

Song of Solomon 8 – Part 1

Song of Solomon 8:1-14 NLT

Young Woman Oh, I wish you were my brother, who nursed at my mother's breasts. Then I could kiss you no matter who was watching, and no one would criticize me. I would bring you to my childhood home, and there you would teach me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, my sweet pomegranate wine. Your left arm would be under my head, and your right arm would embrace me. Promise me, O women of Jerusalem, not to awaken love until the time is right. Young Women of Jerusalem Who is this sweeping in from the desert, leaning on her lover?

Young Woman I aroused you under the apple tree, where your mother gave you birth, where in great pain she delivered you. Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, its jealousy as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can rivers drown it. If a man tried to buy love with all his wealth, his offer would be utterly scorned. The Young Woman's Brothers We have a little sister too young to have breasts. What will we do for our sister if someone asks to marry her? If she is a virgin, like a wall, we will protect her with a silver tower. But if she is promiscuous, like a swinging door, we will block her door with a cedar bar. Young Woman I was a virgin, like a wall; now my breasts are like towers. When my lover looks at me, he is delighted with what he sees. Solomon has a vineyard at Baal-hamon, which he leases out to tenant farmers. Each of them pays a thousand pieces of silver for harvesting its fruit. But my vineyard is mine to give, and Solomon need not pay a thousand pieces of silver. But I will give two hundred pieces to those who care for its vines. Young Man O my darling, lingering in the gardens, your companions are fortunate to hear your voice. Let me hear it, too! Young Woman Come away, my love! Be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.

**Daily Deep Dive:**

The UCG reading program states: “8:1: In Song of Solomon 8:1, the woman expresses her desire that her lover be like her brother—note the "like" (or "as"), not that she wants him to actually be her brother. This may be playing off the man's earlier affectionate references to her as "sister" (4:9-5:2). "Who nursed at my mother's breasts!" in the next line of 8:1 may imply on some level that she wishes she had known the man her whole life—that she had grown up with him (so that she would not have missed any time with him). Yet the main reason she wishes he were like her brother (or, rather, that he would be viewed like her brother) is explained in the latter part of the verse—she wants to kiss him freely in public. As *The New American Commentary* states: "The point is that she wishes she were free to display her affection openly. In the ancient world this would have been impossible for a woman with any man except a father, brother, or other near relative, the kissing of whom would not be construed by the public as a quasi-sexual act. The freedom to kiss in public would not apply to her husband" (p. 424, note on verse 1). *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* concurs but explains that this is deduced mainly from the passage itself: "The verse likely reflects some kind of cultural norms for public intimacy. That is, it might be permitted to touch, hold hands, and kiss a brother, but not a lover (or perhaps even a husband) since the latter, as opposed to the former, would have erotic implications, likely thought unseemly in public. The problem, however, is that we must infer this custom from the verse since we do not know in any kind of detail the customs of the day" (p. 204, note on verse 1). Of course we do see this in later Middle Eastern custom. *The New American Commentary* further notes: "Fox (*Song*, 166) incorrectly assumes that this [verse] proves that the couple 'is not betrothed, let alone married.' But the open display of affection between the sexes is frowned upon in many societies (e.g., traditional Oriental [i.e., Eastern] society)

regardless of whether the couple is married" (p. 424, footnote on verse 1).

