to be consummated. This is no sinful glee but healthy joy. A boy and a girl who are engaged to be married have a right to indulge joyful fantasies. The human body is as much a masterpiece of God’s creative hand as the human mind. The French sculptor Rodin created a figure cut in stone, who rests his arms on his knees and his head on his hands and is lost in deep thought. Marble expresses thought. So does the human body express the contents of the soul.

The boy starts with the complete picture of beauty. “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!” She takes his breath away. He is like the bridegroom standing at the altar who sees his bride enter the church. He starts tingling with excitement.

We have a hard time imagining that God would get excited about us. Some of God’s excitement rings through in John’s description of the New Jerusalem. It must have been God’s idea to show this to John in a vision. We read: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” God sees His own glory reflected in the bride He has intended to present to His own Son. It is beauty beyond description. Rodin expressed profound thought in marble. God expressed inner beauty in a human body and He expresses spiritual love and perfection in human love. It is a triple comparison. But the ultimate truth is the last one. The other two are pictures of reality.

There seems to be a contradiction in the exclamation, “Your eyes behind your veil are doves.” If the girl were veiled her face would be hidden. The veil here is probably a poetical way of expression, indicating that the girl does not yet belong to the boy. It is a symbol of anticipation, not a cloth that covers her face. The comparison of the eyes with doves is used three times in the Song. In 1:15 the boy uses it for the girl but in 5:12 the girl describes the eyes of her lover. As we have seen above, in connection with 1:15, the eyes are the mirrors of the soul and we believe that the image means that the boy recognizes in the girl the charming beauty of her character.

The next picture, “Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead,” is very expressive. The Palestinian goats are said to be mostly black haired. When a herd of goats descends from the hillside it looks from a distance like a head of wavy black hair.

The comparison of the girl’s teeth with “a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone,” suggests in the first place that the girl is laughing, because her teeth are showing. The sheep that have just been shorn and washed as wet and shiny as they come up from the water. The regularity of the teeth is painted in the presence of the twins. The Tyndale Commentary says that twins among sheep were the exception, rather than the rule. So the poem suggests a mouth that shows teeth of exceptional beauty and regularity.

The red lips invite to be kissed. Undoubtedly that is what the boy intends to do. The phrase: “your mouth is lovely” seems to refer more to the speech than to the outward form of the mouth. The Hebrew word is “midbar” not “pik” which would be the normal word for mouth. The Tyndale Commentary says that the former word means the mouth “as the instrument of speech.” It could also refer to the voice. In the verse 11 the boy says: “Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue.” It seems most likely that the words here are a parallel to that verse and that speech is meant.

The comparison to the temples with halves of pomegranates leads the Tyndale Commentary to some humorous remarks. Dr. Carr says: “Most commentators take the word ‘slice’ or ‘piece’ to indicate the interior of the pomegranate with its juicy red flesh, hard white seeds and yellowish membranes, and then

have trouble dealing with this image. *It sounds like a description of an advanced case of acne.*³¹ Nothing in the words, however, demands the inside of the fruit. It means simply 'piece' ... and could mean the outside surface as easily as the inside. The blush-red smoothness of the pomegranate skin fits the imagery far better." Obviously, the boy intends to describe something beautiful.

The comparison of the girl's neck with "the tower of David," sounds like a strange image to our modern ears, especially since the boy decorates it with a thousand shields of warriors. The key word is elegance. Maybe if we could see the tower of David as the boy saw it, we would more appreciate his poetry at this point. The stately bearing of the girl is the point.

A Dutch poet once wrote: "I saw a woman walk as if she was immortal."³² The tower of David should not be seen as a picture of defense but as a monument of victory. The woman in the Dutch poem gave the impression as if she had conquered death. The boy cannot imagine that this kind of beauty would ever perish.

We all know deep down in our hearts that beauty should not perish. Yet we live in a world that will one day cease to exist, not because God made it for corruption and destruction, but because it has been corrupted and will therefore be destroyed. Our planet is full of life and color and beauty which touch our hearts with a sense of eternity. The colors of the rainbow are the colors of the throne of God, the colors of God's glory. Look at the color the apostle John paints for us in his picture of God's glory: "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."³³ There is a direct link between beauty and glory; that means that real beauty is eternal.

Yet the beauty we know fades and disappears. The boy describes the neck of the girl he loves. She may have been sixteen or eighteen years old. Fifty years later he would not say those things again, when looking at her wrinkled face. He may still have loved her and seen her inner beauty, but the outside glory had faded. Worse: sin has the tendency to wipe out every trace of this liting beauty that makes the heart sing. One of the most heart renting verses in the Bible is this, when the great city of Babylon is thrown down, never to be found again, the voice of the prophet says: "The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again."³⁴ Even the Song of Songs will not be song on earth again, but we know it will be song in heaven. If it will not, what value does it have here then??

Beginning with verse 5 the images become more erotic. Our Western sense of modesty tells us that female breast should remain covered. In other cultures this is not the case. As far as we know the dress code in Israel was very modest. If a woman wore a veil, certainly her breasts would be covered. In these verses the boy gives free reign to his erotic fantasies and describes his feelings in the anticipation of the consummation of their marriage. He describes this part of her body as "twin fawns of a gazelle." Innocent beauty could not be described any better. The eyes of young deer radiate the magic of a fairy tale. Not only are those two young animals there, but they feed upon lilies. This is certainly not a factual description of the habit of deer. They may go after green leaves of any kind, but it is doubtful that they would have a taste for fragrant flowers. In this deviation from reality, however, the boy adds color and fragrance to the picture that create the atmosphere of ecstasy. In the next step he sees himself feeding upon fragrance and beauty all night long. All this is joyful and healthy anticipation.

The Tyndale Commentary says about vs. 7 "All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you," "i.e. no physical or moral shortcoming which would detract or mar her beauty. The word is used only eighteen times in the Old Testament, ten in Leviticus and four in Numbers and Deuteronomy, generally in describing the perfect sacrificial animals which were required (cf. Mal. 1:12-14)." This makes us think of what Peter says about Jesus Christ: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."³⁵ It is true that in the context of the poem the words are used to describe the bride, not the bridegroom, but there would have been no bride if there had not been a bridegroom who was "a lamb without blemish or defect."

³¹ Italics are mine

³² "Ik zag een vrouw die schreed alsof zij nooit zou sterven."

³³ Rev. 4:3

³⁴ Rev. 18:23

³⁵ I Pet. 1:18-19

Vs. 8, “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amana, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions’ dens and the mountain haunts of the leopards,” forms again a problem for the interpreters who try to find the exact geographical locations. They question whether the girl is fleeing from king Solomon to Lebanon or is coming from there. If we take the references to these places simply as poetical images which convey atmosphere and feeling, the problem fades away. The couple could stay where they were and imagine themselves taking a honeymoon in the Swiss Alps. The issue is the joy and excitement, which is the same as if one would stand on top of a snow peaked mountain. It is like the feeling Isaiah captures when he says: “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”³⁶

The NIV translates vs. 9 with, “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.” Other translations say: “You have ravished my heart.” The Hebrew word is *libabtini*, which is variously translated as, “to take heart” or “to lose heart,” “to stir him up” or “to devastate him.” The Tyndale Commentary allows for a sexual connotation here in saying that “aroused my passion” would fit the context.

The verses 10 and 11 paint a word-picture of intoxication, sweetness and beauty. All the senses are involved. The eye feasts on beauty, the tongue tastes the honey, the ear hears the words and the touch, although not mentioned, is implied. Love draws out the whole of human experience.

The picture is not a silent one. “Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue,” implies that the girl is speaking and her words are not meaningless. Love may express itself in “sweet nothings” but sweet nothings convey a meaning too. The image of honey in a love relationship has been carried over into our modern times. Throughout the ages lovers have called each other “honey” and newly weds go on their “honeymoon.” Love is as old as man is.

“Milk and honey” are terms used to describe the character of the promised land. God says to Moses at the burning bush: “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”³⁷ The term is used fifteen times in the Pentateuch for Canaan. So, there may be a suggestion of divine promise in the choice of words here. This marriage that is about to be consummated is part of the fulfillment of God’s promise to man. All marriages are meant to be such a fulfillment. There is a divine element in all human love.

Love expresses itself not in only fragrance and beauty, but also in words that have meaning. “The Word was God.”³⁸ Love is creative, as the Word is creative.

