

The Flame

Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.

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Song 8:6

(BHS)

שִׁימְנֵי כְּחֹתֶם עַל־לִבִּי
כְּחֹתֶם עַל־זְרוּעֵי
כִּי־עֲזָה כַּמָּוֶת אֶהְבֶּה
קָשָׁה כַּשְּׂאוֹל קִנְאָה
רְשָׁפֶיהָ רְשָׁפֵי אֵשׁ
שֶׁלֶהְבֶּתֶיהָ:

(RSV)

Set me as a **seal** upon your heart,
as a **seal** upon your arm;
for **love** is strong as **death**,
jealousy is cruel as the **grave**.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a **most vehement** flame.

You may remember that *mōt* is “death” (line 3). The last word in line 3, “**love**,” you might recognize as a proper name, “**Ahab**.” “The **grave**” in line 4 is of course *sheol*. The last word is the interesting one. It is a noun built from *lahab*, “to burn.” It has a **ש** prefix, which intensifies it. But in the whole Bible, only here is this word suffixed with **יה** (*yah*). *Yah* is part of *Yahweh* (as in “Hallelu-**jah**”) and is taken by RSV (and KJV) as a further intensifier, “a most vehement flame.” Some other modern translations do the same; “a mighty flame” (NIV), “the brightest kind of flame” (NLT). But some gloss in a woodenly literal way, “the very flame of the LORD” (ESV, NASB, Darby).

The Song of Songs explores love in various vignettes or scenes, that are more or less self-contained and do not string together to make a story. In this respect, the poems within the Song are like the psalms of the Psalter. The Song of Songs presents a series of images that capture this or that feature or mood of young love.

There is the image of the young couple playfully pretending the trees and grass are their homes (1:16 – 17). The girl reminisces about the time before love

when access was controlled by her family (1:6, 8:8). The center of the Song is the only place where they are clearly said to be married. It is here that she is a fountain to be unsealed (4:12). Some images are quite erotic (5:4), and some are just fun (6:13). But the further you go through the Song the harder it is to outline. Like love itself, as it progresses it spins more out of control. By the time you reach, “Love is strong as death,” it is no longer lighthearted banter. Love has taken on a weight that previous scenes do not have.

Despite the fact that the Psalter is composed of 150 individual units of poetry that do not add up to a story, there is discernable progress in it. Psalm 1 is a fitting introduction. And as you move through it, the predominance of laments gradually gives way to praises, until it climactically ends with Psalm 150's, “Hallelujah!” The Song of Songs also intensifies near the end, and 8:6 commands the most gravitas, where the power of love (jealousy is a synonym for love here) rivals the grave and death itself. The next verse goes on to say that nothing can quench it—love is a raging wildfire that traverses rivers. It is inevitable and unstoppable. Death and the grave cannot extinguish it.

You may be aware that the Song of Songs is one of those rare books in the Old Testament that does not explicitly mention God. It focuses on human love; it explores the feelings of two teenagers. But in our verse near the end, it compares love's power to the grave. There, it does not suffice to limit Love to the experience of mere mortals. At this point it must invoke the name of Yahweh. A love that death cannot snuff out is “the very flame of the LORD.” This burning love is God-love, Yahweh-love, a divine—not a human—love.

Jesus rose from the grave. Thus, death didn't end his love. And your death won't end this love either. Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb and the Jews said, "See how much Jesus loved him!" They thought that weeping at the tomb was the extent of how he would express his love. But what did Jesus do for the friend he loved? He called Lazarus from the grave by name, "Lazarus, come out!" This is a love that death cannot quell.

Someday you will lie in your grave until no one alive remembers you, except Jesus. He will return because he loves you so. He will come to your grave and call your name and will say to you (2:10ff),

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!
For lo, the winter and storm have passed away.
Flowers have appeared on the earth;
The time for singing has arrived.
The voice of the dove is heard in our land;
Figs glisten with piquant savor;
The aroma of grape now fills the air.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!

Amen, Come Lord Jesus!