

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is romantic poetry at its best. It portrays two passionate lovers who revel in the emotional and physical pleasures of human intimacy. The book was misunderstood in the past as being only an allegory of the relationship between God and the church, but is now accepted as celebrating the profound love between a man and a woman, providing a refreshingly realistic and wholesome treatment of human sexuality without being a how-to manual. The book never mentions God, but it bears witness that the Creator has graciously provided his human creatures with the good gifts of sexuality and intimate love.

Setting

As a song of mutual human love, the Song of Songs is unique in the Bible. It is composed of the speeches of its characters, primarily an unnamed young man and an unnamed young woman. There is no narrator. Though the subject matter is not unique in the Old Testament, the intense and exclusive focus on it certainly is. Other ancient Near Eastern literature, primarily Egyptian, has similar songs of admiration and intense desire in which the lover's physical attributes are extolled and direct invitations to enjoy them are given.

The Song of Songs is associated with Solomon, David's son and the third king of Israel (see "Authorship" below; see also [1:1](#)). Solomon is also mentioned in a few of the poems, both negatively and positively. The motivation of the author was apparently to celebrate God's good gift of love and sexuality.

Authorship

The superscription (first line of text) calls the work, literally, “The Song of Songs of Solomon.” Many take this to mean that Solomon wrote the book in its entirety.

One difficulty with viewing Solomon as the only author is that some of the Hebrew words appear to be foreign loanwords from Aramaic and Persian, which would have presumably come from a later era than that of Solomon, when Persian culture was more widespread. However, it is possible that these words were in use during Solomon’s era. Solomon was the first truly cosmopolitan king of Israel, so it would not be surprising if he used foreign loanwords.

Another problem with accepting Solomon as the sole author is that he was not a good example of godly love—it was precisely his love for many foreign women that led him away from the Lord ([1 Kgs 11:1–13](#)). In fact, the only positive reference to Solomon in the Song is in [Song 3:6–11](#); meanwhile, [8:11–12](#) presents him negatively and [1:5](#) is neutral. It is possible that Solomon did not compose the entire Song, but only part of it—especially if the Song is viewed as a poetic anthology. In this view, Solomon’s authorship of the Song might be similar to his authorship in the book of Proverbs and David’s authorship in the Psalms. On the other hand, Solomon might have written of himself in a self-deprecating tone.

Interpreting the Song

Serious study of the Song of Songs requires a humble, open spirit because of two very significant matters that are usually straightforward in other biblical books but are very obscure here: (1) It is difficult to find a story line in these eight chapters, and (2) if the Song is a story, it is not easy to identify the main characters and their relationships.

Early Interpretation (up to the 1800s). The earliest surviving comments on the Song, provided by Rabbi Aqiba around AD 100, demonstrate Judaism's ambivalence about the message of the Song. The rabbi famously stated: "Whoever sings the Song of Songs with a tremulous voice in a banquet hall and [so] treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come." Some people clearly understood the Song's imagery as sexual. Aqiba censured this interpretation of the Song, even damning those who held it. Aqiba declared, "All the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." Aqiba thus indicated his understanding of the book as an allegory. The man and the woman are not seen as a real man and woman, but as representing God and Israel. Likewise, the Aramaic Targum (interpretive paraphrase) of the Song presents it as the story of God's relationship with Israel from the Exodus to the future reign of the Messiah.

This allegorical view represents the predominant Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Song from Aqiba's time through the mid-1800s. Early Christian interpreters, such as Origen (AD 185–253) and Jerome (AD 347–420), adopted the allegorical interpretation but identified the man as Jesus Christ and the woman as the individual Christian or the church as a whole. Although the details regarding the individual elements within the book varied greatly among Jewish and Christian interpreters, allegorical interpretation was determinative. The allegorical interpretation of the Song is found in Catholic writers as well as in the writings of the Reformers, including John Calvin, John Wesley, and the Westminster Assembly.

Recent Interpretations (1800s to the present). In the 1800s the allegorical interpretation began to lose followers. It became increasingly clear that the only reason to deny the Song's obvious references to sexuality was the deep-seated but unbiblical idea that physical love and spiritual life are polar

opposites. This idea came more from Greek philosophy than from the Bible itself. The Bible text itself never suggests that the images of the Song were intended as anything but sensual and romantic.

Furthermore, archaeology recovered much from the ancient cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Egypt produced love poetry similar to the Song that could only be understood as human love poetry.

There was thus a decisive shift from allegorical interpretation to an understanding of the Song as love poetry. Today it is generally agreed that the Song speaks God's wisdom into this important area of our lives as human beings: It affirms and celebrates God's good gift of love and sexuality in the context of marriage.

The Song as a Love Story. Many scholars understand these poems as a drama telling a story, either about two lovers or about a woman and two men. If only a couple is present, the characters are usually understood to be King Solomon and a young woman, and the entire poem is their conversation with each other. If it is a triangle, there is a second man whom the woman loves. In this case, Solomon is trying to force the woman to leave her true lover and enter his harem, but she remains faithful and true to her lover.

The main drawbacks of the dramatic perspective are: (1) There is no narrator to guide the reading of the story, and (2) there are many different possible stories, and every interpreter seems to see a different story.

