

LECTURE 24: THE SONG OF SONGS
“The God who oversees male and female sexuality”
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I. Orienting Data

- A. Focus:** How to enjoy love—a marriage manual, clarifying the nature of true, pure love.
- B. Content:** A love song of several episodes, celebrating the sexual love and marital fidelity between a woman and a man; the general nature of the song allows it to be used in all contexts where love in marriage is celebrated and where pre-mature “love” is cautioned.
- C. Date of Composition:** If Solomon is the author, which is the most natural reading of Song 1:1, the book was composed in the 10th century prior to the division of the

empire (for the main female character is likely from the northern tribes and yet part of the Jerusalem harem).

- D. **Emphases:** Proper love of a woman and a man for one another; the unquenchable nature of pure love; the delight in and longing for each other that pure love engenders; a caution not to awaken love too quickly.
- E. **Ancient Parallels:** 12th century Egyptian love poetry is amazingly similar to the lyrical celebration of love found in the Song of Songs.

II. Different Interpretations

- A. **The *Allegorical Interpretation*:** The book portrays the intimate love relationship between God and Israel or Christ and his church.
 1. The presence of strong evocative language has often resulted in the entire Song being allegorized, pointing to something other than an actual celebration of intimacy within human marriage. Indeed, in A.D. 550, an early church council forbade any interpretation other than allegorical.
 2. Challenge:
 - a. Capitalizes on human fallenness and the way sexuality has often been twisted so as to become exploitative, manipulative, and destructive up to the present day. But this song celebrates right order, echoes the pre-fall innocence of Adam and Even in the garden, and reaffirms the goodness of God's creation, including sex within the context of marriage (cf. Prov 5:15–20; 1 Tim 4:3).
 - b. There are no clues within the piece itself that it is to be read as anything other than a real human marriage. The greater biblical context, however, does invite the reader to see the human marriage as pointing to something even greater.
- B. **The *Cultic Interpretation*:** The book describes a sacred marriage between the gods.
 1. This view considers a sacred marriage between the gods being enacted by a priestly couple. Such a union in the context of the temple would evoke the gods to produce crops on earth for another year.
 2. Challenge: Moses' condemnation of this type of pagan notions would have certainly disqualified the book from the canon. In contrast, the godly prophets, priests, and poets of old recognized pure doctrine in these pages.
- C. **The *Lyrical Interpretation*:** The book includes a series of love songs that celebrate the love between a man and a woman under God.
 1. In this view, no dramatic plot is evident. Rather the book stands as a collection of 20–40 love poems that bear no necessary connection with one another.
 2. Challenge: The use of refrains (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), the consistent characters, the repeated images, and the apparent unified development all suggest some sort of intentional structuring to the book.
- D. **The *Dramatic Interpretations*:** The song unpacks a developing love story between a man and a woman.
 1. *The Two-Character Drama.* The two-character dramatic interpretation, portraying the developing love of Solomon and the Shulamite woman.
 - a. After the two main characters meet at the beginning of the book, chapters 1–3 depict the development of their relationship, climaxing in their wedding

celebration in chapter 4. The final half of the Song shows their love continue to flourish throughout their married life, until 8:5–14 when the two appear to reminisce about what they have learned regarding intimacy through their years together.

- b. The book's central section (4:16–5:1) appears to support the view that Solomon, not a Shulamite shepherd, is the true love of the Shulamite. The woman expresses desire for her beloved (3:1–5), Solomon arrives in 3:6–11, and the mention of the king's wedding day and gladness of heart in 3:11.
 - c. Holders of this view suggest it allows a more natural reading of true dialogue between the characters, though it does not deny the challenge at points of determining the speakers.
 - d. The greatest challenge to this view is that identifying *Solomon* with the book's ideal lover seems incompatible with Scripture's ideal, for beginning from 1 Kgs 3:1 and moving in 11:1–3 the biblical text portrays Solomon as one far from the biblical ideal for a husband (e.g., Gen 2:15, 23–24; Eph 5:25, 28) or the Deuteronomic ideal for kingship (Deut 17:17): "He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart" (1 Kgs 11:3). Within the book itself, the name Solomon does appear (Song 1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12), but in the text he is portrayed as elevated and distant, on the one hand (3:6–11), and as one ready to flaunt his power and to claim numerous women as a prize rather than to cherish one partner (8:11–12).
2. *The Three-Character Drama.* The three-character dramatic interpretation, portraying the love triangle of the villain Solomon, the Shulamite woman, and Shulamite shepherd.
- a. This view claims that it is an actual shepherd and not King Solomon who is called a "shepherd" (1:7; 6:2–3), who visits the Shulamite in her country home (2:8–13), and who in the closing scene appears with her not in the royal palace but in her native village (8:5).
 - b. This view asserts that a king like Solomon who had multiple wives and concubines could not voice such expressions to a single woman. The Solomonic figure is always in 3rd person in this reading, and the dialogue and love only happens between the shepherd and the Shulamite.
 - c. The narrator appears to portray Solomon negatively in 3:6–11 and 8:10–12. He is exalted yet distant and a mere collector of women with whom he has no real relationship. The Shulamite is clearly one of these women, but she has given her heart and body wholly to another.

