

The Betrothal

Song of Songs 2:8-3:5

Often there is a danger inherent with most students of the Bible to superimpose their modern definition and customs upon the scriptures they are studying. This is true with regard to the Song of Songs where one automatically compares our concepts about dating, becoming engaged, and the wedding upon this text. However, there are vast differences between the customs of today and that of 1000 B.C. in Palestine among the Jews. In our day, after a couple have dated for awhile, the man decides he wants to ask the object of his desires to marry him. He proposes to her and she accepts. They are now engaged to be married. This may take place in privacy or publically. There may be witnesses or not. This engagement does not require a legal document. The man may give the woman an engagement ring. A promise to be married to each other on a certain day is determined by the couple. However, this is not binding. Either the man or woman can at any point, even up to the time of saying their vows, call off the marriage. Furthermore, according to the moral standards of today, a couple often begin the relationship with sex. They will remain sexually active through the period of dating, engagement, and all the way up to the day before they are married. In fact, they will often move into together and set up house and have children before the wedding. In Solomon's day this was not the case with courtship, betrothal, and the wedding of a couple.

In the era of the Song Israelite men and women were required to be sexually pure or virgins before their wedding night. They would begin with a period of courtship. When they desired to become husband and wife, the couple would mutually agree and inform their parents. The families would get together and determine a venue and time for the Betrothal ceremony. According to Jewish traditions the place of the formal Betrothal ceremony was to be the tent, chamber or room associated with the girl's mother (Gen. 24:67). A document would be drawn up as a binding contract for the couple to be married. Sometimes there would be a token of something valuable given to the bride to be and the family would serve as witnesses to the couple's verbal contract instead of or in addition to the written contract. David provided one hundred foreskins from the Philistines he had killed in battle as part of his betrothal contract to be married to Saul's daughter, Michal (2 Samuel 3:14). According to Deuteronomy 20:7 the actual marriage and the betrothal were two different events: *"And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her."* Perhaps a whole year or more would elapse between the Betrothal and the Wedding. During this time the betrothal "was definite and binding upon both groom and bride, who were considered as man and wife in all legal and religious aspects, except that of actual cohabitation." Not only was the couple expected to maintain their virginity during this time, the only way the betrothal contract could be broken was with a certificate of divorcement. When Joseph and Mary were betrothed to be married, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was going to divorce her privately except God sent an angel to confirm that Mary conceived the child as a virgin. Mary was not an adulteress and he had no grounds for putting her away. The two were married and only after Jesus was born became sexually active (Mt 1:18-21).

Most of the section is seen through the eyes and narrated by the voice of the Shulamite. The one possible exception is when her brother's make a comment. Verses eight through seventeen are a complete section in that they are framed by the inclusion of verses eight and seventeen which repeat: *"my beloved"; "like a gazelle," "a young stag, and "upon the mountains."*

The Shulamite begins by describing the excitement of her beloved as he rushes to meet with her in the morning. He can hear his voice as he calls out from afar to alert her to his eminent arrival. His eagerness is like that of the swiftness of a gazelle. "A homonym for 'gazelle' means 'beautiful' and is

likely part of what the metaphor is meant to communicate” (Curtis 127). His coming is also in the strength of a young stag seen leaping and skipping over the countryside to her family home in the village of Shulam. So she is describing the arrival of her young man with anticipation and excitement.

Soon the Beloved is found standing outside on the wall surrounding her home. He looks to catch her eye from the window. However, he is not a “peeping Tom” but without a phone or email in order for him to have a private conversation with and invitation to her, he must find a way to get her attention. The young lovers are separated by barriers, such as, the distance he has had to come over the hills and mountains, the wall, the window, the lattice over the window providing a degree of privacy, and the fact she is at home with her family.

Next she describes the words of the Beloved who is urgently inviting her to a day in the countryside. Notice that his request for a rendezvous is “book-ended” by the inclusio “*Rise up, my love, my fair one*” in verse ten and concluded with the same in verse thirteen. When he invites her to come away with him, he strives to motivate his girlfriend by reminding her that it is now spring time. Spring in love poetry in almost every culture is the universal symbol of the time of young love. The winter rains which last in Palestine from October to March have ended. The flowers have begun to bloom. Singing can now be heard as the people leave their homes to resume their work outside and in the fields. The turtledove which returns in early April can now be heard. Fig trees are becoming fruitful as the season begins. Little grapes are beginning to form on the vine. The pleasant smell of spring fills the air. How can she possibly reject such an appeal to run away with her Beloved for the day?

