

Song of Songs

Summary: *The Song opens with its superscription attributing the work to Solomon, then immediately plunges into the woman's voice — her longing for her lover's kisses, her self-conscious awareness of her dark skin, and her search for the shepherd she desires. The chapter establishes the erotic dialogue between the two lovers and introduces the Daughters of Jerusalem as a chorus. The man responds with lavish praise of her beauty, comparing her to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The woman speaks first and speaks most. In a literary culture dominated by male voices, the Song of Songs gives the opening lines — and the majority of the poem — to a woman. She is not passive; she initiates, she seeks, she demands. Her first words are an imperative: 'Let him kiss me.' The self-description in verses 5-6 ('I am dark and beautiful') is a striking act of self-assertion against social judgment. She has been made to labor in vineyards under the sun, and her brothers are angry with her, yet she refuses shame. The imagery of 'my own vineyard' (verse 6) introduces the Song's central metaphor: the vineyard as the woman's body and sexuality, which she owns and gives freely.*

Translation Friction: *The superscription 'Song of Songs which is Solomon's' (shir ha-shirim asher li-Shelomoh) is ambiguous — the lamed prefix could mean 'by Solomon,' 'for Solomon,' 'about Solomon,' or 'in the style of Solomon.' Solomonic authorship is a literary attribution, not a historical claim most scholars would affirm. The Hebrew in verse 5 reads shechorah ani ve-navah, which can be rendered 'I am dark AND beautiful' rather than the KJV's 'black BUT comely' — the conjunction ve- does not inherently carry adversative force. The choice between 'and' and 'but' is theologically significant: one affirms her darkness as beautiful, the other implies it is a flaw to be excused.*

Connections: *The vineyard metaphor recurs throughout the Song (2:15, 7:13, 8:11-12) and connects to Isaiah 5:1-7 (the vineyard as beloved) and Hosea's marriage imagery. The mare-among-chariots comparison (1:9) draws on Egyptian royal imagery — Pharaoh's chariot horses were legendary. The nard, henna, and myrrh of 1:12-14 appear in the spice catalogues of Proverbs 7:17 and the trade lists of Ezekiel 27, grounding the Song's sensuality in the real luxury economy of the ancient Near East.*

¹The finest song,
which is Solomon's.

²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your lovemaking is better than wine.

³Your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is perfume poured out —
no wonder the young women love you!

⁴Draw me after you — let us run!
The king has brought me into his chambers.
We will rejoice and delight in you,
we will savor your lovemaking more than wine.
Rightly do they love you!

⁵I am dark and beautiful,
O Daughters of Jerusalem —
dark as the tents of Kedar,
lovely as the curtains of Solomon.

⁶Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because the sun has gazed on me.
My mother's sons were angry with me —
they made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not tended.

⁷Tell me, you whom my whole being loves —
where do you graze your flock?
Where do you rest them at noon?
Why should I be like a veiled woman
wandering among your companions' flocks?

⁸If you do not know, O most beautiful among women,
go out and follow the tracks of the flock,
and graze your young goats
beside the shepherds' tents.

⁹To a mare among Pharaoh's chariot stallions
I compare you, my darling.

¹⁰Your cheeks are lovely between the pendants,
your neck with strings of beads.

¹¹We will make you ornaments of gold
studded with silver.

¹²While the king reclines at his table,
my nard gives off its fragrance.

¹³A sachet of myrrh is my beloved to me —
he lodges between my breasts all night.

¹⁴A cluster of henna blossoms is my beloved to me,
in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

¹⁵How beautiful you are, my darling!
How beautiful you are!
Your eyes are doves.

¹⁶How handsome you are, my beloved!
How delightful!
Our bed is lush and green.

¹⁷The beams of our house are cedars,
our rafters are cypresses.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Shir ha-shirim is a Hebrew superlative construction — 'the greatest of songs,' 'the ultimate song,' comparable to 'King of Kings' or 'Holy of Holies.' The attribution to Solomon likely reflects the tradition associating him with 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32) rather than a strict authorial claim.
2. The woman's voice opens the poem with a bold imperative — she does not wait to be pursued but declares her desire. The shift from third person ('let him') to second person ('your') within the same verse is characteristic of the Song's fluid, emotionally charged speech.
2. Dodim (plural of dod) means 'lovmaking, caresses, acts of love' — not abstract love but physical expressions of intimacy. The comparison to wine is sensory: his touch intoxicates more than the finest vintage.
3. The wordplay between shemen ('oil, perfume') and shem ('name') is deliberate and untranslatable — his name and his scent are fused. Identity and sensory presence merge. The alamot ('young women, maidens') confirm the man's desirability: the woman's desire is not private delusion but publicly recognizable attraction.
4. The shift from singular ('draw me') to plural ('let us run, we will rejoice') likely represents the chorus of the Daughters of Jerusalem joining the woman's voice. The king's chambers (chadarav) suggest royal intimacy — the innermost, most private rooms of the palace.
4. Mesharim is rendered 'rightly' rather than KJV's 'the upright' — the word functions adverbially here, meaning 'with good reason, justly, fittingly.' Their love for him is well-founded.
5. The conjunction ve- is rendered 'and' rather than the KJV's 'but.' The Hebrew does not inherently contrast darkness with beauty — it can and does assert both simultaneously. Rendering it 'but' imports an assumption that dark skin is a deficiency to be overcome, which the Hebrew does not require.
5. Kedar refers to a nomadic Arabian tribe descended from Ishmael (Genesis 25:13) known for their black goat-hair tents. The comparison is striking: she is dark like desert tents AND beautiful like royal curtains. Both images coexist without tension.
6. Shecharochet is an intensified form — 'very dark, deeply tanned.' The sun has shezafatni ('scorched me, burned me'). Her darkness is the result of forced outdoor labor, not innate complexion — though the Song never treats this as diminishing her beauty.
6. The vineyard metaphor operates on two levels simultaneously. On the surface: her brothers forced her to tend their vineyards, leaving no time for her own. Below the surface: 'my own vineyard' (karmi shelli) is her body, her sexuality, her self — which she has not been free to cultivate or enjoy. This double meaning recurs at the Song's climax in 8:12.
7. She-ahavah nafshi ('whom my soul loves') is the Song's signature phrase for the woman's desire (repeated in 3:1-4). Nefesh here is not 'soul' in the Greek dualistic sense but the whole self — body, desire, identity, life-force.
7. The word ke-oteyah is debated: it may mean 'like one who veils herself' (suggesting a prostitute, cf. Genesis 38:14-15) or 'like one who wanders' (from a root meaning to go astray). Either reading carries anxiety — she does not want to be mistaken for someone she is not.
8. The speaker here is likely the chorus (Daughters of Jerusalem) or the man himself. The address ha-yafah ba-nashim ('the beautiful one among women') is a superlative — she is the most beautiful of all women. The advice is practical and teasing: follow the sheep tracks and you will find your shepherd.
9. The Hebrew is susati ('my mare') — singular and feminine, not the KJV's 'company of horses.' The image is provocative and deliberately erotic: a mare released among chariot stallions would drive them wild, breaking formation. He is saying: you have the power to undo all composure.

9. Ra'yati ('my darling, my companion, my friend') is the man's signature term for the woman — it implies both romantic love and genuine companionship.
10. Torim ('rows, strings') likely refers to ornamental pendants or earrings framing her face. Charuzim ('beads, strung ornaments') describes jewels strung on a cord around her neck. The man notices how adornment enhances her natural beauty — the jewels do not create beauty but frame what is already there.
11. The plural 'we will make' suggests the man and his companions, or a royal 'we.' The gold-and-silver adornment is a love-gift, crafted specifically for her. The combination of gold with silver nequddot ('studs, dots, speckles') describes fine metalwork — luxury jewelry as an expression of devotion.
12. Bi-mesibbo ('at his circle, at his reclining') describes the king reclining at a banquet — the posture of feasting. The woman's nard (an expensive aromatic imported from India) releases its scent in his presence. The image is sensual: her perfume fills the room, reaching him, drawing him. Her fragrance is her desire made atmospheric.
13. The imagery is simultaneously literal and metaphorical. Women wore small sachets of myrrh between their breasts as perfume. But she says her beloved IS the sachet — his presence against her body is the fragrance she carries. The verb yalin ('lodges, spends the night') is unmistakably sexual: he lies between her breasts through the night.
13. Dodi ('my beloved') is the woman's primary term for the man, appearing over 25 times in the Song. It is built on the same root as dodim ('lovmaking') in verse 2.
14. Kofer is henna (*Lawsonia inermis*), not the KJV's 'camphire.' Henna produces intensely fragrant flower clusters and was used to dye skin, hair, and nails. Ein Gedi is the lush oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea — a tropical garden in the midst of desert. Her beloved is an oasis of fragrance and beauty in a barren world.
15. The double hinnakh yafah ('behold you are beautiful') is emphatic repetition — he cannot say it once and stop. Her eyes are yonim ('doves'), not 'dove-like' — they ARE doves. The metaphor is full identification. Doves suggest gentleness, purity, and soft iridescence.
16. She mirrors his praise back — hinnekha yafeh ('behold you are beautiful/handsome'). Then she turns to their shared space: arsenu ra'ananah ('our bed is green/verdant'). The eres ('bed, couch') is outdoors — a bed of living vegetation, the earth itself as their marriage bed. The whole landscape participates in their love.
17. The lovers' 'house' is the forest itself — cedar trunks are their beams, cypress branches their rafters. The construction metaphor transforms wilderness into a bridal chamber. Arazim ('cedars') were the premier building material of the ancient Near East, associated with temples and palaces. Their love deserves a palace, and nature provides one.