**8:2:** In Song of Solomon 8:2, we have the image of the woman desiring to lead the man into her mother's house, a picture we saw earlier in Song of Solomon 3:4. In the NKJV and other English versions, the word "lead" here is rendered in the subjunctive form as "*would* lead"—following, as with the verbs in the two prior lines at the end of verse 1, from the beginning of verse 1. That is, if the man were perceived like her brother, then she *would* kiss him in public, *would* not be despised for doing so and, in the present clause, *would* lead him and *would* bring him to her mother's house. We have already, in commenting on verse 1, made sense of why the man being as the woman's brother would allow her to kiss him openly. But why would it enable her to lead him to her mother's house? Why should she not be able to freely do this anyway, since this implied going to a place of privacy? It could be that the issue of concern, though not spelled out here, was that of leading him *by the hand*. Recall her dreamlike thoughts in Song of Solomon 3:4: "I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him to the house of my mother." Perhaps, as noted above, a married couple holding hands was also looked down upon. Others, however, interpret this differently. In *The New American Commentary*, Dr. Duane Garrett contends: "The mood of her words here [at the beginning of 8:2] is not subjunctive but indicative and indeed determined, as shown by the juxtaposition of the two verbs; and it should be translated: 'I *will* lead you; I *will* take you to the house of my mother.' Since she cannot express her love with a kiss openly, she will express her love much more fully privately" (p. 425, note on verse 2). The latter interpretation seems likely given the connotations here—since there seems to be little question that she is indeed going to lead him to this place as she desires.

Some, as noted above, take the mother's house here to be the couple's literal vacation destination, it being referred to as the Shulamite's mother's house because—as explained in our previous comments on 3:4—either her father was not in the picture (compare Song of Solomon 1:6) or young women were considered to be raised in their mothers' homes (compare Genesis 24:28; Ruth 1:8). Alternatively, some see the woman as desiring to move back home or near home, taking the man with her (this supposedly being their logical residence together if he were like her brother). Of course, we must not forget the amatory subtext of this unit. The mother's house, taken literally, seems an odd choice for a romantic rendezvous. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says that in Song of Solomon 8:2 the Shulamite "playfully assumed the role of an older sister (I would [or will] lead you—the verb *nahag* is always used of a superior leading an inferior) and even the role of the mother. The lady of the house would give special wine to the guests. So the beloved [i.e., the woman] shared the characteristics of a sister, an older sister, and a mother in her relationship to her husband. The Song also portrays the lovers as friends (cf. Song of Solomon 5:1, Song of Solomon 5:16). Thus the lovers had a multifaceted relationship" (note on Song of Solomon 8:2-4).

In trying to make sense of the mention of the mother's house here, we should also recall the earlier use of the imagery of the woman taking the man to her mother's house in Song of Solomon 3:4—which was followed by the charge to the daughters of Jerusalem in Song of Solomon 3:5 (likely concerning physical relations), just as the current use of the mother's house imagery in 8:2 is followed in verse 4 by a form of the same charge. In our comments on the earlier passage, we noted the possibility that the reference points to a groom visiting a bride's parents' house as initiating a marriage. Some might apply that in the present case to the couple being not yet married and looking forward to

the intimacies of marriage. Yet, if they are already married, the imagery could imply that they want to be as if newly married (on a second honeymoon, we might say today). Alternatively, it was noted in the prior case that some interpret "mother's house" or "mother-house" as meaning the womb, which would make the reference a sexual one.

It was also pointed out, though, that the next phrase in 3:4, "and into the chamber of her who conceived me," made the womb meaning difficult, as the *mother's* womb would then seemingly be meant instead of the girl's (but not out of the question since the girl could have been referring to the same part of her own person as that in which her mother conceived her). A similar difficulty with respect to the womb interpretation occurs in 8:2, the next clause seeming to refer more directly to the mother: "she who used to instruct me." However, this phrase, *t<sup>e</sup>lamm<sup>e</sup>deni*, could also be translated as "you would teach me" (Jerusalem Bible; Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia Commentaries*, p. 180) or "you *will* teach me"—thus referring to the man. Some wish to emend the Hebrew text here. Gledhill comments: "The

troublesome *t<sup>e</sup>lamm<sup>e</sup>deni* can easily revert to *t<sup>e</sup>ladeni* by dropping the 'm,' thus meaning, 'she gave me birth'" (p. 216)—seen to correspond to "her who conceived me" in Song of Solomon 3:4 (and similar meanings in Song of Solomon 6:9 and Song of Solomon 8:5). But dropping a consonant from the Masoretic Text is unwarranted—as is the Greek Septuagint changing the entire line in Song of Solomon 8:2 to repeat the phrase from Song of Solomon 3:4. It seems more likely that the wording in Song of Solomon 8:2 was carefully chosen to be close to the former wording in 8:2 but with a significant difference. The wording may even be intentionally ambiguous as to person. In one sense, the Shulamite, who was reared and taught by her mother in the ways of love, will now take on the role of teacher of

her husband in the bedroom. Yet on the other hand, the woman who was formerly taught by her mother will now learn much more about the ways of love from her husband assuming the teaching role. Thus, the indication may be that they will instruct *one another* in their shared adventure.