The second part of his appeal is found in verse fourteen. His pet name for her is “dove.” The dove has long and widely been known as a image of love and peace. In fact pagan goddesses of love have been represented as love embodied in that of a dove. While it is springtime outside and very inviting. She is like his dove hidden away from him in the cliff and the rock. The term for rock indicates a massive boulder. The Hebrew for cliff is found only here and in Obadiah where it becomes the lofty and egotistically secure position of the Edomites in their country. She has seen and hear the Beloved. He longs desperately to see her lovely or beautiful “*face*” or more accurately her form and her sweet sounding voice. Will his dove come out of hiding and join him?

Before she can give an answer to her Beloved, the Shulamite’s brothers utter a little warning to her in order to sway her decision on meeting with him. Verse fifteen is spoken in the masculine plural therefore it is most likely her brothers doing the speaking here. It was the role and duty of the brothers in the family to watch out for and even protect the virginity of their sisters until the wedding day. Many meanings have been suggested for this little proverb or song in verse fifteen:

*Catch us the foxes,
The little foxes that spoil the vines,
For our vines have tender grapes.*

Considering the context it is most likely a warning of the dangers of sexual immorality which is a common temptation to young lovers at this stage in their relationship. The vine or vineyard are often in this book an image of intimacy between the couple. Her vine or the tasting of her wine is the kisses of the mouth. The little foxes are the innocent physical excitement which if not caught or controlled can lead to the spoiling of the vineyard. After all, in the spring time of love the uncontrolled sexual desires can damage vulnerable grapes. In other words, “*flee youthful lusts*” (2 Timothy 2:22) or “*flee sexual immorality*” (1 Cor. 6:18). So the brothers are saying in effect, “Sister, use self-control here, we know what will happen to your virginity if you allow your ‘little foxes’ or innocent, youthful desires to run out of control.”

The Shulamite in response to her brothers said, “*My beloved is mine, and I am his. He feeds his flock among the lilies*” (2:16). This is a defense of her relationship with her beloved. Her brothers need to know that the two of them are bound to each other. They are “soul mates.” He is her Shepherd and she is the lilies in this relationship. They are more than just a couple who are in love with each other. They have had and continue to enjoy the physical love between them. His kisses have been feeding upon her lips. This is not a reference to fornication. It is an admission that her brothers are right in that she and her lover are physically attracted and somewhat involved with each other.

The girl turns to her Beloved and gives him instructions. He is to turn and go away. He is to do this until the morning when *"he day breaks and the shadows flee away"* (2:17a). He is to leave the same way he came *"like a gazelle or a young stag"* (2:17b). She does not want him to leave without joy but to depart with the same emotion and eagerness by which he came, because they have an important date at her home the next morning.

The phrase *"upon the mountains of Bether"* has given rise to various interpretations. Some see this as a fictitious range of mountains between the fictitious village of Shulum. A literal translation of the term "Bether" would be "a place of separation." "Many scholars suggest that the root connotes cleavage and that she is inviting him to play with her breasts" (Longman 126). However, this is highly unlikely. The breasts of a woman are considered by Proverbs to be the objects of sexual love within a marriage relationship. Solomon warns a man to turn away from the seductions of the prostitute and focus his attentions on the wife of his youth. *"As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love"* (Proverbs 5:19). Therefore such an interpretation of "Bether" would have them committing fornication. Instead, the mountains of separation are metaphorically between the Beloved and the Shulamite. They are cut off from each other until the time of their Betrothal.

As it used to be socially unacceptable for the groom to see his bride just before the day of the wedding or before the wedding ceremony, so it is best for them not to have a little tryst in the countryside the day before their Betrothal ceremony which will take place the next day at her mother's house. She is telling him, "you have the right eager spirit in coming, this is the right place, but this is not the right time. Please go in the same spirit as you have come. But please return to me in the morning.

