Scholia on the Song of Songs

Origen of Alexandria (c. AD 240–250)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

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Preface

(From the Vatican Catena, titled: “Epitome of selected expositions on the Song of Songs, by Procopius, Christian sophist, from the voice of Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria, Origen and Philo of Carpasia, Apollinarius, Eusebius of Caesarea, and various others, namely Didymus, holy Isidore, Theodoret and Theophilus.” — Mai, Class. Auct., vol. IX.)

Section 1

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” She says: let him not betroth me through the prophets, but let him speak with me himself, by spiritual perception. John speaks of this perception when he says, “and our hands handled concerning the Word of life.” She says this as one who has heard what the prophets said: “The king desired your beauty”; and elsewhere: “As a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so the Lord will rejoice over you.” So whenever we search into some divine teaching and grasp it, let us think of ourselves as kissed by the mouth of the bridegroom. And as long as we are at a loss, let us suppose that we are clinging to him and saying, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”

“For your breasts are better than wine, and the fragrance of your ointments is above all spices.”

That is, your virtues surpass the virtues we have, as in the words, “His virtue covered the heavens.” For he is wisdom itself and righteousness itself, but we are wise and righteous only by sharing in them, according to our choice and ability, as we come to live in the sweet fragrance of these. “Your name is ointment poured out. Therefore the young women have loved you.”

Perhaps she is prophesying about the name of Christ, the power that filled the world at his coming. So that, as Paul says, to some it became “a fragrance from death to death,” and to others “from life to life,” the bride would say: “Therefore all have loved you.” But it is not only the young women, who are renewed day by day and have no wrinkle or spot. The ointment was poured out so that it would no longer be kept silent, shut up in unspeakable secrets.

“The king has brought me into his chamber.” That is, she means that it is impossible [for any but] the soul worthy of love, or the Church, or the governing part of Christ [to enter]. Paul, having entered it, said: “But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the things freely given to us by God.” And what are these? “What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered the heart of man; these things God has prepared for those who love him.” For in the bridegroom’s chamber all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. She, going ahead of the young women, was brought in, and stood as queen at the right hand of

the king, in a garment woven with gold, as David says. But concerning the young women: "Virgins shall be brought to the king after her," and what follows.

"We will love your breasts more than wine; uprightness has loved you."

That is, even if now, because of our weakness, we love the wine more than your breasts, bridegroom, when we have improved we will love the breasts more than it. Wine, which gladdens the young women, stands for the things of the law; but perfection is the bridegroom's breasts. Then, as a defense for not yet loving the better things, she says, "Uprightness has loved you"; but we have not yet made our own paths straight.

"I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon."

The Church from the nations says this to the souls from Jerusalem, or to Jerusalem itself. She confesses her blackness, because she does not come from bright and enlightened fathers; for this reason she is compared to darkness. But she is beautiful because of the word she has received; and she is like the curtains of Solomon which she had, along with the other things he possessed in his glory.

"Do not look at me because I am blackened, because the sun has looked askance at me."

Or: because I was darkened by sin, Christ overlooked me on account of my unbelief; the Scriptures proclaim him the sun of righteousness.

"My mother's sons fought against me; they made me a keeper in the vineyards; my own vineyard I did not keep."

That is, the disciples of Christ who teach. They wanted to cleanse me from the evil thoughts [that come from him], and from the demons who work together with those thoughts. So they fought against them in me, since they are sons of the same mother as I am. I mean the mother of freedom. They were taken up into the remnant chosen by grace. I received the covenant that belongs to the Jerusalem above, and I am born again by promise. They did not first set her as a guard and then fight. Rather, by fighting first they made her fit to be placed in the vineyards as a guard... This is Moses and the prophets. Each of them was a full field, which the Lord blessed... And a vineyard: someone who has come to be among these, and does not keep his former condition, as a vineyard from Sodom, makes use of the present word. [The end of this sentence is uncertain.]

If you do not know yourself, O fair one among women, go out in the tracks of your flocks, and pasture your kids by the tents of the shepherds.

The saying much repeated among the Greeks, "Know yourself," which was handed down to the wise Solomon, has been taken up here in advance. By this saying the soul is now threatened by her lover and bridegroom. If she does not keep the beauty given to her in the image of God, she faces expulsion from within, and being placed among the last, pasturing

the perverse kids. “You will pasture them at the tents of the shepherds,” at one time this man’s, at another that man’s, like some vagrant woman, until you are taught by experience and turn back to the knowledge of yourself. The word also fits the Church. A person knows himself when he knows whether his disposition is good or bad. He may be far short of the road to virtue. Or he may be stretching forward to what lies ahead, forgetting what is behind. And if he has not yet received it or been made perfect, he may be drawing near to the borders of beauty. It is also a task to hold back from each action [and examine] how it came about, in every thought and word. By “women” he means souls that are not pure and not undistinguished. A soul that neglects her own knowledge could be tossed by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching, in the dice-play of men. Everywhere she would pasture her own perverse kids rather than pasture by the good word. This word is gentle, even if [it is never smooth?]. From now on she is already fair among women, counted together with the Church of God and more beautiful than the little ones in it. For the so-called women of the Church are incomparably better than the souls of the nations, which go after lovers, the opposing powers, and are called women but not virgins. How is she not better, who has looked up to her own Creator? “Go out” is like being handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, when someone is cut off from the Church. This comes after she was, as he said to the young women, brought in by the king into his chamber.

