



# SONG OF SONGS

## Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

Fall 2006

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### Introduction

#### Name (1:1)

The full title of the book is the *Song of Songs of Solomon*. The term “Song of Songs” is a way of making a superlative in Hebrew, meaning the book could be called the Most Excellent of Songs, or the Best Song Ever.

#### Authorship & Date (1:1)

Traditionally, Solomon had always been regarded as the author due to the title as well as the six other references to Solomon in the book (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12). However, the song is “of Solomon,” which can mean that it is a song written by Solomon, or it could mean it is a song about Solomon. Given Solomon’s marriage to 700 wives, many doubt that he could have experienced or understood the love described in the book. Therefore some scholars believe the book is a fictional account written by an anonymous author, using Solomon as a character in the story. In either case, most scholars can accept a date consistent with the reign of Solomon as the time of its writing.

#### Nature of the Book

Song of Songs is a unique book in the bible. First, it is not an overtly spiritual book. There is only one veiled reference to God in the book. Secondly, the book is an erotic love poem that has some very graphic descriptions of the sexual act. Song of Songs is a “rated R” type of book with detailed descriptions of human bodies engaged in sexual intercourse. For this reason, it is said that Jewish young men would not be allowed to read the Song of Songs until they were 30 years old.

Nonetheless, the sex scenes have two characteristics that distinguish this erotic literature from other erotic literature of the time:

1. The eroticism is found within the context of marriage. The sexual act is poignant and selfless and glorifies not the act itself but the love and attraction of the married couple. The book promotes virginity until marriage (8:8-10).
2. The language is purposefully couched in highly figurative and beautiful language. This is not a crass or clinical description of lovemaking. While it is clear what the song is describing, it is veiled in poetic language so as to make it more discrete<sup>1</sup>.

#### Interpretation of the Song of Songs

##### Allegorical or Natural Interpretation

Because of the subject matter, both Jewish and Christian interpreters through the centuries have struggled to understand why this book has been included in the bible. As a result, the prevailing interpretation of the book has been to not consider the book at face value, but instead to interpret it as an allegory as a description of God’s love for first Israel and then the church. This interpretation was widely accepted until the last two centuries, and is still viewed by some as the appropriate way to look at the book today.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald E. Curtis. “The Song of Songs.” *Creation to the Cross*. (bible.org. Available on-line at <http://www.bible.org>)

Millions of Christians grew up in Sunday School believing this interpretation, as they sung the song *His Banner over Me is Love* (taken from 6:3 and 2:4). This was song was always presented as the love God has for us, not the love between a husband and his wife.

However, there is nothing in the text that indicates that the author wants us to consider this as an allegory of God's love. God is not even mentioned, except tangentially (8:6). Furthermore, the allegorical interpretation requires some tremendous leaps of faith. For example, when Solomon declares, "my beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh which lies all night between my breasts," one commentator states that this really is a description of "the fragrant atonement of erecting a Tabernacle where His Presence would dwell amid the Holy Arks' staves."<sup>2</sup> Such interpretation seems foolish and unnecessary.

### **Purpose and Canonicity.**

The real issue is not should it be interpreted naturally, then, but why would an erotic love poem be included in the biblical canon? Such a question presumes that the act of marriage is a merely a physical event. However, marriage and the sexual act is presented in Song of Solomon not as a physical act, but a spiritual one as well. Marriage and sex were instituted by God before the Fall, and are to be celebrated and enjoyed as part of God's plan. The Song of Solomon illustrates and rejoices in this fact.

### **Imagery in Song of Solomon**

While the book should not be read at face value, it is also filled with metaphors and imagery. It is a love poem, and as a poem the book is not to be read "literally," but instead it is to be read "naturally." The difficulty with the book comes in that the imagery of this cultural context doesn't translate well into our modern context. For example when Solomon describes his lover as having teeth "like a flock of shorn ewes," or a navel like a "goblet of wine" it doesn't exactly sound romantic in our eyes. When reading this imagery, we first trust that as the "song of songs," the original readers found these as beautiful and poignant descriptions, and secondly we should look for the characteristics of the analogy that would make sense in their context.

