

2_THE SHULAMMITE. GOD THE TROUBADOUR

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1. From a narrative viewpoint, that is if we let “the story breathe”, Genesis 2 and 3 can be read in the reverse order.
 2. We usually take these chapters as if they described us events in a chronological order: creation, fall, curses, exclusion from the garden. Another way of approaching this story is reading it in the light of God making garments of skin for Adam and Eve
“The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them”. Gen 3.21
 - 2.1. Nakedness is the symbol of shame, that is of humiliation, insecurity and vulnerability
 - 2.2. Shame expresses the human condition described in Gen 3.16-19:
 - i. Childbearing marked by pain
 - ii. Toxic desire
 - iii. Uneven relationship marked by domination of the one over the other (here man over woman)

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for (or contrary to) your husband,
but he shall rule over you.”
 - iv. Toil in relation to nature and death
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”
3. With regard to this human condition, we cannot help each other: the partner is not the “suitable helper” described in Gen 2.18 – this is expressed figuratively in the way they deal with their nakedness
 - i. they try to hide their shame (i.e. humiliation, vulnerability, insecurity) by themselves (that is helping each other)
 - ii. and all they come up with is a loincloth (fig-tree) which instead gives them out.
- 3.2. The only “suitable helper” is the Lord himself who provides proper clothing (not just a loincloth) – indeed in the OT the Lord presented as the only reliable helper.

3.3. Only God can help humanity to overcome the present human condition marked by shame (i.e. humiliation, vulnerability, insecurity). The way God wants humanity to become is expressed with the image of the garden.

4. So how does God help us to deal with our “shame”? What are these garments the symbol of?

5. A parallel to the first chapters from Genesis can be found in the book of Ezekiel 16.2-14

Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: [...] on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. 5No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.

6“And when I passed by I saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ 7I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

8“When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. 9Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. 10I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. 11And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. 12And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. 13Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. 14And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD.

6. We should read this passage from Ezekiel and the first chapters of Genesis side by side:

Ezekiel 16	Genesis 3
5 You were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.	<u>23</u> So the LORD God banished them from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which they had been taken.
<u>8</u> “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; <u>10</u> I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk	<u>21</u> The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.
<u>6</u> “And when I passed by I saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ <u>7</u> I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.	<u>7</u> Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.
You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. <u>14</u> And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect	The whole description of life in the garden

through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD.	
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7. Just as in Genesis, God is the really “suitable helper”, that is the helper fit for who we are and what our condition requires. Both in Ezekiel and in Genesis 3.21 this is expressed through the image of clothing and covering of nakedness and shame –Ezekiel expands this image when he says that God
 - 7.1. makes the woman live
 - 7.2. takes care of her
 - 7.3. but especially that he empowers her – he does not just cover her, but he also bestows splendor and beauty on her.

8. This empowering in particular is significant with respect to the subordination of the woman described in Gen 3.16

“Your urge shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you.”

 - 8.1. the woman is seen as the hostage of urges which force her to depend on the man; and
 - 8.2. the man is seen as relating to the woman only in terms of power, of domination.
 - 8.3. Incidentally, just as God is portrayed in relation to us at the end of the narrative of the Garden: fearful that human beings might become like him, and banning them from the Garden to prevent this from happening:

22And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” 23So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

9. The OT portrays many strong and independent women but usually they can thrive only at the expenses of men: forcing them, outsmarting them – and use their sexual appeal to this effect. Interestingly, this attitude is praised in Scripture! However, there is one notable exception, that is the Shulammitte.

10. The Shulammitte¹
 - 10.1. It comes from Hebrew shulammit, “woman of Jerusalem” or “the Jerusalemite,” a feminine epithet derived from Salem (Hebrew shalem), an ancient poetic name for Jerusalem (Cf . Psalm 76:2).
 - 10.2. The name can be found only in Song 6:13 and nowhere else in the Bible

Return, return, O Shulammitte, return, return, that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulammitte, as upon a dance before two armies?
 - 10.3. She is the central figure in the Song of Solomon (also called Song of Songs), one of the most positive representations of womanhood and of truly reciprocal love relationship between woman and man in the OT.

11. Apart from her youth and beauty, the Shulammitte’s most striking characteristic is her assertiveness.

¹ See Chana Bloch. “Shulammitte”, *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/shulammitte-bible>

- 11.1. She is described by her lover as “majestic”, or “awesome” – the Hebrew word can also mean “daunting”, “terrible”

Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession? (6.10)

- 11.2. She makes intense statements about herself

I am dark but beautiful, O women of Jerusalem— dark as the tents of Kedar, dark as the curtains of Solomon’s tents. (1.5)

I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers. Thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment. (8.10)

- 11.3. she commands the elements

Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere. (4.16).

- 11.4. She goes out into the streets of Jerusalem at night to search for her lover—bold and unusual behavior for a woman, especially unmarried:

1All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.
2I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.
3The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”
4Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother’s house,
to the room of the one who conceived me. (3.1-4)

6 I opened for my beloved,
but my beloved had left; he was gone.
My heart sank at his departure. ^a
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer.
7The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls! (5.6-7)

- 11.5. Her invitations to love (4:16; 7:11–13; 8:2) are more outspoken than the man’s,

Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside,
let us spend the night in the villages.