2

Summary: *Chapter 2 unfolds the spring of love. The woman identifies herself as a wildflower and the man as an apple tree offering shade and sweetness. She describes being brought to the banquet hall under the banner of love, then pleads for sustenance because she is 'sick with love.' The famous adjuration to the Daughters of Jerusalem ('Do not stir up love until it pleases') appears for the first time. The chapter's second half is the man's springtime invitation — 'Rise up, my darling, and come away' — one of the most celebrated love lyrics in world literature. The chapter closes with the woman's assertion of mutual possession and a brief scene of playful pursuit among the foxes and lilies.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Verse 7 contains the Song's refrain — the adjuration by gazelles and wild does not to awaken love before its time. This oath is extraordinary: it swears not by God but by animals, specifically by the grace and wildness of the natural world. Love is treated as a force with its own timing, its own season, which cannot be forced or manufactured. The springtime passage (2:10-13) is the most sustained nature poetry in the Hebrew Bible, cataloguing the arrival of spring through blossoms, birdsong, fig ripening, and grapevine fragrance. The lovers' world is Eden restored — the garden before the fall, where desire and innocence coexist.*

Translation Friction: *The adjuration formula 'by the gazelles and by the does of the field' (bi-tseva'ot o be-aylot ha-sadeh) may contain a hidden divine name: tseva'ot echoes YHWH Tseva'ot ('LORD of Hosts'), and aylot echoes El ('God'). If so, the oath avoids speaking God's name directly while invoking it through animal doubles — a remarkable theological maneuver that keeps God present in the poem without making the poem 'about' God. The foxes in verse 15 ('Catch us the foxes, the little foxes') have generated endless allegorical interpretation, but the plain sense is likely a love-game: small threats to the vineyard (their love) must be chased away together.*

Connections: The spring catalogue in 2:11-13 reverses the curse language of Genesis 3, where the ground produces thorns — here the earth produces flowers, fruit, and fragrance. The dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14) resonates with Jeremiah 48:28 and Obadiah 1:3. The gazelle imagery connects to 2 Samuel 2:18 (Asahel was 'swift as a gazelle') and to the broader ancient Near Eastern tradition of comparing lovers to swift, graceful animals.

¹I am a wildflower of the Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.

²Like a lily among thorns,
so is my darling among the young women.

³Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
so is my beloved among the young men.
In his shade I have delighted to sit,
and his fruit is sweet to my mouth.

⁴He has brought me to the house of wine,
and his banner over me is love.

⁵Sustain me with raisin cakes,
revive me with apples —
for I am sick with love!

⁶His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand embraces me —

⁷I adjure you, Daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles and the wild does —
do not stir up, do not awaken love
until it desires to arise!

⁸The voice of my beloved!
Look — here he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills!

⁹My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look — there he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice!

¹⁰My beloved spoke and said to me:
'Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one — come away!'

¹¹For look — the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

¹²The blossoms have appeared in the land,
the season of singing has arrived,

and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.

¹³The fig tree ripens its early fruit,
and the grapevines in blossom give off fragrance.
Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one — come away!

¹⁴My dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places of the cliff —
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet
and your face is lovely.

¹⁵Catch for us the foxes —
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards —
for our vineyards are in blossom!

¹⁶My beloved is mine and I am his —
he who grazes among the lilies.

¹⁷Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved —
be like a gazelle
or a young stag
on the cleft mountains.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Chavatslet is not a rose — the identity is uncertain, but likely a crocus, narcissus, or meadow saffron. We render it 'wildflower' to preserve the humility of the self-description without committing to a specific botanical identification. She calls herself common, and he will immediately contradict her.
2. He takes her modest self-description and transforms it: she may be a lily, but she is a lily among thorns. Every other woman is a thorn by comparison. His praise elevates her without contradicting her — she is indeed a lily, but the only lily.
3. She matches his compliment and raises it: he is a fruit tree among barren forest trees — he alone provides shade and sweetness. Sitting in his shade and tasting his fruit is erotic metaphor: his body shelters her and his love is delicious on her tongue.
3. Chimadeti ('I delighted, I desired') shares a root with chemdah ('precious thing, desire'). Her sitting is not passive but eagerly chosen.
4. Bet ha-yayin ('house of wine') is literally a place where wine is consumed — a banquet hall. The diglo ('his banner, his standard') is a military term: armies marched under banners to identify their allegiance. His banner, raised over her, declares that she belongs to love — she is claimed, protected, and publicly identified as his.
5. Ashishot are raisin cakes — dried fruit pressed into cakes, a delicacy and energy food (2 Samuel 6:19, Hosea 3:1). She is faint, overwhelmed, physically weakened by the intensity of desire. Cholat ahavah ('sick with love, lovesick') describes love as a physical condition — the body undone by longing.
6. The posture described is that of lovemaking — he cradles her head with one hand and holds her body with the other. Two bodies intertwined, one supporting and enclosing the other. This exact verse recurs in 8:3, framing the entire Song with this image of physical union.
7. The oath by gazelles and does rather than by God is unique in the Hebrew Bible. The animals may serve as coded references to divine names (tseva'ot echoing YHWH Tseva'ot, aylot echoing El), allowing the oath to carry divine weight without pronouncing sacred names.

7. The verb *techpats* ('it desires, it pleases') gives love its own agency — love awakens when love is ready, not when humans decide.
8. *Qol dodi* ('the voice of my beloved!') is an exclamation of recognition — she hears him before she sees him. The verbs *medalleg* ('leaping') and *meqappets* ('bounding, springing') describe an exuberant, almost superhuman approach. He does not walk — he leaps mountains.
9. The comparison to a *tsevi* ('gazelle') and *ofer ha-ayalim* ('young stag') emphasizes speed, grace, and wild beauty. Then the scene shifts: he has arrived at her house and stands behind the wall, looking in. The verbs *mashgiach* ('gazing') and *metsits* ('peering') create an electric tension — he wants to see her, he searches for her through every opening.
10. *Qumi lakh* ('arise, go for yourself') echoes the *lekh lekha* ('go for yourself') spoken to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 — a call to leave the familiar and journey into promise. His invitation is not merely romantic but transformative.
11. *Ha-setav* ('the winter') refers to the cold, rainy season in Palestine (roughly November through March). *Chalaf halakh lo* ('has passed, has gone away') uses two verbs of departure for emphasis — winter didn't merely end, it LEFT. The world is opening up.
12. *Nitsanim* ('blossoms, buds') signals spring's first visual evidence. *Et ha-zamir* is ambiguous: *zamir* can mean 'singing' or 'pruning' — both happen in spring. The *tor* ('turtledove') is a migratory bird whose return to Palestine in April marks the definitive arrival of spring.
13. *Chanetah paggeha* ('ripens its early figs') — the *pagim* are the small, hard early figs that appear before the main crop. The grapevines are in *semadar* ('blossom') — the tiny flowers that precede the grapes, producing an intensely sweet fragrance. He repeats his invitation, now grounded in sensory evidence: the world is ripe, fragrant, ready.
14. He calls her *yonati* ('my dove') — doves nest in rocky crevices, shy and hidden. She is concealed and he coaxes her out: let me see, let me hear. The double request (sight and sound) matches the double praise: your voice is *arev* ('sweet') and your face is *naveh* ('lovely'). He wants the whole person — visible and audible.
15. This playful verse may be a snatch of a folk song or a love-game between the two. The *shu'alim qetannim* ('little foxes') are small predators that damage vineyards by digging at roots and eating young shoots. The *keramim* ('vineyards') carry the Song's usual double meaning — the literal vineyard and the lovers' relationship.
16. *Dodi li va-ani lo* ('my beloved is mine and I am his') is the Song's most concise statement of mutual belonging. The possessive is symmetrical — neither owns the other more. He grazes *ba-shoshannim* ('among the lilies'), which is both pastoral and erotic. This formula recurs in 6:3 and 7:11, each time with a subtle shift in emphasis.
17. *Ad she-yafuach ha-yom* ('until the day breathes') is a poetic description of dawn — the moment when the first breeze stirs and darkness retreats. She invites him to be like a gazelle on the *hare vater* ('mountains of Bether/cleavage'). *Beter* means 'cutting, cleavage, division' — these may be literal mountains or a veiled reference to her own body's contours.