How have your cheeks been made beautiful like a turtledove’s? Paul also says that the Church, the bride, is members of Christ. Her face, so to speak, is those who surpass the rest in beauty and think nothing shameful. They bear in her the fruit of the modesty that belongs to self-control. Perhaps they were not beautiful before, but they changed so much that it is said to the bride, “How have your cheeks been made beautiful?”, since they have no spot or wrinkle. Perhaps it is also because she knows only the one God, for the turtledove too pairs with only one mate.

We will make you likenesses of gold with spangles of silver.

This means: “The silver was not plentiful, nor poured out.” Few things were spoken in secret by the prophets and the wise men of old. But when he came to stay, the true veil was seen by the one who sees. It was torn from top to bottom, so that the things inside the temple’s inaccessible places could be seen, when the one who lay down and slept like a lion and like a lion’s cub was raised. And after these things:

For then those who have been conformed to his resurrection will themselves receive gold in place of the likenesses. For they will be multiplied with silver and gold.

While the king is on his couch, my nard gave its fragrance.

She says: my nard, with which I anointed him, has given the fragrance of the bridegroom. She anointed the feet of Jesus with her own nard and wiped them with her hair. Then she received it back, changed by the fragrance of the bridegroom. When it reached her head and she perceived it, she says, “My nard gave me the fragrance of the bridegroom.” Therefore

the woman disciple's perfume filled the whole house, as if it came from the very skin of Jesus.

My beloved is to me a bundle of myrrh-oil; he will lodge between my breasts.

I have said that the bride's nard gave me the fragrance of the bridegroom. Now I say that my beloved breathes the scent of myrrh that is not poured out and does not give off its scent outside. It is bound up, and so it gives its sweetness more intensely. The Church from the nations first had a brother in the earlier people, since Christ, as far as the flesh goes, came from them. So she calls him the son of a brother, and of a bridegroom. Aquila, however, has rendered it "father's brother," so we must say that the people of old are the father of the Church from the nations. For the birth in God came from the law and the prophets that were among them, and from them our advance toward godliness began. With the bride's father given this meaning, the Savior is a brother, since like them he was born under the law.

"Behold, you are beautiful, my neighbor; behold, you are evil; your eyes are doves."

It seems that the bride has now seen the beauty of the bridegroom more clearly than before. Through her dove-like eyes she perceives the excellence of the Word and the surpassing quality of his beauty. Perhaps she also hints that the body is a bed shared by herself and the bridegroom, in which the soul, while still in it, is counted worthy of fellowship with the Word. So Paul says, "Our bodies are members of Christ." By saying "our" he means that the body belongs to the bride, and by saying "members of Christ" he means it belongs to the bridegroom. She calls the bridegroom "shady" because of the density of the insights found in the Word and in wisdom. And if the bed shared by both is flourishing, it is no wonder that it shows every good action done through the body as well.

Section 2

“I am the flower of the plain, the lily of the valleys.”

By “flower” he means what is on the way to becoming fruit. In the earthly place, called the plain, the bridegroom, the Word, is a flower with regard to what is still to come. For when the perfect comes, the flower will change into fruit. And since people cannot yet take in more than the flower, he says “on earth.” For this reason the bridegroom has become like a flower of the plain. He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, so that afterward we might be able to look upon his glory. Perhaps for the nobler and level places, called plains, he is a flower, and for those lower and more hollow he is a lily. Having said this, the bridegroom compares the one who is near him with other daughters, the remaining souls, who are thorns by comparison with her. Such are the souls that are not near the bridegroom. But the one who is near is a lily shining out in the midst of them.

“As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons. I desired his shadow and sat down, and his fruit was in my throat.”

It was fitting for the bride, now wholly formed by the bridegroom’s beauty, to say nothing about herself. Instead, in addition to what the bridegroom said about himself, she compares him to an apple tree, and their sons to trees of the forest. Out of the excess of her longing she even desires his shadow, and passes over the quality of its depth. She seems to say this to the young women, just as the bridegroom spoke earlier to his companions. By “sons” she means either the companions, whom she has compared to the bridegroom’s unfruitful trees, or those who are strangers to him. “In his shadow she desired and sat down.” Jeremiah too says in Lamentations: “The Spirit before our face, Christ the Lord, was caught in our corruptions, of whom we said, ‘In his shadow we shall live among the nations.’ ” How could his shadow not become the cause of life for us, who have been set free from the shadow of the law? For the law had a shadow of the good things to come. We are no longer under law but under grace, even if we are still under a shadow, though one very different. For after the present life we shall no longer see through a mirror and in a riddle, but shall behold the truth face to face. The bride will also say, “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee.” For our life is like a shadow, and the one from the nations sat in the shadow of death, and those who do not believe are sitting there still.

