

# The Courtship:

*Song of Songs 1:2-3:5*

The following interpretation of the Song of Songs is based on the belief that Solomon wrote this poem about two literary fictional characters who are young and in love. It is not an allegory, but an example of love poetry meant to be put to music. It has a loose plot with a phase of courtship, marriage, honeymoon, and a period of marital love which includes the natural adjustments found within all new marriages. The intimacies indicated before the honeymoon section are sexual but not to the point of fornication. Both the Beloved and his Shulamite darling are to be considered virgins experiencing their first love. They are betrothed at this point awaiting their wedding day. They are representatives of lovers from 900 B.C.

The Hebrew language gives clear identification as to who the speakers are in a greater portion of this poem. The gender, person, and singular and plural in the Hebrew words will help to correlate the passage with either the Beloved, the Shulamite, the daughters of Jerusalem or some other person or group. For example, the feminine singular is speaking in verses two and three. The feminine plural is used in the phrase "*We will be glad and rejoice...*" which indicates the daughters of Jerusalem are speaking. In like manner, those being addressed can be identified by the Hebrew language used in the text. For example, in the phrase "*Rightly do they love you*" the masculine singular is used for the "*you*" and therefore the Shulamite is speaking of the daughters of Jerusalem who love her Beloved (1:4b). Once in a while the identity of the speaker or those spoken to or those spoken about cannot be so determined. Therefore, the context must be employed to determine these identities.

After a brief superscription in verse one the Song of Songs jumps right into the middle of an on going romance. It begins without an introduction and so it will end in 8:14 without a conclusion.

The Shulamite speaks first. She is most likely talking to herself in a fantasy. She will dominate the dialogue throughout the Song speaking about fifty-three percent of the time. She is aggressive in her pursuit of her Beloved. This may seem odd to our current standards where our Western view is that the young man initiate and pursue the object of his love.

A kiss is longed for from the Shulamite's Beloved. She has obviously experienced such before and longs for more. The metaphor of comparing these loving kisses to wine is found throughout the Song (1:2,4; 4:210; 5:1; 7:9; 8:2). Wine is from the Hebrew *yayin* and could mean grape juice or fermented wine. In view of Solomon's warning about wine in Proverbs 23:29-35 it is hard to image an alcoholic beverage is under consideration. Many find it easy to superimpose our metaphor of being intoxicated with love like one is intoxicated with wine upon the text. Yet it is more likely that the metaphor is employed to show the sweet, refreshing, and drinking of his kisses. As a rule in both the Old and New Testaments it is wise to interpret or translate the word "wine" as grape juice unless there is ample evidence in the context indicate otherwise.

Next, the Shulamite points to her Beloved's "*name*" which is who he is or his reputation. His reputation precedes him like the fragrance of his perfume which introduces his presence to others. The smell of his cologne is of such that it not only arouses her love and affection for him but also all the virgins who know him. Her first poem ends with a desire to being swept off her feet and carried away by her man: "Draw me away!" Throughout the Song her longing to be alone and intimate with her Beloved is proclaimed without embarrassment or apology.

As a response to the Shulamite's longings and her mention of the "virgins" (who love her Beloved) these daughters of Jerusalem will join her pursuit of this love affair: "*we will run after you.*" They will follow vicariously with great interest the development of this romance. These young virgins are city girls who now the country girl from the small town of Shulam.

The yearning of the Shulamite to be with her Beloved continues: *“the king has brought me into his chambers.”* The term *“king”* is not Solomon. It is a metaphor referring the Shulamite’s groom to be. He is her king/her prince. She is giving him the highest praises by making him royalty in their relationship. This is a common metaphor in the love poetry of this time. Some interpret this to be a reference to fornication. However, other translations, such as, the Holman Christian Standard Bible give the correct representation of her yearning: *“Oh, that the king would bring me to his chambers.”* She longs to be in a private place (“bedroom”) with her future husband.

Again, the daughters of Jerusalem respond. *“We will be glad and rejoice in you. We will remember your love more than wine”* They are a sounding board for her emotions. In turn these young ladies are giving her reassurances and support. They will praise or extol this romance of the Shulamite more than the favorite beverage of Palestine.

In the final line of verse four the Shulamite responds to the daughters of Jerusalem about her Beloved: *“Rightly do they love you.”* She is so secure in her betrothal to her Beloved that she can express freely and without jealousy that other young virgins agree that he is quite the catch. Keep in mind the ancient Jewish betrothal is not a loose as out concept of engagement. A betrothal could not be broken without a certificate of divorcement.