Concerning the giving of wine to drink in the next line, this may refer on some level to the role of the lady of the house playfully assumed, as mentioned above. Of course, this should be seen in a figurative sense. "The second line of the verse utilizes the by-now-well-attested theme of drinking intoxicating liquids to signify physical intimacies (Song of Solomon 1:2; Song of Solomon 5:1; Song of Solomon 7:9). Sexual activity is both sensual and intoxicating, and so is drinking spiced wine and pomegranate wine" (*NICOT*, p. 204, note on 8:2). Note particularly that she refers to the juice of her own pomegranate. This is clearly an erotic symbol. We earlier saw the woman's sexuality represented as an orchard of pomegranates (Song of Solomon 4:13). And note the symbolism in one of the Egyptian love songs, where trees of an orchard are describing lovers meeting there: "The sister and brother make {holiday}, {swaying beneath} my branches; high on grape wine and pomegranate wine are they, and rubbed with Moringa and pine oil" (Turin Love Songs, no. 28, in William Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 312). In verse 2 "there is also an interesting word/sound play between 'I would make [or 'will have'] you drink' ('aššaq<sup>e</sup>ka...) and 'I would...kiss you' ('eššaq<sup>e</sup>ka...) in Song of Solomon 8:1" (*NICOT*, note on verse 2). And this follows 'emsa'aka ("I would find") in verse 1. Moreover, "pomegranate (*rimmoni*), and 'right hand' (*wimino*) [in verse 3] have similar sounds" (Gledhill, p. 216). **8:3:** Song of Solomon 8:3 repeats the statement in Song of Solomon 2:6 (about the man holding the woman) that preceded the refrain of adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem in Song of

Solomon 2:7. It now precedes an altered form of that refrain. Some, as in the NKJV translation, take the words in both cases as referring to present reality, which is reasonable. Others see in both cases a wish, translated, "Oh, may his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me" (Glickman, pp. 178, 188). This is also quite reasonable. In the latter case, the realization of the desires expressed in this unit would still be yet to come—perhaps immediately following without direct comment. It is even possible that the ambiguous wording, though the same, could allow for a wish in the former case and present reality in the latter—the context being different.

**8:4:** The present unit concludes in Song of Solomon 8:4 with an altered form of the adjuration refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem that concluded earlier units in Song of Solomon 2:7 and Song of Solomon 3:5. In this case there is no mention of the gazelles and does of the field as before. Perhaps more interestingly, as Dr. Glickman notes, is that the refrain at Song of Solomon 8:4 "replaces the word rendered 'not' (*im*[literally 'if' but meaning 'not' in oath formulas]) that precedes 'arouse' [or 'stir up'] and 'awaken' in the earlier refrains with a different word (*mah*).... Most translations note that this new word preceding 'arouse' and 'awaken' (*mah*—'what, why, that') *can* on rare occasions indicate negation. Then they translate 8.4 like before: 'Do *not* arouse...until it pleases.' But in light of the subtle but very instructive differences in the occurrences of other refrains...the translator must consider whether the variation yields a change of meaning as well. The grammars and lexicons that suggest this new word may imply negation can cite examples only where the negation arises out of a rhetorical question like, 'How can I do this wrong?' meaning 'I can't do this wrong.' But that rarely occurs, and it would be awkward that the imperative 'promise me' (or 'swear to me' [or 'I charge you']) would introduce it. Furthermore, if Shulamith had wished to request a promise 'not to arouse,' she could simply

