

## Song of Songs 8:5 - 14

This last charge signals the end of the Song of Songs. Just as a speech commonly ends in a summary of all that has been said, the artist of God-given talents brings the threads together at the end of the book. In a final setting, the “actors” appear once more to say farewell, i.e. the daughters of Jerusalem, the brothers of the young woman, the friends of the young man, and Solomon the rich king.

At the end, the author comes with a new thought, indicating the origin and essence of love in verses 6 and 7. There is indeed a still more excellent way! The author himself asks the question, “Who is this coming up from the desert, leaning on her lover?” The similarity of verse 5a and 3:6 is clearly seen, and is not accidental. Both verses link up with a charge, and something particular can be seen in both cases. Solomon’s carriage was seen in chapter 3, and here can be seen the young woman leaning on the arm of her beloved. In the first scene, no mention was made of the bride of the king. In the second scene, both lovers are in attendance. Therefore the second scene surpasses the first. They come from the wilderness, the open field, without escort or guide; that is not necessary since they are at home here.

They reminisce about past events, just as today’s young people do. Do you remember this and that? “Under the apple I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth.” Who says this and who awoke whom? The commentaries assume that naturally it is the young man awakening the young woman, as is fitting and seemly, for he takes the initiative in the love relationship. But since the Hebrew language uses different forms for the second person masculine and feminine, there is no doubt that she awakened him, since the masculine form is used. This awakening is not from sleep, rather it refers to the awakening of a slumbering love. It is the well-known verb from the charge: “do not arouse or awaken love.” He had been sitting or standing under the apple tree when she passed by, and he fell in love. Love songs commonly mention “I first saw you when...” It is the unforgettable moment when he discovers the one he loves.

She remembers the place. It was under the apple tree, near his parental home. It seems strange that his mother is also mentioned, and that the young woman mentions his conception in this manner. Such things are not spoken of in western society. But this woman is an Israelite, from the near East. Things that are taboo to us can be mentioned by her, not to be sensational, but to point out the marvels of love in the chain of generations.

How could the author, who is responsible for the composition of the book, have the young woman change the discussion to verses six and seven with their lofty content? Our Bibles omit a line between these two sections. But the transition would have been strange and awkward had she used coarse language. Unlike today’s reader, who from considerations of chastity would only speak of the result (the birth), she penetrates to the source. She wishes to focus on the unstoppable love relationship, the origin to which not only her beloved, but all those without number, throughout the ages, trace their existence.

Verse six begins on a very personal note: “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm.” In ancient times they had two kinds of seals; one was carried around the neck near the heart, an intimate place where one hides precious things. The girl wants to hide close to his heart, like the bundle of myrrh between her breasts (1:13). She also wants to be like the ring with the seal on his finger. Physical attraction reveals what goes on in the soul, in the heart: love, which quickens the heart and stirs the soul.

She compares love with death. With death?! How is this possible? These are two extremes. Love as the fountain of joy contrasts sharply with death as the cause for sorrow. She also mentions the grave, or *sheol*, the realm of the dead. This verse speaks of death and the realm of the dead, not as “fate” or as a place, but personified, as is done more often in the Old Testament (Proverbs 30:16; Isaiah 5:14; 28:15,18).

Why is love compared with this? Because she does not fear these powers. Death is held back by no one, but demands its prey. Love is like that. Just as the one ruthlessly demands lives, snatching and sweeping them away, so the other takes care that new life is conceived (v. 5). If necessary, love is also hard and unyielding, looking for ways and finding them. Woman is especially ingenious in this respect. We can find examples of this in the Old Testament.

The force with which love works is like a “blazing fire, like a mighty flame” [cf. NIV footnote: “like the very flame of the LORD”]. Although the name JAH (or JAHWEH) is seen as a higher level – a mighty flame – it would be fitting to speak here of JAHWEH. Love is not a human product, but is of divine origin. The Lord places this power, whereby man and woman are driven into each other’s arms, against the power of death, to conceive and give birth to new life. Death touches all people and so does life. “Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.” These waters are reminiscent of the primeval power waters can unleash. Who is able to resist such power? The love between a man and a woman is one of the strongest bulwarks against the violence of death!