In verses five and six the Shulamite is still speaking, but not about the daughters of Jerusalem’s love for her groom, but she is defending her self-image to them. Although her skin may be dark compared to them she still considers herself beautiful. The dark tone of her skin is compared to the beduin tribe’s tents. This tribe of Kedar is mentioned several times in the Old Testament (Gen. 25:13; Jer. 49:28,29). They are descendants of Abraham and located in the upper Arabian desert. Her skin color is also compared to the *“curtains of Solomon.”*

She is so self-conscious of her appearance that she does not want the whiter skinned city virgins to look upon her. Why is she so dark compared to them? The Shulamite’s brothers made her work in the vineyards causing the sun to give her over time a deep dark tan. Therefore, this has nothing to do with racial prejudice. It does reflect cultural taste and social prejudice. She was a poor country girl who had to work in the vineyard. She was not afforded the luxury of keeping her self out of the burning rays of the sun. Why? Apparently her brothers were angry with her. There is no clue as to reason for their anger in the context. Yet it is clear from this they have responsibility and authority over her. The end result is that she kept the family vineyard and thus neglected her own vineyard, that is, her physical appearance. However, even in a culture which praised light untanned skin, her darker sun-tanned skin did not keep her from being beautiful. In contrast, our current trend today is to turn our young ladies into sun-worshippers to strip themselves naked to bake themselves in public or on tanning beds to the point they will later have to fight skin cancer.

In verse seven, she turns to speak to her Beloved. The Shulamite wants to spend time with him. He is a shepherd. Her idea is for him to give her a time and place where she can find him and they can have some private time together. Perhaps, at noon when the flocks gather in a shady spot to chew the cud while he rests and watches. She warns him that if he does not give her a meeting place she will have to veil herself and go from flock to flock and shepherd to shepherd until she gets directions to him. The purpose of the veil is not a reference (as some think) to her pretending to be a prostitute, but most likely hiding her identity from his companions, so they will not know the reason for her searching for him. She is desperate in her attempt to find out where he works, so she can have a private rendezvous with him.

Finally the Beloved speaks. Whereas she had defended her cultural and social unattractiveness to the daughters of Jerusalem, he addresses her as the most beautiful of women. He gives her a clue to finding his noon day resting place where they can have a date. She can bring some kids (goats) along and *“follow in the footsteps of the flock”* which will begin *“beside the shepherds’ tents.”* This should lead her to his location.

Perhaps, verse nine begins the dialogue taking place when the love birds meet alone at noon. The Shulamite is his love or *“darling.”* This term is one of endearment he uses for her throughout the Song (1:15; 2:2,10,13; 4:1,7; 5:2; 5:4). The shepherd wishes to use metaphors to describe the object of his love. First, he calls her *“my filly among Pharaoh’s chariots.”* Mares were not hitched up to war

chariots, but Stallions are. So some scholars think this may refer to a battle strategy like the one used by the prince of Qadish who sent a mare in heat among the Egyptian chariots to excite the stallions pulling the chariots and make them non-responsive to directions in battle. However, this ploy was quickly ended when an Egyptian soldier killed the filly. "The metaphor implies that her charms are able to unsettle even the most disciplined of men" (Curtis 122). His second comparison of her beauty involves jewelry. "*Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with chains of gold*" (1:10). This might be literal jewelry which when worn accentuates the natural beauty of her cheeks and neck. Or her cheeks and neck themselves are beautiful like jewelry.

The daughters of Jerusalem respond to this description. Keep in mind they are not on the date with them. This is lyrical poetry not a literal drama. This is how they would respond. They want to help their Shulamite friend out with a gift of jewelry. "*We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver*" (1:11). This would seem to indicate that she did not have any.

Now the Shulamite takes her turn telling of her love for him (1:12-14). The Beloved is the king who sits at his table. She perhaps is the table, where he takes his meal of love. The action of eating and drinking is a common metaphor for physical love. Her fragrance sent forth to him is like spikenard from India. The second fragrance is myrrh "a reddish gum resin from South Arabia" (Curtis 122). He is like a purse or bundle of myrrh which she suspends on a necklace. It will lie on night between her breasts. Perhaps, his love is like a fragrance which she keeps near her heart all night long. The third fragrance comes from a cluster of yellow henna flowers known to grow in the oasis of En Gedi near the Dead Sea. The Song makes use of all the senses to describe the wonderful smell of love. Smells often evoke very strong memories. Sight and smell are used throughout the Song to describe their mutual attraction for each other.

The next several verses (1:15-2:3) consist of a rapid back and forth dialogue between the Shulamite and her Beloved as they describe each others attractiveness. First, he tells her she is fair or beautiful as he focuses on her dove-like eyes. There is no way of knowing what he means by this comparison. To be sure, he finds her eyes very attractive. Next, she returns the compliment by telling him he is fair or beautiful, which is translated "*handsome*" in verse sixteen. She turns to the forest grove where they have having their noon tryst for imagery. His bed comes from a Hebrew term which means a covered or bed with a canopy. It is green or verdant or lush. A thick green cover is over them. Most likely this is a comparison to the location in the tress where they cover their heads with shade as they converse. They are in the country having a picnic of love, so the houses of cedar with rafters of fir are continuing the metaphor of the forest grove where they are meeting. He has a great big beautiful bed and a very luxurious house made with cedar with exposed lofting beams of fir. They are enclosed in their back to nature private home. Both of these trees are known for their appealing fragrance. His is a perfect spot for them to have a private and intimate date.

