

Sexual Allusions and Symbols in the Song of Songs

The man said,

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."
For this reason a man will leave his father and mother
and be united to his wife,
and they will become one flesh.
The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

Genesis 2:23-25.

God desires His children to find delight in the physical aspects of His creation.

It was the Greeks, not the Hebrews, who taught that the material realm was "evil." The Hebrews taught that God made His creation "good," NOT evil (Genesis 1:31). Even after the Fall of Adam, believers are commanded to delight in the goodness of the physical (e.g. Proverbs 5:18-19; Ecclesiastes 5:18-20; 1 Timothy 4:1-5). Believers are not to worship the physical realm. And people will not find "meaning" in the physical realm. But we are commanded to enjoy all of God's creation (in the correct context).

The Greeks viewed only "mind" and "spirit" as good, so many Greeks denied themselves the pleasures of the physical to "purify" their spirit. But the Hebrews taught that neither the plan of God nor religion was ever meant to stifle our pleasure and joy in the material things. The Greeks cremated their bodies, because the physical was "lower" and had no future in the life to come. The Hebrews believed in resurrection of the body and taught that our future was on a new heaven and a new earth, not in some nebulous realm of floating souls.

In many ways the American/English church is more Greek, than Hebrew in its view of God's physical creation. This becomes very evident when you approach the Song of Songs. This book is ignored by most Christian teachers. Other teachers

"spiritualize" the book to refer to Christ and His church. No New Testament writer quotes or uses the Song of Songs in this way. The natural interpretation of the Song is as a warm, positive celebration of human love and sexuality in the context of marriage.

The Song of Songs is unashamedly physical in its descriptions of romantic, sexual love between a groom and his bride. It is so passionate in its portrayal of physical intimacy that a Jewish boy was forbidden to read it until after age 13. The Song contains many metaphors describing various actions relating to sexual arousal and includes various Oriental euphemisms and *double entendres*.

When God spoke of personal aspects of sex in the Song of Songs, He could have used the slang terms; however, they would tend to raise up our psychological censors. He could have used the medical terms, but that would leave a feeling of "mechanics" and science and often a sense of awkwardness. The Lord avoided both problems by using poetic symbolism.

My own "best guess" is that the Song of Songs was used as a "love-making" manual for grooms and brides-to-be. (Of course, it serves the same function for all of you older married folk too.) Read the Song of Songs (i.e. "the best of all songs") with this poetic key in hand. The following symbols are either evident from the context or are frequently used in other Oriental poetic literature of the time. For a complete explanation see the following commentaries: David Hubbard's *Song of Solomon*, Tom Gledhill's *The Message of the Song of Songs*, and Jodie Dillow's *Solomon of Sex*.

1:6 "my own vineyard" ? her body.

1:9 "like my mare" ? at that time in the Orient the horse was not a beast of burden, but the cherished companion of kings.

1:12 "at his table" ? banqueting was done in a reclining position.

1:12 "my perfume spread its fragrance" ? The perfume is nard, or spikenard, a very expensive perfume or ointment from a plant native to India. Origen, one of the great fathers of the early church, observed that the actual spikenard plant emits its scent only when its hairy stem is rubbed, thus hinting at some erotic connotations.

1:14 "henna" ? a fragrant bush which grows and intertwines itself among the vines

in a vineyard.

1:15 "dove" ? symbol of innocence, gentleness and purity ? indicating that the beloved was a virgin.

2:3 "shade," "fruit," "apple tree" ? all ancient erotic symbols. Extra-biblical literature uses "fruit" and "apples" as a symbol of the male genitals, indicating here an oral genital caress.

2:5 "raisin cakes" were used as a religious ritual in fertility rites. The cakes were molded in the form of a female goddess. Along with apples, raisin cakes came to be viewed as an aphrodisiac.

2:5 "lovesick" ? overcome with sexual passion

2:6 "embrace" ? fondle her vulva.

2:7 "Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases" = The experience of lovemaking is too powerful to be aroused before the couple have committed themselves in marriage.

2:9 "gazelle or young stag" ? suggests sexual virility as gazelles and stags in the spring.

2:15 The meaning of the whole verse is: Let us give full expression to our love now while our bodies (vines) are young (tender grapes) before aging (the foxes) takes its toll on our bodies (spoil the vines).