3

Summary: *Chapter 3 divides into two distinct movements. In verses 1-5, the woman recounts a nighttime search through the city streets for her beloved — she seeks him in bed, then rises to search the streets, encounters the watchmen, and finally finds him and brings him to her mother's house. In verses 6-11, an unnamed voice describes a royal procession: Solomon's litter ascending from the wilderness, surrounded by sixty warriors, elaborately constructed with silver, gold, and purple, crowned by his mother on his wedding day.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The night-search sequence (verses 1-5) is one of the Song's most psychologically intense passages. The woman lies in bed, desire keeping her awake, and the one her nefesh loves is absent. She decides to search — an extraordinary act for an unmarried woman alone in the city at night. The watchmen who find her are ambiguous figures — protectors or threats? When she finds him, she seizes him (*achaztivu* — the verb is strong, even violent) and refuses to let go until she has brought him to her mother's chamber. The mother's house, not the father's, is the space of female sexuality and agency in the Song.*

Translation Friction: *The relationship between the night-search narrative and the Solomon procession is the chapter's central puzzle. Are verses 6-11 the woman's fantasy of a royal wedding? A flashback? A separate poem? The shift in tone, speaker, and imagery is so abrupt that many scholars treat them as originally independent compositions. The 'bed of Solomon' in verse 7 may connect to the woman's bed in verse 1, suggesting the search ends in royal consummation — or it may be an entirely different scene.*

Connections: The night-search motif connects to 5:2-8, where a nearly identical sequence occurs with a darker outcome — the watchmen beat her. The mother's house (bet immi) echoes 8:2, where the woman again brings her beloved to her mother's house. Solomon's procession with its sixty warriors echoes the sixty queens of 6:8. The wedding crown placed by his mother connects to the broader biblical motif of mothers blessing sons at pivotal moments.

¹On my bed through the nights
I sought the one my soul loves.
I sought him but did not find him.

²Let me rise now and go about the city,
through the streets and the squares.
Let me seek the one my soul loves.
I sought him but did not find him.

³The watchmen found me,
those who go about the city.
"Have you seen the one my soul loves?"

⁴Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my soul loves.
I seized him and would not let him go
until I had brought him
to my mother's house,
to the chamber of the one who conceived me.

⁵I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles and the does of the field —
do not stir up or awaken love
until it pleases.

⁶Who is this coming up from the wilderness
like columns of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
with every powder of the merchant?

⁷Look — it is Solomon's litter!
Sixty warriors surround it,
the mightiest of Israel.

⁸All of them grip swords,
trained for war —
each with his sword at his thigh
against the terrors of the night.

⁹King Solomon made himself a palanquin
from the wood of Lebanon.

¹⁰Its pillars he made of silver,
its base of gold,
its seat of purple cloth.

Its interior is inlaid with love
by the daughters of Jerusalem.

⠄Go out and gaze, O daughters of Zion,
upon King Solomon —
upon the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
on the day of the gladness of his heart.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Ba-lelot ('through the nights') is plural — this is not one night but a recurring experience. The bed (mishkavi) is the site of expected intimacy; his absence from it is the crisis. The doubled verb biqqashti ('I sought') with the negative lo metsativu ('I did not find him') establishes the seeking-and-not-finding pattern that drives the narrative.
2. Aquamah na ('let me rise now') — the na particle adds urgency. She leaves the safety of her bed and house to search the city. The shevaqim ('streets') and rechovot ('broad places, squares') are public spaces — for an unaccompanied woman at night, this is a transgressive and dangerous act.
3. Ha-shomrim ha-sovevim ba-ir ('the watchmen who go about the city') are the night patrol. That they 'found' her reverses the pattern: she has been seeking without finding, and now she is the one found. Her question gives no name, no description — she assumes her desire is self-evident.
4. Achaztivu ve-lo arpenu ('I seized him and would not let him go') — achaz is strong, even aggressive. She does not simply find him — she grabs him and refuses to release him. She is the active agent; he is the one seized.
4. Bet immi ('my mother's house') and cheder horati ('the chamber of the one who conceived me') specify the destination: not the father's house but the mother's — the matrilineal space of female sexuality. Bringing him there carries unmistakable sexual implication.
5. The second occurrence of the adjuration refrain (identical to 2:7). It marks the close of the night-search narrative and the transition to the Solomon procession. After the intensity of seeking and seizing, the adjuration counsels patience: do not force love's timing.
6. Mi zot ('who is this?') signals awe at an approaching spectacle. Something ascends (olah) from the midbar ('wilderness'). The pillars of smoke (timrot ashan) may be incense or dust clouds. The fragrance of myrrh and frankincense combined with every merchant's powder creates olfactory overwhelm — this arrival is announced by scent before sight.
7. Mittato shel Shelomoh ('his litter/bed, which is Solomon's') — mittah can mean 'bed' or 'portable couch/litter.' In processional context it is a palanquin. The sixty gibborim ('warriors') who surround it echo David's thirty mighty men (2 Samuel 23:8-39), doubled for Solomon's greater glory.
8. These are combat-ready warriors whose swords rest on their thighs — ready to draw instantly. The threat they guard against is mi-pachad ba-lelot ('against the terror of the night'). The nighttime setting connects to the woman's night-search in verses 1-4.
9. Appiryon is a hapax legomenon — it appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. It may derive from Sanskrit paryanka ('bed, couch') via Persian, or Greek phoreion ('sedan chair'). We render it 'palanquin.' The word's foreignness suits the Song's cosmopolitan vocabulary. The Lebanon timber is the same material as the temple (1 Kings 5-6).
10. The materials ascend in value: silver pillars, gold base, purple seat (argaman — the royal purple dye extracted from murex shells). Then the climactic detail: tokho ratsuf ahavah ('its interior is inlaid with love'). The physical construction gives way to metaphor — the innermost space is not lined with material but with love itself.
11. Tse'enah ur'enah ('go out and gaze') — the famous Yiddish women's Bible commentary takes its name from this verse. The women of Jerusalem are called to see Solomon in his wedding crown (atarah) — not the royal crown of kingship but a bridal crown placed by his mother.
11. Be-yom chatunnato uve-yom simchat libbo ('on the day of his wedding and the day of the gladness of his heart') — the wedding day is when heart-joy reaches its peak. The mother who crowns him is the last figure in the chapter — maternal blessing authorizes the marriage.

4

Summary: *Song of Songs 4 contains the first wasf — a head-to-toe praise poem in which the bridegroom celebrates the bride's beauty through an elaborate sequence of pastoral and architectural metaphors. The chapter culminates in the locked garden imagery (4:12–15), where the bride is described as a private paradise of spices and flowing water, followed by the bride's invitation for the wind to carry her fragrance to her beloved.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The wasf (Arabic 'description') is a recognized literary form in ancient Near Eastern love poetry: a catalog of the beloved's features using comparisons drawn from landscape, agriculture, and architecture. What is remarkable here is the density and strangeness of the imagery to modern ears — hair like a flock of goats descending Gilead, teeth like freshly shorn ewes, temples like pomegranate halves. These are not decorations but assertions of abundance, symmetry, fertility, and worth drawn from the agrarian world the poet inhabited. The locked garden metaphor in verses 12–15 is the theological pivot of the chapter: the bride is a gan na'ul ('locked garden'), a spring sealed — language that speaks of exclusivity, of a bounty reserved for one person alone. The garden imagery anticipates and inverts Eden: where the first garden was open and then lost, this garden is closed and then freely offered.*

Translation Friction: *Modern readers must resist two temptations: allegorizing every image into a spiritual abstraction, and reducing the poem to mere eroticism. The Song operates on both registers simultaneously — it is unabashedly about human desire and delight, and the Jewish and Christian traditions have found in it a parable of divine-human love. Neither reading cancels the other. The locked garden language in particular has been weaponized in purity culture in ways that flatten its original meaning. In context, the locked garden is not about shame or restriction but about chosen exclusivity — the bride's own agency in offering what is hers to give.*

Connections: *The garden imagery connects directly to Eden (Genesis 2:8–15) and to the prophetic restoration of Israel as a watered garden (Isaiah 58:11, Jeremiah 31:12). The tower of David reference (4:4) links to military and royal imagery used throughout the Davidic literature. The spice catalog in 4:13–14 — henna, nard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, aloes — echoes the sacred anointing oil and incense ingredients of Exodus 30, placing the bride's body in the register of holy things. Lebanon appears repeatedly (4:8, 11, 15) as the epitome of majesty and fragrance.*

¹How beautiful you are, my darling!