Vs. 12 reads: “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.” The Tyndale Commentary says here: “This verse marks the first occurrence of the *garden* in the Song, but this theme, which will reappear in 4:15f; 5:1; 6:2, 11; 8:13, has already been introduced in 1:8 with ‘my vineyard’. the image of the garden behind its walls and with the gate *locked* suggest the unapproachableness of the area to all but those who rightfully belong. Metaphorically the ‘garden’ is used as a euphemism for the female sexual organs ... and here, a *fountain sealed* and a *garden locked* speak of virginity. The couple, while approaching consummation of their love, still have not reached that level of intimacy.”

The boy continues to describe the *garden* with plants and trees that fill the air with fragrance. “Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices.”

Some of God’s creatures have a better sense of smell than humans do. A dog recognizes his master by his smell. Our odor is a better identification than we realize. Smells are also the finishing touch of the mental pictures of our memories. A Dutch poet wrote a poem under the title *The Smell of Mother’s Hair bun*.³⁹

There is more involved in the picture the boy paints of the girl he loves than the perfume she uses. He describes her character, not her deodorant. It is interesting to trace the history of deodorants. The French excelled in the use of deodorants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because the people were not in

³⁶ Isa. 40:31

³⁷ Exod. 3:8

³⁸ John 1:1

³⁹ De geur van moeders haarrong

the habit of bathing regularly. Deodorants were not used to enhance our sweet odor, but to offset the bad odor that we exude naturally. A human body, left to itself, exudes decay. Obviously, this is the result of the fall. Adam and Eve did not need any deodorant in Paradise. The fact that our dog likes our smell is not necessarily a compliment. Dogs are scavengers. In the natural we give out the scent of our sinful nature.

What the boy describes is the scent of an inner beauty that cannot be found in sinful man. He describes the ideal person, the person God wants us to become, the person who has been redeemed and cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His love for the girl enables him to reach beyond the present reality into eternity with its glory and perfection. The apostle Paul captures this thought when he writes to the Corinthian Church: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?"⁴⁰ When Jesus Christ becomes visible in our lives we will be like a garden "with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices." And our bridegroom will express the same joy and excitement about us as this lover has about his beloved.

The image of vs. 15, "You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon" speaks again of sexual intimacy that is anticipated. The picture of marriage relations as the drinking from a well or fountain is also found in Prov. 5:15-18. We read there as a warning against extra-marital relations: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth." The boy is not satisfied, however with the picture of a cistern in a courtyard. He places his love life in the beautiful surrounding of the forest of Lebanon where the water flows down the mountains. The poem is full of lilting beauty, joy and fragrance. It describes the indescribable.

3. The Marriage Is Consummated 4:16-5:1

4:16 *Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad. Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.*

5:1 *I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk. Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers.*

The Tyndale Commentary says about these verses: "The third major division of the song comes to a climax with these two verses. They form the exact middle of the Hebrew text with 111 lines (60 verses, plus the title, 1:1) from 1:2 to 4:15, and 111 lines (55 verses) from 5:2 to 8:14. These two verses contain five lines of text, but they also contain the climax of the thought of the poem. Everything thus far has been moving towards the consolidation and confirmation of what has been pledged here. The sister/bride now becomes the 'consummated one' ... as lover and beloved extend to each other the fullness of themselves."

Some commentators are confused as to who the speaker is in 4:16. Some divide the verse and two and assign the first part "Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad" to the boy and "Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits" to the girl. There can be little doubt but that the girl is speaking in the last sentence. But I see no reason why the first part should not attributed to her also.

The moment of the wedding has arrived and consummation of the marriage has to take place. As the Tyndale Commentary remarks: "The injunction that concludes sections 1,2 and 4 *do not awaken love until it please* (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), here turns positive as she invokes the wind to awake, for love has pleased to stir." We saw before, in connection with the above mentioned quotations, that "do not awaken love until it please" suggested that sexual intercourse should only take place within the framework of a legitimate marriage relationship. We do not specifically read that a ceremony has taken place, but the implication is unavoidable. Now, as they are officially married, the bride invites the bridegroom to come to her and take her for his wife.

There is nothing vulgar in the description of the consummation. The wind is invited to come and blow so that the fragrance may spread. Fragrance is spread by the stirring of the petals of the flowers. The

⁴⁰ II Cor. 2:14-16

flower gives itself and releases its aroma by shedding her pollen. It is like the breaking of a bottle of perfume. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7 and Mary who anointed Jesus' head in John 12, had to break the bottle of perfume in order to pour out its contents. As the wind releases the fragrance so the seal of virginity of the bride is broken and love finds its consummation in the two becoming one.

The use of the wind as an image has a strong spiritual connotation. Jesus uses it in His conversation with Nicodemus. Speaking about the new birth, He says: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."⁴¹

II. Broadening of Love 5:2-8:14

A. Struggling in Love 5:2-7:10

From the Tyndale Commentary we quote: "This long section marks the working out of the relationship established in the previous chapters. The low-key opening lends a sense of subdued contentment after the joyous abandonment of 5:1. Again, as in the second major section of the song (2:8-3:5), there is a request/denial/search/find sequence in the relationship between the lovers. And again, as there, the resolution of the problem becomes possible only as the protagonists recognize the mutual responsibility each has to the other (cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-5). Here we are given the beloved's perspective. Of the 111 lines, 80 in this section are the words of the girl. This is really *her* book."

1. Bride's second dream of separation. 5:2-7

5:2 - 7

- 2 *I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My lover is knocking: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night."*
- 3 *I have taken off my robe-- must I put it on again? I have washed my feet-- must I soil them again?*
- 4 *My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him.*
- 5 *I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock.*
- 6 *I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer.*
- 7 *The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls!*

Most commentators agree that this section is easiest understood as a dream. Delitzsch says: "To sleep while the heart wakes signifies to dream, for sleep and distinct consciousness cannot be co-existent." Others see it as a description of a temporary lapse of the relationship. This doesn't seem to fit into the idyll which is the topic of this poem.

It would certainly not be uncommon for a newly-wed girl to dream that her husband has left her. It takes time for her emotions to catch up with her new status. Even when she has entered into the state of matrimony, which the Bible describes as "rest" her natural anxieties are not immediately subdued. She struggles with the reality of really being loved. It is sometimes easier to love than to be loved. At least some people find it easier to give love than to receive it. This turmoil is probably expressed in her dream of her lover's approach to her and her apparent rejection of his love.

We often go through the same struggle in the spiritual realm. Our being conscious of our sin and guilt make it hard for us to understand that God would really love us. Yet it is the realization that God forgives us and loves us unconditionally that gives us a sense of self worth that would otherwise be preposterous. The love this girl dreams about is only a vague reflection of God's eternal love for us.

The images of the verses 1-6 seem to be full of word-plays and double entendres in Hebrew. In some context the words "hand" and "feet" are given a sexual connotation. Especially vs. 4 and 5 could be

⁴¹ John 3:8

understood as the boy's approach to the girl with the intent to have sexual intercourse and the girl's excited response to this. But then, in her dream she feels that this would be too good to be true because she is unworthy of such love.

Newly-weds have to learn to be married, especially if they have lived alone for a long time before. It is not enough to become one flesh; two persons are sharing their soul and spirit also and yet they remain separate individuals. In our fallen condition this union will always be flawed and imperfect. What God intended to be a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity will not be perfect until we share His glory. But we do get foretastes of glory on earth.

The struggle the girl dreams about is much deeper than she realizes. Her dream reflects her fear that she may lose the one who is her happiness. That fear is not without ground. Lovers do lose each other, either through death or other forms of separation. That is why there are traces of death in her dream. The dew on the head of her lover is a form of death. Living people don't collect dew, only dead bodies that are left in the open do. The hands that are dripping with myrrh speak of death. Life on earth is fenced in by death. In her dream the fear of death has come to break up her happiness. She dreams that he is gone. Vs. 6 says: "I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer." Her eventual reunion comes when she wakes up. There is the resurrection from the dead. "Love is as strong as death."⁴² If this were not so, would there be a struggle? The thing that bothered me more than anything else in Irian Jaya was that the people never fought with death. They simply accepted it as inevitable.

Bach, in the Saint Matthew Passion uses the theme of the departure of the beloved, borrowed from the song of Songs in connection with the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through this death that the fear of death is conquered in us, according to Heb. 2:14,15.

