

Song of Solomon 5 - Part 2

Some might argue that if the two lovers are married, the man would not need to be let into a shared bedroom with his wife. However, even if a private home is meant, it is possible that he is without a key. Furthermore, women in that society may have had their own quarters separate from their husband—as evidenced by Abraham's wife Sarah having had her own tent (see Genesis 24:66-67; compare also Genesis 31:33). Alternatively, some read Song of Solomon 5:2-6a as heavy with double entendre—the idea being that the man and woman are already lying in bed together and that he is actually seeking sexual entrance while she is sleeping. Verse 3 may speak against that, though, since the woman doesn't want to put on a robe or get her feet dirty after having washed them—which seems to imply having to get up to open the door of her quarters. Yet it could be that she is referring to a possible need to rise briefly after sexual relations.

Of course, even if the man is literally standing outside his wife's door, the implication of this section seems to be that he desires sexual relations—not that he just wants to come in to sleep. As Dr. Michael Fox points out: "While Song of Solomon 5:2 clearly begins a new dramatic sequence...the similarity between the motifs of this unit and those of the preceding one shows that the placement of the units is not random. In the preceding unit the girl was called a 'locked garden' (Song of Solomon 4:12). Here too the boy's entry to the desired place is prevented by a 'lock,' and here too the girl is willing 'to open' to him (Song of Solomon 5:5-6; cf. Song of Solomon 4:16)" (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, p. 142).

The tenor of the woman's response in Song of Solomon 5:3 is unclear. Perhaps she is really sleepy and tired. Some fault her for being lazy, indifferent, cold and unreceptive. Yet it is reasonable that she would be quite groggy, lethargic and even incoherent if awakened late in the night. On the other hand, the husband, if he is literally outside the door, could be faulted for showing up so late—though perhaps his job required it in a later setting. Or, if he is already in bed with her, he could perhaps be faulted for insensitivity. (Those who see this passage as representing Christ and the Church, with some even thinking Jesus referred to the knocking on the door here in Revelation 3:20, fault the woman exclusively for failure to properly respond to her husband—though this may be a misapplication of the passage.) Others see the woman's response as teasing or playful—that is, her complaint is not genuine and she really intends to let her husband in, as we see her desiring him in verse 4 and in verse 6 saying her heart leapt when he spoke. (Thus the problem that develops would be a misunderstanding, and no one's particular fault.)

5:4: In Song of Solomon 5:4, the word translated "latch" here literally means "hole" and "of the door" is not in the Hebrew. Where the NKJV says the woman's "heart yearned" for the man and the KJV has "bowels were moved," forms of the Hebrew words *me'ah* and *hamah* are used. As Lloyd Carr notes: "The basic meaning of the word [*me'ah*, Strong's no. 4578] is the internal organs generally (2 Samuel 20:10; Psalm 22:14), or the digestive tract (Jonah 2:1f.). But several texts use the term to refer to the procreative organs [sometimes rendered 'loins' by translators], either male (e.g. Genesis 15:4; 2 Samuel 7:12) or female (e.g. Ruth 1:11. In Genesis 25:23; Psalm 71:6; and Isaiah 49:1, *me'eh* is used in parallel with *beten*, the common word for *womb*). The focus of the thrill is specifically sexual" (*The Song of Solomon, Tyndale Commentaries*, p. 135, note on Song of Solomon 5:4). *Hamah* (Strong's no. 1993) means to make a loud

sound or, by implication, to be in commotion or tumult. Some see the word in Song of Solomon 5:4 as meaning "moaned," "roiled" or "seethed." Yet it should be pointed out that the two words together can simply connote sympathy: "The Hebrew expression...is used elsewhere to express pity or compassion (e.g., Isaiah 16:11; Jeremiah 31:20). It was not used to express sexual arousal as some scholars maintain" (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, note on Song of Solomon 5:3-4). Yet it may be that the phrase could, in context, be taken in an amatory sense. Perhaps, as with other verses here, a double entendre is intended.