For example, "a flock of shorn eyes which have come up from washing" (4:2) would be very white. Therefore to say a woman has teeth like this would be to say, "you teeth are white," or more romantically, "you have an amazing smile."

The imagery makes reading the book difficult, but when keeps the book new and fresh as we discover the beauty of the imagery.

### **The Storyline**

Even when taking the book at its face value, there are numerous interpretations as to the story line. Here are some various storylines that Donald Curtis suggests<sup>3</sup>:

1. *Anthology*- There is not storyline. Instead the book is a disconnected series of love poems that were collected and put together as a sampler of Solomon's greatest works.
2. *Royal Love Story*- This is the most common interpretation. Solomon falls in love with a young peasant girl while she works in the fields. He brings her to the palace and marries her.
3. *The Love Triangle*- King Solomon falls in love with a young peasant girl and marries her. But the girl remains in love with a simple peasant shepherd. In the end, the girl leaves the king and returns to the countryside to return to her true love. Chapter 5 describes the agony of being separated from her beloved while in the palace, which doesn't make sense if her beloved is indeed the king. Furthermore, in 6:13, the daughters of Jerusalem call to the woman, "come back, come back, O Shulammitte."

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

4. *Peasant Love Story*- The love story is between the young peasant girl and a young peasant shepherd. The references to “the king” are not literal, but are only the girl’s affectionate name for her young lover. Verse 8:7 states, “if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love,” talks of the supremacy of love to wealth, a lesson which is better understood in this storyline.

In my opinion, the most natural story line is the royal love story. However, this does present some challenges to our understanding, which we will address in the structure of the book.

## Theme

The Song of Solomon is an example of a married couple’s enjoyment of each other as they grow in their relationship. There is a call for remaining chaste until the wedding, and then having the freedom to enjoy love together. The book is a poetic example of what Solomon calls for in Proverbs 5:18-19:

*Let your fountain be blessed,  
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.  
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,  
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;  
Be exhilarated always with her love.*

## Structure of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs has a chiasmic structure<sup>4</sup>, meaning the first topic is also the last topic of the book, the second topic is also the second to last topic of the book, and so forth. The center of the book, then is highlighted as the climax of the structure. This structure, as applied to the Song of Songs, is highlighted below:

- A. The bride’s country roots (1:1-17)
- B. Love Grows (2:1-17)
- C. The Bride’s troubled dream (3:1-5)
- D. The Wedding and the Wedding Night (3:6-5:1)
- C’. The Bride’s troubled dream (5:2-9)
- B’. Love Grows (5:10-7:13)
- A’. The bride remembers her country roots (8:1-14)

### The Bride’s Country Roots (1:1-17)

The book opens with the young Shulamite woman in the king’s palace (1:4), reminiscing about how her lover found her in the countryside as the daughter of a vinedresser (1:6b). As she looks at all the beautiful women in court, she becomes self-conscious of her appearance, for she is dark and tan from working in the fields (1:6a). The king assures her that she is “most beautiful among women,” (1:8) and that he is struck by how beautiful she is having been taken out of her peasant garb and adorned with ornaments and necklaces (1:10).

### Love Grows (2:1-17)

The bride is overwhelmed by the love of her beloved. She sees him as a “fruit tree” amongst the forest whose fruit is sweet. He has brought her to his banqueting table, where she might enjoy this fruit. She longs for his embrace (2:6). But she must wait patiently for the wedding before she can

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

realize the consummation of her desire (2:7). She is rewarded for her patience as her lover arrives and protects her “in the clefts of the rock” (2:14).

### **The Bride’s Troubled Dream (3:1-5)**

That evening, the bride has a dream where she cannot find her lover (3:1). She goes throughout the city, asking the night watchmen if they had seen him (3:3). In her dream she finds her lover and bring him home (3:4). But again, she must wait patiently for the wedding before she can consummate her desire (3:5).