How beautiful you are!

Your eyes are doves

behind your veil.

Your hair is like a flock of goats

streaming down Mount Gilead.

²Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes

coming up from the washing —

each one bearing twins,

none among them bereaved.

³Your lips are like a scarlet thread,

and your mouth is lovely.

Your temples behind your veil

are like the halves of a pomegranate.

⁴Your neck is like the Tower of David,

built in courses —

a thousand shields hang upon it,
all the armor of warriors.

⁵Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
grazing among the lilies.

⁶Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and the hill of frankincense.

⁷You are entirely beautiful, my darling.
There is no flaw in you.

⁸Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
come with me from Lebanon!
Descend from the summit of Amana,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards.

⁹You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride!
You have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.

¹⁰How beautiful is your lovemaking, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your lovemaking than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils
than any spice!

¹¹Your lips drip nectar, my bride —
honey and milk are under your tongue.
The scent of your garments
is like the scent of Lebanon.

¹²A locked garden is my sister, my bride —
a locked pool,
a sealed spring.

¹³Your shoots are a paradise of pomegranates
with choicest fruits,
henna with nard,

¹⁴nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon
with every frankincense tree,
myrrh and aloes
with every finest spice.

¹⁵A fountain for gardens,
a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon.

¹⁶Awake, north wind, and come, south wind!
Blow upon my garden
so its fragrances may flow out.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and eat its choicest fruits.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Ra'yati ('my darling, my companion') is the bridegroom's characteristic term for the bride. It derives from ra'ah ('to tend, to shepherd, to be a companion') and carries overtones of intimacy, care, and chosen partnership — not merely romantic attraction but covenantal companionship.
1. The goat-hair image strikes modern readers as bizarre, but in an agrarian context it conveyed overwhelming visual impact: hundreds of dark-haired goats moving as one body down a green slope, a cascade of dark beauty against bright land. The comparison is to the totality of the effect, not to individual animals.
2. The word qetsuvot is debated — it may mean 'shorn' or 'closely matched.' Either reading supports the core meaning: uniformity and freshness. We follow the traditional reading of newly shorn ewes to maintain the pastoral register.
2. Mat'imot ('bearing twins') is the key metaphor: every tooth has its twin, its matching partner in the opposite jaw. The image celebrates symmetry and completeness rather than fertility per se.
3. Midbarekh is a double-meaning word — from the root d-b-r ('to speak'), it can mean 'your speech' or 'your mouth.' The ambiguity is likely intentional: the beloved's lips are beautiful both in form and in what they say. We render it 'your mouth' to capture the physical sense in context while noting the verbal overtone.
3. The pomegranate appears frequently in Song of Songs (4:3, 13; 6:7, 11; 7:12; 8:2) and in temple architecture (1 Kings 7:18–20). Its many seeds made it a universal symbol of abundance and fertility.
4. Talpiyyot is a hapax legomenon — it appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. Proposals include 'courses of stone,' 'an armory,' 'a fortress,' or 'elegant layers.' The uncertainty does not affect the core meaning: the tower is built with impressive construction and adorned with military trophies.
4. The shift from pastoral imagery (goats, ewes, pomegranates) to military architecture (tower, shields, warriors) is jarring but intentional. The wasf draws from every register of Israelite life — farm, orchard, city, and garrison — to say that this woman's beauty encompasses all categories of excellence.
5. The twin fawns grazing among lilies is the Song's most tender bodily metaphor. The image is not about size or shape but about gentleness, symmetry, and the softness of young animals at rest in a flower-filled meadow. The lilies (shoshannim) are the Song's signature flower, and the fawns feeding among them creates a pastoral scene that IS her body.
5. This verse returns in 7:3 with slight variation, forming a refrain. The repetition across the Song creates the effect of a beloved whose beauty is known, returned to, and marveled at again.
6. The verb yafuach ('to breathe, to blow') personifies the day as a living being drawing its first breath. This is more vivid than 'daybreak' and we preserve the metaphor in translation.
6. Mountain of myrrh and hill of frankincense are double-register images: they evoke both a physical landscape and the bride's body anointed with precious spices. The Song consistently refuses to separate geography from intimacy.
7. Kullakh yafah ('all of you is beautiful') — after the item-by-item wasf, he steps back and declares the whole: every part, taken together, is flawless. The brevity of this verse after the elaborate catalog is itself eloquent. Six Hebrew words summarize what the extended description has argued.
7. Mum en bakh ('there is no blemish in you') uses language from the sacrificial system — mum is the term for a disqualifying defect in a sacrificial animal (Leviticus 22:20–21). She is not merely beautiful but perfect, without blemish, worthy of the most sacred offering.
8. The shift from ra'yati ('my darling') to kallah ('my bride') marks a transition in the relationship. Kallah appears six times in 4:8–5:1 and nowhere else in the Song outside this section, suggesting these verses represent the wedding night or its immediate context.
8. The four mountain names — Lebanon, Amana, Senir, Hermon — are all peaks in the same range, viewed from different angles. The accumulation creates a sense of vast, wild distance that the bridegroom wants to overcome.
9. Libbavtini is best understood as 'you have stolen my heart' or 'you have set my heart racing.' Some translations render it 'ravished,' but this carries connotations of force in modern English. The Hebrew conveys willing captivation — the bridegroom celebrates being undone.

9. The 'sister-bride' address (*achoti kallah*) appears five times in 4:9–5:2. In Egyptian love poetry, 'sister' and 'brother' are the standard terms between lovers. The usage signals the deepest form of peer intimacy: this is not hierarchy but partnership.
10. *Dodim* ('love, caresses') is the same word the bride used in 1:2 and 1:4. The verbal echo creates mutuality: these lovers mirror each other's praise. The Song consistently refuses to make one party the sole speaker of desire.
10. The wine comparison (*mah tovu dodayikh mi-yayin*) inverts 1:2 (*ki tovim dodekha mi-yayin*). The same structure, reversed speakers — a literary technique that embodies the equality of desire in this relationship.
11. The 'milk and honey' phrase deliberately echoes the description of the promised land. The poet places the bride's intimacy in the same category as Israel's ultimate inheritance — a land of abundance given by God. This is not casual metaphor but theological assertion: the beloved is herself a promised land.
11. Lebanon's scent was proverbial — its cedar forests, now largely gone, once perfumed the entire eastern Mediterranean coast. Hosea 14:6 uses the same comparison: 'his fragrance shall be like Lebanon.'
12. The garden (*gan*) is the same word used for Eden in Genesis 2:8 (*gan be-Eden*). The echo is unmistakable and theologically loaded: the bride as garden is a restoration of what was lost — a place of abundance, beauty, and intimate communion with another person.
12. *Na'ul* ('locked') and *chatum* ('sealed') are both passive participles — the garden is in a state of being locked, the fountain in a state of being sealed. The text does not say who locked or sealed them. The bride's own agency in 4:16 suggests she holds the key.
13. *Pardes* appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible (here, Ecclesiastes 2:5, and Nehemiah 2:8). Its Persian origin places it in the world of royal gardens — the enclosed, irrigated pleasure parks of ancient kings. The bride's body is not a common field but a king's private paradise.
13. The spice catalog that runs through verses 13–14 lists at least twelve precious plants and aromatics. The accumulation is deliberately overwhelming — the garden's abundance exceeds any single metaphor's capacity.
14. The overlap between this spice list and the ingredients of the sacred anointing oil (Exodus 30:23–25) and the holy incense (Exodus 30:34–38) is too precise to be coincidental. The poet places the bride's garden in the same aromatic world as the tabernacle — a space where God's presence dwells.
14. *Ahalot* ('aloes') refers to eaglewood (*Aquilaria*), not the aloe vera plant. Eaglewood was imported from Southeast Asia and was among the most costly aromatics of antiquity. Its inclusion signals extreme luxury.
15. *Mayim chayyim* ('living water') is theologically charged language. In Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13, God is the source of living water. In Zechariah 14:8, living water flows from Jerusalem in the messianic age. John 4:10–14 draws directly on this tradition. The bride as a well of living water is one of the Song's most audacious metaphors.
15. The progression from sealed spring (v. 12) to overflowing source (v. 15) mirrors the movement of the entire chapter: from controlled exclusivity to abundant generosity. The garden was locked, but its contents are inexhaustible.
16. The shift from 'my garden' (*ganni*) to 'his garden' (*ganno*) is the verse's theological center. She retains ownership — it is she who invites — but in the act of love, what is hers becomes his. This is gift, not seizure. The garden metaphor makes consent visible: she unlocks, she summons the wind, she issues the invitation.
16. The command *hafichi ganni* ('blow upon my garden') uses the same root (p-w-ch, 'to breathe, to blow') as the 'breathing' day of verse 6. Wind, breath, and spirit share the same Hebrew word (*ruach*), connecting the physical act of wind-blowing to the animating breath of desire.