have used the same word for 'not' she used in the earlier refrains.... Quite significantly, the only other place where [*mah*] follows the verb 'promise me' [or 'I charge you'] (in Song of Solomon 5:8), it bears the sense of 'that'" (pp. 226-227). Let's note that third adjuration out of the four in the Song: "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, *that* you tell him I am lovesick" (Song of Solomon 5:8; compare Song of Solomon 2:7; Song of Solomon 3:5; Song of Solomon 8:4). The Hebrew word rendered "that" in Song of Solomon 5:8 is *mah*. As noted earlier, some see here a negative sense: "do *not* tell him." But most understand the meaning as "that" in the positive sense (i.e., "that you do" or "that you will")—which makes a good deal more sense. With this usage in the third adjuration, "the songwriter appears to intentionally prepare the reader for the different sense of the refrain in 8:4, when *mah* occurs twice" (Glickman, p. 227).

Thus 8:4 seems to more reasonably be translated as "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, *that* you stir up and *that* you awaken love *when* it pleases" (not "*until* it pleases" as before—since the Hebrew word here can mean either *when* or *until* depending on the context). Glickman, understanding *mah* as denoting adverbial intensity, translates Song of Solomon 8:4 as follows: "I want you to promise me, O young women of Jerusalem, that you will surely arouse, you will surely awaken love when love pleases to awaken." The previous wording of the refrain in Song of Solomon 2:7 and Song of Solomon 3:5, seeming to be a warning against premarital intimacy (and perhaps even against stirring up loving feelings too early in a relationship), is valid and important. But it is also important to *not* hold back from love and intimacy when the right person and marriage at last does come. The Song thus gives us the appropriate balance: "No way" *before* it's time and "all the way" *when* it's time! Glickman comments: "Perhaps in light of the obvious benefit of acting when



the time is right and Shulamith's unfortunate experience on the night recounted after the wedding night, she desires to state the refrain in its positive form here. In light of the instructive transformations of other refrains in the Song, the resounding encouragement to seize the opportunity for real love when the opportunity arises is a climactic conclusion to this refrain" (pp. 227-228).

As the curtain rings down on this unit, it is not clear whether the lovers are already together in their intimacy or whether they are heading off together (literally or figuratively) for that purpose.

### "Set Me as a Seal Upon Your Heart"

**8:5a:** We come now to the concluding section of the Song, which evidently looks back on the relationship and also looks ahead. In considering the unit's opening in Song of Solomon 8:5a, we should recall that the third unit of the Song closed in Song of Solomon 3:5 with the adjuration refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem and the next, the fourth and central unit (probably concerning the wedding of the couple), opened in Song of Solomon 3:6 with "Who is this coming out of the wilderness...?"—this being likely a reference to the woman (compare also Song of Solomon 6:10). Even so, the unit before the present one closed in 8:4 with a form of the adjuration refrain and this last unit opens in verse 5 with "Who is this coming up from the wilderness...?"—clearly defined in this case as the woman, since she is "...leaning upon her beloved" (same verse).

Recall from our comments on the preceding unit that some believe the couple was there heading off on a romantic getaway to rekindle their romance—some understanding the destination to be the woman's childhood home. Proponents of the shepherd hypothesis see the couple leaving the palace and harem in Jerusalem and permanently returning to the area of the woman's childhood home. In either case, Song of Solomon 8:5 is often considered to be the couple coming up from the wilderness in

approaching the childhood home. Taking verses 8-9 to be the words of the Shulamite's brothers is considered to buttress this view—the idea being that these words are spoken during a visit to the home of the woman's family. This is part of the reason that some attribute verse 5 (as the NKJV does) to an unnamed relative—often viewed here as witnessing the couple's arrival at the country homestead. The other reason is that the speaker is taken to be the same in the latter part of the verse—where the speaker, a single individual, is deemed from the wording to have been present at the birth of the person being addressed. This is likely a mistaken notion, as we will see. Furthermore, we should consider that the Song is not a drama in the sense that we might expect a brief walk-on role. It is a song sung in parts—and it seems odd that there would be a man waiting to sing this one small part. (Though one man singing here who also sings elsewhere with a male chorus is perhaps conceivable.)