5:5: In Song of Solomon 5:5, the Shulamite says that she arose for her beloved and that her hands and fingers dripped with liquid myrrh on the handles of the lock. This is understood in one of three ways among natural interpreters. Some see the woman getting out of bed and quickly splashing or rubbing on myrrh as perfume so that it was all over her hands and got onto the lock handle when she touched it. Others see the myrrh as having been left on the lock handle by the man as a token of affection, this being earlier a symbol for him in Song of Solomon 1:13, the myrrh getting onto her hand because of touching the handle. Sometimes cited in this regard is the first-century-B.C. Roman poet Lucretius. In his work *On the Nature of Things*, he said, "But the lover shut out, weeping, often covers the threshold with flowers and wreaths, anoints the proud doorposts with oil of marjoram, presses his love-sick kisses upon the door..." (quoted by Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia Commentaries*, p. 168, footnote on 5:2–6:3). Of course, this was written around 900 years after the Song and in a very different cultural setting. Still others see an erotic metaphor in Song of Solomon 5:5. The man's lips are said to drip liquid myrrh in verse 13.

5:6-7: When the woman at last opens for her lover in Song of Solomon 5:6a, whether this means that she literally arises to let

him in, does so in a dream or, in a metaphoric sense, becomes receptive to sexual union, it is too late. He is gone! It would seem that whether the woman was genuinely sleepy in her earlier response or was being coy, the man takes her lack of immediacy as a rebuff. Thus we have a problem between the lovers. As Shakespeare wrote, "The course of true love never did run smooth" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 1, Scene 1). Some recognize this episode as representative of a period of sexual adjustment to each other in marriage. Upset at the man's departure, the woman seeks and calls for him in similar imagery to that of Song of Solomon 3:1-5. It seems likely that at least Song of Solomon 5:6-7 contains a dream or daydream-at-night sequence similar to that of the prior passage—especially given the lack of reaction to being struck by the watchmen in verse 7. Perhaps finding her lover gone sent her into the dreamlike mode described previously.

How are we to understand the abuse by the city watchmen here? They strike and wound her and strip off her light overcloak, as the word translated "veil" in the NKJV is thought to mean (this being a different word from that often translated "veil" in Song of Solomon 4:1). Again, a literal interpretation does not seem likely. Those who take this literally and see the Shulamite as the bride of Solomon should consider the implausibility of city watchmen assaulting the queen of Israel. Would they not recognize her? How would she even have made it out of the palace? As for the Shulamite being a designation for a woman *not* married to Solomon, this still does not explain her being able to roam the streets at night—much less the striking and stripping and lack of reaction to this mistreatment. Thus we look to a dreamlike, figurative interpretation here. Recall that in the parallel of Song of Solomon 3:1-5, the watchmen seemed to signify the woman's own sensibilities, her mental and emotional governors that took hold of her, helping her to see things rationally (i.e., she "got a

grip" on herself). In the present case, we should consider that the woman is perhaps wracked with guilt for effectively chasing her lover away, even if unintentional. Thus, through the mental and emotional patrol of her mind, she essentially beats herself up and is left miserable over what has happened.

5:8: Her message then in Song of Solomon 5:8 to the daughters of Jerusalem is to tell her beloved that she is lovesick. That is, she doesn't want him to have the wrong idea, thinking she doesn't want to be with him (sexually, the whole context implies). Rather, she desperately longs for him, ailing from desire. A few translators take the words here to have the Shulamite charging the daughters to *not* tell her beloved that she is lovesick—out of embarrassment over her foolish actions in searching for him (e.g., Fox, p. 146, note on 5:8). Yet this denies the clear sense of longing here and is probably not grammatically accurate. (More on this will follow in the comments on Song of Solomon 8:4.) As noted with regard to Song of Solomon 2:5, Egyptian love songs 6, 12 and 37 describe the symptoms of lovesickness. Observe the latter: "Seven days have passed, and I've not seen my lady love; a sickness has shot through me. I have become sluggish, I have forgotten my own body. If the best surgeons come to me, my heart will not be comforted with their remedies. And the prescription sellers, there's no help through them; my sickness will not be cut out. Telling me 'she's come' is what will bring me back to life..." (Papyrus Chester Beatty I, Group A, in William Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 320-321).