5

Summary: Chapter 5 opens with the consummation — the man enters his garden and feasts on its honey, wine, and spices. A mysterious voice urges the lovers to eat and drink deeply. Then the mood shifts dramatically: the woman recounts a nighttime episode where her beloved knocked at her door, but by the time she opened it, he had vanished. She searches the city streets (echoing chapter 3) but this time the watchmen beat and strip her. The Daughters of Jerusalem ask what makes her beloved so special, prompting her to deliver a stunning wasf of the man's body — the only such poem about a male figure in the Hebrew Bible.

What Makes This Remarkable: The wasf of the man (verses 10-16) is extraordinary. Male beauty is almost never described in ancient literature with this level of physical detail and erotic charge. His head is finest gold, his locks are date clusters, his eyes are doves by water streams, his cheeks are spice beds, his lips drip liquid myrrh, his hands are gold cylinders set with beryl, his torso is polished ivory covered with sapphires, his legs are marble pillars on gold bases, his appearance is like Lebanon, and his mouth is sweetness itself. The woman gazes at the man's body with the same intensity he brought to her body in chapter 4. The Song insists on full mutuality of desire and admiration.

Translation Friction: The watchmen's violence in verse 7 is deeply troubling and deliberately so. The same watchmen who were neutral in 3:3 now beat her and tear her veil. The text offers no explanation or condemnation — it simply reports. This may represent the danger women face when they claim sexual agency in a patriarchal society, or the vulnerability of desire in a hostile world. The Song does not resolve this violence; it stands as an unhealed wound in the poem's otherwise joyful landscape.

Connections: The garden consummation in 5:1 completes the garden metaphor that began in 4:12. The night-search of 5:2-8 parallels 3:1-4 but with a darker outcome, creating a literary diptych: sometimes you find love, sometimes love finds only violence. The wasf of the man parallels and balances the wasf of the woman in chapter 4. The gold, ivory, sapphire, and marble of his description echo the materials of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6-7), suggesting that the beloved's body is itself a sacred space.

¹I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride.
 I have gathered my myrrh with my spices,
 I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,
 I have drunk my wine with my milk.
 Eat, friends!
 Drink, and drink deeply, lovers!

²I was asleep but my heart was awake.
 The sound! My beloved knocking!
 "Open to me, my sister, my darling,
 my dove, my perfect one —
 for my head is drenched with dew,
 my locks with the moisture of the night."

³I have taken off my garment —
 how can I put it on again?
 I have washed my feet —
 how can I soil them?

⁴My beloved thrust his hand through the opening,
 and my insides churned for him.

⁵I rose to open for my beloved,
 and my hands dripped with myrrh,
 my fingers with liquid myrrh,
 upon the handles of the bolt.

⁶I opened for my beloved,
 but my beloved had turned and gone.
 My soul went out at his going.
 I sought him but did not find him.
 I called him but he did not answer.

⁷The watchmen found me,
 those who go about the city.
 They beat me, they wounded me,
 they stripped my veil from me —
 the keepers of the walls.

⁸I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem —
if you find my beloved,
tell him this:
that I am sick with love.

⁹What is your beloved more than any other beloved,
O most beautiful among women?
What is your beloved more than any other beloved,
that you so adjure us?

¹⁰My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.

¹¹His head is finest gold,
his locks are wavy clusters,
black as a raven.

¹²His eyes are like doves
beside streams of water,
bathed in milk,
mounted in their settings.

¹³His cheeks are like beds of spice,
towers of perfumes.
His lips are lilies,
dripping with liquid myrrh.

¹⁴His hands are cylinders of gold
set with beryl.
His torso is polished ivory
covered with sapphires.

¹⁵His legs are marble pillars
set on bases of fine gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.

¹⁶His mouth is sweetness itself,
and all of him is desire.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O Daughters of Jerusalem.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The five first-person perfects create a rhythm of completion: gathered, eaten, drunk. Every image from the spice garden of chapter 4 is now consumed. The garden that was locked is now fully entered and enjoyed.
1. The final imperative ('eat, friends; drink deeply, lovers') is one of the Song's most debated lines. The identity of the speaker is unknown, but the effect is clear: an outside voice sanctions and celebrates the lovers' union.
2. Ani yeshenah ve-libbi er ('I was asleep but my heart was awake') — the body sleeps while desire remains alert. She hears him knocking (dofek) and calling through the door with four terms of endearment: sister, darling, dove, perfect one. His appeal is both romantic and pathetic — he stands outside in the night dew, wet-haired, begging entry.

2. The knocking on the door and the request to 'open' (pitchi li) carries obvious sexual overtones alongside the literal scene.
3. Her hesitation is the chapter's turning point. She has undressed and bathed for sleep; rising to open the door would mean redressing and dirtying her feet. The excuses seem trivial, but they create the fatal delay. By the time she acts, he will be gone. This is the Song's most painful moment of missed connection — desire that hesitates loses.
4. He reaches his hand through the latch-hole (chor) — the opening in the door through which a hand could reach to lift the internal bar. The image is intensely physical and erotically charged: his hand penetrating the opening. Her response is visceral: me'ay hamu alav ('my insides churned/trembled for him') — me'im are the intestines, the gut, the deepest interior of the body. Her desire is not in her mind but in her bowels.
5. She finally rises — and finds that he has left myrrh on the door handle. Her hands drip with mor over ('liquid myrrh, flowing myrrh') as she touches the bolt (man'ul). The myrrh is his trace, his residue — he was here, he touched this very surface, and his fragrance remains. The image is simultaneously romantic and tragic: the perfume of his presence lingers after his departure.
6. Dodi chamaq avar ('my beloved had turned and gone') — chamaq means 'to slip away, to withdraw.' He came, he waited, he left. Nafshi yats'ah be-dabbero ('my soul went out at his speaking/going') — her nefesh departs, she nearly dies from the pain of his absence. The seeking-and-not-finding language returns from 3:1-2, but now without resolution. She seeks, calls — silence.
7. The parallel to 3:3 is exact — until it turns violent. The same watchmen, the same city, but now hikkuni petsa'uni ('they beat me, they wounded me'). They also nasa'u et redidi me'alay ('they took my veil from me') — stripping a woman's covering is an act of public shaming (cf. Isaiah 47:2-3). The Song offers no explanation for this violence. The text simply absorbs it and moves forward. A woman seeking love in a dangerous world encounters the world's brutality.
8. The adjuration returns but transformed — no longer a warning about love's timing but a desperate message to be relayed. Cholat ahavah ani ('I am sick with love') echoes 2:5 but now the lovesickness has a sharper edge. She is beaten, stripped, alone in the dark, and her message to her absent beloved is simply: I am dying of desire for you.
9. The Daughters of Jerusalem ask the question that prompts the wasf: mah dodekh mi-dod ('what is your beloved more than a beloved?') — what makes him special? Why should we carry your message? The double question demands an answer, and she will give them one that transforms the entire second half of the chapter.
10. Tsach ve-adom ('radiant and ruddy') — tsach means 'dazzling, bright, clear' and adom means 'red, ruddy.' The combination suggests glowing health: bright skin flushed with vitality. Dagul me-revavah ('distinguished/bannered among ten thousand') — like a banner visible above a crowd of ten thousand, he stands out. The wasf begins with the whole before moving to parts.
11. Ketem paz ('finest gold, pure gold') — his head shines like the highest grade of refined gold. Qevutsotav taltalim ('his locks are clusters/curls') — the hair is thick, wavy, hanging in heavy ringlets. Shechorot ka-orev ('black as a raven') — the contrast between gold head and raven-black hair creates a striking image of brilliance framed by darkness.
12. The dove metaphor from 1:15 returns, now applied to the man. His eyes are doves beside water (al afiqe mayim — 'beside water channels'), bathed in milk (rochotsot be-chalav — white, glistening), and yoshvot al mille't ('sitting/mounted in their settings,' like gems in a bezel). The image layers: doves by water, washed in white, perfectly set — his eyes are jewels alive with gentle beauty.
13. His cheeks are arugat ha-bosem ('beds of spice') — the garden metaphor now applies to his face. Migdelot merqachim ('towers of perfumes') — his cheekbones rise like towers from which scent pours. His lips are shoshannim ('lilies') dripping mor over ('liquid myrrh'). When he speaks, when he kisses, myrrh flows. His face is a spice garden; his mouth produces the most precious resin.
14. Yadav gelile zahav ('his hands are gold cylinders') — gelilim are round, cylindrical rods. His fingers are smooth gold tubes set with tarshish (beryl or chrysolite — a yellow-green gem). Me'av eshet shen ('his belly/torso is a plaque of ivory') — his abdomen is smooth, pale, and hard as worked ivory, me'ullefet sappirim ('overlaid with sapphires' — blue lapis lazuli veining beneath the skin). The materials are those of temple furniture and royal vessels.
15. Shoqav ammude shesh ('his legs are pillars of marble/alabaster') set on adne paz ('bases of pure gold') — he stands like a temple. Mar'ehu ka-Levanon ('his appearance is like Lebanon') — not a single tree but an entire mountain range: vast, majestic, covered with forests. Bachur ka-arazim ('choice as the cedars') — he is the finest specimen, selected like the best cedar for the temple. His body is architecture, landscape, and forest.
16. Chikko mamtaqqim ('his palate/mouth is sweetnesses') — the plural intensifies: not merely sweet but the essence of sweetness. Ve-kullo machamaddim ('and all of him is desires/delights') — machamad is 'that which is desired, a precious thing.' He is not just desirable but the embodiment of desire itself.
16. The closing declaration zeh dodi ve-zeh re'i ('this is my beloved and this is my friend') answers the daughters' question from verse 9 and reasserts the Song's central insight: the lover is also the friend. Dod (lover) and re'a (friend, companion) are held together. Erotic passion and genuine friendship are not opposed but fused.