Others who believe the lovers leave on a getaway vacation, whether to the countryside generally or to the woman's childhood home particularly, see verse 5 not as early in the getaway but as the *end* of it. That is, they see here the man and woman returning to Jerusalem *from* vacation (which is understood to have occurred between verses 4 and 5 without description). In this view, the beginning of verse 5 is read as being spoken by residents of Jerusalem—most likely the chorus representing the daughters of Jerusalem, who were just mentioned in verse 4. This would parallel the chorus of women singing, as they probably do, "Who is this [or she]...?" in Song of Solomon 3:6 and Song of Solomon 6:10.

Some, as we earlier saw, recognize the getaway intended by the woman in the previous section to be purely figurative, so that no literal trip was being proposed. In this view, the husband and wife were either going to their new life together after the wedding feast or, more likely, intending after a period of trouble in marriage to

reconnect with one another in their own home and bedroom. This could mean that the beginning of verse 5 is to be understood figuratively as well—the man and woman returning from the countryside signifying their reemergence among people after a period of private lovemaking. Or the man and woman coming up from the wilderness together might signify their reunion after the period of distress. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* states: "A final picture of the Song's couple is presented here. The wilderness or desert had two symbolic associations in the Old Testament. First, the wilderness was associated with Israel's 40-year period of trial. In their love the couple had overcome trials which threatened their relationship (e.g., the insecurity of the beloved, Song of Solomon 1:5-6 [more so in Song of Solomon 3:1-5]; the foxes [if that was really a problem], Song of Solomon 2:15; and indifference [or perhaps simply misunderstanding], Song of Solomon 5:2-7). Second, the desert or wilderness was used as an image of God's curse (cf. Jeremiah 22:6; Joel 2:3). The couple's coming up out of the wilderness suggests that in a certain sense they had overcome the curse of disharmony pronounced on [the primal couple] Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:16b)" (note on Song of Solomon 8:5). Along these lines, the first emergence from the wilderness in Song of Solomon 3:6 perhaps symbolized coming from the betrothal period separation and difficulties and, in the wedding ceremony, inheriting the "Promised Land" of marriage. This second emergence from the wilderness could be seen as a renewed inheriting of that Promised Land—a renewed marriage. Only now their emergence from the wilderness is not merely through the institution of marriage (as symbolized by the public wedding) but through leaning on each other, working out their difficulties and growing together in love and intimacy (shown by the two coming up together privately). Again, it would make sense here that the chorus sings the beginning of verse 5—not as literal witnesses of

a return from the wilderness, but as friends noting the special togetherness of the couple. The NIV lists the singers here as the "Friends"—referring to the chorus.

**8:5b:** Who, then, is singing in Song of Solomon 8:5b, who is being addressed, and how is this part of the verse to be understood? As mentioned above, the NKJV attributes both parts of the verse to a relative—thought, because of the wording in the latter part, to have been present at the birth of the person being addressed. (The idea is that the speaker points to a literal apple tree and says to one of the newly arrived lovers, "That's the spot where you were born [or conceived].") There are a few points we should observe.

First of all, the object suffixes of this verse are all masculine—the "you" addressed being apparently the man. Some dispute this, however, on a thematic basis. They correctly point out that other references to being brought forth by the mother in the Song apply to the woman (Song of Solomon 3:4; Song of Solomon 6:9; Song of Solomon 8:2). There is, however, an earlier mention of the man's mother in the context of the wedding, she being the one who crowns him and thus sends him off into marriage (Song of Solomon 3:11). And this may apply here in a figurative sense with the woman as the speaker, as we will see momentarily. Yet another reason people insist on the man not being the one awakened and brought forth, in either a literal or figurative sense, is that they find this difficult to reconcile with the man as a type of Christ (or God in Jewish allegory). How, in a spiritual sense, could the woman, as the Church or Israel, (or a relative, for that matter) have wakened Christ (or God)? Would it not be the other way around? Of course we then get into disputes about Israel or Mary giving birth to Christ. And would this not also be an issue with the mention of the mother in Song of Solomon 3:11? Or how about the woman proposing to lead the man in Song of Solomon 3:4 and Song of Solomon 8:2? Indeed, a preconceived notion about