III. The Structure

A. Proposals for the Two-Character Drama:

1. Estes ("Song of Songs," in *WOTARCA*, 395) offers the following outline:
 - a. Progressing toward Marriage (Song 1–3)
 - b. Wedding Celebration (Song 4)
 - c. Growing in Intimacy (Song 5–8)
2. Garrett (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 383)
 - a. The lovers presented (1:1–6)
 - b. Scene 1: the lovers together (1:7–2:7)

- c. Scene 2: hope, invitation, and dream (2:8–3:5)
 - d. “Solomon’s” wealth and extravagance (3:6–11)
 - e. Scene 3: admiration and invitation (4:1–5:1)
 - f. Scene 4: dream and search (5:2–6:3)
 - g. Scene 5: the delights of love (6:4–8:4)
 - h. Conclusion(s): love strong as death (8:5–14)
3. Dorsey’s symmetrical proposal (*The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 200)

- A Opening words of mutual love and desire (1:2–2:7)
- B Young man’s invitation to the young woman (2:8–17)
- C Young woman’s nighttime search (3:1–5)
- D CENTER: Their wedding day (3:6–5:1)
- C’ Young woman’s nighttime search (5:2–7:11[H5:2–7:10])
- B’ Young woman’s invitation to the young man (7:12–8:4[H7:11–8:4])
- A’ Closing words of mutual love and desire (8:5–14)

B. Proposals for the Three-Character Drama:

1. Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., 375
 - a. Superscription (1:1)
 - b. The Shulammite Maiden in Solomon’s Harem (1:2–3:5)
 - i. The king and the maiden banter (1:2–2:2)
 - ii. The maiden seeks her absent lover (2:3–3:5)
 - c. Solomon Woos the Shulammite Maiden (3:6–7:9)
 - i. Solomon’s first proposal (3:6–5:8)
 - ii. Solomon’s second proposal (5:9–7:9)
 - d. The Shulammite maiden rejects King Solomon (7:10–8:4)
 - e. The Shulammite maiden and the shepherd-lover are reunited (8:5–14)
 - i. Maiden’s brothers see the lovers approaching (8:5a)
 - ii. Maiden addresses her shepherd-lover (8:5b–7)
 - iii. Maiden’s brothers reminisce about their sister (8:8–9)
 - iv. Maiden boasts of her chastity (8:10–12)
 - v. Shepherd beckons the maiden for a song (8:13)
 - vi. Maiden responds in song (8:14)
2. Ian Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 246–47:
 - a. Outline:
 - i. The lovers presented (1:1–17)
 - ii. Springtime in Palestine (2:1–17)
 - iii. The terrors of the night (3:1–11)
 - iv. A man enraptured (4:1–5:1)
 - v. The lovers entranced (5:2–6:10)
 - vi. The dance of delights (6:11–7:13)
 - vii. Love strong as death (8:1–14)
 - b. Overview:
 - i. In chs. 1–2 the Shulamite expresses her love for her lover, and her lover reciprocates (1:1–2:17)

- ii. In ch. 3 the contrast between the king and lover is heightened, as the woman expresses her determination to overcome threats to her relationship with the shepherd and her negative view of the royal harem (3:1–11).
 - iii. Chs. 4–5 expresses the threats to and the depths of the relationship between the shepherd and Shulamite, using language and imagery that point to committed, marital-like partnership between the two (4:1–5:16).
 - iv. Chs. 6–7 supply graphic development of the God-honoring relationship (6:1–7:13)
 - v. In ch. 8, the Shulamite rejects King Solomon and is reunited with her shepherd-love (8:1–14).
3. John Currid, “Song of Songs” in *ESVSB*
- a. Outline:
 - i. Title: The best of songs (1:1)
 - ii. The lovers yearn for each other (1:2–2:17)
 - iii. The shepherdess dreams (3:1–6:3)
 - iv. The lovers yearn for each other again (6:4–8:4)
 - v. The lovers join in marriage (8:5–14)
 - b. Currid believes that the “king” and “Solomon” is only a secondary character against which the shepherd is contrasted. Currid also believes that the body of the book (3:1–6:3) is the Shulamite’s dream of longing for her lover and that only in 8:5 is the marriage actually consummated. My challenge with this is that the type of dream activity in 3:1–6:3 would seem to qualify as impure *lust* that itself does arouse and awaken love *before* the proper time (Song 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4).

