

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #13:
OBSERVATIONS ON SOME OF OUR SONGS, PART ONE:
IS JESUS THE “LILY OF THE VALLEY”?**

By John Temples

Two beloved and oft-sung songs among churches of Christ are “The Lily of the Valley” and “Jesus, Rose Of Sharon.” The first song begins this way: “I have found a Friend in Jesus, He’s everything to me; He’s the fairest of ten thousand to my soul; the Lily of the Valley, in Him alone I see all I need to cleanse and make me fully whole.” The second starts this way: “Jesus, Rose of Sharon, bloom within my heart.”

Is Jesus the Lily of the Valley? Or the Rose of Sharon? Where did these names come from?

Both terms are found in a single passage in Song of Solomon, chapter 2. On its face, the Song of Solomon is a celebration of human romantic love between a man and his wife (or his betrothed). But is it something more?

Jewish rabbis, and later church leaders, struggled with the Song of Solomon. The reason was that parts of the book are, well, quite *erotic*. (I’ll wait while you look those parts up.) Origen, a leader of the church in the second century, said of the Song of Solomon: “I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of vexations of the flesh and blood, and has not ceased to feel the passions of this bodily nature, to refrain from reading this book.”

These rabbis and church leaders perhaps even wished God had not included the Song in the Bible. What to do about it, they thought--how can we remove the embarrassment of having a book of the Bible openly celebrate and glorify (gasp!) sex? Not to worry, said one rabbi--I’ve figured it out. It’s all *figurative and allegorical*. The romance between the man and the woman represents and illustrates God’s love for Israel. Problem solved! And later, after the church was established, the love affair became that of Christ for His church.

So, when in chapter 2, the man (called the Beloved in the text) compliments the woman (called the Shulamite) on her beauty, and she responds, “I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys,” somehow, these terms registered with the early church leaders and songwriters, who began to say that these were prophetic terms describing Jesus. (After all, He is beautiful and pure, etc., etc.) This connection between wildflowers and Jesus is now so entrenched that many commentators flatly state, “Here, Jesus calls Himself the Lily of the valley and the Rose of Sharon.” And we sing the same sentiment without even a second thought.

There are some real problems with this interpretation. For one thing, nowhere in the Bible is Jesus specifically called the Rose of Sharon or the Lily of the valley. And the Lord never referred to Himself in such terms. He did mention lilies in Luke 12:27, saying, “Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” What a great opportunity for Jesus to have proclaimed Himself as “the Lily of the Valley”--but He did not do so.

Actually, no one called Jesus “the Lily of the Valley” until a man named Charles Fry wrote the song of that name in 1881. He was reading the Song of Solomon and had the idea to make the words of the Song a typical description of the Lord. (<http://dianaleaghmatthews.com/the-lily-of-the-valley/>)

For another thing, in the text, the person claiming to be the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley is a woman (the Shulamite), not a man. Even if the Song of Solomon were an allegory of Christ and His church (which is very unlikely), “rose of Sharon” and “lily of the valley” would be names of the church, the bride of Christ; not the Lord Himself.

Let’s look at the actual text in question. Here is Song of Solomon 1:15 - 2:2:

The Beloved (the man):

15 Behold, you are fair, my love!
Behold, you are fair!

You have dove's eyes.

The Shulamite (the woman):

16 Behold, you are handsome, my beloved!

Yes, pleasant!

Also our bed is green.

17 The beams of our houses are cedar,

And our rafters of fir.

1 I am the rose of Sharon,

And the lily of the valleys.

The Beloved (the man):

2 Like a lily among thorns,

So is my love among the daughters.

In this part of Song of Solomon, the Beloved (the man) and his wife (or his betrothed) are exchanging sweet nothings, with each trying to outdo the other. In 1:8, the Beloved calls her “the fairest among women.” The Shulamite responds, “My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blooms in the vineyards of En Gedi” (1:14).

This tryst continues with the man saying, “Behold, you are fair, my love! You have dove’s eyes” (1:15). She responds, ‘Behold, you are handsome, my beloved! Yes, pleasant! Also our bed [or couch] is green. The beams of our houses are cedar, and our rafters of fir” (1:16). (She was an outdoors kind of gal.)

She is starting to be embarrassed by all the flattery, so she then says: “*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys*” (2:1).

The “rose of Sharon” and “lily of the valley” were common wildflowers that grew in the fields of Palestine. So the girl was simply being modest! Her Beloved had just said she was Miss Universe, being exceedingly fair and having the eyes of a dove. She modestly replied, “Aw shucks, I’m nothing special--I’m just a common flower of the field.”

To his credit, the guy picks up on this and replies, “You may be a lily; but your beauty exceeds all the other lilies--all the other ones look like thorns in your presence.” (That’s John Temples’ paraphrase of Song of Solomon 2:2.)

Notice that in these verses there is nothing remotely typical of or connected to Jesus. In fact, as we said, the only reason Song of Solomon was called an allegory of the love between Christ and the church was to soften and sanitize the overt sexual references in the book.

In my view, the Song of Solomon is simply a celebration of courtship and marriage and the romantic aspect of love between a husband and a wife; there are no fancy metaphors or hidden meanings in it. God put it in His book to glorify marriage, and to emphasize the importance of romantic affection in our marriages.

So are we going to stop singing “Jesus Rose of Sharon” and “Lily of the Valley”? Probably not. But just remember that these designations are products of a hymn writer’s imagination, and almost certainly are NOT Biblical titles of Christ.

In Part 2, we’ll comment on some other songs in our songbooks.