12Let us go early to the vineyards

to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom—
there I will give you my love.
¹³The mandrakes send out their fragrance,
and at our door is every delicacy,
both new and old. (7.11-13)
that I have stored up for you, my beloved.

- 11.6. she is the one who apparently takes the initiative in their lovemaking:

Under the apple tree I awakened you;
there your mother conceived you,
there she who was in labor gave you birth.
⁶Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm, (8:5f).

- 11.7. The Shulammitte speaks the first and the last words in the poem:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.
³Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the young women love you!
⁴Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers. (1.2f)

¹⁴Come away, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the spice-laden mountains. (8.14)

- 11.8. she delivers most of the lines, including the climatic speeches about the power of love

⁷Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires. (2.7)

Love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
⁷ Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of one's house for love,
it would be utterly scorned. (8:6–7).

- 11.9. Her voice and thoughts come directly to the reader, unmediated by a narrator.

- 11.10. Her repeated adjurations to the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), filled with awe at love's power, convey the seriousness with which she regards this relationship.

- 11.11. When she asks her lover to be true to her forever (8:6), she is expressing a hope for a permanent bond in emphatic language.
12. The attitude of the man towards the Shulammitte is marked by tenderness and respect. This appears for instance in the dramatic scene depicted in chapter 5
- 12.1. The lover knocks at the door (5.2)
 My beloved is knocking:
 “Open to me, my sister, my darling,
 my dove, my flawless one.
 My head is drenched with dew,
 my hair with the dampness of the night.”
- 12.2. The Shulammitte does not open straight away, the lover leaves, and she runs after him. He chooses to withdraw rather than conquer, wait for the girl to be ready.
13. The poem is filled with reciprocal declarations of love and tenderness which echo Adam’s first words, when he saw Eve: “This is now no bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2.23) – but in the Song of Songs it is the Shulammitte who takes the leading role.
14. Where however Genesis and the Song of Songs more enlighten each other is in one of the refrains of the Song:
 “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2.7; 3.5; 8.4)
- 14.1. Love cannot be rushed or forced. It requires time. It takes time, and patience.
- 14.2. This is the antidote to domination in the relationship: no relation can thrive unless this reciprocal desire and love are awakened
- 14.3. in the situation of domination described in Genesis relations are not based on the reciprocity of desire, but urges are manipulated to control the other partner.
15. One of the most attractive aspects of the Song of Songs is the way it follows the meandering of love through keenness, hesitations, separations, reunions, which progressively lead to the final celebration of love:
- Love is as strong as death,
 its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
 It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
 7 Many waters cannot quench love;
 rivers cannot sweep it away.
 If one were to give
 all the wealth of one’s house for love,
 it would be utterly scorned. (8:6–7).
16. God never mentioned in the Song of Songs – and there have been many theories as to why then it became part of the bible. The answer might be that one does not need God to be named to recognize what can only be the result of his work, of his “help” (“suitable helper” to heal the problems of our human condition and especially our love).
17. It is not by accident that those who looked very closely for at least a cryptic reference to God in the Song of Songs found it in these climatic verses:
 Love is as strong as death,
 its jealousy unyielding as the grave.

It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.

- 17.1. The word for 'flame' (sal·he·bet·yah) contains the name of God (YAHweh)²
- 17.2. Some think it is a cryptic reference to God, so that the sentence means "The flame of the Lord", although the word is probably better translated as a "God-like flame."
18. The idea is that the love described by the Song of Songs, and the reciprocity in the relationship between the woman and the man, are the way God intends this love to be, what he wants us to learn. This love is a value in itself. Significantly, at no point in the Song it is question of procreation
19. The image of the garden recurs constantly in the poem (4.12-5.1)
- 12You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.
13Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
with choice fruits,
with henna and nard,
14nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,
with myrrh and aloes
and all the finest spices.
15You are a garden fountain,
a well of flowing water
streaming down from Lebanon.
16Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.
1I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk.
- 2My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to browse in the gardens
and to gather lilies.
3I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;
he browses among the lilies. (6.2)
- 11 I went down to the grove of nut trees
to look at the new growth in the valley,
to see if the vines had budded
or the pomegranates were in bloom. (6.11f)

² Though the name of God is to be celebrated (Psa 68:4), Jewish tradition forbids saying YHWH, due to the fear that God's name may accidentally be taken in vain (Lev 24:16). Instead, the name *Adoni* (LORD) was/is substituted. Over time the initial vowels of *Adoni* and *Elohim* (A+E) found their way inbetween the consonants of YAHWEH producing YaHWeH.

20. The garden is a symbol of their union – both emotional and sexual. Whether the parallel is intentional or not, God's intention for humanity is
- 20.1. to overcome the present human condition marked by shame (i.e. humiliation, vulnerability, insecurity)
 - 20.2. the creation of a harmonious and reciprocal relation between the man and the woman which is the Garden of Eden – the situation to which God wants to lead humanity.
 - 20.3. Indeed in the Song of Songs nudity and sexuality are not more cause of shame because they do not evoke desire to possess, control, use, but a delight which knows how to wait, take time, until it becomes reciprocal.