C. Assessment of Structure

1. Each of Dorsey’s units begins with a change in perspective and with the lovers experiencing tension, but each unit closes with the lovers reunited with a sense of tranquility. Identifying these interpersonal elements is helpful.
2. What he misses, however, is the way the four repeated refrains appear to guide structure. The Shulamite charges her ladies-in-waiting, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem” (Song 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4), by which she appears both to warn them of what could be lost if they move too quickly and to celebrate what she now enjoys—awakened true love.
 - Song 2:7. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.
 - Song 3:5. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.
 - Song 5:8. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love.
 - Song 8:4. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem: why should you stir up or awaken love until it pleases? (DeRouchie translation)
3. The book clearly uses framing devices, for both the front and back of the book use the vineyard metaphor (Song 1:6b; 8:11–12), mention or note the speech of the brothers (1:6b; 8:8–9), repeat the statement of embrace (2:6; 8:3), and reassert the refrain of adjuration (2:7; 8:4).

4. Song 4:16–5:1, which appears to include a detailed account of the couple’s intimacy, stands as the exact center and climax of the Song, with the 60 verses on each side (so Davidson, “The Literary Structure of the Song of Songs *Redivivus*,” *JATS* 14 (2003): 62–64.
5. Potential Outline:

| | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Superscription | 1:1 |
| True Love Declared While the Maiden Is in Solomon’s Harem | 1:2–2:7 (embrace, 2:6; refrain, 2:7) |
| True Love Longed For: The Maiden’s Desire and Dream of Loss | 2:8–3:5 (refrain, 3:5) |
| True Love Contrasted and Challenged | 3:6–5:8 |
| Solomon’s arrival as a foil for true love | 3:6–11 |
| The shepherd’s reveling in his maiden’s beauty | 4:1–15 |
| <i>The couple’s intimacy celebrated</i> | 4:16–5:1 |
| The maiden’s desire and dream of loss | 5:2–8 (partial refrain, 5:8) |
| True Love Testified: The Couple’s Delights of Love | 5:9–8:4 |
| The maiden’s reveling in her shepherd’s beauty | 5:9–16 |
| The couple’s delight in each other | 6:1–12 |
| The couple’s declaration of love | 6:13–8:4 (embrace, 8:3; refrain 8:4) |
| Conclusion: True Love Affirmed and Solomon Rejected | 8:5–14 |

IV. Message

- A. **4 Main Voices** (usually tracked by the gender [masculine or feminine] and number [singular or plural] of the Hebrew words)
 1. *Soprano* (woman / “my love” / “She” in ESV), who plays the leading role, celebrating the love she has for her shepherd-lover (= “Shulamite, Song 6:13)
 2. *Baritone* (man / “my beloved” / “He” in ESV), the shepherd-lover who celebrates the beauty of the Shulamite and his lover for her.
 3. *Chorus* (woman’s companions in Solomon’s harem / “friends” / “Others” in ESV), called the “daughters of Jerusalem”
 4. *King Solomon*, who is only addressed in third person and stands as a foil for the shepherd-lover (1:1; 3:6).
- B. **A Song of Love and the Place of Solomon**
 1. The Song focuses on the relationship of a shepherd boy bridegroom (1:7) (1:1; 3:6–11) and the “Shulamite” (*šūlammît*, 6:13[7:1]; see 6:4–10), which some think means “Mrs. Solomon” but which more likely identifies her as a woman from “Shunem,” a northern village in the tribe of Issachar, Josh 19:18; 2 Kgs 4:8). The Song was most likely written *by* King Solomon (*šēlōmō*, 1:1) (or perhaps *for* Solomon), but it most likely is not *about* Solomon. Instead, he stands in the background and is portrayed as an elevated by distant king who has his choice of thousands of ladies (3:6–11; 8:11–12; cf. 1:4, 12). The maiden and her suitor, however, are content with the simple life, so long as they can have each other.
 2. As Scripture, the Song seeks to encourage pure love in all marriages. The goal is to challenge every married couple not to allow the world to define true love but to seek it as God defines it and where he awakens it. Such love is “the very flame of the LORD” (8:6) that can blaze with unquenchable burning.
 3. Song of Songs is likely a commentary on Genesis 1–2, celebrating the proper use of “desire” (Song 7:10; Gen 2:24), in contrast to the curse in Gen 3:16.

4. The Song portrays the ideal, though still imperfect, type of love, which works through challenges and retains lasting commitment:
 - a. The title is the “Song of Songs,” which places this particular expression of love above all others. Like “the King of kings” means the highest of all kings, and “the Holy of holies” means the most holy place, so “the Song of songs” means the best of all love songs. This is the type of love that we should seek.
 - b. We can easily read the Song as a meditation on God’s ideal for marriage within a cursed world. If written by Solomon, it would likely be toward the end of his life prior to the division of the empire (note that the Shulamite is from the northern tribes, yet part of Solomon’s harem) and after he recognized how far he had distanced himself from the ideal. It may even be that the trueness of love and the beauty of marriage between one man and one woman that this book depicts was part of the impetus for humbling Solomon and returning him to the Lord. We do not read of such a return in Scripture, but the Chronicler lets him die while pursuing God, and the fact that much of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs likely derived from him suggests that he was indeed regenerate and that his wisdom finally overcame his foolishness.