In vs. 3 the girl offers some excuses for not getting up that sound rather trivial to us. "I have taken off my robe-- must I put it on again? I have washed my feet-- must I soil them again?" The gist of what she says is: "I don't feel like getting up." The strength of a love relationship lies in the willingness to sacrifice. John says: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."⁴³ Getting up from bed to let her lover in doesn't seem like a sacrifice; yet, she feels too comfortable to bring herself to do this for the one she loves.

Our comfort is often our greatest enemy, both in our human relationships as well as in our fellowship with God. The girl's brush with death puts things in the right perspective. When, in her dream, she loses her beloved she is willing to suffer for him, as is expressed in the beatings by the watchmen and in her being robbed. Vs. 7 says: "The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls!" We don't have to fear death anymore, but death can help us to understand the present and make sound judgments for the future. That is why Ecclesiastics says: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure."⁴⁴ It is only when we have settled in our minds the issue of death that we can live as we should. If the girl had decided that she would give her life for the one she loved, getting out of bed for him would not have been an issue. This is what Jesus meant when He said that we would hate our lives and lose it in order to find it. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple."⁴⁵

Of course, as becomes clear from the rest of the story, the girl loves the boy much more than she knows. We know ourselves very little. That is why the enemy can deceive us so easily. The devil thought he knew Job and that his tactics would make Job fall. God knew better. God knows us better too than we know ourselves. That is why John can say in I John 3:19,20, "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence. Whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."

⁴² 8:6

⁴³ I John 3:16

⁴⁴ Eccl. 7:1-4

⁴⁵ Luke 14:26

The girl's dream about her lover's departure corresponds to the believer's experience of not feeling the Lord's presence. The Lord is, of course, always with us but sometimes we do not feel Him near. Often we find ourselves in the same emotional condition as the girl during her bad dream. The heavens are closed like a brass door. The Lord seems to have left us, as David felt in Ps. 42:9,10 and Ps. 43:2. "I say to God my Rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?' My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" "You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" It is an experience of being out of touch with reality. Sin has a tendency to pull us out of reality into a dreamlike state. God doesn't lie when He assures us: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."⁴⁶ Yet, even Jesus Christ felt Himself forsaken by God when He carried the sin of the world on the cross. Such is the effect of sin. There is, of course, a deeper mystery to Jesus' "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"⁴⁷ than we will be able to fathom, but we understand that the presence of sin can close our eyes for the reality of God's presence. I do not mean to say that a lack of awareness of God's presence is always due to a particular sinful act. Sometimes the polluted atmosphere of sin will do this to us.

Although God is always present (as Paul states in Acts 17:27,28 - "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'") He may hide Himself from our consciousness to draw us out of ourselves. After all, the girl did get up and out into the street. Jesus tells us to find God in our inner room,⁴⁸ but sometimes we have to go out to find Him. Dr. Simpson relates his experience of seeking God in prayer and not finding Him. But when he went out to visit some needy people, the Lord was there.

The experience of suffering is a sure guarantee to bring us closer to God, once we have set out on the path of seeking Him. The girl may have dreamed this: "The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls!" But this dream made her realize that fellowship with the one she loved was worth the price. People who have suffered physical or emotional abuse because of the Lord have had the experience of being drawn closer to Him. David says: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word."⁴⁹ And there are countless examples of people who have been drawn closer to God through suffering and persecution. The growth of the church in Communist China is a clear example and so is the fact that a large number of Negro slaves accepted the faith of their masters, who called themselves Christian. There is no human explanation for this fact apart from the love of God, that touches man's heart and comforts him. Comfort and ease are detrimental to spiritual growth. But, as the church found out centuries ago, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

2. Bridegroom's Handsomeness Is Praised 5:8-6:3

- 8 *O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you-- if you find my lover, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love.*
- 9 *How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others, that you charge us so?*
- 10 *My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand.*
- 11 *His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven.*
- 12 *His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels.*
- 13 *His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh.*
- 14 *His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires.*
- 15 *His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars.*

⁴⁶ Heb. 13:5b

⁴⁷ Matt. 27:46

⁴⁸ Matt. 6:6

⁴⁹ Ps. 119:67

- 16 *His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.*
- 6:1 *Where has your lover gone, most beautiful of women? Which way did your lover turn, that we may look for him with you?*
- 2 *My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to gather lilies.*
- 3 *I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies.*

In vs. 8 the girl gives her second charge to the daughters of Jerusalem. This time the charge is not a warning to wait until marriage before entering into an intimate relationship, as we found in the preceding warnings, but to find this person she loves and convey a message to Him. "Tell him I love him to the point of fainting," she says. In answering this charge the daughters of Jerusalem want to know what is so special about this person. What does he have that other boys don't? This gives the opportunity to the girl to testify about the person she loves and in doing so she realizes what she would miss if she would lose him. In the verses 10-16 she gives the most beautiful and poetical description of a person that can be given. Beginning with: "My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand," to "His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem." With the exception, maybe, of the first and last statements, "My lover is radiant he is altogether lovely," the whole description of the boy is given in terms of physical beauty. It is, of course, on the basis of his physical qualities that he will be recognizable. This doesn't mean that the girl does not see any spiritual beauty in him. It will be true though that she doesn't know him yet fully at this point, having just been married to him.

This brings us to the question of how much we know of the One we love. Peter says to his disciples: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."⁵⁰

When the apostle John sees the Master he loves in his vision in Patmos, he describes Him in terms that are a beautiful mixture of physical and spiritual attributes: We read in Rev. 1:10-17, "Among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance." His reaction to this vision was: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead."

There is something deeply moving about the girl's testimony. This is what all testimonies should be: a declaration about the beauty of Christ. This beauty should be seen in us and not just transmitted by word of mouth. Our lives should be such that people see something in us that puzzles them and make them ask questions. The apostle Peter puts this beautifully in I Pet. 3:15, where he says: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to every one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." The ASV puts it this way: "But sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord." And TLB says it beautifully also: "Quietly trust yourself to Christ your Lord, and if anybody asks why you believe as you do, be ready to tell him, and do it in a gentle and respectful way."

We can, of course, only give testimony about the beauty of our Lord Jesus Christ in the measure in which we know Him ourselves. Our love for Him will largely depend upon how much we have understood of His love for us. That is why knowing Him should be the top priority of our lives. After a life full of experiences with the Lord, Paul says: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."⁵¹

When we place the girl's testimony about her lover side by side with John's testimony about Christ in Rev. 1:10-18 we see that, although John describes Him in terms of awesome physical beauty he conveys a picture of spiritual qualities. We may assume that, maybe unwittingly, the girl does not just describe the boy's body but his soul. After all, she does not just love his body she loves him. In this light we should read her words.

⁵⁰ I Pet. 1:8

⁵¹ Phil. 3:10-11

The boy is described as a living statue: “His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars.” This is the most beautiful poetry one can image. The girl sees her husband as a wife should see him, as the one who gives her protection and security as well as tenderness and love. This kind of beauty in a man is uplifting for the woman. Just as the love and beauty of Christ make us what we are supposed to be. We will be what we should be once we see Him as He is. As the apostle John puts it: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁵²

When the girl describes her lover in physical terms she does not leave out his inner beauty. It is only since sin entered the world that a dichotomy between soul and body has crept in. A beautiful body can be the home of an ugly soul and visa versa. In God’s original creation the body reflected the soul’s qualities. The perfect man Jesus Christ, of course, is perfect in this respect also. We can safely say about Him: “He is altogether lovely.”

Finally, the fact that the girl shares the most intimate picture of her lover with other girls would be rather unusual in our culture. We would regard it as an intrusion of privacy. After all, the girl’s relationship with this boy was unique and it was certainly not to be shared with others. In the spiritual realm, however, it is most fitting to share the beauty of Christ with others. We could answer the question: “How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others, that you charge us so?” with the words that the essence of the Christian faith is a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and that the fullest satisfaction a human being can experience, is to share in His love.

In the last three verses of this section, that is the first three of the new chapter, the daughters of Jerusalem ask the question: “Where has your lover gone, most beautiful of women? Which way did your lover turn, that we may look for him with you?” and the girl answers in an enigmatic way, that he has gone to “his garden.” According to the Tyndale Commentary the words “where” and “which way” are two different words in Hebrew and the latter one is only used here in the Old Testament.

