There is no key to the Song of Songs. Though what I’ll be presenting here will probably come across as an attempt at one, I don’t mean it that way – this structure is most certainly one among many legitimate structures to the Song. The Song can be a panel structure or a chiasm. It can be divided into an abundance of distinct, independent poems, or it can be united as a single grand poetic narrative. It can be read as a run through Israel’s history, a grand allegorical depiction of God’s love for His people, or simply as a love story between King Solomon and his wife, not to speak of the allusions to the Temple liturgy or the coming Messiah. All of these are legitimate, and they each reveal unique angles on the poetry of the Song.¹

This is not to say the book is incomprehensible or chaotic and that we’re creating these structures out of nothing. They really are all there, the panel structures, the chiasms, the narratives and allusions. Take, for example, the refrain “My beloved is to me, and I to him” (2:16). It can structured both in terms of its prepositional phrases to form a panel structure, and it can also be laid out as a chiasm in terms of person.

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a My beloved  a My beloved
 b to me      b to me
a’ and I  b’ and I
 b’ to him a’ to him²
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This combination of chiasm and panel structures repeats itself throughout the book.² Some of this may be due simply to the density of the poetry, making it fairly easy to form into whatever structure the reader happens to

¹ Ernst Wendland talks of interpreting the Song as charting a path “through the thick forest of reiteration and figurative language which constitutes the exquisite lyric form and content of the SoS.” He also calls it a “veritable verbal jungle”. Both are apt images. Ernst Wendland, “Love Lyrics”, 2,32. (Note: I couldn’t find any publication information on this document, so I’ll just refer to as “Love Lyrics”. The page numbers refer to the page numbers in the pdf itself.)
² From an unpublished class handout from Peter Leithart. But you already knew that.
want to push. But this doesn’t account for all of it. The structures are, at times, too clear and too intentional to be ignored, and their multiplicity contributes to the point of the Song as a whole. The Song of Songs about love. It’s a dance, a drama. It’s unsettling and surprising, and that’s the point. The reader, like the lovers, gets caught up in the ecstasy and passion of the moment. The poetry doesn’t let the lovers, or the reader, rest, at least for long.4

That being said, there are still some general structural points many commentators agree on. It is generally acknowledged that the 1:2-2:7 and 8:3/5-14 form an inclusio5, and the parallel between the two city scenes – 3:1-5 and 5:2-8 – is hard to miss.6 Most commentators also acknowledge that the center of the book is somewhere around 4:16-5:1, where we have a very strong consummation scene in the garden. With those connections in place, we’re left with what to do with 2:8-17, 3:6-5:1, and 5:9-8:4, yielding either a panel structure or a chiasm in the middle of the book. Here are three structures, side-by-side, so the common themes are clear (the similar connections are bolded).

<table>
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3 Space doesn’t permit an extended discussion of this, but one other fairly clear example would be 3:1-5. Dorsey points out a seven point chiasm (David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Baker Academic, 2004), 204), and the passage can also fit a tight panel structure, pairing 2a with 3 (go about the city, she speaks), 2b with 4a (not found/found), and with verse 1 and 4b forming an inclusio. Also, see Richard M. Davidson, “The Literary Structure of Song of Songs Redivivus,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 64 for more discussion on the combination of chiasms and panel structures.

4 Ellen Davis calls it “a dream transcribed”, which point out another aspect of the Song’s approach to rest. We do find the Shulamite sleeping, but it’s restless sleep (“my heart is awake” in 5:2). Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 238.

5 See Davidson, 52–4 and Dorsey, 211–3. Dorsey includes a brief list of supporters in 211n31.

6 See Dorsey, 213n34.

7 Davidson, 50.

8 Dorsey, 212.

9 Davidson, 47.
In general, I agree with structures like these, and my own is almost identical to David Dorsey’s. However, I’d like to focus on two specific angles that haven’t, to my knowledge, been combined in the way I’m presenting them here. The first is the repetition of a specific, basic narrative of separation to unity between the lovers, and the second is the alternation between the primary speakers of a given section. In this way, I believe the Song of Songs can be read in expanding cycles of the same narrative, where the first telling of the story is the first step to the second telling of the story. These cycles also directly parallel one-another in a seven-point chiasm, each point alternating between speakers to form a dialogue between the lovers.

The narrative I’m referring to is the story of the bride being called out of her home to join Solomon in marriage. Song of Songs begins immediately with this basic narrative in 1:2-2:7. That narrative is then repeated through the whole book, with 1:2-2:7 serving as step one. If we look even earlier, we also find it a third time in 1:2-4. Here is a basic, point-by-point layout:

1. The Shulamite approaches Solomon (1:2-3 / 1:2-7 / 1:2-7)
2. Solomon calls on the Shulamite to leave her home and come join him (1:4a / 1:8-11 / 2:8-17)
3. The Shulamite agrees, leaving her home to join Solomon, and the lovers are united, entering into the garden/bedroom/vineyard, rejoicing in one another (1:4b / 1:12-2:7 / 3:1-8:14)

Following this basic narrative, there are a number of important general movements going on in Song of Songs. In the first half, there is an emphasis on “come out” and “come away” language from Solomon directed to the Shulamite (1:8; 2:10, 13; 4:8, 3:6). Aside from 8:5, this dramatic tension is absent in the second half of the book. Instead, it’s replaced with the tension of Solomon trying to gain access to the garden/bedroom/vineyard,
checking if the garden fruit is ripe for the eating (4:12; 5:1,2; 6:11-13; 7:11-8:2; 8:8-14). The reason for the shift is that in the middle of the book, during the wedding scene, the Shulamite has arrived (cf. 3:6-11).  