C. The Contribution of Song of Songs to Scripture

1. Elsewhere in Scripture:
 - a. Descriptions of physical beauty are normally restrained (e.g., Rachel is beautiful [Gen 29:17]; David is ruddy and handsome [1 Sam 16:12]; and Abigail has a beautiful countenance [1 Sam 25:3]).
 - b. Physical beauty is fleeting (Prov 31:30).
 - c. A woman’s greatest focus should be on inward beauty (1 Tim 2:9–10; 1 Pet 3:3–4).
 - d. Improper sexual relations are condemned (e.g., Exod 20:14; Lev 18, 21; Deut 5:18; Prov 2:16–19; 5:1–6; Matt 5:27–30).
2. The Song of Songs works with a handful of other texts:
 - a. To highlight that physical delight in a member of the opposite sex and sexual arousal are indeed part of God’s good gifts when enjoyed in the proper context (Gen 1:26–28; 2:20–25; Matt 19:1–12; 1 Tim 4:3).
 - b. To guide the enjoyment of healthy, physical love God’s way (cf. Ps. 45; Prov. 5:15–23; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1–5, 36–37; 1 Tim. 4:1–5; Heb. 13:4)
 - Ps. 45:13–17. All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. ¹⁴In many-colored robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. ¹⁵With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king. ¹⁶In place of your fathers shall be your sons; you will make them princes in all the earth. ¹⁷I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations; therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.
 - Prov. 5:15–23. Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. ¹⁶Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? ¹⁷Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. ¹⁸Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, ¹⁹a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. ²⁰Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? ²¹For a man’s ways are before the eyes of Yahweh, and he ponders all his paths. ²²The

iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. ²³He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

- 1 Cor 7:1–5, 36–37. Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. . . . ³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.
 - 1 Tim. 4:1–5. Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.
 - Heb. 13:4. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.
3. Always the book assumes that sex is only to be enjoyed in the context of monogamous marriage (cf. Prov 5:18; Eccl 9:9; Mal 2:14). If Solomon is the author, he would be writing this book to actually counter his own practice and failure.
- Prov 5:16–18. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? ¹⁷ Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. ¹⁸ Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 - Eccl 9:9. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.
 - Mal 2:14. But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

D. Use of Evocative Language

1. More than any other book in Scripture, Song of Songs uses evocative language to celebrate the beauty and gift of sexuality and desire within marriage.
 - a. Kisses are with the mouth and erotic and not a peck of social convention (Song 1:2).
 - b. The language of “love” refers to sexual intimacy (1:2); it is used elsewhere of the advances of the wayward wife (Prov 7:18) and in the allegory of the young girl who has reached physical maturity capable of love (“you were at the age for love,” Ezek 16:8). The climax of love in the Song is 4:16–5:1, where full sexual union is described by the metaphor of eating fruit from a luscious, God-given garden.¹ This is the “one flesh” relationship properly

¹ Other biblical descriptions for intercourse include “to know” (Gen 4:1, 17, 25), “to lie with” (19:32; 29:23, 30; 38:26), and “to enter” (Ruth 4:13).

- experienced (Gen 2:24), where desires are rightly placed and God's right order is celebrated (Song 7:10). Misplaced desire is part of the curse and always results in ruin (Gen 3:16).
- c. The maiden celebrates shelter under her man's protection (Song 2:3) and clearly portrays resting in his embrace: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me" (2:6; 8:3). Along with the depiction of Solomon's wealth and extravagance (3:6–11), she uses a whole range of images to describe to the daughters of Jerusalem her shepherd-lover's body (5:10–16). The maiden, more than the shepherd, is displayed in the book as longing for deep companionship and intimacy. The fact that her description of her man is given to the daughters of Jerusalem expresses the deep respect and honor she has for him and aligns with the call elsewhere for wives to respect their husbands (Eph 5:33; 1 Pet 3:2, 5–6).
 - d. As for the man, he describes the woman's body to her 3x (Song 4:1–15; 6:4–7; 7:1–9), using the language of a garden and vineyard full of precious spices and wine for the husband's pleasure. The text at times presupposes that she is naked, for the man describes her graceful legs (7:1), her waist and navel (7:2), and her breasts (7:3). His descriptions of his spouse are much more developed than the maiden's, perhaps highlighting the visual appetite of the man. Significantly, however, his graphic words are given directly to his girl in affirmation and love. There is *no* allowance in the Song for men to exploit their wives in the presence of others or objectify their wives as a city conquered rather than a jewel treasured (cf. Eph 5:25, 28, 33; Col 3:19; 1 Pet 3:7). In the Song, the man only addresses his girl, whereas the girl addresses both her man and the ladies in waiting.
2. The Song draws on a range of human activity to describe the beauty of love in tasteful ways—the world of nature (gardens, mountains, forests, animals, plants, spices, etc.), architecture (towers, walls, cities, etc.), clothing/jewelry, and warfare.
 - Song 2:8–9. The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice.
 - Song 2:14. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.
 - Song 4:1. Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
 - Song 4:5. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies.
 - Song 5:12. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool.
 - Song 7:4. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus.
 3. The evocative language has served as the key instigator of non-literal readings of the text. In contrast, however, the Song appears to be celebrating sexual intimacy between a man and a woman in the context of marriage as a God's good gift. The book celebrates and clarifies the beauty of the "one flesh" relationship.