The first surprising element in the question of the daughters of Jerusalem is that they recognize the beauty of the bride after she has given her description of the beauty of the groom in the previous verses. Her loving and emotional description made his beauty reflect on her. We often see this marvelous thing happen with people who have lived together for years in loving fellowship, that they start to look alike. Inner beauty is transferable between persons and it expresses itself in physical characteristics.

What is true on an earthly level is true in the spiritual realms also. We shall be like Him as we become enthralled by His beauty, love and majesty.

The girl’s answer in vs. 2 and 3: “My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to gather lilies; he browses among the lilies,” makes little sense if it were taken literally. If she knew where he had gone there would have been no reason for her anxious search and the involvement of others. The garden and the lilies are a returning theme in the song and they refer, in every instance, to the intimacy of love. The girl’s words should be taken as an indication that she has woken up from her dream and that she experiences the presence of her husband in the most intimate way. The clause, “I am my lover’s and my lover is mine,” which is also a re-occurring statement in the song, fits the suggestion that the lovers are together and that the girl is conscious of this fact.

As we have seen before, awareness of the presence of the One who loves us and acceptance of the fact of being loved, does not come natural to most people. It has to be learned. The best formula for the experience of God’s love is the little chorus: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

The surprising part in this section is, again, the involvement of the third party, the daughters of Jerusalem. Like in 5:1, it seems strange to us that others would be drawn into what, in our opinion, should be a strictly private and intimate affair. But here, again, we may have the difference in cultural background, in which intimacy between lovers was openly discussed without vulgarity and, if we keep the spiritual dimension in focus, we can say that the love between our Lord and us is a common experience. In this sense does the presence of the others widen the horizon of this Song. And that may be the intent.

3. Bride’s Beauty Is Praised 6:4-7:10

⁵² I John 3:2

- 4 *You are beautiful, my darling, as Tizrah, lovely as Jerusalem, majestic as troops with banners.*
 5 *Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Gilead.*
 6 *Your teeth are like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing. Each has its twin, not one of them is alone.*
 7 *Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate.*
 8 *Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number;*
 9 *but my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. The maidens saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines praised her.*
 10 *Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?*
 11 *I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley, to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom.*
 12 *Before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people.*
 13 *Come back, come back, O Shulammite; come back, come back, that we may gaze on you! Why would you gaze on the Shulammite as on the dance of Mahanaim?*
 7:1 *How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of a craftsman's hands.*
 2 *Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies.*
 3 *Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.*
 4 *Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus.*
 5 *Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses.*
 6 *How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights!*
 7 *Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit.*
 8 *I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples,*
 9 *and your mouth like the best wine. May the wine go straight to my lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth.*
 10 *I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me.*

There is no doubt but that these words, through 7:9a, should be ascribed to the boy. The words: "May the wine go straight to my lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth. I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me," are, obviously, the girl's response.

The groom opens this poem in which he sings the bride's beauty by comparing her, respectively, to Tizrah, Jerusalem and "troops with banners." About Tizrah, the Tyndale Commentary says: "Tizrah was an ancient Canaanite city in Samaria which served as the capital of the secessionist Northern Kingdom for some fifty years during the reigns of Jeroboam and his successors until Omri established Samaria as the capital about 879 BC (1 Ki. 14:1-20; 16:8-26). The exact location of the city has not yet been established, but most authorities identify it with Sechem on the main road toward Beth-Shean. The site is one of great natural beauty with extensive gardens and groves encouraged by its abundant water supply (one of the best in Israel)."

The picture of Jerusalem as a symbol of beauty is obvious. The psalmist praises the architecture of the city when he says: "Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together."⁵³

More puzzling is the mention of the army. "Terrible as an army with banners," as the KJV renders it, is repeated in vs. 10. TLB paraphrases it with, "how you capture my heart." The NIV says in vs. 4, "majestic as troops with banners." In vs. 10 the translation is accommodated to the context. We read: "Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?" The word "terrible" or "majestic" is the translation of the Hebrew "ayumma" which, according to the Tyndale

⁵³ Ps. 122:3

Commentary, is related to the noun “terror, dread, awe.” It could be rendered as “awe inspiring” or “terrific.” The same word is found in Hab. 1:7, where the Chaldean army is described with the words, “They are a feared and dreaded people.” About “Terrible as an army with banners,” the Commentary says: “(Heb. *kannidgalot*) is more difficult [to translate]. The Hebrew text does not contain the word for ‘army’, but simply reads ‘as bannered’. The context suggests that it is the cities which are thus bedecked, and the introduction of ‘armies’ here is superfluous. In the light of the discussion of *dgl*, meaning ‘to look upon’ (cf. 2:4), this colon is rendered simply ‘splendid to look upon’. The expression is repeated in 6:10. Cf. 5:10.”

This comparison of the girl with the cities of Tizra and Jerusalem evokes the picture John paints of the bride of Christ, as the New Jerusalem. In Rev 21:9-27. In vs. 9-11 we read: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” If Tizra pictures the beauty of the countryside in which the city is located, Jerusalem shows us the awe-inspiring sight of the city itself.

Cities in the Bible are mainly pictures of what man built for himself. They are often shown as symbols of evil. We read about Nimrod, “Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, ‘Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.”⁵⁴ And in the New Testament the city of Babylon stands for all that is evil in the world.⁵⁵ But the girl in the Song of Songs is like the city God built. She is identified, not with the works of men who broke of their relationship with God, but with the beauty of what God has done in restoring man to the position He had in mind for him when He created Adam and Eve.

In vs. 5 the boys speaks again about the eyes of his beloved, as he did in 1:15 (“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.”) and 4:1,9. (“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves.” “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.”) And now here, “Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me.”

The Hebrew verb which is translated with “overwhelm” is “rahab.” It is variously rendered as “disturb, overcome, dazzle, hold captive.” According to the Tyndale Commentary the verb occurs only four times in the Old Testament. Three times here and once in Ps. 138:3 which says: “You made me bold and stouthearted.” The LXX translates “rahab” with the Greek verb “anapteroo,” which, literally means to raise the feathers (of a bird), or metaphorically “to put on tiptoe of expectation” or “to excite” and bring to a state of eager expectation. The Tyndale Commentary says: “This is clearly the intent here - her glance ‘turns him’ and makes him bold in his intentions.” A footnote is added to this which says: “Pope translates ‘drive me wild’, following Waldman’s rendering ‘sexually aroused.’” This all sounds very plausible, but for the fact that the boys says, “Turn your eyes from me,” which gives the impression that he doesn’t want to be aroused. In the language of lovers, however, words often convey a meaning opposite of what is being said. This may very well be the case here.

The following images describing her hair, her teeth and her temples are a repetition of what was said in ch. 4:1-3.

The mention of “sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number,” in vs. 8 strikes us as strange. The intent is, obviously, to bring out the fact that this girl is superior to the large number of wives, concubines and aspiring concubines that Solomon had at that time. The numbers would indicate that the poem was written during the early period of Solomon’s reign. The harem of the king had not yet grown to seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, as is mentioned in I Kings 11:3. We tend to think that, in this case at least, bigger is not better. The fact that Solomon shared his love with so many made him, in our opinion, not a better lover but a lesser one. This was, probably, not the philosophy shared by the people in Solomon’s time. They must have considered Solomon to be *the* great lover. I take it, therefore, that the boy is saying here that he is actually richer than Solomon because the quality of his love surpasses Solomon’s quantity.

⁵⁴ Gen. 10:8-12

⁵⁵ See Rev. 17-19 and I Pet. 5:13

Twice in the New Testament Jesus uses Solomon as a measure to determine values. In Matt. 6:28-30 He, actually, says that those who put their faith in God are richer than Solomon. "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" And in Matt. 12:42 He declares Himself to be the source of wisdom from which Solomon received his insight. "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here." These quotes give depth to the utterance of the boy, who considers himself richer than Solomon. He had, of course, not yet read the words of Jesus in the New Testament, but the Holy Spirit, sometimes, runs ahead of people and gives them prophetic insight beyond the scope of the own vision.

We could object that, if the above interpretation is correct, Solomon could hardly have written this poem. But I believe it is clear from the other books in the Bible, that are attributed to Solomon, that the king had the wisdom to be able to look at himself from a distance and evaluate himself, sometimes even not without irony.