spiritual parallels should not be the basis for ignoring Hebrew grammar. Marvin Pope in his *Anchor Bible* commentary correctly points out that the retention of the masculine suffixes in the Jewish Masoretic Text here despite this running counter to centuries of Jewish allegorical interpretation, supports a solid early tradition for the masculine suffixes (*Song of Songs*, p. 663, note on verse 5c). This is not to say there is no typology here—but it probably should not be applied strictly to every line or passage. It thus seems best to take the grammar of Song of Solomon 8:5b at face value and understand the man as the one being addressed.

Second, the phrases in verse 5b represent key themes in the Song. "Awakened" occurs earlier in the adjurations to the daughters of Jerusalem about not awakening and then awakening love (Song of Solomon 2:7; Song of Solomon 3:5; Song of Solomon 8:4) and also in the erotic central passage of the Song, where the woman calls for the north wind to awake and blow on her garden (Song of Solomon 4:16). The "apple tree" (or a comparable fruit tree, as it is not certain just what fruit is meant by the term "apple" in both places—some suggest apricot) was used of the man as being the place of love and intimacy in Song of Solomon 2:3—the fruit there and in Song of Solomon 2:5 being symbolic of sensual pleasure. And being brought forth by the mother is, as already noted, mentioned of the woman in Song of Solomon 3:4, Song of Solomon 6:9 and Song of Solomon 8:2 (the former and latter verses here occurring in a sexual context and perhaps having an erotic meaning). So it seems most likely that the sentence in Song of Solomon 8:5b is to be taken in a figurative sense of sexuality—especially on the heels of an emergence from the wilderness that is also probably a metaphor concerning the relationship. Surely a relative is not making all these erotic connections. This is most likely private communication between the lovers—probably the woman (as the

NIV notes) speaking to the man, as per the grammar. As before, some of the prior references alluded to concern the experience of the woman—though both were involved in these and there may be a mutual application, especially as the last section concerned the woman taking the initiative to lead the man in a renewal of romance and intimacy.

Third, the repetition near the end of the verse seems to emphasize not just being conceived, but the labor of birth, as the NIV translates it. As Dr. Craig Glickman explains: "The word for 'to labor' in birth [as he translates it] may also mean 'conceived' or simply 'to be pregnant.' The noun derived from the word means 'labor pains,' which favors the meaning of the verb as 'to labor' in birth. Perhaps the songwriter intends both meanings, having a play on words with a single word" (*Solomon's Song of Love*, p. 228). Here, again, may be a figurative picture of the pain of labor giving way to the joy of new life.

Putting all of this together, it would seem that the woman is telling the man that she awakened him sexually during the delight of intimacy with him—and that he was born anew through this experience (or perhaps that he was, so to speak, born to be loved by her). More specifically, she may be speaking of having *re* awakened him sexually in a rebirth during their recent intimacy—the idea possibly being that she herself has followed the pattern of his mother in giving new life to him (in their revived relationship) after going through a period of distress. Directing attention toward the apple tree, besides its implication of sensual delight, would seem to indicate a return to the joy of love in the opening section of the Song (again see Song of Solomon 2:3). That is to say, after coming up from the wilderness in a renewal of marriage, the lovers find that they have arrived back at the love they once knew. This truly is a beautiful picture. Of course, it is contingent on seeing some chronological progress in the Song from the beginning until this point. A number of interpreters deny

this, but it helps a great deal in making sense out of what is being described throughout.