### **The Wedding and the Wedding Night (3:6-5:1)**

#### **The Wedding (3:5-11)**

Finally, there is the wedding day. King Solomon comes to the wedding in a sedan chair made of cedar (3:9-10), accompanied by soldiers and guards (3:7-8). He is wearing his crown and is a sight for all to behold on this is wedding day (3:11).

#### **The Wedding Night (4:1-5:1)**

Here we get a glimpse into the bridal chamber on the wedding night. Solomon begins by describing the beauty of his wife (4:1-6), concluding that she is “altogether beautiful... and there is no blemish in you” (4:7). As he delights in the beauty of his bride, he is aroused: “you have made my heart beat faster” (4:9).

His bride has saved herself for this moment, waiting patiently (2:7, 3:5), keeping her “garden locked” (4:12). But now, the garden is unlocked, and the groom is invited into *his* garden (4:16) and he enjoys the pleasure of the garden (5:1a).

Then, the narrator calls out with approval, “eat friends; drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers” (5:1b). This suggests that enjoying this moment is a gift from God which should be savored and enjoyed by the lovers.

### **The Bride’s Troubled Dream (5:2-9)**

The bride is asleep, but dreaming (5:2). In her dream, she hears her lover knocking on the door. She hesitates to let him in as she is already wearing her nightgown (5:3). But she changes her mind, gets up and goes to let him in (5:4), but he is gone (5:6). The same fearful dream before the wedding has returned, that her lover has given up on her and left her. She runs out into the city and finds the watchmen again (5:7), only this time, the watchman assault her (5:7).

### **Love Grows (5:10-7:9)**

The bride remembers the strength and beauty of her husband (5:10-16). But doubt still remains. With all the beautiful women in Jerusalem, her dream reveals her concern that her husband might leave her for another (6:2).

But Solomon reminds her that to him, she is more beautiful than any other woman, and more beautiful than “60 queens and 80 concubines” (6:8-9). This passage presents us with some difficulties. We know that Solomon had numerous wives and concubines. Was this woman just one more of his wives? Was she just number 61? That, indeed, seems to be the bride’s concern and worry. Yet Solomon’s response is that she is more beautiful than any of the other queens and concubines. Had he finally found true love? If so, it seems to contradict the message of the book, which calls on at least the bride to wait until marriage. Or is the book promoting a double standard when it comes to virginity.

There are two primary interpretations of this passage:

1. This wedding is the first for Solomon, and he too was a virgin when their love is consummated in chapter 4. The comparison in 6:8-9 is hypothetical.

2. Solomon already has several wives, and his latest bride, the Shulamitte woman, is struggling with her husband's polygamy (6:3). She has kept herself pure for her husband (2:7, 3:5, 4:12, 8:8-10), and she is insecure about her relationship with a man who has a harem (1:5-6). The other women of the harem ridicule her because she thinks she is unique among her husband's lovers (6:1).

While the first option is more comfortable to our modern day sensibilities, the second storyline seems to be a more consistent storyline and better explains the troubled dreams of the new bride.

### The bride remembers her country roots (7:10-8:14)

The king describes her beauty to her again (7:1-9), and desires to enjoy her once more (7:8). However, the bride suggests that before they make love again, that they go on a couple's retreat to the countryside (7:10-13), and then she will "give you my love" (7:12).

While in the countryside, their love is rekindled and they embrace (8:1-3). But the bride is asking for Solomon to reaffirm his commitment to her, in the midst of her doubts (8:6-7):

*"Put me like a seal over your heart,  
Like a seal on your arm.  
For love is as strong as death,  
Jealousy is as severe as Sheol;  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
The very flame of the LORD.  
Many waters cannot quench love,  
Nor will rivers overflow it;  
If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love,  
It would be utterly despised."*

In other words, enough flattery, and enough of the gifts. She is asking Solomon to commit to her. She had saved herself for him (8:8-10). The least he could do is commit to her. She is willing to give her "vineyard" to him (8:11-12). But she does ask him to care for her family as they protected her honor until they married (8:12).

Solomon responds to her. He wants to hear what she has to say (8:13) and agrees to her call. In response, she invites him to make love to her again (8:14).

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