6

Summary: *Chapter 6 opens with the Daughters of Jerusalem asking where the beloved has gone so they may seek him together. The woman responds that he has gone to his garden — she already knows where he is. She restates the formula of mutual belonging: 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' The man then delivers another wasf praising her beauty, comparing her to Tīrzah and Jerusalem, declaring that she is unique among all women — queens, concubines, and maidens alike acknowledge her singularity. The chapter closes with a mysterious scene involving the Shulammitte and the dance of the two camps.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The reversal of the mutual-possession formula in verse 3 is subtle but theologically significant. In 2:16 she said 'my beloved is mine and I am his.' Here she reverses the order: 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' The emphasis shifts from possession to self-giving — she names her belonging to him first, then his to her. By 7:11 it will shift again: 'I am my beloved's and his desire is toward me.' The progression tracks a deepening of love from mutual claiming to mutual yielding. The 'terrible as armies with banners' comparison (verse 4) is one of the Song's most striking moments — beauty is not merely pleasant but overwhelming, a force that can conquer armies.*

Translation Friction: *Verse 12 is among the most obscure verses in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew is genuinely unclear: lo yadati nafshi samatni markevot ammi-nadiv — something like 'I did not know, my soul set me among the chariots of my noble people' or 'I did not know myself — my desire set me in the chariots of Amminadib.' Every translation is a guess. The identity of the Shulammitte (6:13/7:1 in Hebrew versification) is equally debated — is she from Shulem (Shunem), is this a feminine form of 'Solomon' (Shelomoh/Shulammit), or is it a title?*

Connections: *The comparison to Tīrzah (verse 4) dates the poem or its setting to before 880 BCE, when Tīrzah served as the capital of the northern kingdom before Samaria replaced it (1 Kings 15:33). The sixty queens and eighty concubines (verse 8) echo Solomon's harem (1 Kings 11:3), though the numbers here are smaller. The 'dance of the two camps' (mecholat ha-machanayim) in verse 13 may connect to the place name Mahanaim (Genesis 32:2), where Jacob saw the camp of angels.*

¹Where has your beloved gone,
O most beautiful among women?
Where has your beloved turned?
Let us seek him with you.

²My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spice,
to graze in the gardens
and to gather lilies.

³I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine —
he who grazes among the lilies.

⁴You are beautiful, my darling, as Tīrzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
formidable as armies with banners.

⁵Turn your eyes away from me —
they overwhelm me!
Your hair is like a flock of goats
streaming down from Gilead.

⁶Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
coming up from the washing —
each one bearing twins,
none among them bereaved.

⁷Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.

⁸Sixty are the queens,
eighty the concubines,
and young women beyond counting.

⁹But one is she — my dove, my perfect one.
She is the only one of her mother,
the pure one of the woman who bore her.
The young women saw her and called her fortunate;
queens and concubines praised her.

¹⁰Who is this gazing down like the dawn,
beautiful as the moon,
radiant as the sun,
formidable as armies with banners?

¹¹I went down to the walnut garden
to see the new growth by the stream,
to see if the vine had blossomed,
if the pomegranates were in bloom.

¹²Before I knew it,
my desire set me
among the chariots of my noble people.

¹³Turn, turn, O Shulammitte!
Turn, turn, that we may gaze upon you!
Why would you gaze upon the Shulammitte
as at the dance of the two camps?

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The Daughters of Jerusalem respond to the wasf of chapter 5 by offering to join her search. Their question — *anah halakh dodekh* ('where has your beloved gone?') — uses the same language she used in her search (3:1-4, 5:6). But the woman no longer needs their help.
2. She knows exactly where he is — in his garden (*ganno*). The language echoes 4:16 and 5:1: the garden is her body, and he has gone to it. *Li-r'ot ba-gannim* ('to graze in the gardens') and *li-lqot shoshannim* ('to gather lilies') are erotic euphemisms — he feeds on her beauty and gathers her flowers. She answers the daughters' question with calm certainty: he is with me.
3. The formula from 2:16 returns reversed: there it was *dodi li va-ani lo* ('my beloved is mine and I am his'); here it is *ani le-dodi ve-dodi li* ('I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine'). She puts her belonging to him first. The shift suggests a deepening from claiming to yielding — she leads with gift, not possession.
4. *Tirzah* ('delight') was the capital of the northern kingdom before Samaria — a city of legendary beauty. Jerusalem represents the southern ideal. Together they encompass all of Israel's beauty. Then the stunning third comparison: *ayummah ka-nidgalot* ('formidable as bannered hosts'). Her beauty is not merely attractive but terrifying — it overwhelms like an army on the march. Beauty as military force.

5. Hasebbi enayikh mi-negdi she-hem herhivuni ('turn your eyes from opposite me, for they have overwhelmed/emboldened me') — her gaze is too much for him. He asks her to look away because her eyes undo his composure. This is not rejection but surrender: her beauty has conquered him. He then repeats the wasf from 4:1 — her hair like goats descending Gilead.
6. Nearly identical to 4:2 — the repetition is deliberate, creating a structural parallel between the two wasf passages. The teeth metaphor emphasizes whiteness, uniformity, and completeness. Repetition in the Song is not laziness but ritual: praise worth saying once is worth saying again.
7. Repeated from 4:3b — the pomegranate flush of her cheeks glimpsed through the tsammah ('veil'). The repetition of these specific comparisons ties chapters 4 and 6 together as a matched pair of praise poems.
8. The ascending numbers (sixty, eighty, countless) catalog the royal court's women — queens (melakhot), concubines (pilagshim), and alamot ('young women, maidens'). Against this vast field of feminine beauty, one woman will be singled out as incomparable.
9. Achat hi ('one is she') — against sixty queens, eighty concubines, and countless maidens, she is achat, unique, singular. Yonati tammati ('my dove, my perfect one') — the same pair of epithets from 5:2. She is unique to her mother and barah ('pure, bright, chosen') to the one who bore her. All the women of the court recognize her superiority: the daughters call her ashru ('fortunate, blessed') and the queens hallelu ('praise her').
10. Mi zot ('who is this?') echoes 3:6. She is compared to celestial bodies in ascending intensity: the dawn (shachar — the first light breaking), the moon (levanah — 'the white one'), the sun (chammah — 'the hot one,' blazing brilliance). Then the military comparison returns: ayumma ka-nidgalot. She is dawn, moon, sun, and army — everything that rises and overwhelms.
11. The speaker shifts — likely the woman. Ginnat eoz ('walnut garden') is a specific, cultivated space. She descends to inspect the ibbe ha-nachal ('green growth of the valley/stream'). The vine and pomegranates are checked for blossoming — the garden imagery that has represented the lovers' relationship is now examined for signs of flourishing.
12. This verse is notoriously obscure. Lo yadati ('I did not know') introduces confusion or surprise. Nafshi samatni ('my soul/desire placed me') — her own desire transported her. Markevot ammi-nadiv could mean 'chariots of Amminadib' (a proper name), 'chariots of my noble people,' or 'chariots of a willing people.' The overall sense: desire swept her away before she understood what was happening.
13. Shuvi shuvi — the fourfold repetition of 'turn, return' creates urgent rhythm. The Shulammit is addressed by name (or title) for the only time in the Song. The chorus wants her to turn so they may gaze at her. The responding question may be the woman's self-deprecating reply: why would you stare at me?
13. The mecholot ha-machanayim ('dance of the two camps') is unknown — it may be a specific dance, a military formation, or a wedding tradition. The Shulammit title may be the feminine form of Shelomoh (Solomon) — making her his counterpart.