**8:6-7:** Continuing the apparent theme of renewing the marriage (as, again, coming up from the wilderness in Song of Solomon 8:5 was an image previously associated with what seems to be the wedding of the couple in Song of Solomon 3:6-11), we are next, in Song of Solomon 8:6-7 given a call to renewed commitment and an abstract description of the nature of love, which in context refers to the various aspects of the love between a man and woman in marriage—including the mutual attraction, passionate desire, romantic feeling, companionship, concern, and commitment that bind them together. As the pronouns in verse 6a are masculine singular, it is clear in context that the woman is speaking to the man—and, given the "for" here, that she speaks through the end of verse 7 (as is generally acknowledged). She asks him to set her as a seal on his heart and on his arm (verse 6a). Engraved stone or metal seals, used for identification (Genesis 38:18) and signature purposes, were carried on one's person—just as people in the Western world today don't leave home without wallet and driver's license. The word for "seal" in Song of Solomon 8:6 "is an Egyptian loanword. Such objects could be worn on strings about the neck (Genesis 38:18) and thus lie over the 'heart'; they were also worn as rings on the hand (Jeremiah 22:24)" (Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs, Hermeneia Commentaries*, p. 191, footnote on Song of Solomon 8:6). Interestingly, the boy in one of the Cairo Love Songs may have used similar imagery: "If only I were her little seal-ring, the keeper of her finger! I would see her love each and every day... {while it would be I} who stole her heart" (Group B, no. 27 or 21C, translated by Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and The Egyptian Love Songs*, p. 38). Here the picture is of perpetual closeness with the person loved.

Song of Solomon 8:6, however, does not mention the finger but the "arm." Some picture a bracelet. Yet a ring on the finger could be meant if the word literally translated "arm" is interchangeable here with "hand," "just as in Song of Solomon 5:14 'hand' was understood as 'arm'" (Murphy, footnote on 8:6). Yet the nuance of "arm" is surely deliberate in this brilliantly crafted work. If the woman herself is pictured as a seal, then it would seem she wishes to be over the man's heart (in private affections) and on his arm (in the sense of holding onto his arm and being presented on his arm in public). Their arrival in Song of Solomon 8:5 was marked by her leaning on him, evidently on his arm. On the other hand, "set me as a seal upon your heart...upon your arm" may have the sense of "*impress* me as a seal onto your heart and arm." In this case, the idea is that she be indelibly stamped onto his heart (that is, onto his emotions and inner commitment) and onto his arm (meaning, as with God's commandments in Deuteronomy 6:6-8, onto his actions). And, considering the identification imagery, she may have been asking that the man be completely identified with her—that in observing him, all would see a man wholly devoted to her (her name being figuratively tattooed on his arm, as we might think of it today). Moreover, there may be a sense here of a mark of ownership—that the man would willingly belong, and be *seen* as belonging, to her (in this apparent recommitment to marriage with its mutual possession). The remainder of Song of Solomon 8:6-7 gives the basis of the commitment the woman desires of the man—clearly implied to be the basis of her own feelings. The first two lines about the seal are connected by the word "for" to the next two lines about love being as strong as death (in not letting go of those in its grasp) and, likewise, jealousy (i.e., proper jealousy in the sense of guarding the exclusivity of the committed relationship) being as "unyielding as the grave" (NIV)—the word "cruel" in the KJV and NKJV probably being a wrong nuance in this case of the Hebrew



word here that literally means "hard." Glickman notes a short chiasmic or symmetrical pattern: *a*: heart; *b*: arm; *b'*: strong; *a'*: jealousy unyielding (p. 228). This abstract statement about the nature of love, continuing through to the end of verse 7, is quite remarkable here—there being nothing else like it in the Song. Having tied the whole of the Song together in the description of the renewal of the relationship in verse 5, the segment that follows forms the secondary high point of the Song (the climax being the central passage, 4:16-5:1). Here in Song of Solomon 8:6-7, in what is likely aimed at the audience in an instructive sense, we are told not only about the unbreakable grip of love and accompanying jealousy, but that love is a flame of God, as the words in the last line of verse 6 can be translated "a flame of YAH." If this translation is correct, this is the only direct mention of God in the Song. The translation issues here, and the import of this segment, are considered in detail in our introduction, and you may wish to review that here. Though this translation is disputed, it reasonably fits here—and the wording may be intentionally ambiguous so that the mention of God is very subtle. In any case, it is clear that God is the very author of human love and sexuality.