In addition to this shift, there is also a blending of imagery in the second half of the book. After the Shulamite arrives, certain language that had been used to describe the Shulamite is being used to describe Solomon (e.g. black in 1:5, 5:11; lilies in 2:1-2, 5:13; eyes as doves in 1:15, 5:12; fragrances in 4:10-5:1, 5:13, 6:2). He is becoming like the Shulamite, becoming like her land and her people (5:15). And the same goes for the Shulamite, who is being welcomed into the royal house (6:8-9; 7:1,5), becoming lovely like Jerusalem (6:4). The lovers are being united and are even becoming like one another.

At this level, the parallel between 1:2-2:7 and the entire book is fairly vague. But not only do we find the same general narrative in both, we also find detailed, parallel chiasms. Many commentators have recognized the seven point chiastic structure of 1:2-2:7. The section is made up of seven speeches, beginning with the Shulamite in 1:2-7 and alternating in speaker until we finish in 2:3-7 with the Shulamite again. The book as a whole follows the same pattern if we follow the primary speaker in each section.  

| a 1:2-7  | – Shulamite |
| b 1:8-11 | – Solomon |
| c 1:12-14| – Shulamite |
| d 1:15   | – Solomon |
| c’ 1:16-2:1 | – Shulamite |
| b’ 2:2  | – Solomon |
| a’ 2:3-7 | – Shulamite |

When we parallel the scenes with each other, obvious parallels begin to emerge on multiple levels. Not only do we have the general narrative parallels mentioned earlier (e.g. 1:8-11 and 2:8-17 both deal with the

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10 The concept of “waking” seems to follow this narrative, too. In the first half of the book, we are warned about waking up love. In the middle, though, we hear “Awake! Enjoy the love, drink deeply!” (5:1) Then, the exhortations to the Daughters of Jerusalem are no longer warnings. In 5:8, it’s reversed, and they are encourage to help the lovers unite. In 8:5, the Hebrew verb seems to change to one of encouragement, not of warning.

11 Dorsey mentions the gender alternation for the whole book, but splits B’ into two sections and doesn’t acknowledge A’ to primarily have the woman as the primary speaker. See Dorsey, 211.

12 In all of these sections, both the Solomon and the Shulamite speak. This is because each section is still a dialogue in itself (if they’re singing back and forth, this would make it a song of songs). The primary speaker is still easy to identify in each case, in spite of the alternating dialogue.
“come out” or “come away” motif, but more specific narrative parallels between to emerge (e.g. in both 1:12-14 and 3:1-5, they spend the night together after the Shulamite is called to “come away”). Also, the settings for each scene parallel each other in most cases. Here is a more fleshed-out version of the comparison (the settings for the whole-book scenes are listed after the speaker in parentheses; in most cases, they correspond to 1:2-2:7):

a 1:2-7 / 1:2-2:7 – Shulamite (vineyard/king’s chambers)
   vineyard, king’s chamber
b 1:8-11 / 2:8-17 – Solomon (garden)
   “come away” (2:10,13) and “go out” (1:8)
c 1:12-14 / 3:1-5 – Shulamite (city/bedroom)
   at night, she pulls him into the bedroom and spends the night with him
d 1:15 / 3:6-5:1 – Solomon (garden)
   Solomon’s first wasf; Behold, you have dove’s eyes
c’ 1:16-2:1 / 5:2-6:3 – Shulamite (city/bedroom13)
   Shulamite’s wasf; in Solomon’s garden, with lilies and cedars of Lebanon
b’ 2:2 / 6:4-8:2 – Solomon (garden)
   Solomon’s second wasf(s); Shulamite beautiful one among the (royal) daughters
a’ 2:3-7 / 8:3-14 – Shulamite (vineyard/apple tree)
   vineyard/house of wine, apple tree

From here, I’ll go through each pair individually, as well as D in the center. I’ll begin each section with a brief summary of the pair, followed by arguments for dividing the sections the way I have (in addition to the speaker alternation). After that, I’ll address the larger parallel between the pair on the whole-book level, and finally, the parallel of each macro-section back to its corresponding micro-section in 1:2-2:7. From here on out, I’ll also generally refer to the macro-sections according to their chiasm points (A, B, B’, etc.), but I’ll try to reserve that language for the macro-sections.

1:2-2:7 – 8:3-14 (A and A’)

13 The setting here is a little fuzzy, since in the second half of C’, we start to move into the garden. Exactly when she arrives, though, is unclear, and it seems there is movement toward the garden from 5:9 all the way to 7:13.
The first pair of the chiasm is one of the most clear parallels in Song of Songs. As we saw above, many modern commentators acknowledge roughly the same inclusion surrounding the book, with only minor debates over the exact boundaries. These two sections are also two of the most easily identifiable sections in the book, being marked off by arguably the Song of Songs’ strongest section-dividing refrain – “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it please.”

*Internal Structures*

As mentioned above, the division of 1:2-2:7 into a seven point chiasm, based on the alternating speakers, is crucial to understanding the Song of Songs. Here it is again:

a 1:2-7 – Shulamite speaks
   into the king’s chambers (1:4)
b 1:8-11 – Solomon speaks
   fairest among women (1:8)
c 1:12-14 – Shulamite speaks
   lying together at night
d 1:15 – Solomon speaks
   Behold, you are fair, my love!
c’ 1:16-2:1 – Shulamite speaks
   garden bedroom
b’ 2:2 – Solomon speaks
   like a lily among thorns
a’ 2:3-7 – Shulamite speaks
   into the king’s house of wine (2:4)

The back-and-forth nature of the dialogue is striking, especially as we move closer to the center and the exchanges become more brief, more intense. In several instances, the speakers (or singers) engage in call and response, where a speaker picks up on the previous theme, then introduces a new one, which the next speaker continues. In verse 15, the center of the dialogue, Solomon shouts out an exclamation of the Shulamite’s beauty

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14 One point of dispute is whether to include 8:3-4 in the final section or in the previous section. I am following Davidson, 53 by including the refrain in the final section, as I think it’s main purpose is to echo 2:6-7.
15 See Dorsey, 201, for more details on how the pace of the Hebrew intensifies as we approach the middle of the chiasm.
— “Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair! You have dove’s eyes.” The Shulamite responds in kind — “Behold, you are handsome, my love! Yes, pleasant!” — then moves on to describe their bed, concluding with “I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys.” Solomon responds by continuing the lily theme — “Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.” The Shulamite’s response? “Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among the sons.”