7

Summary: *Chapter 7 (following Hebrew versification, beginning at 7:2 in English Bibles) contains the final and most daring wasf — a foot-to-head praise of the woman's body as she dances. The man describes her feet, thighs, navel, belly, breasts, neck, eyes, nose, and head with increasingly bold imagery. The chapter climaxes with the woman's triumphant declaration: 'I am my beloved's and his desire is upon me' — the final evolution of the mutual-possession formula. She invites him to the countryside, the vineyards, and the fields where she will give him her love.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This wasf reverses the direction of chapter 4: there he began with her head and moved down; here he begins with her feet and moves up. The reversal suggests she is dancing — the observers' eyes naturally move upward from her sandaled feet. The metaphors are also bolder: her navel is a round goblet that never lacks mixed wine, her belly is a heap of wheat fringed with lilies, her breasts are like clusters of grapes he desires to grasp. The woman's declaration in verse 11 (Hebrew) is the Song's theological summit: ani le-dodi ve-alay teshuqato ('I am my beloved's and his desire is upon me'). The word teshuqah ('desire') appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible — here, in Genesis 3:16 (the woman's desire for her husband after the fall), and Genesis 4:7 (sin's desire for Cain). The Song reverses Genesis 3: there, desire was linked to domination; here, desire is mutual and free.*

Translation Friction: *The boldness of the body imagery has always made commentators uncomfortable. The navel-as-wine-goblet and belly-as-wheat-heap are the Song's most explicitly physical descriptions, and attempts to allegorize them reveal the discomfort more than they resolve it. The Hebrew in verse 1 describes her dancing thighs and the 'curves of her thighs' (chammuqe yerekayikh), which is frank anatomical description. We preserve the text's directness.*

Connections: The teshuqah ('desire') in verse 11 explicitly reverses Genesis 3:16, where the same word describes the woman's desire bound to her husband's rule. Here the same desire operates without domination — the fall's distortion of eros is undone. The vineyard and field imagery of verses 12-14 return to the Song's opening themes (1:6, 2:15) and anticipate the final vineyard declaration in 8:12. The mandrakes (duda'im) in verse 14 echo Genesis 30:14-16, where Rachel and Leah negotiate with mandrakes for access to Jacob — an aphrodisiac plant linked to fertility and desire.

- ¹How beautiful are your sandaled feet,
O daughter of nobles!
The curves of your thighs are like ornaments,
the work of a master craftsman.
- ²Your navel is a rounded goblet —
may it never lack mixed wine!
Your belly is a mound of wheat
fringed with lilies.
- ³Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.
- ⁴Your neck is like a tower of ivory.
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon
beside the gate of Bath-rabbim.
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon
facing toward Damascus.
- ⁵Your head crowns you like Carmel,
and the flowing hair of your head is like purple —
a king is held captive in the tresses!
- ⁶How beautiful you are, how delightful —
O love, among pleasures!
- ⁷Your stature is like a palm tree,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
- ⁸I said: 'I will climb the palm tree,
I will seize its branches!'
Let your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
- ⁹and your mouth like the finest wine —
flowing smoothly for my beloved,
gliding over the lips of sleepers.
- ¹⁰I belong to my beloved,
and his desire is toward me.
- ¹¹Come, my beloved, let us go out to the field,
let us spend the night among the henna blossoms.

¹²Let us rise early to the vineyards,
let us see if the vine has blossomed,
if the grape blossoms have opened,
if the pomegranates are in flower.
There I will give you my love.

¹³The mandrakes give off their fragrance,
and at our doors are all choice fruits,
new and old —
my beloved, I have stored them up for you.

¹⁴If only you were like a brother to me,
one who nursed at my mother's breasts!
If I found you outside I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The wasf begins at the bottom — pe'amayikh ba-ne'alim ('your feet in sandals'). She is dancing, and the observers' eyes start at her moving feet. Bat nadiv ('daughter of a noble/prince') gives her aristocratic status. Chammuqe yerekayikh ('the curves of your thighs') is frank anatomical praise — the smooth, rounded contours of her upper legs are like chala'im ('ornaments'), as finely wrought as a master artisan's work.
2. Shorrerekh aggan ha-sahar ('your navel is a round/crescent goblet') — the comparison to a wine goblet that never runs dry is unmistakably sensual. Bitnekh ('your belly, your womb') is a heap of wheat (the golden-tan color of her skin) surrounded by lilies (shoshannim). The images are of abundance: wine that never empties, grain heaped high, flowers framing everything.
3. Repeated from 4:5 with slight variation — the 'grazing among the lilies' clause is omitted here, focusing purely on the twin fawns. The repetition underscores the permanence of his admiration.
4. The neck moves from 'Tower of David' (4:4) to 'tower of ivory' (migdal ha-shen) — smooth, pale, and precious. Her eyes are berechot be-Cheshbon ('pools in Heshbon') — the still, deep pools near an ancient Transjordanian city. Her nose is ka-migdal ha-Levanon ('like the tower of Lebanon facing Damascus') — a watchtower on the heights, commanding and dignified.
5. Her head is like Carmel — the great headland jutting into the Mediterranean, majestic and commanding. Her flowing hair (dallat roshekh) is like argaman ('purple') — the royal color. Then the astonishing conclusion: melekh asur ba-rehatim ('a king is captured/bound in the tresses'). Her hair is a trap that snares kings. His whole wasf concludes with his own captivity — he, the king, is a prisoner of her beauty.
6. Mah yafit u-mah na'amt ('how beautiful you are and how pleasant') — the superlatives overflow. Ahavah ba-ta'anugot ('love among delights/pleasures') addresses her not by name but as ahavah itself — she IS love, embodied.
7. Qomatekh damtah le-tamar ('your height is like a palm tree') — the date palm is tall, straight, graceful, and fruitful. Her breasts are now compared to eshkolot ('clusters') — date clusters or grape clusters hanging from the palm. The shift from fawns to fruit clusters prepares for his intention in the next verse.
8. Amarti e'eleh ve-tamar ('I said, I will climb the palm tree') — he will ascend her body as one climbs a date palm to harvest fruit. Ochazah be-sansinnav ('I will seize its branches/fronds') — achaz ('to seize') is the same verb the woman used in 3:4 when she seized her beloved. Now he seizes her. The climbing and grasping are explicitly sexual.
9. Ve-chikkekh ke-yen ha-tov ('and your palate/mouth like the best wine') — her kisses intoxicate like the choicest vintage. The wine 'goes for my beloved smoothly' (holekh le-dodi le-mesharim) — the woman takes over mid-verse, speaking of 'my beloved.' The final image — dovev siftey yeshenim ('causing the lips of sleepers to murmur') — suggests wine so potent it makes even sleeping people speak, or kisses that penetrate even sleep.
10. The teshuqah wordplay with Genesis 3:16 is almost certainly deliberate. The Song presents itself as Eden restored — a garden where desire operates without shame, domination, or curse. His desire is upon her as gravity is upon the earth: natural, constant, joyful.
11. She takes the initiative: lekchah dodi ('come, my beloved'). She invites him out of the city, into the sadeh ('field, countryside'). Nalinah ba-kefarim can mean 'let us lodge in the villages' or 'let us spend the night among the henna blossoms' (kofer/kefer). The henna reading connects to 1:14 and the Song's fragrance imagery.
12. The vineyard inspection from 6:11 returns, but now with an explicit purpose: sham etten et doday lakh ('there I will give you my lovemaking'). The vineyard that was 'mine' in 1:6 — the one she had not tended — is now the site of deliberate, chosen lovegiving. She will give him her dodim in the

place where love and nature merge.

13. Duda'im ('mandrakes') are an aphrodisiac plant with a long history in love magic (Genesis 30:14-16). Their fragrance announces sexual readiness. At 'our doors' (petachenu) — the shared threshold — are kol megadim ('all choice fruits'), both new and old. She has been saving pleasures for him: chadashim gam yeshanim ('new and also old') — fresh experiences and familiar delights.
14. Mi yitenkha ke-ach li ('who would make you like a brother to me') — she wishes for the social freedom that siblings enjoy. In the ancient Near East, a sister could kiss her brother publicly without scandal. She wants to express her love openly, without social punishment. The verse exposes the constraint she lives under: their love, though right and mutual, is judged by the world outside.