The Song as a Two-Character Drama. Some interpreters understand the Song as a drama of King Solomon's love affair with a woman. According to this view, the entire poem is a conversation between Solomon and the woman he loves more than all of the other queens and concubines in his harem.

If there was a favored woman in Solomon's life, the Scriptures suggest that she was Pharaoh's daughter, whom he married very early ([1 Kgs 3:1](#); [7:8](#); [9:24](#); [11:1](#)), not the working woman from the king's flocks and vineyards who is pictured in the Song. Furthermore, this song of true love is not very credible if the woman was one of the scores of Solomon's women who are mentioned in [Song 6:8](#). In other words, if this romance between Solomon and the woman was of such deep sincerity, why did Solomon add hundreds of other women to his harem?

The Song as a Three-Character Drama. Noting the difficulties with the two-character story line, several recent scholars have become convinced that the Song actually describes a three-character drama. This would suggest a more complicated plot: The woman actually loves a shepherd, not the king, but unfortunately she finds herself in Solomon's harem as a concubine, probably because she is unable to pay a debt of one thousand pieces of silver, which she owes as caretaker of the king's vineyards ([8:11-12](#)). She is unable to pay because her angry brothers have forced her to take care of vineyards other than her own ([1:6](#)). So even though she is in the very close and potentially intimate presence of the king in the city palace ([1:12](#)), her passionate thoughts are set intently on her love for a common shepherd in the countryside ([1:7](#)). This fervent affection drives her to escape with her true love into the country where they declare their mutual love to one another in marriage. Three separations of the couple are recounted in the song, and the agony of isolation from each other is just as intense as their ecstasy when together. After the woman escapes and lives with her shepherd husband, she is able to hire caretakers to harvest her crop and pay off the debt to Solomon. Now she and her beloved are forever free to continue living and loving together in the countryside ([8:12-14](#)).

The Song as an Anthology of Love Poetry. Some scholars have concluded that approaching the Song as a drama imposes a story on the book that is not really there. These interpreters believe that the Song of Songs is an anthology of love poems that do not tell a story, but rather evoke a mood. The poems use imagery to express the poets' understanding of human sexuality. In this way, the Song is similar to the book of Psalms, except that all the poems have to do with love between a man and a woman.

From this perspective, the Song of Songs is composed of some twenty love poems that are bound together by consistency of characters, refrains, repeated images, and other poetic binding devices.

The main criticism of viewing the Song as merely a poetic anthology is that the Song exhibits a greater unity and development than is usual for such a collection. There is repetition and development of poetic themes, and there seems to be growth in the couple's relationship. Those who view the Song as a story or drama would argue that the anthology view fails to take this into account. Even if the Song is not a story per se, it certainly seems to have a

structure and coherence that transcends the individual stanzas of poetry. However, those who view it as an anthology rather than a story generally do take into account the unity and development in the Song. They view the Song like a concerto or symphony in which themes repeat and build without actually uncovering a narrative or plot.

Conclusion. Each of these interpretive approaches has its challenges. The approach of the study notes here is (1) to point out different elements in the book that might contribute to a story line or to our understanding of its structure as an anthology and (2) to discuss the possible meaning of individual scenes and images.

Marriage in the Song

The man and woman in the Song of Songs speak in the most romantic terms, describing sensuous longings and alluding to an intimate physical relationship. However, they are never explicitly described as married, leading some readers to suggest that the Song is an example of unmarried love in the Bible. Such a reading ignores obvious allusions to the true marriage relationship between the man and the woman. The language of some of the passages clearly indicates that the couple is married. For example, the man occasionally refers to the woman as his “bride” (e.g., [4:8–12](#)).

Even more importantly, viewing the couple as unmarried though sexually intimate does not take into account the context of the Song. In the context of ancient Israel, it is essentially unfathomable that this couple would not be married when engaged in such an intimate relationship. A study of Old Testament history (see [Gen 39](#)), law (see [Exod 20:14](#)), and wisdom literature (see [Prov 5–7](#)) makes it clear that sexual relations were only tolerated within the legal commitment of marriage. It would be quite strange for this book to be preserved alongside the other books of Jewish Scripture if it promoted sexual activity outside of marriage. Thus it is most natural to understand this couple as being married, at least in those passages where they are found in intimate embrace.

Meaning and Message

Many people have questioned whether the Song of Songs, with its overtly sensual imagery, belongs in Holy Scripture. But this poem is a wonderful celebration of one of God's good and holy gifts. The Bible does not envision human beings as intangible souls temporarily encased in a body; rather, body and soul are interconnected aspects of a single entity. The body is important, and sexuality is sacred and good when enjoyed within marriage.

Human Intimacy. Intense love and the appropriateness of voicing that love in words of physical attraction and fulfillment is the central theme of the Song. Yet it is clear that the lovers' relationship is not merely physical. While their relationship certainly includes the sensual enjoyment of each other, it also includes friendship and a desire to be with each other for more than sexual reasons.

As human love poetry, the Song plays a crucial role in the Bible. Love and its physical expression are major aspects of the human experience, and God has spoken through the Song to encourage us and warn us about the power of sexuality in our lives. Here we have wonderful wisdom from God describing the beauty of a wholesome sexual relationship between a woman and a man. According to the Song, sexual intimacy in marriage should be mutual, exclusive, complete, and beautiful. The book encourages intimate, passionate love between a man and a woman who have committed themselves to each other.