"Bring me into the house of wine."

She says this to the bridegroom's friends, the holy angels, or the apostles and prophets. It is almost as if she were saying, "Mix me together with the body of Christ."

"Support me with myrrh, surround me with apples, for I am wounded with love."

Symmachus published it this way: "Lay me down among vine-blossoms." That means among fragrant trees that bear good fruit and are in bloom, as opposed to the so-called worthless trees, which are fruitless or bear bad fruit. Some copies have: "Support me among unperfumed things." This must be understood either of believers who are not yet fit to be called members of her who has no spot or wrinkle, or of people outside the faith who are nonetheless decent. As for "pile me up with apples," Symmachus makes it clearer and says, "roll apples around me." The bride wants to rest with many apples rolled around her [or: him]. I think these apples are the fruit of the apple tree among the trees of the bridegroom's forest, so that she may share in their quality. "For I am wounded," she says, "by a love-charm," according to Symmachus, and "by the chosen arrow," according to Isaiah.

The voice of my beloved! Look, he is coming, leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills.

Some have assigned this to what comes before, but the Hebrew sets it as a separate section. It is clear that the bride is talking with the daughters of Jerusalem when she suddenly hears the bridegroom's voice. He is presumably speaking to some people. She perceives him on the mountains and hills near her place, and nothing about him is out of keeping with a young deer. Then, in his eagerness for the bride, he came near the house and appeared behind it. Next he leapt and reached the windows of the house, as though lovingly wanting to look in at her. Near the house where the bride is, many nets have been spread out, lying in ambush for the bride and those around her. The bridegroom, being stronger, tore through them and looked in through them. He calls the bride to come near. By what he has done to the nets he encourages her to despise them, since they are already torn. He also encourages her because the hard season has passed through them. He calls it winter, and it brought useless and violent rain. He urges her on, too, with the good things of the present season. He speaks of flowers, as in spring, and of the tending of vines. He describes the voice of the turtledove, the young figs on the fig tree, and the vines in blossom. He also describes the place where she will rest with him. He wanted her, once there, to appear to the bridegroom with her whole face, and to let him hear her sweet voice.

"My beloved answers and says to me: Arise, come, my neighbor, my beautiful one, my dove. For look, the winter has passed, the rain has gone and has departed on its own. The flowers have appeared on the earth. The time of pruning has arrived. The voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has put out its young figs. The vines are in blossom, they have given off their fragrance," and so on.

"Arise," he says, "from perceptible things to intelligible things, so that we may be together." "The rain has gone": we would say the rain was the time before the Coming, when God commanded the clouds to rain the word of the law and the prophets. This has ceased, since "the law and the prophets were until John." Spring and summer come after the Coming. There is no longer any need of rains, since the flowers that come through Christ have appeared on the earth. And since his Coming, the fig tree is not cut down as fruitless, as it was in the former time. For now it has put out young figs, and the vines are in blossom. That is why he says, "[as] branches of Christ we are a fragrance to God." "Arise, come, my neighbor, my beautiful one, my dove. And come, my dove, into the shelter of the rock, next to the outer wall. Show me your face, and let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely."

He wants the soul to rise above perceptible things. He calls the perceptible world the wall and outer wall, as of a city. So the soul that shares in the Word must be in the shelter of the rock, outside not only the city's wall but also the outer wall. Having come near in this way, she can behold the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, with unveiled face, obeying the one who says, "Show me your face." He also longs to hear her speaking, and admires her voice as sweet. The outer wall (proteichisma) is what Isaiah calls the "perideichon," saying, "he will set a wall, or an outer wall." So he wants her to go out from bodily things and to be not only at the wall, which I take to be the account of the world, but also next to the outer wall. This is the last principle of bodily things and the beginning of the incorporeal.

Catch for us the little foxes that ruin vineyards, for our vines are in blossom.

The bridegroom says these things to his friends. These are either angels or holy men, all who are teachers of the Church. The exhortation is given for the salvation of the vineyards. The crafty powers are to be caught, because they destroy the very beginning of the fruit's growth. Then the vines, tended by God, will be able to advance from first blossoming to the full ripening of the fruit. Because of free will, however, they are able either to bear fruit or not. Or perhaps the foxes are also people, who by the sharpness of a different teaching hinder those who have begun to run well. He wants these caught while they are still small, before they advance further in ungodliness. Once one has become a large fox, the friends cannot catch him, and only the bridegroom can hunt him down. But while they are just beginning to practice worse things, they are easily caught even by the friends. He may also be calling the vineyards "small", for a fox has no power against large ones.

My beloved is mine, and I am his. He pastures his flock among the lilies, until the day breathes and the shadows move.