The Song of Solomon Illustratedwww.acts17-11.com/snip_song.html

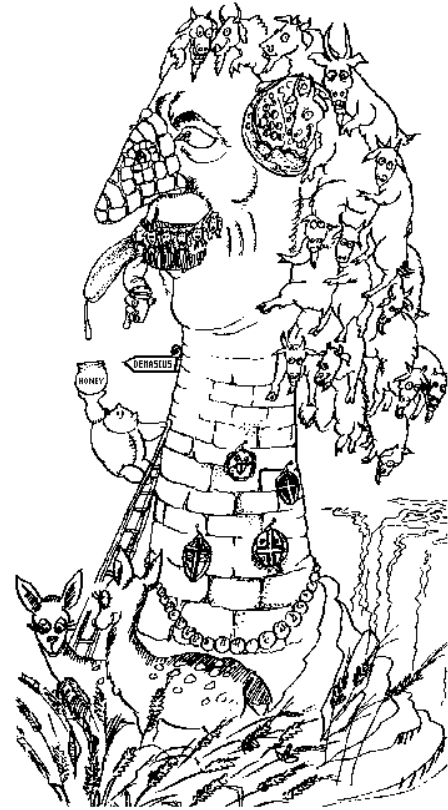
“How beautiful you are, my beloved, how beautiful you are!
 Your eyes are like doves behind your veil.
 ... Your hair is like a flock of goats...
 Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes...
 Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
 Your temples are like a slice of pomegranate...

“... Your neck is like the tower of David
 built with rows of stones
 on which are hung a thousand shields...
 ... Your two breasts are like fawns,
 twins of a gazelle
 which feed among the lilies...

“... Your lips, my bride, drip honey,
 Honey and milk are under your tongue...
 And the fragrance of your garments
 Is like the fragrance of Lebanon.
 Your belly is like a heap of wheat...

“... Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon,
 which faces toward Damascus...”

—From Song of Solomon chapters 4 and 7

**E. Interpretation**

1. *The Background of Genesis 1–3 and the Hope of New Creation*
 - a. The Song should be read in the light of Genesis 1–2, where God plants a garden and places man and woman in it, calling them to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen 1:28). The narrative in Genesis 2 concludes: “A man shall ... hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”
 - b. While the Song celebrates the ideal of Gen 1–2, it is birthed within the context of Gen 3 and beyond. That is, the Song is honest in its expression of challenges and temptations in relationship.
 - i. The girl is terrified of losing her man and fears his loss (Song 3:1).
 - ii. The girl longs to be able to publically demonstrate her affection for her beloved, but social convention apparently does not allow for this (8:1).
 - iii. The girl’s world is one in which love can be sought too quickly and in the wrong places (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).
 - c. As such, the Song moves beyond “the doctrine of creation and fall to the necessity of the doctrine of redemption and re-creation” (Gledhill, “Song of Songs,” *NDBT*, 217). We see this in at least two ways.
 - i. First, within the context of the Writings, the Song helps clarify *how those trusting in God’s kingdom promises were supposed to live*. Specifically, only those who celebrate sexual intimacy within the