Later that same day she goes to bed but cannot sleep. He came that morning to call upon her to awake. Now she cannot sleep. In the words of the Shulamite comes a poem of longing and fear of separation (3:1-5). He came that morning to end their separation, she sent him away to continue their separation for one more day, and now she longs to end it. She has sent her beloved away till morning. She is tossing and turning in a sleepless distress. Her longing to be with her Beloved is the reason for her insomnia. She is not expecting him to be in her bed. After all, he was sent away till they are to have their appointment with her family in the morning. And she has laid in bed awaiting the time of their reunion most of the night until the early hours of the morning.

Yearning for her lover in her drowsy dreams leads her to a determined plan of action. She gets up out of bed and goes about finding her Beloved. He may already be on his way. Her search comes up empty. She cannot find him. She may have insecurities arising in her due to the fear that sending him away yesterday means he may not choose to come again today. Although she cannot find her Beloved, the city watchmen find her. They no doubt are concerned to find her out in the dark hours of the early morning. They may have confronted her. So she asks, *"have you seen the one I love?"* Perhaps they knew him or did not. Nonetheless, she is desperate and will turn to anyone for help. Suddenly as she turns away from the watchmen, she immediately runs into her Love.

Once her Beloved is found the Shulamite will not let him go. He is to be brought home to her mother's house. The flow of this poem has taken us from the Shulamite's sleepless longing upon her bed for her man, to the city streets urgently and fearfully searching for her man, to finally bring her man home to her mother's house. However, not just the house but "into the chamber of her who conceived me." This may be the mother's bedroom. Where she springs in with her man in the morning hours to present him to her mother. Mothers had a great deal of responsibility in planning for their daughter's betrothal and then marriage. Some take the phrase to mean "her mother's womb" and therefore a reference to sex. This is very unlikely. Sex with her man inside the mother's house before marriage would be found out. Instead her motive is to bring him to the mother so that the Betrothal ceremony can begin as soon as possible.

As a side note this event is comparable to the events of chapter 5:2-8. The repetition of this after they are married is another argument for the unity of this book.

As the last section of poems ended in a warning to the daughters of Jerusalem, so they are again charged by the Shulamite. Again the charge is *"by the gazelles or by the does of the field"* (3:5). This may be in reference to the fact that even animals do not force mating upon each other. They had

instincts and proper time before they select a mate. Trying for force true love as God has intended to exist between a man and a woman leads to problems. To stir up love can cloud one's judgment and lead to uncontrolled passions. Far too many young women have become involved with a man in search for this romantic love, yet "had never experienced true love from anyone, thought they deeply desired love. Over and over they reported how they had become sexually involved with someone because they thought such intimacy would bring the commitment and love they so desperately wanted" (Curtis 131). The advice today might be worded, "do not date till you are ready to find the right mate" or "do not force marriage until you ready to push a baby carriage" or "be patient to marry the man you would want to be your children's father."

Questions:

1. How is the ancient practice of betrothal different from the modern idea of engagement to be married? What are the pros and cons of betrothal?
2. What is an inclusio? Where are they found in our text?
3. How does she describe the Beloved's arrival?
4. What are the various barriers mentioned in this text which stand between the lovers?
5. What does spring time often illustrate in love poetry?
6. What motives does the Beloved present to her for running away for the day into the countryside?
7. How is she like a dove in this context?
8. How does one know verse fifteen is not being spoken by the Shulamite?

9. What is the warning being given by the brothers to the Shulamite in verse fifteen?
10. What is the meaning of the Shulamite's response to her brother's warning?
11. How, why, and for what reason does the Shulamite send the Beloved away?
12. Why does the Shulamite suffer a sleepless night? What does she do about it?
13. What does she do when she finds her love? Why?
14. What warning does she give to the daughters of Jerusalem? Why?

Application & Discussion:

1. How needful, who should, and when should they get involved in warning a young couple in love concerning the dangers of “*youthful lusts*”?
2. Is it important for the family to be involved in planning and guiding their children during the dating, engagement, wedding, and marriage process? Explain.

Homework: Encourage and warn someone this week to “*flee youthful lusts*” or “*flee fornication.*”