Either the bride speaks to the companions of the bridegroom, as one who has no share with the foxes. "For they shared with us," she says, "blood and flesh, and we shared incorruption with him." Or she speaks this way because God comes to be in the soul, and the soul moves its dwelling into God. Paul speaks in the same way: the body is not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. For the bride, the Church, is the body of Christ, which

is in no way for fornication but always for the Lord. The Savior himself says, "Remain in me, and I in you." In the verses that follow, however, it is written the other way around: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." Or perhaps this is because the beginning of the kindness came from the bridegroom. If he had not shown himself to her, she would not have been devoted to the bridegroom. When she beheld his divine beauty, she was brought to a saving love, and after that, devoted to his beauty, she says, "and I am his." Then she took up the order the other way round. Before the perfect came, she said, "I am my beloved's." But when he is completely revealed and leaves nothing hidden, she perceives this and says, "and my beloved is mine." It is said somewhere in the prophecies, "The Lord himself will shepherd us forever," but not as he shepherds us now, among lilies in the midst of thorns. So after saying, "I am the flower of the field, the lily of the valleys," he adds, "As a lily among thorns, so is my neighbor among the daughters." And [note that he did not say this as if of the bride (?)]. For this reason he has also come: so that the flock being shepherded would not be caught on the thorns.

Until the day breathes and the shadows pass away.

For this reason he also dares to say mystically in Jacob, "By day I was being burned up by the heat." For in the heat of the present life we need the one who shepherds us, because of the noonday demons. For he says to the obedient person, "He will not be afraid of the noonday demon," and likewise, "The sun will not burn you." The one who bears our weaknesses and suffered pain on our behalf was himself burned by the heat for us, to buy us out from these things. In the same way he bought us out from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us. He also shepherds among lilies, and he does so until the shadows of life pass away, as in the words, "Our days pass by like shadows." Perhaps also, before his coming, through the law and the prophets, he shepherded among lilies while the scorching heat still lasted. After his coming he still shepherds, but not among lilies. For as if the day had already breathed out, it is said, "Beloved, you know that it is the last hour."

Turn back, be like, my beloved, a gazelle or a young deer of the stags, upon the mountains of the hollows.

Earlier the bride spoke to the young women; now she speaks to the bridegroom. So she takes up a likeness that suits the present moment: to the gazelle, because of its keen sight, and to the fawn of the deer, because it destroys the race of serpents. She asks him to do these things on the mountains of the hollows. When she says "Turn back," she means: turn back from existing in the form of God, and take up these things, coming among human beings out of love for me. Most of them, because of their wickedness, spend their lives in hollows. The "mountains of the hollows" are the righteous, who rise above evils. When the Word has turned back, he is likened to a gazelle among those who devote themselves to contemplation, and to a fawn of the deer among those who are more practical and who tear down the opposing powers. The word "or" in "or a fawn" is a disjunctive particle. Theodotion said, "on the mountains of incense," which still points to the saints.

Section 3

On my bed at night I sought the one whom my soul loved. I sought him and did not find him. I called him and he did not answer me. “I will get up now and go around in the city, in the markets and in the streets, and I will seek the one whom my soul loved.” I sought him and did not find him. I called him and he did not answer me. The watchmen who go around in the city found me. “Have you seen the one whom my soul loved?” It was only a little after I had passed from them that I found the one whom my soul loved. I took hold of him and did not let him go, until I brought him into my mother’s house and into the chamber of the one who conceived me.

Having spoken of the mysteries that come before the marriage, she now calls him at night to her bed. She wants to share in deeper secrets and to take part in a more perfect rest, for that is what the bed means. “At night” means in a time of quiet, far from the sight of those who cannot behold such things. The soul of the one who seeks the deeper things of the divine Word on the bed must first be wounded with love. The beloved waits for the longing one to rise, so that, having intensified her desire, he may show himself at the right time to her who has labored much in seeking him. For after saying, “On my bed at night I sought the one whom my soul loved,” and, “I sought him and did not find him,” she adds, “I will get up now and go around.” Let us then put aside lying on our backs and drowsy closed eyes, and rise, obeying the one who says, “Awake now, you who sleep.” The whole world is the city that she must go all around, coming to know it through contemplation, in the teachings of wisdom. For these are the markets, from which something useful may be taken. But she also goes into the streets, for wisdom is praised in the ways out, and in the broad streets she speaks with boldness. We too have been commanded to write on the breadth of our heart. Yet since she is seeking something greater than markets and streets can offer, she says she has not found him.

Even so, she keeps on toward the finding, and is found by those who guard the city and go around it. These would be the ministering spirits. They are the ones whom the Lord sent out to go through the earth. She asks them about the one she longs for, but no answer from them is recorded. We are taught that if we are going to find the one we long for, we must pass beyond them a little and become better than such angels. Peter seems to speak of them in his Letter, teaching the surpassing excellence of what is laid up for the perfect:

"things into which angels long to look." It is enough to pass such beings by only a little, so that the one longed for may be found; and once found, may be held; and once held, may be understood. For holding him is of no benefit unless constant meditation keeps hold of what has been understood. That is why she says, "I did not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house." So after departure from here, she may enter with him into the house of the Jerusalem above. There she brings in the more ordinary insights of the Word, but the more secret ones into the chambers of her who conceived the bride. The same one is shown to be both mother and the one who conceived, because the beginning of a person's formation lies in conception. She is called mother after the shaping, and after the completion of the one conceived.

