

SPECIAL EDITION **Willis Barnstone** **Song of Songs**

SONG OF SONGS SHIR HASHIRIM הַשִּׁירִים שִׁיר [1]

Song of Songs or The Songs of Solomon is the fifth book in the Ketuv הַשִּׁירִים שִׁיר. The book takes its name from the opening phrase, “The song of songs, which is of Solomon.” Songs has been traditionally attributed to Solomon in the tenth century BCE, but again the attribution to a king is to secure a place in the canon. Its date of composition may be between the fourth and the second centuries BCE. Its sources are frequently thought to derive from much earlier Egyptian love poetry from the thirteenth to eleventh centuries, skillfully translated by Ezra Pound and others. The Egyptian erotic love songs are not sacred, nor is Song of Songs.

Song of Songs celebrates sexual love and is the only extended love sequence in the Bible. So to keep this most beautiful and dramatic sequence safely in Scripture, it was held to be an allegory of the relation between God and his people. In the Christian Bible it is an allegory of Christ the groom and his church. The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross read the Song of Songs as a physical union of the soul with God, represented as the Shulamite princess with her lover prince. Song is a broken drama in stunning scenes of pastoral beauty and sensuality.

The Song of Songs is sometimes called a wedding idyll. It is actually a fragmentary collage of dramatic events of a singular woman and her princely lover in sublimely erotic lyrical moments. Its setting is Israel with a view to the beauty of Lebanese gardens beyond the mountains. The characters speak in plain, lucid defiance of their elders’ authority in an escape to sexual freedom and humanity. Love is better than wine and triumphs over death. The woman, the hero in one of the Songs, is beaten by the city watchmen as she looks for her love who has abandoned her; then she welcomes him back to her so they can spend the night together and in the morning wander unknown villages. It ends as it begins, with the affirmation that love is better than all else, better than wine, stronger than death. The Song of Songs is the love poem of love poems. Poets of the West as well as Sufi Persian poets have looked to it as their model. The three major poems of St. John of the Cross retell the Canticles.

Your Love Is Better than Wine

Kiss me with kisses from your mouth.

Your love is better than wine.

Your ointments have a good fragrance!

Your name is spread far like fragrance of oils

poured on the body

and so young women love you.

Take my hand.

We will run together.

You the king took me to his rooms.

I am happy, happy in you,

and say your love at night is better than wine.

It is right for me to love you. 1.1-4.

I Am Black

I am black yet beautiful,

O daughters of Yerushalayim,

as black as

as lovely as Solomon's tapestries.

Don't look at me with scorn

because I am black,

because the sun has scorched me.

My mother's sons hated me.

They made me guardian of the vineyards

yet I failed to guard my own vineyard.

You whom my soul loves, tell me

where you graze your sheep,
where they lie down at noon.
Why should I wander veiled
among the flocks of your companions? 1.5-7

Like My Glowing Mare

O beautiful one, if you don't know,
go and follow the flocks
and feed your lambs and small goats
by the shepherd's tents.
I compare you to my mare
glowing among the Pharaoh's stallions.
Your cheeks tease me with ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels.
I will make gold loops for your ears,
with studs of silver. 1.8-11

Between My Breasts

While the king lay on his couch
the spikenard aroma of my body filled the air.
My love is a sachet of myrrh

as he lies at night between my breasts.

My love is a cluster of henna blossoms

in the desert orchard of En-Gedi. 1.12-13

King and Woman

You are beautiful, my darling.

You are beautiful,

your eyes are doves.

You are beautiful, my lover.

You are beautiful,

our couch is the fresh grass,

the beams of our house are cedar,

our raft 1.14-16

Rose

I am a rose of Sharon,

a lily of 2.1

Lily

A lily among thorns

is my love 2.2

In the Rooms

An apple tree among trees

is my love

among young men.

I delight in sitting

under his shadow

and lie before him,

his fruit sweet to my tongue.

He leads me to his drinking room

and his banner over me is love.

Feed me your raisins,

comfort me with apples,

for I am sick with love.

His left hand is under my head,

his right hand caresses my body.

O daughters of Yerushalayim,

swear by the gazelles

and deer of the fields

not to wake us until

after we have merged in love. 2.3-7

My Lover's Voice

My lover's voice is coming.

Hear him! O hear

him bounding on mountains,

skipping over hills.

My lover is is a gazelle

or a young stag.

He is standing

behind our wall,

gazing in through the window.

peering through the lattice.

My lover answers

and speaks to me:

“Rise, my love, my beauty.

and come away.

Winter is past,

the rains are over and gone.

Wild flowers appear on the earth,

the time of the nightingale has come.

The voice of the turtledove

is heard in our land.

The fig tree is grown heavy

with small green figs,

and grapevines are in bloom,
pouring out fragrance.

Rise, my love, my beauty,
and come away.

My dove, you are in the crevices of the rock,
in the recess of the cliffs.

Let me look at your face,
let me hear you.

Your voice is delicious
and your face is clear beauty." 8-14.