The last two lines of verse 6 go with the first two lines of verse 7. So intensely does true love burn that "great waters" (*māyīm rabbīm*) cannot put it out—these being representative in other passages of Scripture of destructive forces and applying most naturally here, since water would typically extinguish a flame. This is not to say that love can never die—for it clearly can and does die out through neglect and wrong choices of the lovers themselves. But when true love is burning, it cannot be quenched. At the end of verse 7 we are further told that love cannot be bought. If a man gave everything he had for love, "it [or 'he,' this could be translated] would be utterly scorned" (NIV). Shepherd-hypothesis advocates take this as a summary of what has

happened throughout the Song. *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* contends here: "True love is not only unquenchable, it is also unpurchaseable. Solomon had made every effort to buy her love with all the luxuries of the court, but to no avail. The Shulammitte speaks from experience" (note on verses Song of Solomon 8:6-7). Yet there are ways to understand this passage that do not require a three-character interpretation. If Solomon is the lover in the Song, the woman could simply be making a point that it was not his wealth that drew her to him in love as some might assume—that he, rather, won her over naturally because no one can be induced to true love through bribery. On the other hand, if a poor shepherd and vineyard caretaker girl are being extolled in the Song as if they are king and queen, the girl may be contrasting her man with the real Solomon, commenting that true love is not really about wealth and splendor. Murphy makes another suggestion here, pointing out that this pronouncement of disdain on one seeking to buy love "may seem somewhat anticlimactic after the preceding lines, but in the biblical world, where the *mohar*, or bride-price, played a significant role, the reference was appropriate. Moreover, the practices associated with the bride price seem to figure in the background of vv 8-12" (p. 198, note on verses 6-7). We will consider this shortly.

**8:8-10:** The next segment here, Song of Solomon 8:8-10, seems to spring out of nowhere. While these verses go together based on the same matter under discussion carrying through them, it is not clear who is speaking and who is being discussed. Let's first consider what is being talked about, as this is fairly easy to discern. In verse 8, a group or an individual speaking on behalf of a group mentions having a little sister with no breasts—probably indicating that she is very young. Concern is expressed as to what to do for this sister in (or perhaps in consideration of) "the day when she is spoken for"—which seems to indicate the day that commitment is made to her in betrothal or marriage (or at

least the time when such is possible). Some note a similar expression in 1 Samuel 25:39 regarding David and Abigail. In fact, this meaning would follow well in the context of the commitment sought in Song of Solomon 8:6.

Verse 9 is either a response by another part of the group here or a continuation by the same speaker or speakers if the question at the end of verse 8 was posed rhetorically. If she is a "wall," verse 9 says, the group will build a silver battlement on her—and if a "door," the group will enclose her with cedar boards. Some assume that the "wall" imagery here corresponds to the girl having no breasts and believe that the intention is to enhance her flat-chested appearance. But this is clearly not the case. The "if" here clearly indicates a condition not presently apparent. Of course some then assume that the concern is whether the girl will remain undeveloped. But this is not the point either. In verse 10 a girl who does have breasts (which are reckoned as towers) is presented as a "wall" (so no flatness is intimated here). Moreover, the imagery of building of *battlements* on this wall shows what kind of wall is meant, making the meaning plain. "The wall (the Hebrew word [and the battlements imagery] signifies a fortified city wall, not the wall of a house)...suggests defence, impregnability, repulsion of intruders. Metaphorically it represents chastity, unavailability, self-protection and preservation" (Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, p. 236). Indeed, in the context of preserving a young girl for marriage, the wall imagery could reasonably apply only to the guarding of her virginity. The battlements, normally meaning further stone courses (though some picture turrets here), could entail extra support in maintaining virginity. Yet their being silver would seem to refer more to adornment as a reward or gift (perhaps a bridal gift)—the courses atop the wall being the place in this metaphoric picture to place such adornment.