Who is this who comes up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, from all the powders of the perfumer?

The soul that ascends in life and in word is very beautiful. It has fled the sins common among the many, which are said to go up out of the desert. The saying that the righteous person is the fragrance of Christ in every place, to those who are being saved, is understood in the same way as being "perfumed with incense". It is like stalks sending up sweet smoke, which delights the breathing of those who call them blessed.

Section 4

“Your teeth are like flocks of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing. All of them bear twins, and none among them is childless.” They bear twins in another sense too, because of the twofold understanding, the [literal] and the spiritual. “Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your speech is lovely.”

That is, let the preparation of the word be fiery, so that it can win the hearer. Or it points to the blood-filled and life-giving quality of the words that go out through the lips, as if they were dipped in the true drink of the blood of Christ.

“Your cheek is like a piece of pomegranate rind, apart from your silence.”

To the praise of self-control he adds praise for silence. The bride knows the times for lovely speech and the times for praiseworthy silence. And since a faithful spirit hides matters, the bride also hides her insights in the depths. They are like the seeds of the pomegranate, each in its own rank, [embodied] in the ruling part of the soul. That is why he added, “apart from your silence”. He means that the doctrines kept silent are like pomegranate seeds under its rind.

“Your neck is like the tower of David, built with Thalpiot. A thousand shields hang upon it, all the missiles of the mighty.”

Aquila has rendered Thalpiot as “battlements”, and Symmachus as “heights”. It follows from this that the tower above the battlements is wisdom. From wisdom, likewise, hang the shields, which are the doctrines that have been believed, which the Apostle called, in the singular, “the shield of faith”. The “missiles of the mighty” are the arguments that powerfully overturn the persuasiveness of those who oppose the truth. Instead of “battlements”, the fifth edition has “commandments”, interpreting the sense rather than the word. For unless commandments have been laid down first, it is impossible for true knowledge to be built up.

“Your two breasts are like two twin fawns of a gazelle, feeding among the lilies, until the day breathes and the shadows are moved.”

The ruling part of the soul is meant, as the breasts are in the case of a bride. It is the most keen-sighted part. That is why he compared it to two fawns of a gazelle grazing in beautiful

and fragrant places, signifying things understood by the mind and things perceived by the senses. He says fawns because now we know in part. But when the perfect comes, we put away childishness. That will be when the scorching heat of the present life ceases and a time of refreshment arrives, and the shadow is dissolved as well, for the present life is a shadow. For then we shall feed as full-grown people, no longer as fawns.

"You have captured our heart, my sister, my bride. You have captured our heart with one of your eyes, with one necklace of your neck."

The "necklace" is so called from being put on and fastened around the bride's neck. But if the bride's breasts remained as two fawns of a gazelle, how [were they made more beautiful]? As I said, it would not have been spoken in wonder about the faculty of the mind alone. The doubling of the wonder also showed the growth of beauty, as in "you have captured our heart", said a second time. The bride's garments are those who have put on Christ Jesus: bowels of compassion, kindness and humility. The lips are the teachers, and the honeycombs are good words. The prophets and apostles made the honeycomb and the honey.

"A garden shut up, my sister, my bride. A garden shut up, a fountain sealed."

A second time "a garden shut up" is said. The first refers to one who is making progress, the second to the perfect one, when his ruling part, once it has been [seen through], is stamped with the seal of the knowledge of God. Or else, now the bride is only a garden shut up, but in the age to come, because of her perfection and steadiness, she is also a fountain sealed. "For to everyone who has, it will be given, and he will have abundance." Now, then, Scripture [says] that she is simply a garden. Elsewhere, as if speaking of another, it adds also "a vegetable garden".

"Rise up, North wind, and come, South wind. Blow through my garden, and let my spices flow."

The bride seems to rebuke the North wind, having received authority from the bridegroom, who rebuked the wind. That is why it is said in the three evangelists that he rebuked the wind, and the winds simply obey him. So Christ takes up residence in souls, [driving out] the devil. About him it is said, "God will come from Thaman", that is, from the south.

Section 5

"Open to me, my sister, my neighbor, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night."

The words "to me" had to be added to "open," because it is possible to open to opposing powers as well. He seems to speak of the dew as a nuisance, and likewise of the drops of the night, since he appears to be looking for rest from them. This fits what came before. After the resurrection he entered when the doors were shut. He calls Thomas, and through him every unbelieving soul, to open its own heart and take in the full assurance of the resurrection. He calls him "perfect" because he said, "My Lord and my God." The dew points to the resurrection at dawn, when the dew comes down.

My beloved passed by; my soul went out at his word.

When the bride reached the bolt, ready to open her soul to the Word, he showed only his hand and some of his deeds and then passed by. The bride was not yet able to go on to see more. At the same time he is arranging to increase her love still further. The soul goes out and leaves its home in the body because of the Bridegroom, the Word, since it has its citizenship in heaven.

I sought him and did not find him; I called him and he did not answer me.