The Foxes

We must catch the foxes,
the little foxes,
who are ravaging the grapes.

Our vineyards are in blossom. 8.15

In Lilies and Mountains

My lover is mine

and I am his.

He feeds his sheep

among the lilies.

Till day cools

and shadows tumble,

come stay with me.

Be a gazelle

or a young stag bounding

on jagged mountains. 2.16-17

In My Bed at Night

In my bed at night

I look for him whom my soul loves

and cannot find him.

I'll rise and wander in the city
though streets and markets,
looking for him whom my soul loves.

Yet I cannot find him.

The watchmen who go about the city
find me. I ask them:

Have you seen him whom my soul loves?
I barely leave them
when I find him whom my soul loves.

I seize him. I won't let him go
until I've taken him to my mother's room
and he is lying in the bed

of her who conceived me.

O daughters of Yerushalayim,
swear by the gazelles

and the deer of the hills

not to wake us

till after we have merged in love. 3.1-11

Shlomo Is Coming

Who is coming up from the sand and wilderness

like a pillar of smoke

from burning myrrh and frankincense

and all the powders of the merchant?

Look. It is the carriage of Shomo

and around it sixty brave men,

sixty brave men from Yisrael.

They carry swords and are expert in war.

Swords are strapped to their thighs

against the terror in the night.

King Shlomo made a carriage

from the cedars of Lebanon.

He made the posts of silver, its back

of gold, its seat purple

and the interior inlaid with love

by the daughters of Yerushalayim.

Come outdoors, daughters of Zion. Gaze
on the king with the crown
his mother gave him on his wedding day,
the day his 3.6-11.

Your Lips Are a Thread of Scarlet

You are beauty, my love,
you are the beautiful.
Your eyes are doves

behind your veil.

Your hair is a flock
of black goats weaving

down the hills of Gilead.

Your teeth are flocks
of lambs newly shorn

fresh from the watering
trough, perfect,
with no flaw in them.

Your lips are a thread
of scarlet and your voice
is a cloth of softness.

Your cheeks are halves
of a fresh pomegranate
cut open and gleaming

behind your veil.

Your neck is a straight
tower of David

built with turrets
and a thousand shields,
armor of brave men.

Your breasts are twin
fawns, twins of a gazelle
feeding 4.1-5

Before Twilight

Till afternoon is cold

and its shadows blur,

I will climb over

the

and wander

of spices. 4.6.

Perfection

In you is beauty,

my lover, with

no stain in you. 4.7

Come Away with Me

Come away with me. Let us leave Lebanon.

Let us leave the hills, my bride.

Come down from the peak of Amana.

Let us descend the peaks of Senir

and Hermon. We will abandon

the dens of lions

and walk 4.8

Love Better than Wine

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride,
you ravished my heart with one of your eyes,
with a single jewel from your necklace.

How tasty are your breasts, my sister, my bride!

How much better is your love than wine.

Your ointments are richer than any spice,
your lips drip like the honeycomb, my bride,
and under your tongue as pure honey and milk.

Your c 4.9-11

My Sister, My Bride

My sister, my bride, you are a garden
enclosed and hidden,
a spring locked up, a fountain sealed.

Your cheeks
are an orchard of pomegranates
with rare fruits,

henna, spikenard, spikenard and saffron.

Calamus and cinnamon

and every tree bearing incense.

From you drip aloes

and all choice spices.

You are a fountain

of gardens, a well

of living waters

and bubbling 4.12-15

Winds

Awake north wind and come south wind!

Blow on my garden, let the spices

be tossed about. Let my love come into

his garden and eat his precious fruits. 4.16

Gardener

My sister and bride, I enter the orchard and gather

wild herbs and condiments.

I eat my honeycomb with honey, drink wine with milk.

Friends and lovers, imitate me. Drink deep. 5.1

My Hair Is Wet with Drops of Night

I'm sleeping but my heart is awake.

My lover's voice is knocking:

"Open, let me in, my sister and darling,
my dove and perfect one.

My head is soaked with dew,

my hair is wet with drops of night."

I have taken off my garments.

How can I put them on?

I have washed my feet.

How can I dirty them now?

My lover's hand shows at the door

and in me I burn for him.

I rise to open to my love,

my hands drip with liquid myrrh,

my fingers drench perfume

over the handle of the bolt.

I open to my love

but my love has turned and gone.

He has vanished.

When he spoke my soul vanished.

I look for him and can't find him.

I call. He doesn't answer.

The watchmen who go about the city find me.

They beat me, they wound me,

they strip me of my mantle,

those guardians of the walls!

I beg you, daughters of Yerushalayim,

if you find my love

you will say that I am sick with love. 5.2-8

Her Companions

How is your friend the prince of lovers,

O beautiful woman?

How is your friend the prince of lovers?

Why do you swear us to an oath? 5.9

Doves by the Small Rivers

My love is radiant. He is ruddy,
one in ten thousand.

His head is fine gold,
his locks are palm leaves in the wind,
black like ravens.