In vs. 9 the uniqueness of the girl is expressed, first of all by calling her "my perfect one," and "the only daughter of her mother." This may not necessarily mean that she was the only female child in the family. It is probably a poetical expression. The virgins, queens and concubines of the previous verse are drawn into the picture again and are made to bow down before this simple shepherd girl from Shulam, much in the way in which Joseph in his dreams saw his brothers, his father and mother bow down before him.⁵⁶ The following verse even strengthens the link between the boy's praise of his bride and Joseph's dreams. We read, "Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?" As we have seen, the last clause of the verse is, actually, the same as in vs. 4, "majestic as troops with banners." The NIV is, probably, correct in linking the image to the heavenly constellations.

The comparison between the girl and the galaxies makes us think of what David says in Ps. 8. In vs. 3 and 4 we read: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" Seeing himself against the background of the night sky, David realizes how small and insignificant he is. But then he discovers the miracle of God's creation, that the smallness of man is endued with the greatness of God. In vs. 5 and 6 he says: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet." The bridegroom has made the same discovery about his bride. He sees her clothed with the brightness of the sun and the beauty of the moon and stars.

So must God see us from above. In God's eyes we surpass the radiance of the heavenly bodies. The elders of the churches are, in Jesus' hands, represented as seven stars.⁵⁷ And in Dan. 12:3 we read, "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." But of the New Jerusalem, which is the bride of the Lamb, we read, not only, that it shone with the glory of God but that the city doesn't need any sun or moon because of the glory of God within it.⁵⁸ We have more eternal value for our Creator than the rest of creation.

Vs. 11 and 12 are probably another poetical description of sexual intimacy between the newly weds. The bridegroom says: "I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley, to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people." It appears, however, that vs. 12 throws translators and interpreters for a loop. The Tyndale Commentary says: "Commentators are unanimous that this verse is the most difficult in the Song and one of the most difficult in the Old Testament to make sense of." A footnote at this point quotes Roland Murphy who says that this verse is the most obscure in the Song and has resisted all attempts at translation. The section in the Tyndale Commentary ends by saying: "The precise meaning of the verse is not clear. Perhaps there is some merit in Fuerst's suggestion that there is some idiomatic meaning we cannot recover." The Hebrew word which is translated in the NIV as "Before I realized it" is "*lo' yadati*" which, literally, means "I did not know." "My desire" is the translation of the Hebrew "*napsi*." The RSV translates this with "my fancy." The biggest obstacle is, of course, the appearance of the royal chariots. It seems to me,

⁵⁶ Gen. 37:5-11

⁵⁷ Rev. 1:16,20

⁵⁸ Rev. 21:11,23

though, that if we keep in mind the fact that we are reading poetry, the description of the experience of supreme joy as a ride in a royal chariot is not too hard to grasp. We have seen the same image used before in 1:9 and 3:6-10. TLB's paraphrase gives this verse an interesting twist and, in doing so, links it to the following verse where the girl seems to be called back. We read, "Before I realized it, I was stricken with terrible homesickness and wanted to be back among my own people." This puts the words in the mouth of the girl.

The easiest way to interpret the last verse of this chapter seems to be to ascribe the words again to the daughters of Jerusalem. "Come back, come back, O Shulammitte; come back, come back, that we may gaze on you! Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte as on the dance of Mahanaim?" "Come back" does not, necessarily, imply that the girl has left. It is more probable that, at this point, she has withdrawn to a private place to be with her husband. Again, confusion reigns among the commentators as to the meaning of this verse. The NIV translation of the Hebrew word *ʾwʿnʿhʿzʿh* with "gaze on" seems better than merely "look upon" as some of the other translations have. According to the Tyndale Commentary it means "to see with insight and understanding." Dr. Carr says, "The verb is used frequently of the prophetic visions." So the daughters of Jerusalem do not merely want to see the Shulammitte dance, but they want to understand the meaning of the exuberant joy which is part of the wedding celebration. The Holy Spirit seems to indicate with the choice of words that we have to look beyond the expression of love between husband and wife to the real meaning of love, as God reveals it to His church in His Son Jesus Christ.

In chapter 7:1-9a the boy loses himself in ecstasy over the girl's beauty. The Tyndale Commentary takes this passage as comments by the onlookers while the girl is dancing. This is, probably, due to the fact that the description of her body begins with her "sandaled feet" and goes from there upwards. But I take it that, at this point, the boy is alone with his new bride. Some of the images are repeats from previous monologues, but some new features are introduced. The detailed description of her body indicates an intimacy greater than before, such as should only be found between married couples. The tone is the same as in Prov. 5:18-19, "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love." The couple is, obviously, at this point deeply engaged in an intimate experience of one another's love.

It remains hard for us to grasp that a Scripture passage, such as this one, could have spiritual significance. The description of the girl's body by her loving husband is so specifically sexual that we have a hard time crossing the line we have drawn between "eros" and "agape." We seldom realize that God did not draw this line; we did. God draws a line, where we don't, between erotic love in a marriage relation and adulterous lusts. It is precisely because we, almost automatically, jump from erotic feelings to sinful sensations, that we have trouble to identify with Paul's statement: "The two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁵⁹

The loving description of the girl's body begins at her feet and moves up to her head. "How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter!" (vs. 1). "Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses." (vs. 5). The title "prince's daughter" refers to the nobility of her character not, necessarily, to her physical descent. The insertion of those words indicate that, for the boy, the beauty of her body is an expression of the beauty of her soul. She is God's masterpiece Who, as a Master artist, formed her body to express a spiritual reality. If man can take a piece of wood, or a block of marble and cut away at it till it expresses thoughts and emotions, how much more can God express beauty beyond description in the realities of flesh and blood!

The glance of the boy moves up from her feet to her thighs. What the NIV calls "graceful legs" is better translated as "rounded thighs," like in the RSV and most other translations. The Hebrew word *sarr*, which most translators render as "navel" means, according to the Tyndale Commentary "private parts." It would be inconceivable that such comments would be made by onlookers, instead of by the lawful husband of the bride. Also the description of the waist as surrounded by lilies has a clear erotic connotation. The comparison of her breasts with a pair of fawns is a repeat of 4:5. In 4:4 her neck was also compared to a tower, there the tower of David, here an ivory tower. The reference is probably to color and smoothness rather than to the shape. Previously, her eyes were compared to doves, as in 1:15; 4:1, here, in the groom's mind, they evoke the pools of "Heshbon by the gates of Bath-Rabbim." The Tyndale Commentary says here: "Recent excavations in Jordan, not far from modern Amman, have revealed the remains of large reservoirs near the city." The name Bath-Rabbim is further unknown in the Bible. It could be the name of one of the

⁵⁹ Eph. 5:31-32

city gates. The meaning of the image is clear, though. The girl's eyes reflects the tranquillity and peace of her beautiful soul. A Dutch proverb says: "Quiet waters have depth."⁶⁰

The comparison of the nose with "the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus," is even harder to grasp for us. There may be a play of words in this image. The name Lebanon is, according to the Tyndale Commentary, derived from the Hebrew word "*laben*" which means white. The comparison may be more concerning the color of her nose than the shape of it. Obviously, a compliment is intended.

Also the head, compared to Mount Carmel, speaks of beauty, grandeur and majesty. The image has nothing to do with shape or size but with the feeling of awe one gets by seeing the beauty of a mountain range. I have made turns on a road and, all of sudden, seen the high mountains of Switzerland or Irian Jaya in front of me, which sight took my breath away. Looking at the girl's would stop the boy in his tracks and make him pause to admire.

Comparing her hair with royal tapestry does not seem to be a correct translation. The RSV is more correct when it says, "your flowing locks are like purple." From 4:4 and 6:5, we learn that the color of the girl's hair was black. So the word "purple" cannot refer to the color of her hair. It has been suggested that her hair had lustrous highlights which shimmered and rippled as she moved. Purple being the color of royalty, though, it could mean that she looked like a queen. The reference, in one breath to the king, makes this interpretation quite plausible. Again, this does not, necessarily, imply that the lovers belong to the royalty. But they feel like king and queen.

Vs. 6 sums it all up in the words: "How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights!" If "beautiful" stands for her physical appearance, "delights" must refer to her inner beauty, her character.

The last part of the lover's ode speaks again of the moment of greatest intimacy. The climbing of a palm tree to pick its fruit is a real conquest. Those who have seen people climb palm trees will agree. The boy is ready to conquer his bride and enjoy the moment of full intimacy with her, which is expressed in the eating of the fruit. The intoxication of that moment is emphasized by the use of the wine image. To which the girl responds with surrender in the giving of herself. This moment of sexual unity is described in terms of greater excitement than in 5:1, where the boy says in the most delicate way: "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk." The climbing of the palm tree and the drinking of the wine speak of an increase of passionate emotions. Intimacy is greater here than before and the experience is more intoxicating.