The soul keeps on seeking the Bridegroom, the Word. When it has found him, it is puzzled about other matters and seeks again. When it has contemplated those, it longs for the revelation of still others. And when it has obtained these, it prays that the Bridegroom will visit it again for the sake of yet more.

My beloved is white and ruddy, chosen out from ten thousands.

He is white because he is true God, and ruddy because of the incarnation.

His head is gold, pure gold; his locks are palm clusters, black as a raven.

The locks are compared to the clusters of the palm trees because of their thickness. They say these clusters take the place of seed for the female palms, so that the trees bear edible fruit. The locks are called black, and the word is meant as praise, because of the depth of the thoughts that grow, as it were, in place of hairs; they add to the Bridegroom's beauty. The

words “like a raven” were not chosen, I think, simply for the color. The raven is a symbol of the very deep ones, those filled with dark water in the clouds of the air. Job spoke of them: “Who has prepared food for the raven? Its young ones cry out to the Lord.” God has prepared much food for those whose minds are deeper. Their disciples are the young ones; they give themselves to prayers and cry out to the Lord. They wander about and search for the food that lies within the things they are puzzling over.

His jaws are like bowls of spice, putting forth perfumes.

By the jaws of Christ we should understand those who serve the word of God and spiritual food. Because of the fullness of fragrance in their good works and words, they are like bowls of spice. Because of the varied word rooted in them, drawn from every part of the composition of Scripture, they always bear fruit like a perfumer’s blend.

His belly is an ivory box, set upon a sapphire stone.

The belly of the Word means those who can hold the mysteries, that is, those who are hollow for receiving them. The “box” means those who are fit for keeping them safe. It is said to be ivory for its brightness and clearness. Such a belly, the ivory box, has been laid upon a sapphire stone, who is Christ. So all who are the belly of the Word take the Lord into the womb out of fear, and give birth to the spirit of salvation. For this reason the belly of the sacrifice in Leviticus is washed, so that nothing filthy is left in it.

Section 6

You are beautiful, you who are near me, like good pleasure, lovely as Jerusalem, a wonder like ranks drawn up in order.

The nearer she comes to the Bridegroom, the better the things she is compared to. To "beautiful," "lovely" and "near" he added "like Jerusalem." He also calls the perfected Church awe-inspiring. She is so in one way among the opposing powers, who cannot fix their gaze on the beauty of her face. In another way she is so among those lower than herself, who resemble the ordered arrangements in the universe. Symmachus reads not "ranks set in order" but "battle lines." For they are a wonder, like a formation of armies that strikes terror into enemies.

Turn your eyes away from facing me, for they have given me wings.

The Church looks upon the loveliness and beauty of Christ. With greater progress she is able to perceive his divinity, in that all things came to be through him. He rejoices in the power of her eyes, whether she is the Church or the soul that is the bride of the Word. He commands her to turn, on rational wings, toward the heights, so that she may reach the summit of perfection. Then she may see him winged, no longer coming down with her for her sake, and she may be able to say, "Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, now we no longer know him." So, he says, he has gone up together with your progress, since you have become able to look in, and no longer to seek anything further in the [incarnate] economy.

Your hair is like flocks of goats that came up from Gilead. Your teeth are like flocks of shorn sheep that came up from the washing. All of them bear twins, and there is none among them that is childless.

These things are said to the bride for the second time. The first time, I think, she appeared like this as far as was possible, while she was still in this present life. The second time is when she has come to perfection. For this reason he now only hints at it: "Your teeth are like flocks of shorn sheep." According to Aquila and Symmachus it reads, "Your teeth are like flocks of sheep," or "of ewe lambs." It was also fitting for this to be said at the point of perfection, so that "from the washing" refers no longer to the first washing but to the second. "Bearing twins" perhaps means that they are fed by the contemplation of things understood

by the mind and things perceived by the senses. It also means that none of them is barren of nourishment from the word, whatever its subject.

There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and young women without number. But my dove is one.

The young women have no number. This is not because they fall outside of counting, but because they are [worthy] to be numbered. Perhaps this is connected with the same thought: the difference here among the young women who share in Christ resembles what the Apostle says about the resurrection of the dead, when he speaks of "orders." For since death came through a man, through a man also came the resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive, each in his own order. For each person's life, word and disposition will cause him to be ranked ahead according to his worth.

Do not be surprised if the bridegroom had a beautiful bride, and perhaps a second and a third and more. If you also understand his brides, you will not be afraid to say from the Song: "There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and young women without number. But my dove is one." The bridegroom is the Word. The bride is a rational living being. [This is so] if a soul understands and the bridegroom takes the bride. But since this Word shares himself not with one soul but with many different ones, let him call the one who shares in a royal and conspicuous honor the perfect dove. To those who are royal but of lesser rank he gives the name queens, and this is why there are sixty queens. He also shares himself with other souls who are being trained by the fear of God. These are the concubines. There are still other souls of lower rank, who have less fear. These are the young women without number. So here too the bridegroom, [seeking] those who are beautiful and able to be his partners, came out from the heavenly bridal chamber. He shares himself with angels and archangels, who are the brides of the Word, and with thrones and lordships.