Next, the Shulamite turns her focus from the ideal setting for their mid-day date to her modest self-description. Still borrowing the images of nature she indicates that she is must a "*rose of Sharon*" (2:1) or like one of the simple lilies found in the valleys. Rose is not as we envision, but it was a narcissus or another flower found in the fertile valley of Sharon. The lily may be a reference to the lotus flower which is a type of lily. Whatever the flowers are, the point she is trying to make is that there is nothing unique about her, she is just one of many common pretty little flowers among vast fields and valleys teaming with them in springtime.

The Beloved does not see her this way at all and makes a quick contradistinction that his darling is "*like a lily among thorns*" (2:2a). All the other girls are like thorns around her. She stands out among them. He finds not one of them appealing or attractive.

She is quick to respond in kind, the Shulamite's Beloved is "*like an apple tree among the trees of the woods*" (2:3a). The apple tree in springtime is very fragrant and beautifully blossomed to stand out among all the other trees of the forest. Notice, how she continues her forest imagery. She finds him unique compared to all the other men. In fact, she considers herself very fortunately that he has chosen her to "*sat down in his shade with great delight.*" His fruit is sweet to her taste which is a reference to their shared verbal and physical love. Like the old love song says, "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me."

In this first of six sections of the Song, the Shulamite closes with an summation of her romance with the Beloved to this point (2:4-7). He has invited her into the *"banqueting house"* which literally is "house of wine." Again, the eating and drinking metaphors for feasting on each others words and kisses of love. He has raised a banner or flag of love over her. This same term for banner is used in Numbers to demonstrate a location or place of a tribe of Israel. In this case her place is with him and his love shows everyone she is his girl. She is lovesick. Those involved with an strong romantic relationship like theirs will often forego eating and drinking food for the sake of more time together. She may be literally weak and feeling sick therefore in need of cakes of raisins and apples. More likely these foods are uses a metaphors for love-talking and love-making, she is in need of his love to keep her well. They are representative of her need for his intimate embrace described in verse six. This is not necessary implying they are to have sex (see Genesis 29:13).

The Shulamite concludes with a warning to the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7). They are *"not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases."* This charge is given again in 3:5 and 8:4 with some variation. Several meanings have been given to this warning. She is telling them to leave her lover and her alone til they can satisfy their love and desire for each other. This is unlikely, since they are not present in the forest glade with them, but only by poetic license metaphorically present. Such an interpretation would have them committing fornication. Another view is this loving couple have awaked their passions to the point they are suffering. They are in danger of being tempted to sexual desire to commit fornication. So she warns these inexperienced city girls to beware of the inherent danger of romance leading to sex before marriage. Perhaps, what is really being said here to these virgins has to do with their response to vicariously following her romance. She has made it so appealing, they may be tempted to want a "beloved" of their own to experience such love. They might even be tempted to rush into just any relationship. Instead, the need to be patient and wait for the right man to come along at the right time. Notice this charge comes with the unique oath they are to take promising *"by the gazelles or by the does of the field."*

#### Questions:

1. How is it possible to determine who is speaking to whom about whom?
2. T F The Shulamite speaks more than have the time in this Song.
3. T F The term "wine" is beyond all doubt in reference to an alcoholic/intoxicating beverage.
4. What term does the Shulamite most often use to describe her lover in the Song?
5. Who are these "daughters of Jerusalem"? What are they to the Shulamite?
6. Who is called "king" and why in this text?
7. Research and explain the differences between the ancient Jewish custom of betrothal and our modern concept of engagement to be married. Are they the same? Explain.

8. Why is her skin dark? How does she feel about this?
9. How can the Shulamite find her Beloved for a noon day date?
10. What term does Beloved use most often to refer to the Shulamite in the Song?
11. What gift do the daughters of Jerusalem want to give to the Shulamite (1:11)?
12. T F The action of eating and drinking is a common metaphor for physical love in the Song.
13. What three fragrances are used to describe their attractiveness to each other (1:12-14)?
14. What is the bed and houses of the beloved?
15. How does she modestly describe herself in 2:1 and how does her Beloved respond?
16. What warning does Shulamite give to the daughters of Jerusalem and why?

**Application & Discussion:**

1. How important is one's self-image either physically or sociably in day to day relationships and responsibilities? Should Christian women wear jewelry? (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3,4).
2. How far is too far with regard to physical intimacy between engaged couples?