The girl responds to her lover's passion by letting her love flow toward him. She picks up his use of the image of wine and says: "May the wine go straight to my lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth." The expression, probably, stands for the exchange of passionate kisses. The Hebrew word, which is translated here with "teeth" is "*w^esenim*." According to the interpretation of the "*w^e*" part of the word, it is variously translated as "sleep" or "teeth." The KJV, for instance, renders the verse with, "And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak."

Vs. 10 repeats the girl's declaration 2:16 and 6:3. We have seen, though, that there is a subtle progression in each of the repeats. In 2:16 she says: "My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies;" in 6:3 the accents shifts from the balanced "I am his and he is mine" to the girl, with, "I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies." And now her she loses herself completely in her husband's love by saying, "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me." The change in stress expresses beautifully the progression of surrender to her husband the bride manifests.

Love is not a static condition. It grows between two individuals. Surrender and sacrifice of oneself is a basic feature of love. It is proof of love's divine origin. The surrender of love does not entail a loss of identity, but a loss of independence. In a marriage, becoming "one flesh" does not diminish the individuality of the partners. To the contrary, it tends to enhance personality. But, when the two become one, they cease to act independently.

The spiritual implications of the above are clear. Jesus did not become less God or less Man when He gave Himself for us. As a matter of fact, His death on the cross opened the gates of glory for the Man Jesus Christ. Our surrender to Him and the denial of ourselves draws us into this glory. We will only keep what we give away. We will only live as we die.

⁶⁰ "Stille wateren hebben diepe gronden."

B. Growing in Love 7:11-8:14
1. Bride's Desire to Visit Her Home 7:11-8:4

- 7:11** *Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages.*
12 *Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom-- there I will give you my love.*
13 *The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my lover.*
8:1 *If only you were to me like a brother, who was nursed at my mother's breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me.*
2 *I would lead you and bring you to my mother's house-- she who has taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates.*
3 *His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me.*
4 *Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*

These verses, obviously, belong to the girl. She seems to refer to the first encounter mentioned in 1:4-17, where the couple, at that time still unmarried, stretched out in the grass under the trees. Whether she wants to visit her home, as our outline suggests, is not clear. The Hebrew word "*koper*" which is translated "in the villages" in the NIV is rendered as "among the henna bushes" by the NEB. The Tyndale Commentary says here: "The lexicons list at least four different nouns with this form and spelling. The verbal root means to cover or seal something (e.g. Gn. 6:14), and is used most frequently of 'atonement', i.e. 'covering' sin. The nouns, however, vary considerably. I 1 Samuel 6:18; 1 Chronicles 27:25; and Nehemiah 6:2, *koper* is translated *village*, i.e. 'unwalled village' in contrast to 'walled' cities. But twice before in the Song (1:14; 4:13), *koper* is used of the copper-coloured cosmetic dye extracted from henna- plant. This shrub, which grows wild in Palestine, is covered in spring with fragrant whitish flowers growing in clusters like grapes. In view of the parallel in vv. 11f. with the perfume/vineyard/field motifs from earlier in the Song (e.g. 1:13f.; 2:11-27; 4:12-16, etc.), NEB *henna bushes* is preferred over the other versions."

It could be that a word-play is intended here. In marriage, the husband becomes the protection of the wife. He is like to wall around the city. It is possible that the girl refers to the sense of security she receives from her relationship with her husband. For us, the use of the word "*koper*" or "*kafar*" suggests strongly the Old Testament picture of atonement for sin by substitution. Our security is in our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, Who took our sins upon Himself and not only covers us but washes us in His blood.

The images in vs. 12 and 13 evoke a word picture of youth, vitality, freshness, color and fragrance. It does not, necessarily, mean that the lovers would take an early walk in the vineyard. The blooms and blossoms describe their romantic feelings and the intense enjoyment of one another. Where in 1:9-17 the couple may have been stretched out in the open field and fancied themselves in the king's palace, it could be that here they are, actually, in bed in their own home and see themselves as strolling through the vineyard in the early morning, inhaling love and beauty.

The mandrakes emphasize the intensity of their passion for each other. The Tyndale Commentary remarks here: "The *mandrake* or 'love apple' is a pungently fragrant plant that has long been considered an aphrodisiac - not that these lovers needed any additional stimulation, but the use of such items has long been a part of the lore of love-making. The word occurs only here, and four times in Genesis 30:14-16." The fact that the girl mentions this fruit, together with "every delicacy, both new and old" that she has stored up for her lover, simply means that she gives him the fullness of her love.

Isn't this what the Lord expects from us? When God commands His children, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,"⁶¹ He means that we should love Him passionately! God gives us an example in erotic love that often escapes us when we transfer it to the spiritual realm.

The phrase, "At our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my lover," seems to say that the life of the girl, up to this point, has been a preparation for this moment. When she falls in love and marries her lover, she realizes that she has been made for this experience. This again, has

⁶¹ Deut. 6:5

its counterpart in our spiritual lives. When we are found by God we, immediately, understand that we were made for a relationship with the living God. When we experience God's love we feel like a fish in the water; we have found the element in which we are supposed to live.

The girl's exclamation in 8:1 sounds strange to our Western ears. For us, a display of affection in public is not offensive, as it is in many Eastern cultures. The tribal people in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, for instance, would indicate their relationship as husband and wife in public by walking at a certain distance from one another. But relatives would hold hands in public without embarrassment. TLB renders this verse with: "Oh, if only you were my brother; then I could kiss you no matter who was watching, and no one would laugh at me."

The following verse sounds even stranger to us. "I would lead you and bring you to my mother's house-- she who has taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates." It is obvious that the girl does not want to live with her lover in a brother-sister relationship. The RSV and some other translations add the phrase, "into the chamber of her that conceived me." This clause is found in the LXX. The passage is parallel to the one in 3:4, where we read: "I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me." We remarked there: "The reference to the place establishes in a poetical way, a chain of life. The sexual reference is not to her own experience, but to that of her parents. It is the place where she was created, the place where she came into the world. The suggestion is that the fruit of the marriage she anticipates will be the birth of their own children. She sees herself as a link in the miracle chain of life. The picture she paints is more than one of mere enjoyment of intimacy with her lover; it is a picture of life." Some of this thought is repeated here, although the context is different. Here she is married. The consummation which was still wished for in the previous situation has taken place here. She wants to place her experience with her husband in the larger framework of the chain of life. However great and intoxicating the experience of love may be, it is not a goal in itself. It has a purpose that lies beyond the joy of the moment. It leads to the future when they will have children, like their parents did. It points to eternity.

There is some difference of opinion between commentators and translators of the words "she who has taught me." The form of the Hebrew verb can be taken as either masculine or feminine. The context seems to require the feminine interpretation. Her mother taught her the facts of life, not her new husband. The girl doesn't only want to have sex, she wants to have children with her lover. This attitude lifts up the whole poem to a higher level.

Verse 3 and 4 repeat what was said in 2;6,7. But there the words were spoken in anticipation of the marriage. Here the goal is reached; the two are married and live together. The charge to the daughters of Jerusalem is not anymore a warning against an illegitimate and premature relationship. It is a demonstration of the fact that patience is rewarded. The gazelles and the does of the field that were mentioned in 2:7 are absent in vs. 4. But the solemn oath, translated as "I charge you" is the same. These words carry the same weight as Jesus' words which He introduces with "Amen, amen."⁶²

2. Journey and Homecoming 8:5-14

- 5 *Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her lover? Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth.*
- 6 *Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.*
- 7 *Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.*
- 8 *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?*
- 9 *If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar.*
- 10 *I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers. Thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment.*
- 11 *Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver.*

⁶² for example John 1:51

- 12** *But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon, and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.*
13 *You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice!*
14 *Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.*

We enter into the last section of the Song of Song, this Poem of Poems. Many of the images are repeats of previous sections but all are placed in a different context. The opening phrase: "Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her lover?" is the same as in 3:6. But there it was the boy who came from the desert. Here it is, obviously the girl.

The apple tree was used as an image to describe the excellency of the boy above all the other men. Here the boy uses the image and connects it to the mother of his new bride.

Vs. 6 and 7 contain a profound vow of commitment to one another, expressed supremely in beautiful language.