I went down into the garden of the nut tree, to see among the produce of the torrent, to see if the vine had flowered and if the pomegranates had bloomed. There I will give my breasts to you. [It is a land] like my soul. He set me among the chariots of Aminadab.

By way of example, the righteous are nut trees. They bear fruit through their priestly service to God, because they have a hedge around them. The nut has something bitter and bilious, and something else hard, like the trials. Trial may also be called a torrent, as in the saying, "Our soul has passed through a torrent." So the bride wanted to go down into the garden of the nut tree. That is, having fallen from the [things] of paradise into this toilsome life, she wanted to see some strange offspring of the winter, while a dark river flows. Or, according to Symmachus, she went down to learn whether the gorge of life has [autumn] fruit. She also wanted to see whether the vine had flowered, having escaped the winter and reached the spring, the time of the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. For that is when the vine usually blooms in Judea. She wanted to see also whether the pomegranates had bloomed, whose fruit is abundant and is enclosed in an orderly way by the rind. The bride's cheek is likened to this. "There," he says, "I will give you my breasts." That is, the

ruling part of the soul. But “my soul did not know,” she says, and it has failed the promise, being unable to do anything from itself. Yet I was not left behind in these things. For the father of Naasson, the ruler of my people, Aminadab, set me to be his chariots for himself. Naasson is interpreted as “serpent-like,” and he is the ruler of the bride’s people. This Aminadab, in Numbers, is the father of Naasson, the ruler of the tribe of Judah, who is taken over into Christ, because, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” so, she says, he set me as his chariots, himself driving my thoughts.

“Return, return, Shulammite; return, return, and we will look upon you.”

Section 7

"What will you see in the Shulammite? She who comes like dances of the camps." For she has come up out of the washing, like the ranks of angels.

Aquila and the fifth edition gave the name as "Soulabitis," meaning "at peace." The bride of the Word is the soul, the Church of Christ, because of the one who made the two one and broke down the dividing wall of the fence. But if the name is "Soulamitis," or "plundered" according to Symmachus, the bridegroom might say to her: "O plundered one, you who came under the power of the one who took you captive, return to your former noble birth." Now she receives the down payment, as the firstfruits of adoption, and the hope of the resurrection. [And if she receives the garment of the promise and of incorruption, the word "return" is repeated more often, as encouragement.] For then, he says, it is truly possible to see you. I think these words are spoken by the companions of the bridegroom to the bride, and the bridegroom answers them, "What will you see?" She is compared to an army of victors. For the one bride has within herself a multitude of camps. The members of the bride are many groups: they are choruses, because they sing praise to the divine in harmony and speak of God to him; and they are camps of peace, because they have brought down their enemies. But the scene is no longer one of war. The friends of the bridegroom call back the one who labored for those in the torrent and was plundered on their account (for "Shulammite" is interpreted "plundered"). They say, "Return, and we will look upon you." For they saw that her ill-treatment was not fruitless but ended in a good outcome. Those in the torrent had been condemned and handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. Now they have passed through the water of the torrent, and she led them with her as victors. She comes like choruses of camps, like men returning from war, dancing in various groups, singing songs of victory and saying, "Lord, you have crowned us as with a weapon of good will."

"The curves of your thighs are like [little necklaces], the work of a craftsman's hands."

In many places Scripture uses the thighs to speak of generation. So here it shows the bride's orderliness and fine proportion in the region of generation. It is like necklaces fashioned with virtue.

"Your navel is a rounded bowl, never lacking mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, fenced in with lilies."

Wisdom calls people together to the navel, the bowl, saying, "Come, drink the wine that I have mixed for you." This points to what is spiritual, [the spiritual Spirit]. The text also adds "a heap of wheat" to signify spiritual food. For "heap" means a gathering of virtues: a multitude brought together into one in harmony.

The lilies would also be the flowers of the grace of God, which she gathered from among the thorns of life.

"Your neck is like a tower of ivory."

Those who do what pleases the bridegroom were called towers. Their lookout is the contemplative soul, which watches everything from on high. The tower is of ivory because of its brightness and smoothness: nothing rough from wickedness is in the bride's neck. He no longer said, [concerning the dead], "those who feed among lilies," for they had come to be above the lilies in the midst of thorns. He also wants us, as lovers of learning, to have a soul that is the daughter of many wise men, and to be at the entrances of many studies, which he called gates. The abundance of the grace of knowledge among the teachers in you is so great, he says, that not only those near you enjoy their instruction, but even those outside and far away already enjoy the benefit of it.

"Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, looking toward the face of Damascus. Your head upon you is like Carmel, and the braid of your head is like purple: a king bound [in the galleries]."

Whoever has pure breathing, and through perceiving the divine Word is able to run after him at the fragrance of his ointments, is a nose that senses spiritual sweet smell. He keeps watch to see whether any teaching among the nations seems conspicuous. For Damascus stands for the nations, and the face is a symbol of what is conspicuous and fine. Frankincense is carried up to the altar of God. Carmel is interpreted "knowledge of circumcision." Whoever can say with boldness, "We are the circumcision," knows circumcision. And from the head, that is, from Christ, the knowledge of spiritual circumcision was born.