This is not, however, how the book closes. In spite of the fairly clear structure of A, A’ is a mystery. It’s clearly a section in itself, but little ties together its various themes. There is no neat chiasm and no clear narrative movement for the section as a whole, in spite of Dorsey’s best efforts.

Parallels Between the Pair

In spite of an unclear internal flow, there are strong echoes of section A in A’. In both, we find the Shulamite under the shade of an apple tree (2:3 and 8:5), and in both, she is in conflict with her brothers (1:6 and 8:8-9). In 1:6, the Shulamite complains that she has not been able to keep her vineyard, and in 8:12, we find her inviting Solomon into her now-cultivated vineyard. All these themes are unique to these two sections, as well as the specific form of the refrains in 2:6-7 and 8:3-4. Some commentators have even recognized that 8:5-14 follows a seven-point gender-alternation pattern similar to 1:2-2:7. Here is Davidson’s attempt:

a (introductory unnamed voice with rhetorical question about the) female (8:5a)
   b male (8:5b)
      c female (8:6-7)
         d male (brothers) (8:8-9)
      c’ female (8:10-12)

16 Partially because of the sudden and unprecedented interruption in 8:6-7, which doesn’t have a parallel earlier in the book. The end of the Song of Songs is full of references to earlier episodes in the book. Literally every verse from 7:10 to the end of the book, aside from 8:6-7, is a clear reference or quote from earlier. See the following rough list: 7:10 (2:16; 6:3); 7:11-12 (2:10-13; 6:11); 7:13 (2:3; 4:13,16); 8:1-5a (3:4-6); 8:3-4 (2:6-7); 8:5b (2:3); 8:8-12 (1:5-6); 8:13 (2:13); 8:14 (2:17; 4:6). The declaration of 8:6-7 is clearly exceptional, then, and designed to grab our attention, though I’m not sure what that means. Perhaps it’s the “moral” of the book, similar to “Fear God and keep His commandments” in Ecclesiastes.

17 See Dorsey, 210. Davidson, following Shea, makes a strong case for 8:3-14 being a mirror image of 1:2-2:7 based on the repetition of certain key images and phrases. See Davidson, 53. That still doesn’t solve the problem of an internal flow to A’, but it brings some structure to it.
Where this particular seven-point structure is legitimate or not, the section does at least have a dialogue feel to it, bringing more strength to gender-alternation way of reading the Song as a whole.

*Parallels with 1:2-2:7*

For our parallel between the chiasm in 1:2-2:7 and the chiasm of the book as a whole, 1:2-2:7 should correspond to 1:2-7. Drawing parallels between a section and a subset of that same section may seem a bit unnecessary, but just to be thorough, I’ll do so. Interestingly, if my suggestion that 1:2-4 begins a narrative that is expanded upon in 1:2-2:7, the parallel actually goes beyond simple identification of a section with itself. In verse 4, the Shulamite says, “The king has brought me into his chambers”, which is referenced again in 2:4 – “He brought me into the banqueting house”. This is the central theme of 1:2-2:7; the Shulamite is making eyes of Solomon, trying to make it into his chambers, and he allows her in.

On the other hand, we have 2:3-7 paired off with 8:3-14. This pairing is particularly strong, as these are the only two passages in the book where we find the Shulamite in the shade of an apple tree (2:3 and 8:5), and where this particular refrain is used (“His left hand... and his right hand...” followed by the exhortation to the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love). In both, the lovers also find themselves in a vineyard (8:12) or “house of wine” (2:4).

2:8-17 – 6:4-8:2 (B and B’)

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18 Davidson, 52. The pattern here is admittedly much weaker than in 1:2-2:7, mainly in a and b.

19 Interestingly, the wording changes slightly in 8:4, where ’im is replaced with mah. The word change is slight, but significant, leading me to think the exhortation is no longer a warning but an encouragement. In 8:4, the Shulamite may be saying “How/when will you awaken love?” And what comes immediately after the exhortation? The Shulamite is awoken under the apple tree.
The second parallel of my structure is much more debatable than the first. While B is an easily recognizable section\textsuperscript{20}, neatly encapsulated with a clear inclusio and narrative theme, B’ lacks the same surface-level clarity as section B. In spite of this, the two are strongly tied together. They’re both thick with strong garden imagery, specifically of the coming of the spring, which shows up nowhere else in the book. In both, Solomon is the primary speaker, but the Shulamite is silent in neither.

**Internal Structures**

Section B is marked off fairly clearly. It immediately follows the strong refrain of 2:6-7, and in 3:1, the setting shifts to a night-city scene. Internally, verses 8 and 17 also form a strong inclusion around a central song, sung by Solomon, where he urges the Shulamite to leave her home. The song itself is a panel structure, moving from an exhortation to rise up to references to voice/singing, and then to tender grapes.

\begin{itemize}
  \item a – the beloved as a gazelle leaping upon the mountains (8)
  \item b – the beloved is outside the Shulamite’s, looking in (they are apart) (9)
  \item c – Rise up and come away (10)
  \item d – Spring is past, voice of the turtledove (11-12)
  \item e – tender grapes (13a)
  \item c’ – Rise up and come away (13b)
  \item d’ – let me hear your voice (14)
  \item e’ – tender grapes (15)
  \item b’ – beloved is mine, and I am his; he feeds his flock among the lilies (they are united?) (16)
  \item a’ – the beloved as a gazelle leaping upon the mountains (17)
\end{itemize}