In vs. 8-10 a young sister, supposedly the bride's sister, is introduced. The intention is, probably, to show the bride's maturity in comparing her with a girl who has not yet reached marriageable age.

In vs. 11 and 12 the boy compares his newly acquired wealth with the riches of king Solomon, suggesting that he has the better deal.

Vs. 13 and 14 contain the final love call; the first one uttered by the boy, the second by the girl.

All this seems rather complicated and it is not amazing that some commentators believe that these last verses are a series of unconnected poets added by editors and copyists. I do not share this concept. It is true that these last ten verses can be divided into five sections, but that doesn't mean that there is not connection.

It is hard to determine who speaks the words: "Who is this coming up from the desert leaning on her lover?" It can hardly be either the girl or the boy, since they are the ones who are coming up from the desert. So, again, a third party is introduced.

The image of the desert was used also in 3:6. In connection with that verse we made the following remarks: "The girl seems to add a divine element to her love relationship with the words: 'Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant?' In the history of Israel the column of smoke and fire was the visible demonstration of the presence of God. It was the Shekina glory. We have seen before that love on a human level portrays the character of God. God is love and all human love is derived from Him. It was God's glorious presence that kept people alive in a place of death. We could hardly imagine a more beautiful description of the girl's experience than this: in the dreadful desert of her life appears the column of smoke and fire that lights up her soul with love. It is like light that shines in the darkness." In 8:5 the column of smoke and the perfume is not mentioned. Here the girl leans on her lover. Yet, we can say that the two pictures do not differ. The divine glory is personified. Like Israel was surrounded and covered by the cloud which, in Moses' words meant, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms,"⁶³ so, here the girl is leaning on the arms of the person she loves and who loves her.

It is the boy who says: "Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth." If we take the apple tree to mean a certain place under a certain tree, the words would make very little sense. In 2:3 the girl had compared the boy to an apple tree. She said: "Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste." It is probably to this image that the boy refers here. Their romance started, so to speak, under an apple tree. In using the image again and in linking it to the love life of his mother-in-law the bridegroom makes the same profound reference to the larger context of their love as the bride did before in 3:4. They both see their exhilarating experience of love in the context of the chain of life in which they are a link. This means that they have not lost their heads, although they may have lost their hearts. They understand the meaning of their relationship. Not many people ever come that far in their marriage relationships.

The bride was conceived and born under the apple tree. Poetically speaking, this means that her father loved her mother and she herself is the fruit of this lover relationship. Now she experiences the same relationship with her husband which will result in the birth of new life.

⁶³ Deut. 33:27

A rather unusual feature in this verse is the mention of her mother's labor. Her mother suffered for her to be born. This suffering is the result of sin. As a result of the fall of Adam and Eve God said to the woman: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children."⁶⁴ The reference to this pain seems strange in this idyll. Jesus uses the same image in connection with His death and resurrection. He said: "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."⁶⁵ The love between this boy and girl is played out in an imperfect world; a world stained by sin. The poem describes life in the midst of death.

Vs. 6 says: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm." The NEB uses the words "wear me." The Tyndale Commentary remarks here, "NEB catches the ancient Near Eastern custom of wearing signet rings or cylinder seals on cords around the neck, but the force of the Hebrew verse here is more correctly rendered by the other version." (NIV "place me.")

Beside other, secondary, meanings of this image, such as ownership, the obvious intent seems to be that the girl wants the boy's heart to be sealed or closed for other girls and she wants to be that seal. One of the features that gives depth to a marriage relationship is exclusiveness. A married man should only pay attention to the girl who is his wife.

In 4:15 the boy had said to the girl: "You are a sealed fountain." This seal was broken in the bond of their marriage. Now the boy becomes sealed. When the physical seal of the girl's virginity was broken by the boy, the seal of spiritual and emotional exclusiveness was placed on the boy's heart. The heart is, of course, the seat of emotions. Prov. 4:23 says: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." The arm is the tool that expresses affection. The girl leans on the boy's arm for support, for protection and for affection.

In our relationship with God the seal stands for the Holy Spirit. "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."⁶⁶ In the spiritual realm the seal of the bridegroom is placed on the bride. We belong exclusively to God as the object of His love. If we are placed as a seal upon His heart that is the only our response to our being sealed by Him first.

The main idea conveyed by the image of the seal is, of course, that the relationship is legal and binding. The seal takes love out of the sphere of emotions and places upon a level of a binding and irrevocable union. Our relationship with God is sealed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God binds Himself to us in Him and we enter into a relationship with Him that is eternal.

The second part of the verse indicates the strength of the seal in the comparison with death. The introduction of death in the poem is amazing and it has a dramatic effect. We associate love with life, and rightfully so. By casting the deep shadow of death upon love, the light of love shines more brightly. Death is the inescapable issue for man. No one escapes death. Death is the ultimate enemy. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."⁶⁷ In love death meets its match. We learn in the Gospels that love, ultimately, conquered death. Jesus died for us because He loved us and thus he overcame the stranglehold death held upon mankind. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."⁶⁸ Death makes all relationships temporal, love makes them eternal. In using the image of the seal the girl expresses the thought that their relationship should never end, although she knows that it will on earth. Obviously, she says more than she can, possibly, know. But the Spirit in her knows what He is saying to us.

The parallel phrase to "love is strong as death," is "its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame." The ASV renders the last clause as "A very flame of Jehovah." The Tyndale Commentary says about the word "jealousy", "*Jealousy* (NEB *passion*) is not to be understood in a negative sense ('the green-eyed monster'), but rather as an assertion of the rightful claims of possession. Cf.

⁶⁴ Gen. 3:16

⁶⁵ John 16:21-22

⁶⁶ II Cor. 1:21-22

⁶⁷ Heb. 9:27

⁶⁸ Heb. 2:14,15

the cognate adjective in Exodus 20:5; 34:14. *etc.*⁶⁹ Regarding the word “unyielding” the Commentary says: “*Cruel* (NIV *unyielding*; JB *relentless*; Heb. *qaseh*) occurs some thirty-four times in the Old Testament, but only this once in the Song. The meaning ‘hard’ or ‘obstinate’ (vs. ‘soft’ or ‘weak’, 2 Sa. 3:39), *i.e.* ‘inflexible’, is best rendered with the NIV or JB rather than the negative sense of other versions.”

Jealousy does have a negative connotation in our modern use of the language. But since the word is used of God there is, obviously, a positive and good kind of jealousy without which love is not genuine. Jealousy guards the exclusiveness of love. A man who truly loves his wife ought to be jealous when she gives up her undivided devotion to her husband and starts to pay attention to other men. The reverse is, of course, true also; a woman should be jealous for her husband. Jealousy may not always be active and on the service in a marriage relationship, but it should not be absent. Vs. 6 treats the concept of jealousy as a fiery protection.

The Tyndale commentary says here: “*A most vehement flame* (NIV *mighty flame*; NEB *fiercer than any flame*; JB *a flame of Yahweh himself*; ASV *a very flame of Jehovah*; Heb. *salhebetya*). JB and ASV take the last syllable of the Hebrew as the divine name Yahweh, the LORD. The meaning could be ‘love is a flame which has its origin in God’; while this is technically true, the fact that this is the only place in the Song a possible use of the divine name appears militates against this understanding of the final syllable. More likely, this is simply a use of a standard idiom for the superlative, as the RSV translates.” It seems to me that the Jewish tendency to avoid any direct mention of God’s name would preclude the use of the letters *ya* as a mere superlative. I would rather settle for the fact that the poet literally considers jealousy to be a flame which has its origin in God.

Like the apostle Paul in I Cor. 13, Solomon extols love above all the other qualities God has bestowed upon man. Without love life is not worth living. Love gives a glow of eternity to our transient existence on earth. “Love never ends.”⁷⁰

Vs. 7 says: “Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.” Where in the previous verse jealousy was compared to fire, here love itself is the unquenchable. Water, which is the arch enemy of fire, finds itself powerless in the face of this opponent. Often water is stronger than fire, but if fire is hot enough it vanquishes water, as Elijah demonstrated. When Elijah rebuilt the altar of God and brought the sacrifice saturated with water, we read: “Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.”⁷¹ Water may put out fires on earth, it is powerless against “the fire of the LORD.”