"Why were you made beautiful, and why made sweet, love, in your delights? This is your greatness: you were made like a palm tree, and your breasts like clusters of grapes." This is because your mind is lofty, and nothing earthly is carried along with it.

The bridegroom says this in wonder at her change for the better. A good balance of the elements produces health in bodies. In the same way, a kind of health and beauty comes to the soul from its impulses and aversions. The bride was ugly through wickedness, but she has changed through virtue into beauty. She was bitter, but she has become most pleasant and sweet to him. So he says that, as lavish feasting is the desired thing in bodily delights, love is the desired thing for those who enjoy spiritual delight. [In the other versions the pronoun "your" is placed differently.] He might be saying: "You take more delight in love than in the other fruits of the Spirit, so that for love's sake you bear all things and endure

all things." Some bodies are small and others large, and in the same way a soul is great or small in proportion to what it accomplishes.

That is, he says, your thoughts are nourishing and good to drink, and not at all sour like unripe grapes.

"Then I will go up into the palm tree. I will take hold of its heights, and your breasts will be like clusters of the vine. The scent of your nose will be like apples, and your throat like good wine, going straight to my beloved, [being made fit] for my lips and teeth."

Because she has been likened to a palm tree, she calls the bridegroom a palm tree, having understood the height and greatness of the Word. She hoped to go up to this height at the end of the songs, when the bride is perfect. Then she will also take hold of the bridegroom's breasts, which stand for the closely packed teachings. That is why they are likened to clusters of the vine, of which the Savior said, "I am the true vine." What comes out of the hidden things of the Word guides and gladdens so much that one can speak when he should, to whom he should, and as much as he should. The lips show speech, and the teeth show restraint in speech. This is in line with the saying, "Make a door and a bar for your mouth, and a measure and a weight for your words." In such people not only are the thoughts secure, but the lips also are bound by discernment. The good wine is the one brought out of the good treasure of the heart.

"I am my beloved's, and his turning is toward me."

This is said of her who has been made perfect: nowhere will he find rest of every kind, wherever he turns himself, as he does with me. "Come, my beloved, let us go out into the field. Let us lodge in the villages. Let us rise early for the vineyards. Let us see whether the vine has flowered, whether the henna blossom has bloomed, whether the pomegranates have bloomed."

The bride makes her appeal on behalf of the lesser ones, asking him to go out from the innermost, blessed dwelling places to look after them. For these are the field, the villages, the vineyards and the pomegranates.

Section 8

“When I find you outside, I will kiss you, and indeed they will not despise me. I will take you along. I will bring you into my mother’s house, into the chamber of her who conceived me. I will give you spiced wine to drink, from the juice of my pomegranates.”

She found him when he had stepped out from his high place of watching, and she embraced him.

“I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and the forces of the field: why do you stir up and rouse up love until it wishes?”

This is already the second time she has adjured them. But earlier, in her doubt, she put “if” first. Now she has taught the manner of the stirring, the rousing and the love, and she makes it plain, as it were: “In adjuring you I adjured you by these things, that you stir up and rouse up.”

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For love is strong as death, and jealousy is hard as Hades.”

The bridegroom urges her to shape every thought and action by his own stamp. He says that love, strong as death, does this, for it bears all things and endures all things. It is strong like a death that puts sin to death. Or rather, since death has mastered all things, because in Adam all die, and Hades likewise, he says that love and jealousy are of this kind. This is the jealousy one must have for God, which is hard against those who sin, like that of Elijah and Phinehas. Or the bridegroom says this to her: “Set me as a seal, to seal your thoughts and your actions, and struggle for the truth even to death.” In Hades also the Jews were jealous of Christ, when they bribed the soldiers. “Our sister is little, and she has no breasts.”

The human soul is small. The church of God, while still being built up on earth, is small too, and does not yet have thoughts (for that is what the breasts are). It grows toward greatness of life and of thoughts, whenever it makes its thoughts and prophetic insights clear, or has room for the harmony and working of power. [These souls] also say these things together with the spirits of the prophets and the righteous. “You who sit in the gardens, companions

are attending to your voice; make me hear. Flee, my kinsman, and be like the gazelle, or the fawn of the deer, upon the mountains of spices."

The bride saw the bridegroom resting in the gardens, and saw the companions attending to his voice, which she herself had heard. She wants him to turn away from the things of this place, with sharp and penetrating sight. He is to be like a gazelle in speed and keen vision. He is to be like a fawn in holding his enemies in contempt, as one holds snakes and scorpions. And he is to go up to those who have risen like mountains and breathe out every fragrance. Of these it is said, "His foundations are in the holy mountains." This is the reading of the Seventy, of Theodotion, and of the fifth edition. Aquila, however, gave "the one sitting in gardens." Symmachus gave "the one dwelling," [so that the first things are said to the bride, his (?) flowing, listening attentively to her and rejoicing].

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