Whoever thinks that such love can be bought for money is badly mistaken. Such a person makes himself despicable. Corruptible love is not dealt with here. That is not really love.

The fountain of true love is the LORD. Chapter 8:6 is the only place where JAHWEH is mentioned by name. The story has gradually moved toward him, even though these Outlines have already mentioned his name several times in the considerations about the Song. Right from the beginning the poet has been moving toward this clearly developed point of view.

We have now come to 8:8. “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?” Just as in verse 5b, another segment of the past is brought up. She is reminded of what was said a long time ago by her brothers. She was young and carefree at that time, as is typical for that age. But the brothers, who have already been mentioned in 1:6, looked ahead and were thinking of the future: “What shall we do for our sister for the day she is spoken for?”

Were they afraid she would be left, that no one would ask for her hand? Or did they fear that she would not behave like a chaste virgin? Verse 9 seems to indicate the latter: “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.” Needless to say, this is another metaphor, even though exegetes differ here on whether “wall” and “door” refer to the same thing, or whether they are contradictory ways of dealing with the problem.

Those who agree with the first possibility think that the wall, and also the door – which can be closed! – shows that she is not open to the advances of strangers. Those of a different opinion see the wall as a picture of honour and virtue, while the door is a picture of frivolity. In both cases the brothers intend to take measures. In the first case they will build towers on her with beautiful silver ornaments as a token of their high esteem. If the other is true, they will not fail to close the “entrance.”

Some years have passed by. The little sister has now grown up, and has shown herself to be a wall, not someone who would go out with everyone. It is unknown whether the brothers expressed their gratitude. It is clear, however, that what they had seen coming did in fact happen: “I am a wall and my breasts are like towers.” It is remarkable that what was once described as twin fawns of a gazelle, the pride of the young woman, are now compared with towers, which repel strangers. They repel, but also attract at the same time.

That is the difficulty with such defenses. The enemy feels himself irresistibly attracted. While she repels strangers, they feel attracted to her. That is how it is. Now it is important that she recognizes her future boyfriend among all these strangers. Even though she did not always welcome him either (cf. 2:14; 4:8,9; 6:4b,5a,10), “I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment.” Remaining with this image, the garrison is ready to capitulate and will surrender the fortress.

Once more Solomon enters the picture, as owner of the vineyard in Baal Hamon: “he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver.” K. Schilder’s sermon about this text<sup>1</sup> has contributed much to the correct insight of this book in Reformed circles. Not every point of his book can be agreed upon, but much is helpful. It remains an open question whether there was indeed a place by that name where Solomon had a vineyard, but the possibility remains. However, it is important to note that these closing verses refer back to the first verses of the book, for both in 1:6 and in 8:12, we read the words: *karmi sjelli* (my vineyard). Since in 1:6, the vineyard was a metaphor of the young woman’s body, the speaker in this verse could be referring to this again, in which case Solomon’s vineyard alludes to his vast harem. As far as the young man in the Song of Songs is concerned, Solomon may keep his vineyard, with best wishes for his happiness. The young man has his own, and is content!

They are not yet married. Otherwise he would not say in verse 13: “You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice!” (cf. 1:7b) The boys from the village would like to see the young woman, the keeper of the vineyard, and hear her voice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Included in his book Verzamelde Werken, Afdeling 1; Preken, Deel 3, 171

That is how it goes when boys are together, they tell jokes or whistle, and give themselves airs. The young man hopes that she will pass them by, ignoring them, and only talk with him, her lover. He waits in anticipation.

Then she speaks, "Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains." This is yet one more memory they have in common. They remember again what happened in 2:8-17. He is now certain that she will not let him walk alone anymore. Together, hand in hand, or arm in arm, they will walk through the village to the outside world, to the "spice-laden mountains", their fairy garden, to find a happiness together that cannot be expressed with a pen.

Unless it is the pen of the man who, driven by the Holy Spirit, wrote the Song of Songs.

Heinrich M Ohmann