Love is also the greatest treasure one can find. The remainder of the verse says: “If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.” It cannot be bought. Not many people understand this profound truth. Wealth, in any form or shape, is considered a valid substitute for happiness. It is not. Wealth is the least of all things a person can possess. It does not provide for our deepest needs of happiness and protection. But love does. Sacrificial love on a human level, in which one is willing to give himself or herself completely for the other, even to the point of death, provides perfect happiness. Wealth makes the owner the focus of all attention; love focuses on the other. Wealth imprisons people; love liberates. John’s definition of love is: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”⁷² Love is not for sale. It can only be obtained by the sacrifice of oneself.

The verses 8-10 seem rather obscure and out of context. The most logical explanation seems to be that the bride compares herself to a younger sister in order to demonstrate her own maturity. It could even be that she speaks about herself and her condition when she was young and immature. All this to relish the fact that she is now ready for married life.

Many commentators believe that the poem ends with verse 7 and that the last seven verses are an appendix from the hand of a later editor. The main problem lies in the details of the plan what to do with the younger sister “for the day she is spoken for.” In vs. 9 we read: “If she is a wall, we will build towers of

⁶⁹ Ex. 20:5, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” Ex. 34:14, “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

⁷⁰ I Cor. 13:8 (RSV)

⁷¹ I Kings 18:38

⁷² I John 3:16

silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar.” The images of the wall and the door are, probably, poetical pictures of the girl’s character. According to the Tyndale Commentary, “Delitzsch suggests that *wall* signifies ‘firmness of character’, which will be enhanced by strong silver-covered *towers* (NIV; RSV *battlement*), and door signifies one accessible to seduction and therefore in need of ‘strong cedar’ (cf. 1:17; 5:15), reinforcing to safeguard her sanctity.” The idea then would be that the younger sister be kept pure till the day of her marriage. If this is true the comparison between the bride and her younger sister serves a double purpose. Not only contrasts the bride her own maturity with the immaturity of her sister, but she also emphasizes the fact that she, herself, remained a virgin till the day of her wedding. The mention of the wall brings, at the same time, out her own strength of character also. The use of these images, however, remains difficult to grasp.

In the next verse the girl applies the images to herself. She says: “I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers. Thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment.” The word translated “contentment” is “shalom” in Hebrew. The Dutch translation says here: “Then I became in his eyes as one who surrenders.”⁷³ The underlying thought for this translation is that a wall and towers are symbols of resistance and defense. Their use is to keep the enemy out. The phrase “Then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace.” as the RSV translates it, could very well be taken as “one who asks for peace.” That is, probably, what the Dutch translators had in mind. I like the thought very much. After all, in a love relationship the partners surrender to each other. They give up their independence and that is the essence of “shalom.” The Tyndale Commentary says here: “The central concept of the Hebrew term is one of unimpeded relationships with others and fulfillment in one’s own undertakings.”

The spiritual implication of these images is not hard to find. God’s created us in such a way that we could come into this world as a small entity that would grow to full maturity. He wants us to grow and become mature. We often use our coming of age, however, to assert ourselves. “Shalom” is the fruit of a mature surrender to our Creator. Like the Peace Offering in Leviticus 2, where the fruit of the harvest is sacrificed to God, so our Peace Offering consists of the recognition that He made us, and that we owe our being to Him. This is expressed in the adoration of the twenty-four elders in Rev. 4:11, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” We do well to understand against whom we should defend ourselves. The young girl’s wall and door were meant to keep the enemy out, so that when the time of maturity would come the lord of her life could come in. Many people misunderstand the purpose of their lives by surrendering to the enemy and defending themselves against the Lord.

Surrender may not be the root significance of the word “shalom.” But the elements of contentment, fulfillment and peace will only become active through surrender. We find life by losing it, as Jesus says in Matt. 10:39 and other verses: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

In the verses 10 and 11 the image of the garden, or vineyard comes up again. The first time it was used by the girl in ch. 1:6 as a symbol of her own life. The equivalent, the garden, is mentioned in 4:12, 15, 16; 5:1; 6:2. Every time the private life of the girl is intended. We may presume that the use of the image is consistent and that, here too, the reference is not to a particular plantation that belonged to Solomon, and another one that belonged to the bride or groom, but to the love life of each of them. Several commentators identify the vineyard with Solomon’s large harem.

This raises again the question as to whether Solomon could be the author of this poem. I still believe he could. A man with Solomon’s intelligence and skill could write about himself, taking a distance from the subject and give an accurate analysis. He certainly did so in Ecclesiastes, so why not here.

Another question is who is speaking, the boy or the girl. In the poem both have used the image as referring to the girl. TLB assigns these words to the girl, but I believe it to be more logical if we put the words in the boy’s mouth. He is the one who compares his riches to those of Solomon and draws the conclusion that he is the richer of the two. “One greater than Solomon is here.”⁷⁴ The Tyndale Commentary believes that the issue in the use of the image is not the comparison of riches, but of rights. We read: “The contrast here is with the rights of the king to administer his own possessions and the right of the girl to her own person.” I still believe that the point of the comparison is the difference in riches. The NIV is, may be, less clear than the RSV. The first reads: “The thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon, and two hundred are

⁷³ “Toen werd ik in zijn ogen als een, die overgave aanbiedt.”

⁷⁴ cf. Matt. 12:42

for those who tend its fruit.” The latter says: “You, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred,” the intent being, “keep your money, I have something better!”

The name Baal-haamon may be translated as “Lord of a crowd.” But, according to the Tyndale Commentary, the Vulgate is the only translation that gives this rendering. All the other translations consider the words to be the name of a place. The problem, however, is that the place has not been identified. For the meaning of the image this is of no importance. It could even be that a pun is used and that an existing name was purposely changed, so Solomon could be called “Lord of a crowd,” that is one possessing a large harem.

The word “shekel” is not in the original, but most translations use it as it was and is the common currency. “The thousand” and “the two hundred” as the RSV and KJV read, is, literally, more correct.

This brings us to the last two verses of the poem. Again, the garden is mentioned, this time in the plural. If the use of the word is consistent, as an image of intimate life, it is not an indication of a place but of a condition. The question is, again, who is speaking? If the girl speaks to the boy, the plural, gardens, may suggest that he should turn from a divided attention to several person, to his one and only love. If the girl is addressed, we could hardly see in the word gardens a meaning of multiple relations. That would disqualify the girl completely for the kind of love described here.

It could also be that the girl is pictured here as an important lady, as a queen, who has ladies in attendance. And, finally, we have seen before that the presence of others puts the poem into the right perspective. This particular love affair may be highly personal and private, but love is a common phenomenon among human beings. And since this relationship is a picture of the relationship of Christ to the church, it is important to realize that, however personal the experience may be, it is not unique; there are others who are part of the same fellowship.

The Song of Songs ends with the words: “Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.” Other translations have the words “make haste.” (RSV, ASV, KJV). The Hebrew word is “barah” which is only used here in the poem. The NEB translates it with “come into the open.” These closing words remind us of the closing words of the book Revelation: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”⁷⁵ In the light of these verses the translation, “come into the open,” seems very appropriate. We are awaiting the revelation of our Lord, our Bridegroom, the One who loves us and gave Himself for us.

The gazelle, the stag, the spices and the mountain are all images that have been used before. Here the mountain is “spice-laden.” The whole picture is one of intense and abundant enjoyment of love in all its aspects: physical, emotional and spiritual. It involves the whole man. It is the ultimate relationship between two persons who become one in spirit, soul and body.

The invitation “come” or “make haste” supposes that the best is still to come. Amen! Come Lord Jesus!

Conclusion:

The theme of this Song of Songs is, undoubtedly, the perfect love affair. It is an idyll, an ideal that cannot be achieved in an imperfect world. All conjugal love should be like this, but none measures up completely. We should use the Song as the sailor uses the stars. He knows he cannot reach them but he sets his course by them.

Above all, though, the Song reminds us of the love of God. The theme is not about sexual love only. Sexual intercourse is mentioned delicately and explicitly, but the Song goes well beyond that. It offers no excuse for the sexual aspect of a relationship, but it is made clear that love demands the whole man: body, soul and spirit. When God created man He invented sex as an integrate part of human life. The fact that the devil has caused more havoc in that aspect of human behavior than anywhere else, does not make the devil the author of man’s sex life. We belong to the Lord, body, soul and spirit.

The apostle Paul puts it very precisely when he says: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”⁷⁶ We will come closest to the core of all relationships, both with God and our fellowmen, if we glorify God in our bodies.

⁷⁵ Rev. 22:17,20

⁷⁶ RSV