Though the ending of section B’ is clear enough with the refrain in 8:3-4, it begins immediately after the refrain of 6:3 – “I am by beloved’s, and my beloved is mine. He feeds his flock among the lilies.” This is not a particularly strong refrain, since in itself it doesn’t end any other macro-sections of the book. The shift in speaker, though, supports the section division. 5:2-6:3 was dominated by the speech and songs of the Shulamite, searching for her beloved in the city. In 6:4, we switch to Solomon’s songs of praise for the

\textsuperscript{20}Davidson points out several commentators who have included 2:8-3:5 in one larger section (see pp. 46-47), and there is definitely a point to be made there, especially when a parallel is drawn to 5:2-8. 5:2 seems to be an echo of 2:8-17, with Solomon approaching the Shulamite in her house after he had been outside (“my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of night”), and in both, the Shulamite begins the scene excited by “the voice of my beloved.”
Shulamite, and we move to the garden. The dialogue shift (Shulamite -> Solomon), combined with the scene change (city -> garden), and the refrain of 6:3 are enough to justify the division.

Section B’ is arranged internally in a panel structure. It begins with a wasf in 6:4-10 (marked off by the “awesome as an army with banners” inclusio). After that, someone, presumably the Shulamite, goes down to the garden to check if the fruit is ripe, but is interrupted by an exhortation to dance (6:11-13). Solomon steps in with another wasf (7:1-10), moving into another trip to the garden to see if the fruit is ripe (7:11-13). It is, and so they move on to her mother’s house (8:1-2).

a wasf – blessed by royalty (6:4-10)
   b Has the vine budded? Has the pomegranate bloomed? (6:11-13)
a’ wasf – “A king is held captive by your tresses” (7:1-10)
   b’ Has the vine budded? Has the pomegranate bloomed? (7:11-13)
   c to her mother’s house (8:1-2)

*Parallels Between the Pair*

In both B and B’, spring is the theme. In B, Solomon sings that spring has come. In 2:13, the vines have tender grapes (*semadar*) and give forth their fragrance (*natan reyach*). These exact phrases also appear in 7:12-13,

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21 The Hebrew is ambiguous, but the reference to chariots seem to indicate it is the Shulamite, given that she was compared to one back in 2:9. She is also clearly the one speaking in 7:11-13, a repetition of 6:11-13.
22 Verse 13 can be translated “turn, turn, O Shulamite, turn turn, that we may look upon you.” In her response, she speaks of the “dance of the two camps”, and Solomon proceeds to begin his next song of praise describing her feet. This makes verse 13 read like an exhortation to dance. In fact, the section as a whole is structured around back-and-forth dialogue, culminating in 7:10 where the Shulamite interrupts Solomon and completes his sentence for him. It’s this scene especially that makes me think the Song of Songs should be interpreted as a stage performance, a song and dance between two main actors (along with the twin choruses of brothers and daughters of Jerusalem). I don’t particularly like musicals, but I can’t help reading Song of Songs as one.
23 The parallel between b and b’ here is very strong, as the Hebrew is virtually identically when speaking of the vines and pomegranates.
24 This seems a strange ending given the optimism of 7:11-13. But the imperfect verbs in the Hebrew are ambiguous here, and there seems to be a chance that the proper translation is one of optimism instead of hopeless dreams (“I will” instead of “I would”). Perhaps the point of 8:1 is that she is asking who will give Solomon to her as a brother. And the answer? Her mother.
25 Many of the parallels here come from Davidson, 54-55. He recognizes the connection between 2:8-17 and 7:10-8:2, but given his much more detailed structure, fails to extend the parallel to 6:11-13.
where the vines again have tender grapes, and the mandrakes give forth their fragrance. In B, Solomon says that flowers “appear” (literally “are seen” in the Hebrew). In B’, the Shulamite goes down “to see” the garden (6:11), and later calls out to Solomon “let us see” if the vine has budded (7:12).

The theme of “seeing” goes beyond the garden, though. In 2:14, Solomon calls out “Let me see your face...for...your face is lovely.” In 6:12, the Shulamite is exorted by the companions to dance, “that we may look upon you.” In addition to that, B’ is mostly taken up by Solomon’s twin songs of praise for the Shulamite. In B, there were twin exhortations “Rise up, my love (ra’yah), my fair one (yaphah), and come away” that he might see her. Now, in B’, she has left her home, she has risen up and come away, and so now Solomon sees her. Appropriately, there are now two songs of praise, corresponding to the two exhortations, the first opening with “You are beautiful (yaphah) my love (ra-yah).”

And now that Solomon has beheld his love, the main tension of the scene has shifted. In 2:8-17, Solomon wished only to see the Shulamite’s face, to hear her voice. Now that he sees her (7:1-7), he wants to touch and taste her (7:8-9). Continuing on this theme, in 7:11-13, Solomon hears the Shulamite speak; he smells her mandrakes and sees the pleasant fruits at the gates. But v. 13 is not relieving. “The pleasant fruits...which I have laid up for you, my beloved” call for the obvious next step – for Solomon to seize the pleasant fruits and taste them. And this is exactly what we find in 8:1-2, where the Shulamite is no longer lamenting her