His eyes are doves by the small rivers.

They are bathed in milk
and deeply set.

His cheeks are a bed of spices
blowing in fragrance.

His lips are lilies,
moist with tastes.

His arms are rounded gold
inset with beryl.

His belly is luminous ivory
starred with sapphires.

His legs are pillars of marble
set on sockets of fine gold.

His appearance is the tall city of Lebanon,

excellent with cedars.

His mouth is luscious, made of desire,

all of him is pleasant.

This is my lover and friend,

O daughters 5.10-16

Companions

Beautiful woman,

where has your lover gone?

He has disappeared.

We will help you find him. 6.1

Lilies

My love has gone down to his garden

to the beds of spices,

to feed his sheep in the orchards,

to gather lilies.

I am my lover's and my lover is mine.

He feeds his flock among the lilies. 6.2-3

A City with Banners

Your beauty is Tirzah
or even Yerushalayim
and frightening as an army with banners.

Look away from me.

You make me tremble.

Your hair is a flock of black goats weaving

down the hills of Gilead.

Your teeth are flocks of lambs newly shorn

fresh from the watering trough, perfect,

with no flaw in them.

Your cheeks are halves of a fresh pomegranate

cut open and gleaming behind your veil.

Sixty queens and eighty concubines

and countless virgins are nothing like my dove,

undefiled love and unique choice

of her mother who bore her.

Women look at her and call her happy.

Concubines and queens praise her.

Who is she? Her gaze is daybreak,
her beauty the moon,
and she is the transparent sun,

yet fr 6.4-10

Walking Around

I go down to the orchard of nut trees
to see the green plants of the valley,
to see if the vines are in bud,
whether the pomegranates have blossomed.

Unaware, my soul leads me
into a chariot beside my prince. 6.11-12

Dancer

Come back, come back, O Shulamite,
and we shall look at you.

Will you look at the Shulamite

as at a dancer before two armies? 6.13

Your Navel a Moon-Hollow Goblet

Your sandaled feet define grace,

O queenly woman!

Your round thighs are jewels,

handiwork of a cunning craftsman,

your navel a moon-hollow goblet

filled with mixed wines.

Your belly is a bed of wheat

laced with daffodils.

Your two breasts are two fawns,

twins of a gazelle.

Your neck is a tower of ivory,

your eyes are pools in Heshbon

by the gate of Beth-rabbim.

Your nose is a tower of Lebanon

facing the city of Damascus.

Your head is like Carmel,

and purple is your flowing hair

in which a king lies captive.

How calm and beautiful you are,

my happy love.

You are stately like a palm tree

and your breasts a cluster of grapes. 7.1-7

I Will Climb

I will climb the palm tree

and take hold of the bough.

Let your breasts be the grapes of the vine,

your breath the taste of apples.

For the roof of your mouth

the choice wine for my love

goes down smoothly and makes

your lips tremble in sleep. 7.8-9

Let Us Go Out into the Fields

I am my lover's and he desires me.

Come, my darling,

let us go out into the fields

and spend the night in villages.

Let us wake early and go to the vineyards

and see if the vine is in blossom,

if the new grape bud is open

and the pomegranates are in bloom.

There I will give you my love.

The mandrakes will spray aroma,

and over our door will be precious fruits,
all the old and new
that I have saved for you, my darling. 7,11-13

If You Were My Brother

Oh, if you were my brother
who sucked my mother's breasts!
When I find you in the streets
or country, unashamed I will kiss you
and no one will despise me.

I'll take you to my mother's home
and into her room
where she conceived me
and there you'll instruct me.

I'll give you spiced wine to drink,
the juice of my pomegranates.
Your left hand lies under my head,
your right hand caress my body.

O daughters of Yerushalayim,
swear by the deer of the hills
not to wake us till after we have merged in love. 8.1-4

Companions

Who is coming out of the desert wilderness,
leaning on 8.5

Under the Apple Tree

Under the apple tree I aroused you
and you woke to me,
where your mother was in labor,
where she 8.5

A Seal on Your Heart

Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm,
for love is strong as death.

Jealousy is cruel as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

a flame of God.

Many waters cannot quench love,

rivers cannot drown it.

If a man measured love

by all the wealth of his house,

he would be utterly scorned. 8.6-7

The Brothers

We have a young sister

and she has no breasts.

What will we do for our sister

when they ask for her hand?

If she is a wall

we will build turrets of silver on her.

If she is a door

we will 8.7-9

My Towers

I am a wall

and my breasts are towers,

and in his eyes

I bring 8.10

Her Vineyard

Solomon has a vineyard at Baal-hamon.

He let out the vines to the guardians,

each bringing a thousand pieces of silver

for the good fruit.

My own vineyard is about me.

You may keep the thousand, my king,

and use two hundred to pay off the guardians.

The King Begs

You who live in the gardens,

your companions are listening for your voice.

Let me hear it too.

Come, Young Stag

Hurry, my darling!

and be like a gazelle

or a young stag

upon the mountain of spices.