- context of marriage, never arousing or awakening love until the right time, will enjoy the coming kingdom (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4).
- ii. Second, when placed within Scripture as a whole, the Song's celebration of human love in marriage is seen to provide the necessary means for getting to enjoy the more ultimate relationship of love to which marriage itself points.
2. *The Nature of True Love.* The Song celebrates human love within the bounds of God-ordained marriage.
 - a. True love allows for no intruders, for it "is as strong as death" and its jealousy "as fierce as the grave" (Song 8:6).
 - b. True love is constant, unable to be overcome by trial (8:7).
 - c. True love is not a commodity to be purchased or traded (8:7).
 - d. True love is God-wrought—"the flame of Yah" (8:6).²
 3. *Human Marriage as a Parable Designed to Heighten Messianic Hope.*
 - a. While the Song of Songs is written to revel in the gift of human love within the context of marriage, when read canonically it would have also heightened hope in the ultimate consummation of the kingdom of God. Indeed, the placement of the Song in the Writings suggest that enjoyment of the ultimate marriage between God and his bride exists only for those who celebrate human sexuality within the context of marriage.
 - b. Background for viewing human marriage as a parable of God's love for his people.
 - i. As early as the Pentateuch, we are told that Yahweh "set his affections" on Israel and "elected" her due in no way to her own greatness and that he brought her forth from Egypt because of his "love" for her and his keeping his oath to the patriarchs (Deut. 7:6–8). Israel is charged to guard against sinfully pursuing other gods and thus "whoring after" or "committing fornication with" other lovers (Exod. 34:11–16; Lev. 20:4–6; Num. 15:38–40). God even tells Moses that they will do just this after his death (Deut. 31:16). All these texts ready the reader to view the original marriage covenant in Genesis 2 as paradigmatic for God's relationship with his people.
 - Exod. 34:12–16. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. ¹³ You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim ¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, for Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), ¹⁵ lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, ¹⁶ and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.
 - Lev. 20:4–5. And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, ⁵ then

² Jesus declared, "What therefore *God* has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt 19:6). Furthermore, the discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5 points to the God-wrought nature of true love, for the call for mutual submission within marriage (5:22–33), merely unpacks in one context the participial phrase "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21), which itself is part of the unpacking of what it means to fulfill the imperative "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). Without the Spirit of God working in the heart, the radical love of wife to husband and head to helper is impossible.

I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

- Num. 15:39–40. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of Yahweh, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. ⁴⁰ So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.
 - Deut. 31:16. And Yahweh said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them.
- ii. The Former Prophets describe Israel’s idolatry in the land in words that directly allude to the predictions in Deut. 31:16.
- Judg. 2:16–17. Then Yahweh raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of Yahweh, and they did not do so.
- iii. The Latter Prophets highlight God’s relationship with Israel as a marriage covenant, treat their violation as worthy of a divorce, and identify the new covenant as a restoration with escalation of the original marriage relationship.
- (1) Jeremiah portrays Judah as bride (2:2) addicted to adultery (2:20) with multiple partners (3:1). She is worthy of divorce (3:8–11), yet what God will do is create a new covenant with her that will result in her transformation (Jer 31:31–32).
- Jer. 2:2, 20–25, 31–32; 3:1–3. Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says Yahweh, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. . . . ²⁰ For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds; but you said, ‘I will not serve.’ Yes, on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore. ²¹ Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine? ²² Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord Yahweh. ²³ How can you say, ‘I am not unclean, I have not gone after the Baals?’ Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done— a restless young camel running here and there, ²⁴ a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her. ²⁵ Keep your feet from going unshod and your throat from thirst. But you said, ‘It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go.’ . . . ³¹ And you, O generation, behold the word of Yahweh. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, ‘We are free, we will come no more to you’? ³² Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number. . . . ^{3:1} If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares Yahweh. ² Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. ³ Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore; you refuse to be ashamed.”

- Jer. 3:8–11. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. ⁹ Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. ¹⁰ Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.” ¹¹ And the LORD said to me, “Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.”
 - Jer. 31:31–32. Behold, the days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares Yahweh.
- (2) Ezekiel depicts Judah as an adulterous people with amnesia, having forgotten how their husband Yahweh had redeemed them (Ezek 16:22, 43). Yahweh, therefore, will punish them but then later restore (16:59–63).
- Ezek. 16:22. And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood.
 - Ezek. 16:43. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things, therefore, behold, I have returned your deeds upon your head, declares the Lord GOD. Have you not committed lewdness in addition to all your abominations?
- (3) Isaiah asserts that Israel is a harlot (Isa 1:21; 57:3).
- Isa. 1:21. How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.
 - Isa. 57:3. But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman.
- iv. Hosea’s own life presents the most poignant portrayal of Yahweh’s pursuit of his unfaithful wife, for the prophet follows the command to marry a prostitute (Hos 1:2), who then must later be redeemed from the slave market (3:1). The pain, sorrow, and disgrace of covenant faithlessness is here graphically portrayed, and yet with it comes a glorious vision of the coming restoration of the marriage covenant between Yahweh and his people. Israel will once again call Yahweh “My husband” (2:14) as God allures and then betroths his people, creating a new marriage covenant with his former bride (2:14, 18–20). This will take place in “the latter days,” and Israel will serve “Yahweh their God” and “David their king” (3:5).
- Hos. 2:14, 16–20. Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. . . . ¹⁶ And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’ ¹⁷ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. ¹⁸ And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹ And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. ²⁰ I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.
- v. Psalm 45 is tagged a “love song” in the title, and it appears to be a royal wedding song that addresses the king (Ps 45:2–9) and the soon-