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26 Davidson, 55, in a detailed parallel of 2:10-15 to 7:11-13, points out that these phrases appear nowhere else in the book, strengthening the connection. To be entirely fair, though, natan reyach is also a reference back to 1:2-4 and 1:12.
27 The themes of seeing are definitely connected. Seeing the garden and its ripe fruits is to behold the bride and her beauty (cf. 4:1-5:1). But the “seeing” has moved in B’.
28 The twin seeing/hearing themes seem especially important in Song of Songs. Not only do they show up in 2:8-17, but in 5:2-8, the Shulamite hears the voice of her beloved, but when she opens the door, is unable to see him, and he fails to give an answer when she calls out (she can no longer hear him). When they are together, the lovers spend their time singing about each other’s beauty, which is to say, they hear each other see each other. While one lover looks upon the other, they sing, meaning the other gets to enjoy hearing.
29 Throughout the book, three of the senses – smell, sight, and hearing – are all important in bringing the lovers together (they smell, hear, and see each other, the source of their mutual attraction). Once together, they enjoy the sights, smells, and songs, but also move to the more consummate senses of taste and touch (the repeated left hand/right hand refrain of 2:6-7 and 8:3-4 is another example of this). And when you think about it practically, it’s fairly obvious – you see, smell, and hear before you touch and taste.
inability to see or hear Solomon (as she had in the twin city scenes) but rather her inability to seize and kiss Solomon – touch and taste.\(^{30}\)

**Parallels with 1:2-2:7**

2:8-17 is the first section where Solomon is the primary speaker, which corresponds to 1:8-11. The connection here is primarily narrative rather than in repeated words and phrases.\(^{31}\) In 1:8-11, the Shulamite has just asked Solomon where he feeds his flock, that she might approach him. He answers by telling her to “come out (yatsa’) after the footsteps of the flock”. This is the second step of the main narrative of the Song of Songs, when, after Solomon notices the Shulamite, he calls her away from her people. For the book as a whole, 2:8-17 represents this same step, being the strongest presentation of the “come out/away” theme. Twice, Solomon repeats “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away”.\(^{32}\)

The second parallel is between 2:2 and 6:4-8:2. 2:2 is an entirely unique verse in Song of Songs. Though lilies certainly show up often, the phrase “lily among thorns” shows up nowhere else, and neither does “my love among the daughters”. In fact, the word “daughter”, aside from repeated references to the “daughters of Jerusalem/Zion”, only shows up in reference to the Shulamite one other time: in 7:1, where Solomon refers to her as a “prince’s daughter”.

This is significant. Daughters, at least in Song of Songs, are royalty. The daughters of Jerusalem are a sort of royal entourage that gradually accepts the Shulamite as the king’s wife. In 1:5-6, the Shulamite tries to convince them not to judge her for her dark skin and poor social status. In 5:9-6:3, they agree to help the

\(^{30}\) This is one argument in favor of a parallel between 2:8-3:5 and 5:2-8:2 as a whole. In both, Solomon approaches the Shulamite, calls her out of her room, and is found after a long search. In the end of both, they end up in her mother’s house, where they embrace and kiss. In other words, we move from sight, hearing, and smell to touch and taste. Both 1:5-2:7 and 3:6-5:1 follow the same sensual movement.

\(^{31}\) One possible echo is in “Your cheeks are lovely” (1:10) and “your face is lovely” (2:14). The word translated lovely is na’veh, which is a fairly rare book in Song of Songs, appearing only five times. The others are in 1:5, 4:3, and 6:4.

\(^{32}\) The only other significant reference to this is in 4:7-8, when the Shulamite is arriving from Lebanon. It seems redundant, given the context, so it comes across almost as a ceremonial repetition, a reference back to something that’s already happened.
Shulamite find Solomon, calling her “fairest among women”. And immediately after that, in section B’, the Shulamite is being exalted to royal status (6:8-10, 7:1, 7:5).

To say, then, that the Shulamite stands out among the daughters, as Solomon does in 2:2, is to say that she has become part of the royal household. And not only that, but she is the most beautiful, the highest of all the daughters – his woman. Consequently, the only place the word “Shulamite” appears is in B’, where she is being exalted to her royal status. She has received approval from the queens, concubines, and virgin daughters of Jerusalem. She is a lily among thorns, the “perfect one” among the daughters (6:9), a “prince’s daughter” (7:1), Solomon’s “only one” (6:9), the Shulamite, and Solomon is held captive by her beauty (7:5).33

In addition to the royalty implications, these are the only places where Solomon goes out of his way to point out that the Shulamite is the most beautiful among the women. Aside from three references to the “fairest among women” phrase (1:8, 5:9, and 6:1), nowhere else in the book does this “one out of many” theme appear.

Before moving on from B’, there is one more parallel to draw back to 2:2. As I’ve referenced several times, the second half of Song of Songs is the most difficult to subdivide. It is strongly intertwined, and there are no entirely obvious section markers. Instead, section C’ continues on the theme of D (in C’, Solomon is knocking on a locked door, calling her “sister”, which is exactly what he was just doing at the end of D). We then move onto the Shulamite’s only wasf on Solomon’s beauty and end with the Shulamite desiring to go to the garden to see Solomon. B’ picks up on both of those themes, with the lovers traveling to the garden, Solomon singing two wasfs as they go. D had started the wasfs, bringing all three sections together as a tightly-connected dialogue between the two lovers.

This is exactly what we find in 1:15-2:3, as I pointed out earlier. By the time we reach v. 15, the dialogue has intensified, and the couple sings a tight call-and-response, each section thematically blending with the next. In addition to the blending of themes, 1:15-2:3 contain the main songs of praise for 1:2-2:7, comparable to the

33 This same idea of the woman’s exaltation into the royal household shows up in Psalm 45:10-15.
wasfs of 4:1-8:2. They are much shorter in 1:15-2:3, but they serve the same purpose, as no other sections in 1:2-2:7 highlight the beauty of the lovers nearly as much.  

3:1-5 – 5:2-6:3 (C and C’)

By far, the clearest parallel in the Song of Songs is the connection between the two city scenes. In both 3:1-5 and 5:2-8, the Shulamite awakens at night in her bed, searches through the city for Solomon, and has an encounter with the watchmen. Both conclude with the Shulamite speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem – in C with an exhortation not to awaken love, and in C’ with a call for help to find Solomon.