2:16 "feeds among the lilies" ? refers to kissing some tender part of each other's bodies.

2:17 "until the day breaks" ? she wants it to last until the morning.

2:17 "upon the mountains of Bether" ? run your hands and mouth over the contours of my body.

3:6-11 The groom's wedding procession. Solomon is a kind of code name for the lover as Shulamite (see 6:13, i.e., "Solomoness") is for the beloved. The picture of the processional with its entourage and trappings is hyperbolic, deliberately

exaggerated to heighten the significance of the event. Behind this poem may lie a royal wedding song from Solomon's time which helped to shape its extravagant descriptions of royal largesse expended in the services of love.

3:11 "crown" ? In ancient times garlands were worn on weddings and the bride and groom were called queen and king.

4:3 "temples" ? cf. Judges 4:21-22, describe more generally the side of the face. Hence "cheeks" is meant. Her cheeks are compared with the rosy, roundness of "pomegranate" halves.

4:4 "neck like tower of David" ? erect and queenly carriage.

4:4 "shields" ? tiered or layered coins or ornaments of precious metal that adorned her neck as she walked in public. The coins or ornaments were her dowry.

4:5 "two fawns," "twins of a gazelle" ? The reference is to the dorcas gazelle, an animal about two feet high at the shoulders, and a marvel of lightness, beauty, and grace. The gentle beauty of its eyes was proverbial. The attractiveness of the gazelle invited petting and affectionate touching. One of the most common associations with the gazelle was that it was a delicacy served at Solomon's table (1 Kings 4:23). They are delicious to eat. As gazelles were warm and affectionate, so was the beloved as a sexual partner.

4:10 "wine" ? symbol of supreme pleasure.

4:10 "the scent of your perfumes" ? those she naturally produces.

4:11 "your lips drip with honey" ? speaks of the sweetness of her kisses.

4:11 "honey and milk are under your tongue" ? points to the depth and fullness of the kissing.

4:12 "garden" ? The garden refers to her vulva and vagina. When the lover says it is locked, he is saying it has never been entered; she is a virgin. Thus to describe his wife's vulva as a garden is to say it is beautiful to behold, like flowered gardens of the East.

4:12 "a spring shut up" ? its precious liquid is reserved for private use. Because

water was scarce in the East, owners of fountains sealed the fountain with clay which quickly hardened in the sun. Thus, a walled fountain was shut against all impurity, no one could get water out of it except its rightful owner.

4:13 "orchard of pomegranates" ? depicts the beauty and color/tone of her vulva which abounds in delights to his senses.

4:13 "pleasant fruits" ? Her vagina is a source of sexual refreshment for him to experience. As a carefully cultivated Eastern garden yields delicious "fruit", so his bride's garden is a source of delicious fruit (sexual pleasure), when "cultivated." Furthermore, it is a source of fertility. To make love with her is like entering Paradise. Her pleasures are secret and hidden from all but her husband ? the rightful owner of the garden.

4:15 "rivers of water" ? One inference of this picture of abundant moisture is that her body is prepared by its own secretions for the long-awaited consummation.

4:16 "Awake, O north wind and come, O south!" ? The north wind brings clear weather and removes clouds, and the south brings warmth and moisture. When they blew across a garden in Palestine, coolness and sultriness, cold and heat, would promote the growth of the garden. She is asking her spouse to stimulate her garden with caresses to promote the growth of her sexual passion.

4:16 "Let my beloved come to his garden" ? The Hebrew word (literally, "enter" or "come into") is used frequently of sexual penetration (Genesis 16:2).

5:1 "I have come into...have gathered....have eaten...have drunk" ? The past tenses are a clear clue to what has happened. The invitation has been responded to in every detail and more. The fullness of covenant-love ("my sister, my spouse") has been experienced. The true marriage feast has been completed.

5:1 "wine and milk" ? readily understood in that culture as fertility symbols.

5:2-6 These verses can be read on one level as the lover coming and knocking on the door of his beloved's house. But many commentators see an underlying meaning. The word "open" is twice used without door in Hebrew as object. "Head covered with dew," "hand by the latch," "feet" and "hand" (which can be euphemisms for genitals) ? all of these point to double meanings.