- to-be queen (45:10–17). Significantly, the song appears to be prophetic in its intention, for the king is called “God” (45:6–7), and the NT reads the text messianically (Heb 1:8–9), very much in line with how Pss 72 and 110 are read (e.g., Zech 12:9; Heb 1:13). If Solomon is the author of the Song of Songs, it seems likely that he is portraying this couple as the ideal for marriage—indeed, what a royal marriage *should* be.
- vi. In the New Testament, the use of marriage as a metaphor for God/Christ’s relationship with his people reaches culmination. Israel’s spiritual adultery continues in the lives of the religious leaders (Matt 12:38–39; 16:1–4; Mark 8:38). Jesus is the bridegroom who is present but who will soon be taken away (Matt 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34). The church is his bride (Eph 5:22–27), and he will return for her to consummate all things, celebrating the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7–9).
- c. In light of the above, it seems that the stage was already set for reading the celebration of marriage in Song of Songs as anticipatory of the greater, more ultimate marriage. (Note: In the following excursus, Jim Hamilton approaches the book as if Solomon the king’s marriage to the Shulamite is what the book celebrates. While I affirm the likelihood of Solomonic authorship, I am most prone to view the book as pointing not to his marriage but to another marriage that for him supplied an ideal picture of true love—a type love that he could only dream of in this life but that he could hope for in the next.)

Intended Allegory in the Song of Songs?

By Jim M. Hamilton Jr. on April 1, 2013 (<http://jimhamilton.info/2013/04/01/intended-allegory-in-the-song-of-songs/>)

For a number of years now learned interpreters of Scripture have been telling us that the Song of Songs is (primarily) about human love. I put the word *primarily* in parentheses in that last sentence for a reason. I had grown so accustomed to the emphasis on human love in the Song that I had begun to assume that’s all modern commentators said about it. As I was recently pondering this, I went back and looked at what they actually say. They typically add a word like “primarily” or “mainly,” leaving the door open to a spiritual meaning of the Song. But then when they get into it, all they talk about is human love.

In this post I want to pose a question: is it possible that Solomon *intended* the Song to have an allegorical layer of meaning?

Usually when you suggest that the Song is about something more than human love, people roll their eyes and write you off as a prude.

I’m not a prude, okay?

I do think the Song is about human love, and I think human love is great. Really great! I love my wife, and I can’t get over God giving us something so surprising, so pleasing, so good as marriage. Everything that happens within the context of this comprehensive interpersonal union of one man and one woman being one flesh is better than any of the perversions people use to ruin it. So I’m on board with human love in the Song.

My question, though, is whether there’s more to the Song than merely human love, more that Solomon, whom I take to have written the Song (cf. Song 1:1), *intended* his audience to get from this piece of poetry. I’m not out to defend the history of interpretation by asking this question, but it is worth observing that the idea that the Song has a spiritual meaning has been, well, dominant across the ages. Is there exegetical evidence for it, though?

Let me note that by *allegory* I don’t mean something terribly complicated. Let’s stick with a simple definition from dictionary.com: “a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.” This seems to work for the way Paul uses allegory in Galatians 4:24.

So here’s the simple proposal this post is inviting you to consider: is it possible that Solomon *intended* to

represent the spiritual relationship between God and his people through a poetic depiction of the human relationship between the King and the Bride in the Song of Songs?

What could have prompted Solomon to think of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as being analogous to human marriage?

Well, in Exodus 34:14–16 Israel is already being warned not to “whore after their gods.” By describing idolatry with the language of prostitution and sexual immorality, Moses is talking about the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as though it is a marriage. So this way of thinking about God’s relationship with his people is well established prior to the time of Solomon, and it continues after Solomon, not least with Hosea, where when Hosea marries Gomer, Hosea plays the part of Yahweh, Gomer the part of Israel.

So I think we can be confident that biblical authors prior to and after Solomon were thinking about a spiritual meaning of marriage, recognizing an analogy between human marriage and God’s covenant with Israel. Is there more specific evidence?

Psalms 45 is perhaps the closest analogy to the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, being a wedding song for Israel’s king. The Psalm begins with a celebration of the king in Psalm 45:1–9, then concludes with an address to the princess marrying the king in 45:10–17. As the psalmist extols the greatness of the king, he says in Psalm 45:6, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,” showing—at least—a very tight connection between Yahweh and the king who represents him. With a statement like this in Psalm 45, and with other texts in the OT communicating a very close connection between Israel’s God and Israel’s king (e.g., Num 23:21; Isa 9:6; Jer 23:6; Hos 3:5; Mic 2:13; 5:4; Zech 12:8; 13:7) it would seem natural—not forced or fanciful—to see an analogy between the King and his Bride and Yahweh and Israel in the Song of Songs.