Internal Structures

Section C is clearly marked off with a scene shift in 3:1, and the strong refrain of 3:5. It is a short, dense poem in the Hebrew, thick with word repetition. The words “seek” (baqash) and “find” (matsa’) and repeated 3 and 4 times, respectively. Phrases like “the one my soul loves” and “I sought him, but I did not find him” are also repeated. The action also moves quickly, creating a very tense, fast-moving scene.

a  By night on my bed
   b  I sought the one my soul loves
      c  I sought him, but I did not find him
a’ Behold, I will arise and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares
   b’ I will seek the one my soul loves
      c’ I sought him, but I did not find him.
  a” The guards found me, those who go about the city
   b” Have you seen the one my soul loves?
      c” Shortly after I passed by them, I found the one my soul loves.
       c”’ I held him and would not let him go  
  a”’ Until I had brought him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me
       [refrain follows in verse 5]  

34 Consequently, on the whole-book level, 2:8-3:5 contains very little emphasis on the beauty of the lovers. There is plenty of action – just as there is in 1:8-14 – but very little exposition of beauty, at least in comparison with the latter half of the book. In the first half, the couple is focused on being united; only once they are united is there time for all the singing about noses, eyes, and lips.
35 This parallels “I sought him but I did not find him”, poetically very similar in the Hebrew.
Section C’ begins with a similarly abrupt beginning in 5:2, “I sleep, but my heart is awake – the voice of my beloved!” I covered the justification for a section break in 6:3 in my discussion of section B’, but there is also internal evidence in the internal cohesion of 5:2-6:3. The section begins with the Shulamite searching through the city and moves into a dialogue between the Shulamite and the daughters of Jerusalem, which comes to a completion in 6:3. The section can be divided broadly into two panel structures.

5:2-8
a My heart is awake – the voice of the beloved! He arrives and knocks. (5:2a)
   b He sings (5:2b)
      c Their hands rise to the door, dripping with myrrh, yearning for love (5:4-5)
   a’ She opens, and he is gone. Her soul leaps. She seeks and cannot find. (5:6a)
   b’ She calls, but he does not answer (5:6b)
      c’ She is seized and beaten by the watchmen. “Tell him I am lovesick!” (5:7-8)

5:9-6:3
a What is your beloved more than another beloved? (5:9)
   b Praise of Solomon as a garden, centering around bed of spices and lilies (5:10-16)
      a’ Where has your beloved gone, what we may seek him with you? (6:1)
      b’ To his garden, to the bed of spices and lilies (6:2-3)

Based on these internal structures of C and C’, the obvious question that follows is why we’re uniting them sections into one macro-section. Davidson, for example, questions the very idea of distinguishing between micro- and macro-sections and splits 5:2-6:3 into 5:2-8 and 5:9-6:3. Davidson recognizes the refrain language in 5:8 from 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4, and so he concludes that this two must be a section-ending refrain. 3:1-5 and 5:2-8 seem to parallel each other nicely, and both end with the same refrain, so why muddy the waters by bringing in 5:9-6:3?

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36 Because of the constant parallels in the Hebrew, one can also find a chiasm and a panel structure in these verses.
37 In a’ and b’ there is a reversal, or an absence, of what was in a and b (the beloved, his voice, etc.) In both sides, the poetry grows to a height of intensity in c and c’, in both cases leaving the Shulamite yearning for love. By v. 8, we’ve reached the height of hear yearning and desperation, and so she reverses the refrain. Now she demands that the daughters of Jerusalem help her to find Solomon – to awaken love. And they comply, bringing relief to the tension.
38 See Davidson, 47n15.
39 Davidson, 50n27.
The problem is that this is too simplistic. While the language is certainly similar, the author draws a parallel precisely so that he can shatter our expectations. In both the preceding exhortations to the daughters of Jerusalem, the situation was different. There, the lovers were united (2:4-6 and 3:4). The refrain began in a moment of relief and rest, and is rather long-winded, taking the time to call upon the gazelles and does of the field before making the charge clear.

When the familiar refrain begins in chapter 5, though, we are at the height of tension. The Shulamite has been frantically searching for her love, yearning for union with him, and she has not found him yet, the complete opposite of the previous city search. As a result, the refrain has changed. Whereas before, the Shulamite took her time, now she jumps immediately into it. “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!” There is no talk of gazelles or does and no hint of rest. Instead, the Shulamite is desperate – the refrain has become a passionate cry for help instead of a restful exhortation.

After a cry like this, we expect an answer, and this is exactly what we get. “What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?” Immediately the daughters of Jerusalem respond to the charge, continuing the dialogue that was started in v. 8.

This fits with the overall parallel between C and C’. C’ is primarily an expansion, an elaboration on C. 3:1-4 sets up an intense, but brief search scene in the city. We begin in the Shulamite’s bedroom, move to the city, and are back again in four verses. The watchmen are nothing more than a nuisance, and it is only a short time after passing by them that the lovers are reunited. And with them united, we move to an exhortation to the daughters of Jerusalem to end the scene.

Not so in C’. Each part of the city scene is expanded, offering more details elaboration. We start with the Shulamite in her bed, with the added detail that she is half-asleep (“I sleep, but my heart is awake”). Instead of simply rising up and seeking Solomon, in C’, he sings to her, calling for her to open. In C, we learn that Solomon is gone after only a line; in C’, it’s five verses until we find out.
The city search scene in C’ itself is also more intense. Before, she sought him but did not find him. In C’, she is calling after him loudly, desperately listening for a response. In the first scene, when the watchmen found her, she was allowed to ask them a question then simply pass by. Here, they beat her and tear her veil away. They leave her beaten and wounded, and she cries out to the daughters of Jerusalem for help. Predictably enough, the dialogue with the daughters of Jerusalem has also expanded. Before, it was a brief, restful exhortation. Now we have an eleven verse call and response before we reach a restful moment in 6:2-3.