5:2 "my head is covered with dew" ? pre-ejaculation fluid drips from the lover's penis.

5:3 There is a difference in intensity between the lover's ardor (v. 2) and the beloved's reluctance to inconvenience herself and respond to his overture (v. 3). She tries to put off his advances.

5:3 "feet" ? often a euphemism for genitals.

5:4 "hand by the latch" ? "Latch" is literally keyhole. It was the ancient custom to secure the door of a house by a cross bar or by a bolt, which at night was fastened with a little button or pin. In the upper part of the door, there was a round hole (a keyhole) through which any person from the outside might thrust his arm and remove the bar, unless the hole was sealed up. "Hand" is often a euphemism for genitals.

5:4 "my heart yearned for him" ? her mood changes.

5:6 "my beloved had turned away and was gone" ? too late.

6:11 "garden," "vine," "pomegranates" ? all occur most frequently in sections where the man is speaking. He uses them to paint poetic pictures of the woman's erogenous zones.

6:13 "Shulamite" ? a feminine form of Solomon and, therefore, part of the royal motif which threads through the song.

7:2 "navel" ? incorrect translation. While the Hebrew word could take that meaning, it is generally translated today as "vulva."

7:2 "round goblet" ? The Hebrew for "round goblet" should be rendered "a bowl in the shape of a half moon." The allusion to the female genitals is obvious.

7:2 "heap of wheat" ? In Syria, the perfect skin was considered to be that which could be compared in color to the yellowish-white of wheat after it had been threshed and winnowed.

7:2 "set about with lilies" ? pubic hair that guards and graces the "banquet bowl" of the vulva.

7:8 "climb the palm trees" ? To "climb the palm tree" had a special meaning. In the Ancient Near East the artificial fertilization of the female palm tree flowers by the male palm tree flowers has been practiced from the earliest times. The male and female flowers are born on separate trees in clusters among the leaves. In order to fertilize the female tree, one must climb the male tree and get some of its flowers. One then ascends the female tree and ties among its flowers, a bunch of the pollen-bearing male flowers. Thus, to climb the palm tree is to fertilize it.

7:8 "I will take hold of its branches" ? The man says he will take hold of her branches, i.e. fruit stalks of the date palm ? her breasts. Now he changes images from date palms to grape clusters for breasts, which seems more appropriate. Grapes swell and become increasingly round and elastic as they ripen, similar to the female breasts when sexually aroused.

7:12 "vine has budded," "grape blossoms are open," "pomegranates are in bloom" ? all of these terms are capable of a literal, horticultural meaning; yet each is used in the Song as an image with erotic implications.

7:13 "mandrakes" ? considered to be an aphrodisiac in the ancient world.

8:6 "seal over your heart..seal on your arm" ? The seal of a king was commonly a sign of his ownership. It signified something of great value. She desires to be set as a seal on her husband's heart ? the place of his affection. To be set like a seal on his arm is to be in the place of his strength or protection.

8:10 "breasts were like towers" ? The towers on the walls of the city were the first things an enemy saw. But because of the ability of the tower to provide a defense for the wall and city, the sight of those towers discouraged an attack. In a similar way, the beloved's fully developed breasts, ready for love, were inaccessible. She was impressive to look at, like the towers of the city. But any enemy of her virtue was quickly repelled.

8:8 The brothers' strategy depends on the sister's character. If she is a wall ? impervious to the advances of men ? they will simply encourage and praise her for her virtuous stand. Just as a battlement of silver increases the beauty of the wall and attractiveness of the city, they will increase her good character by adding to her dowry (which was worn around the neck). There is, however, another possibility. It could be that their sister will turn out to be a door ? easily entered, easily seduced.

Should that prove to be the case, they will take a different approach. They will barricade her with planks of cedar. In other words, they will be very strict with her and protect her from men's advances.

8:11,12 "my own vineyard is before me" ? The man probably speaks this. In these verses he compares his vineyard, i.e. his wife, with Solomon's vineyard at Baal Hamon. His bride was to him a vineyard beyond price.

8:14 "mountains of spices" ? She sees her body as a veritable mountain range alive with fragrances. Thus she invites her husband to make love.