8

Summary: *The final chapter of the Song gathers its themes into a crescendo. The woman brings her beloved to her mother's house for instruction in love. The adjuration refrain sounds for the last time. Then comes the poem's theological summit: 'Set me as a seal upon your heart, for love is as strong as death, jealousy as fierce as the grave; its flames are the very flame of Yah. Many waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away.' The chapter closes with the brothers' speech about their little sister, the woman's assertion of sovereignty over her own vineyard, and a final exchange of longing between the lovers.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Verses 6-7 contain what many scholars regard as the only direct theological statement in the Song of Songs. The word shalhevet-yah ('flame of Yah') is the sole occurrence of a divine name in the entire poem — and even this is debated, since the -yah suffix could be an intensifier ('a mighty flame') rather than a theophoric element ('the LORD's own flame'). Either reading is staggering: love is either identified with God's own fire or described as the most intense force in creation. The declaration that many waters cannot quench love echoes the primordial chaos-waters of Genesis 1 and the flood of Genesis 6-9 — love survives what destroys the world. The final vineyard scene (verses 11-12) brings the poem full circle: in 1:6 the woman lamented that her brothers made her tend their vineyards while her own went untended. Now she declares: 'My vineyard, which is mine, is before me.' She has reclaimed what was taken.*

Translation Friction: *The identity of the speakers in verses 8-9 is debated. 'Brothers' discuss their 'little sister' — but are these the same brothers from 1:6 who punished her? Are they protective or controlling? The woman's response in verse 10 ('I am a wall, and my breasts like towers') is either an assertion of sexual maturity or a claim of chaste inaccessibility. The vineyard parable in verses 11-12 introduces Solomon by name, but the woman's point seems to subvert his wealth: Solomon can keep his thousand silver pieces; she owns her own vineyard and gives it to whom she chooses.*

Connections: *The adjuration refrain (verse 4) appears for the third and final time (cf. 2:7, 3:5), forming a structural spine for the poem. The vineyard metaphor (verses 11-12) recalls 1:6. 'Love is strong as death' (verse 6) resonates with the covenant language of Deuteronomy and the prophetic marriage metaphors of Hosea. The 'seal upon your heart' connects to the signet ring imagery of Haggai 2:23 and Jeremiah 22:24, where the seal represents irrevocable personal identity. The mother's house (verse 2) echoes 3:4. The final call — 'Flee, my beloved' — returns to the gazelle imagery of 2:9, 2:17, bringing the poem to a circular close.*

1If only you were like a brother to me,
one who nursed at my mother's breasts!
If I found you outside I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.

2I would lead you, I would bring you
to my mother's house — she who taught me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the juice of my pomegranate.

³His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand embraces me.

⁴I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem —
do not stir up, do not awaken love
until it pleases.

⁵Who is this coming up from the wilderness,
leaning on her beloved?
Under the apple tree I awakened you.
There your mother labored with you,
there she who bore you labored.

⁶Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm —
for love is as fierce as death,
passion as relentless as the grave.
Its flames are flames of fire,
the very blaze of Yah.

⁷Many waters cannot quench love,
nor can rivers sweep it away.
If a man offered all the wealth of his house for love,
he would be utterly scorned.

⁸We have a little sister
who has no breasts yet.
What shall we do for our sister
on the day she is spoken for?

⁹If she is a wall,
we will build upon her a battlement of silver.
If she is a door,
we will barricade her with planks of cedar.

¹⁰I am a wall,
and my breasts are like towers.
So in his eyes I have become
one who brings peace.

¹¹Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon.
He entrusted the vineyard to keepers;
each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand pieces of silver.

¹²My vineyard, which is mine, is before me.
The thousand are yours, Solomon,
and two hundred for those who tend its fruit.

¹³You who dwell in the gardens,
 companions are listening for your voice —
 let me hear it!

¹⁴Flee, my beloved!
 Be like a gazelle
 or a young stag
 upon the mountains of spices.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Mi yitenkha ke-ach li ('who would make you like a brother to me') — she wishes for the social freedom that siblings enjoy. In the ancient Near East, a sister could kiss her brother publicly without scandal. She wants to express her love openly, without social punishment. The verse exposes the constraint she lives under: their love, though right and mutual, faces a hostile world.
2. Bet immi ('my mother's house') returns from 3:4 — the matrilineal space of female sexual knowledge. Telammedeni ('she who taught me') — the mother instructs the daughter in the arts of love. She will give him yayin ha-reqach ('spiced wine') and asis rimmoni ('the juice of my pomegranate'). The pomegranate is HER pomegranate — her body's offering. The spiced wine and fruit juice are erotic hospitality: she will intoxicate him with herself.
3. This verse repeats 2:6 exactly — the intimate embrace that frames the Song. The repetition creates an inclusio: the same posture of lovemaking that appeared early in the poem returns near its end. The lovers' bodies are intertwined in the same way, confirming that their love has not diminished but deepened.
4. The third and final occurrence of the adjuration refrain (cf. 2:7, 3:5). This time the oath formula ('by the gazelles and the does') is omitted — the charge is issued without the animal oath, as if by now the Daughters know the weight of the words. The refrain's final appearance seals the poem's wisdom: love has its own timing, and to force it is to destroy it.
5. Mi zot olah min ha-midbar ('who is this coming up from the wilderness?') echoes 3:6 but now she comes leaning on her beloved — mitrapeqet (from rafaq, 'to lean, to support oneself'), a posture of intimate dependence. The apple tree (tappuach) returns from 2:3 — under the same tree where she first sat in his shade, she now awakens him. The location is also where his mother gave birth: love and birth share the same sacred ground.
6. The four key terms in this verse — ahavah, mavet, qin'ah, shalhevet-yah — form the theological core of the entire Song. Love is placed alongside death and Sheol as a cosmic force. Its fire carries the divine name.
6. The seal (chotam) imagery connects to Haggai 2:23, where God makes Zerubbabel 'like a signet ring' — a sign of irrevocable choice. She asks to be his signet: chosen, irreplaceable, authoritative.
7. Mayim rabbim ('many waters') are the primordial chaos-waters — the tehom of Genesis 1:2, the flood-waters of Genesis 6-9, the sea that God subdued at creation. These cosmic forces cannot extinguish love's flame. Neharot lo yishtefuha ('rivers cannot sweep it away') — even the mightiest currents are powerless against love.
7. The second half shifts from cosmic to economic: if a man offered all the substance of his house (kol hon beto) for love, boz yavuzu lo ('they would utterly despise him'). Love cannot be purchased. It is not a commodity. The wealthiest man cannot buy what the poorest lover freely gives. This is the Song's final wisdom statement: love transcends death, water, and wealth.
8. The brothers speak — likely the same brothers from 1:6 who controlled the woman's labor. They discuss their 'little sister' (achot lanu qetannah) who has not yet reached puberty (shadayim en lah, 'she has no breasts'). Their question — mah na'aseh la-achotenu ('what shall we do for our sister') — reveals their assumption of authority over her sexuality. They will decide what happens to her body. The woman in the next verses will reject this authority entirely.
9. The brothers propose two scenarios. If she is a chomah ('wall') — sexually inaccessible, chaste — they will reward her with a silver battlement (tirat kesef), adorning and elevating her. If she is a delet ('door') — sexually accessible, open — they will barricade her with cedar planks (luach erez), closing her off. Either way, they control the outcome. The wall/door metaphor reduces her to architecture they can modify.
10. The woman responds with devastating authority. Ani chomah ('I am a wall') — she claims the identity the brothers proposed, but on her own terms. Ve-shaday ka-migdalot ('and my breasts are like towers') — she is no longer the 'little sister' without breasts. She is fully mature, fortified, and powerful. Az hayiti ve-enav ke-motse'et shalom ('then in his eyes I became one who finds/brings peace') — shalom ('peace, wholeness, completion') echoes both Shelomoh (Solomon) and Shulammit. She has found peace — not through her brothers' control but through her own agency and her beloved's recognition.
11. The vineyard parable begins. Solomon's vineyard at Ba'al Hamon ('lord of abundance' or 'possessor of a multitude') is leased to tenants (notrim, 'keepers' — the same word used of her vineyard-keeping in 1:6). Each tenant owes a thousand pieces of silver for its produce. The vineyard is vast, commercial, operated through intermediaries. Solomon never tends it himself — he owns it from a distance.

12. The vineyard metaphor completes its arc. In 1:6: 'my own vineyard I have not kept' — lament. In 8:12: 'my vineyard, which is mine, is before me' — triumph. Between these two statements lies the entire Song: the journey from controlled labor to free love, from others' vineyards to her own.
13. The man speaks: ha-yoshevet ba-gannim ('you who dwell in the gardens') — she lives in the garden that IS her. Chaverim maqshivim le-qolekh ('companions are listening for your voice') — others also want to hear her. But his request is personal and urgent: hashmi'ini ('let ME hear it!'). After all the seeking, finding, losing, and praising, his final desire is simply to hear her voice — the same request he made in 2:14. Love ends where it began: with longing for the beloved's presence.
14. The Song's final word belongs to the woman. Berach dodi ('flee, my beloved') — the verb barach can mean 'flee' or 'hurry.' She urges him to come quickly, like a gazelle or young stag, to the hare vesamim ('mountains of spices') — her fragrant body, the landscape of their love. The poem does not end with arrival but with invitation. Love is perpetual motion — always calling, always running, always seeking the next encounter. The Song closes not with consummation but with desire still in flight. The last sound is her voice, calling him onward.