3:1-5
1a – By night on my bed, I sought the one I love
1b-2 – I sought him, but I did not find him. She rises to go about the city, seeking and not finding.
3-4 – The watchmen find her and let her go. She finds Solomon.
5 – O daughters of Jerusalem, do not awaken love.

5:2-6:3
2-5 – She awakes, hearing the voice of her beloved. He calls out to her to open the door. Their hands approach the opening, ready to be united.
6 – She opens the door for her beloved, but he had turned away and was gone. She seeks him, but cannot find him, calling out for him but hearing no response.
7 – The watchmen find her. They beat her, wound her, and tear away her veil. She is still alone.

5:8-6:3 – O daughters of Jerusalem, help me find my love!
Who is he, that’s worth the effort? He is altogether beautiful.
Where is he, that we can help? He is in his garden.

Parallels with 1:2-7

Section C parallels the second Shulamite scene in the introductory section of Song of Songs, 1:12-14. This is admittedly one of the weakest parallels – a tense city search scene is being compared to a rather serene bedroom scene – but remember that we’re not looking for explicit repetition in these parallels. We’re looking for thematic echoes and similar narrative movements.

The most striking parallel is the fact that both scenes occur at night. They both also move to the bedroom by the end – 1:12-14 is there by verse 13; 3:1-5 starts there, moves through the city, and returns in
verse 4 (“the chamber of her who conceived me”). These are scenes of union in bed at night – both strongly euphemistic (“a bundle of myrrh… that lies all night between my breasts” and “I held him and would not let him go… into the chamber of her who conceived me”).

Both scenes also move in the same direction narratively. They are preceded by the “come out/rise up my love” scenes of 1:8-11 and 2:8-17, and they both show the Shulamite following Solomon’s instructions. 1:12-14 opens with the Shulamite at the king’s table, indicating that she came out, away from her brothers’ vineyards, and followed him (v. 8). 3:2 is more direct. Solomon told the Shulamite to “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:10, 13). So what does she do next? “I will rise now…I will seek the one my soul loves” (3:2). Solomon told his love to rise up and come after him, and so she has risen up and sought him who she loves.40

The second city scene corresponds to 1:16-2:1. The parallel here is primarily with the second half of C’, the Shulamite’s dialogue with the daughters of Jerusalem. The Shulamite’s only wasf in Song of Songs is in this dialogue (5:10-16), and 1:16-2:1 begins with the Shulamite’s only wasf-like language of 1:2-2:7 – “Behold, you are handsome, my beloved! Yes, pleasant!” Both also revolve around garden language more than any other sections in the book where the Shulamite is the primary speaker.41 In 1:16-2:1, their bed is green, and the Shulamite is a rose and a lily. In C’, both responses center around beds of spices and lilies, and Solomon turns out to be in his garden in 6:2.42

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40 The second city scene does much the same thing. In 5:2, Solomon is knocking on her locked door, which is exactly what he was just doing a few verses ago.

41 This seems like a dubious claim at first, but the most intense garden/nature scenes are all scenes where Solomon is speaking (B, D, and B’). Her other scenes are full of vineyards, apple trees, and a city. The same goes for 1:2-2:7. 1:2-7, 1:12-14, and 2:3-7 all focus on vineyards, as well as fields (where flocks reside), the bedroom, and the apple tree, respectively. None focus on gardens.

42 Section C’ is a perfect example of the mixing of themes and structure in Song of Songs. Not only is garden imagery strong, but we also find royal imagery (“chief among then thousand”), architectural imagery (“pillars of marbles”), and Lebanon imagery (his hair is black as a raven, his countenance like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars). The further we go in the book, the more common this sort of mixing of themes becomes.
In addition to the garden and wasf themes, two of the three uses of the word “cedar” are in these sections (1:17 and 5:15). Lilies also play a big role in both passages (2:1 and 5:13, 6:2-3). In addition, color seems to play an important role. In nearly every verse in 5:10-6:3, there is a reference to something white – doves washed in milk in 5:12, lilies in 5:13, ivory in 5:14, pillars of marble in 5:15, and lilies again in 6:2-3. Two of these are also paired with something red – he is white and ruddy in 5:10, and we find ivory inlaid with sapphires in 5:14. This is an echo back to 2:1, where she is a lily and a rose.

3:6-5:1 (D)

Section D is recognized by many commentators, at least in part, as the center and climax of the Song of Songs. It is an extended wedding scene, beginning with a wedding processional (3:6-11), followed by a song of love from Solomon as he sees his bride (4:1-7), and ending with another song of praise by Solomon as he moves closer to his bride, calling her “my sister, my spouse” (4:8-5:1). The scene ends with 4:16-5:1, where Solomon enters into his garden to eat and drink the fruit, and someone calls out “Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!”

Internal Structure

We start with 3:6-11, one of the most difficult passages in Song of Songs to handle structurally. There is no obvious thematic parallel in the book, and this is the only extended passage from a perspective other than Solomon or the Shulamite. Davidson parallels 3:6-11 with 5:9-6:3 under the vague title of “Praise of the

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43 The other is in 8:9. There is also a clear reference to cedars, without naming them, in 3:9.
44 Four out of the eight references to “lily” in the Song of Songs occur in these two sections.
45 Wendland quotes Lloyd Carr as saying that “these six verses pose one of the most difficult questions in the interpretation of the Song”. Wendland, “Love Lyrics,” 25.
46 It’s clearly not Solomon (he’s referenced in v. 11), and the “this” in “who is this” is feminine, referring to the Shulamite, eliminating her as the speaker.
Groom”; he justifies this by claiming 3:6-11 is all about praise of the groom’s palanquin.47 He does point out some legitimate linguistic parallels (“pillars” shows up in both sections), but thematically, the comparison is strained, and equally valid parallels can be drawn to 4:1-5:1. Edwin Webster has another very detailed structure, and he fails to find any parallel at all for 3:6-11, calling it an unparalleled “interlude”.48

In spite of the unparalleled scene, 3:6-11 is still strongly tied to the rest of the D in its wedding theme. Solomon is waiting in Jerusalem with his mother, watching his bride arrive in the palanquin he built for her. It is a wedding processional, and nowhere else in the book, aside from in 3:6-11 and in 4:8-5:1, is there any talk of weddings. The narrative of the section as a whole fits – we have a wedding processional (3:6-11), a song of praise from Solomon when his bride arrives, and a second song, more intimate song moving to the union of the lovers, where Solomon calls the Shulamite his “spouse” six times. To break the section down further and draw parallels to other portions of the Song seems to ignore the obvious: we’re at a wedding.