5:9: In 5:9, the beginning of the second subsection of the current unit (verses 9-16), the daughters of Jerusalem, whom the Shulamite has just addressed, respond to her—their words likely being sung by the chorus. They refer to her as "fairest among women" or "most beautiful of women" (NIV)—as they also do in Song of Solomon 6:1. This descriptor was earlier given in Song of Solomon 1:8, where it was not clear whether the daughters of

Jerusalem or the lover was speaking. Some contend that the use of this phrase by the women is sarcastic—especially followers of the shepherd hypothesis who see the other women here as members of Solomon's harem. As for the daughters asking what is so special about the Shulamite's lover, some see their query as sincere (deeming them her friends) while others view it sarcastically as well. Shepherd-hypothesis adherents sometimes point out that this verse creates a problem for those who see Solomon as the woman's true love—for would not the women already know all about him? Yet it could be that their question is a mere literary device to give the woman an opportunity to extol the attributes of her beloved.

5:10-16: This she does in the verses that follow. In a *wasf* (again, a song of descriptive praise cataloging a person's physical characteristics) in Song of Solomon 5:10-16, the Shulamite sings of her beloved's body from head to toe. She starts out in verse 10 with his overall general appearance, "white and ruddy" describing the reddish tinge of healthy white skin (compare 1 Samuel 16:12; 1 Samuel 17:42; Lamentations 4:7)—and "chief among ten thousand" referring to his distinguished appearance (not to being king). She later concludes summarily, "Yes, he is *altogether* lovely" (Song of Solomon 5:16). "And in between, she compliments ten aspects of her beloved. This number underscores his worth in her eyes, since *ten*, like *seven*, is a number used to signify perfection" (Glickman, p. 100)—ten signifying a full enumeration, there being ten fingers of the hands. The aspects here are: 1) head (verse 11a); 2) hair (verse 11b); 3) eyes (verse 12); 4) cheeks (verse 13a); 5) lips (verse 13b); 6) arms (verse 14a); 7) "body" or abdomen (verse 14b); 8) legs (verse 15); 9) countenance or stature; 10) mouth or speech. Let's note a few particulars here. "Gold" denotes the precious quality of his head, not to being blond, as the man's hair is black (verse 11). Observe that the longest description is given of the

man's eyes (verse 12), which are compared to doves, just as the man drew the same comparison with the woman's eyes (see Song of Solomon 1:15; Song of Solomon 4:1). The "lilies" the man's lips are compared to in Song of Solomon 5:13b are often thought to be reddish in color, perhaps lotuses or anemones—and this goes for the mention of the same flowers throughout the Song (though it could be that the comparison is due to shape rather than color). The word translated "body" in verse 14b is a form of *me'ah*, the word used earlier in verse 4 in reference to the innards of the abdomen. Obviously the word must also be applicable to the exterior or it could not be praised as something visible in verse 14. Some believe an erotic reference is intended by the woman here. Yet we should note that she is not speaking directly to her lover in private but describing him to other women. (Of course, this may all be part of her dream.)

After reaching the legs in the downward progression of praise (verse 15a), the woman mentions the man's "countenance" (NKJV) or "appearance" (NIV). While the word rendered countenance could refer to facial expression, the comparison with Lebanon and its cedars (which are great and tall) implies appearance more broadly. In fact, it seems likely that the legs, being long and sturdy, lead to mention of the man's great stature and bearing. The concluding focus on the mouth being sweet in verse 16 seems a regression from the downward progress of the *wasf*. It may mean that consideration of all his qualities has led her to desiring to kiss him. Or, since the lips were earlier mentioned in verse 13b, the man's "mouth" in verse 16a may refer to another aspect that does not fit in the bodily description—his *speech*, as the mouth often connotes in Scripture. This, she tells the daughters of Jerusalem in verse 16b following the *wasf*, is her lover and this is her "friend"—i.e., her companion, stressing not just their sexual relationship but also their general

togetherness and closeness. All of this, she tells them, makes him a man to be desired (thus explaining her lovesickness).” [END]