What about evidence that later OT authors might have read the Song this way? Is there anything that points in that direction? The King in the Song is regularly called the Bride’s “beloved.” This particular Hebrew word means different things in different contexts. In some contexts it means “uncle.” It is not often used outside the Song of Songs the way Solomon uses it in the Song. In fact, the only place *outside* the Song of Songs where the word is used with the same meaning it has *in* the Song is Isaiah 5:1, where Isaiah writes, “Let me sing for *my beloved* my love song concerning his vineyard.” What follows in Isaiah 5 makes it clear that Isaiah is referring to Yahweh as his beloved. Given the fact that the only Scripture in which the word is used this way prior to Isaiah is the Song of Songs, it would seem at least possible that Isaiah’s thinking about the Lord has been influenced by the Song, with the result that Isaiah refers to the Lord the way the King is referenced in the Song. A related form, though not exactly the same Hebrew word, is used in a similar way, with reference to the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, in Jeremiah 11:15, Ezekiel 16:8, Psalm 60:5 (MT 60:7)/108:6 (MT 108:7), and 127:2.

There is more that could be said. For instance, the king’s procession to the wedding in Song 3:6–11 seems to have been crafted to recall Israel being led out to Sinai for the wedding between herself and Yahweh, who would dwell with her in the tabernacle and lead her by the pillar of fire and cloud. But the strongest argument for this way of thinking about the Song, it seems to me, comes from Paul telling the Ephesians what marriage is ultimately about in Ephesians 5:32, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

Yahweh married Israel at Sinai. When she broke the covenant by whoring after other gods, she was eventually exiled, with the prophets promising a renewal of the broken marriage (see esp. Hos 2:14–23), a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34). Jesus came calling himself the Bridegroom (Matt 9:15), being recognized as such by the Baptist (John 3:29), and laying down his life for his bride (Eph 5:25) that she might be clothed in white linen for the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:7–8).

The Song of Songs is a poetic summary and interpretation of the Bible’s big story: the descendant of David—king of Israel about whom the promises of 2 Samuel 7 were made (promises resonant with the blessing of Abraham from Genesis 12:1–3, promises that will be realized through the one whose descent can be traced all the way back to Adam, who can thus be identified as the promised seed of the woman from Genesis 3:15)—renews an eden-like intimacy between himself and his Bride, reversing the affects of the fall (cf. Gen 3:16 and Song 7:10). All this is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, son of David, Yahweh incarnate, the one greater than Solomon (Matt 12:42), who initiated the new covenant between himself and his bride, the church, and who will return for the grand consummation when the Bride herself, the new Jerusalem, will descend from heaven having the glory of God (Rev 21:9–11).

—For more see Jim M. Hamilton Jr., “The Messianic Music of the Song of Songs: A Non-Allegorical Interpretation,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 331–45.

F. Synthesis

1. The Song is God’s way of recapturing the fidelity, unity, and intimacy of marriage, which the enemy has tried to take away from God’s people by making

- sex seem either titillating outside of marriage or something shameful and unmentionable within marriage. This inspired author has a different view: sexual desire and intimacy is God-wrought and designed to be expressed in marital love.
2. The Song also includes due caution to young people not to attempt to enjoy such expressions of love outside marriage (see Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Love is powerful and unquenchable, easily insights jealousy, and cannot be purchased with money; it is a fire placed by Yahweh himself (8:6–7)!
 3. The message of the Song does not stop with human intimacy seen in marriage, for it fits within the overall flow of the Writings that heighten hope in God’s kingdom work through his messiah. The Song uses human marital intimacy as a parable for the ultimate relationship: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”
 4. For those still enslaved without the full realization of God’s kingdom promises, the Song stresses two things:
 - a. People will only enjoy kingdom hope when sexual desire and intimacy is expressed in the context of marriage alone.
 - b. Those who practice sexual intimacy in the context of marriage are provided a continual reminder of the intimacy God desires with his people and that will only be realized through hope in his Messiah.

V. Guided Reading for Song of Songs

A. Points of Focus:

1. Key Chapters: 7–8
2. Key characters/places: the Beloved, daughters of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the Shulammitte, Solomon

B. Questions:

1. In light of parallel Hebrew constructions in Exodus 26:33–34 (NASB) and Deuteronomy 10:17, what do you think the phrase “Song of Songs” means?
2. Where are the closest literary parallels with the Song of Songs to be found?
3. The Song is a linked chain of lyrics that depicts what?
4. Like “wisdom” in Proverbs 8:1–9:12, “love” finds a voice in the Song of Songs. In view of the way it is portrayed, what do we learn about love? (Note especially the recurring refrain in 2:7; 3:5; 8:4 and the final summary in love in 8:6–7.)
5. The refrain “[Do] not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” occurs 3x in the Song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). What is the point of this statement?
6. Song of Songs 8:6–7 provides the “literary climax” of the Song? In one sentence, summarize the main point of these verses.