In addition to the wedding theme, there’s also a strong geographical movement in section D. We begin watching the wedding processional moving out of the wilderness toward Solomon. In the six “spouse” mini-poems of 4:8-5:1, we find that same movement. 4:8 re-iterates the “come out” motif, and in v. 9-11, she seems to be arriving (he sees and smells her, and he kisses her in v. 11).49 From there, they move to unlocking the garden (sexual consummation?), still mentioning the fact that she has arrived from Lebanon (“streams from Lebanon” in 4:15). In this way, section D traces the movement of the Shulamite from her home to be with Solomon, and when they are united, it introduces the major theme of the second of the book – gaining access to the garden.

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47 Davidson, 56-57.
48 Davidson, 46.
49 Also, when she arrives, she still smells like Lebanon (v. 11), which is a good thing. Solomon does not want to rid her of all traces her heritage, which is why he starts looking like Lebanon in the very next section. See Davis, 267-8 for further discussion on the Lebanon themes in the Song.
The movement through section D is primarily linear, not chiastic, but a fairly strong parallel may be drawn between 3:6-11 and 4:8-5:1. Both re-iterate the “come out” motif, and they are the only two sections that mention marriage. They both also mention myrrh, frankincense, and perfumes (“all the merchant’s powders” in 3:6 and “all spices” in 4:10), and they both specifically mention Lebanon. The main problem with this is that it places the wasf of 4:1-7 at the center, which seems an odd climax for the wedding scene, let alone the whole book.  

Parallel with 1:2-2:7

The parallel between section D and 1:15 is actually the simplest of all these parallels. Solomon’s praise in 1:15 is repeated almost word-for-word in 4:1. This exact praise appears nowhere else in the book.

Conclusion

The Song of Songs is a frustrating book. It ends on a very unsatisfying note, with the lovers yet again apart. It creates a cycle of itself, looping in and out of union and consummation, leaving the lovers forever unsettled, forever seeking, yet, at the same time, forever in the bliss of that dance. The challenges and labors of love don’t stop when a couple comes together initially, and the Song of Songs reflects that well. Love is not an initial trial followed by a lifetime of stillness. Love’s garden scene is not an image of serene stillness, with two lovers lying beneath a tree next to a calmly rippling stream. Instead, those moments of rest always burst into passionate songs (“Set me as a seal upon your heart!”) or difficult, painful trials (“If you find my beloved, tell him I am lovesick!”). Or, put another way, love doesn’t end in the bedroom, with the lovers finally, and ever after, at rest. Instead, like the Song of Songs, it begins there.

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50 Dorsey finds a much more elaborate, seven-point chiasm in section D. See Dorsey, 204-7.

51 This problem isn’t too big of a deal, though, if we take into account Dorsey’s observation that many chiasms in the Song of Songs don’t operate like normal chiasms, not actually finding their climax in the center. See Dorsey, 206n22.
The same holds true for interpreting the poem. The Song of Songs plays with its readers. In nearly every line, the poetry parallels earlier images in the book, weaving together each theme and motif until they’re practically inseparable. And that’s just the internal structure. Take it together with the allusions to other portions of the Old Testament – the temple liturgy, Israel’s exodus from Egypt, Solomon’s own life – and the constant parallel to the relationship between God and man, and you have a breathtakingly beautiful poem that we are far from grasping.

At some level, that’s the point. Tracing whispers, echoes, and shadows through the Song of Songs can be a maddening experience. Just at the point when you feel you’ve discovered the key to the book, when you reach toward the door to unlock all its secrets, you find nothing on the other side and go shouting through the city streets, desperate to find the answer. At other, less frantic times, when you’re able to submit to the complexity and depth of the Song and let it wash over you instead of trying to seize it, it’s astounding the beauty you encounter. Clearly something is going on here, something very intentional and beautiful; though we can’t put that something into words and structures very well, Solomon apparently was able to.

52 Take, for example, the Shulamite’s mother’s house. In 3:4, they go there after the city scene, which is followed by the exhortation refrain and “Who is this coming out of the wilderness” in 3:6. We find this exact narrative movement in 8:2-5. But here, the city scene is chapters back (5:2-8), with a lengthy garden-exploration scene in between (5:9-7:13). Is this exploration through the garden how the Shulamite brings her lover to her mother’s house? Is her mother’s house the garden itself? That would seem absurd, because the Shulamite is the garden (5:1). And yet, she apparently is, as “his garden” is apparently apart from the Shulamite in 6:2, and she has to go check it in 6:11-13 and 7:11-13. And in 8:5, there is a particular apple tree where her mother brought her forth; is this her mother’s house? And what does it have to do with the apple tree in 2:3, which is Solomon himself? Or the palanquin of 3:7-11, which follows the first “Who is this coming up out of the wilderness” line from 3:6 – how does that play in? Like I said – maddening. But it’s a good maddening. Like the insanity of love, whereby a man would give up all the wealth of his house (8:7). Which makes it odd that Solomon is receiving money in 8:12, and that he apparently still has his house with all his wealth (2:4)...

53 This metaphor can extend far too long for comfort, because I’m fairly certain some city watchmen beat me a few times and made away with more than few chiasms.
Bibliography


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