

Song of Solomon

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, As a seal upon your arm;
For love is as strong as death, Jealousy as cruel as the grave;
Its flames are flames of fire, A most vehement flame.” (Song 8:6)

Can a powerful and popular man with a harem fall genuinely in love with a common country girl? Would such a girl agree to become part of his royal harem? And, if she did, what would happen to that love; how would she deal with such competition; would there be any hope for the kind of marriage envisioned at creation? The “Song of Songs which is Solomon’s” probes those questions, not from the standpoint of the great king himself but from the standpoint of one special bride, an unnamed Shulamite, who enters into a deep and mutual love with her royal husband, yet who desires more than he at the moment is willing (or perhaps even capable) of giving. In short, she desired an exclusive relationship such as was entailed in God’s design for marriage from the beginning. Told from her standpoint, the Song of Songs is a plea for exclusivity in marriage, apart from which even the most rapturous erotic love remains somehow incomplete.

Authorship

Solomon is stated to be the author in the opening verse and his name appears numerous times in the book (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:1, 12). Objection to Solomonic authorship is raised on the basis of subject matter (exaltation of marital love by a polygamist) and by reason of certain linguistic features that are assumed to be late, neither of which are sufficient grounds for denying the traditional ascription to Solomon.

Date

Since Solomon died in 931 B.C. the book cannot be later than that. Due to the book’s emphasis on the beauty of marital love with an assumed measure of exclusivity, a

period early in his reign is likely for the events described, though the final composition may have occurred later in his life.

Historical Setting

There are no notices by which to place this work historically. The geographic references presuppose a united kingdom. The subject matter reveals a Jewish setting in Canaan.

Original Readers / Occasion

There are no addressees in the book. Subject matter and purpose must determine the intended readership. Since Song of Songs is a celebration of sexual love within the marriage relationship, it is intended for all humanity as a statement about the potential joys of marriage when entered into and conducted according to God's design. That design clearly enjoined an exclusive relationship that involved the delights of sexual relations. In addition, their marriage is often viewed as symbolic of the relationship between God and His people, whether Israel or the Church (though this is not to be sought by the means of allegorical interpretation).

Special Issues

Literary Genre. At the heart of the interpretive problem of Song of Songs is a determination of the type of literature. Historically, the Song has been understood by Jewish exegetes as an allegory of God's love for Israel. This was adopted by Christian commentators at a very early time but as depicting Christ's love for the Church. Both of these moves were the result of embarrassment over treating the book as a celebration of sexual love in marriage. It has also been understood as God's love for the virgin Mary, as the mystical union of an individual's soul with God, as a collection of peasant wedding

poems, as a liturgy for the wedding of two pagan gods, as an anthology of disconnected love songs, and as a drama.¹ All of these views have deficiencies though some have elements of truth to them. It has become common in modern times to take the Song literally as dealing with sexual intimacy in marriage. However, this in itself does not solve all of the interpretational difficulties. The Song of Songs is best understood as a “lyric idyll, a type of love song” which displays certain characteristics of drama with multiple characters and flashbacks and flashforwards, all of which ignore a strict chronological sequence.²

Literary Structure. There is agreement that the book is a unity that displays an integrated, well-crafted structure, though there is not yet a consensus on the exact breakdown of the component parts. There are obvious parallelisms and chiasms, the observance of which helps greatly in determining the structure and message.³ By noting the gender and number in the Hebrew text it is possible to determine for the most part the various speakers and addressees. A real problem with the shepherd hypothesis (of the three part drama scheme) is the lack of such speaker determination for the shepherd figure.

¹ For an overview of the history of interpretation see J. Paul Tanner, “The History of the Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (January-March 1997), 23-46.

² Joseph C. Dillow, ed. Ronald B. Allen, “Notes on the Book of the Song of Songs,” unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary: n.d., 3-4.

³ For helpful discussions of structure see J. Paul Tanner, “The Message of the Song of Songs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April-June 1997), 142-61 and David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 199-213.

Message

The Song of Songs celebrates the enjoyment of sexual love as it calls for and is only fully realizable in the security of an exclusive relationship between a wife and her husband.

Outline

Title: “The Song of Song’s which is Solomon’s.”	1:1
I. Reflections during the pre-wedding phase.	1:2—3:5
A. Reflections as the wedding day approaches.	1:2—2:7
1. Reflection in the palace by the Shulamite.	1:2—8
a. The Shulamite expresses desire for her Beloved, mirrored by the Daughters of Jerusalem.	1:2—4
b. The Shulamite self-consciously reflects over her appearance.	1:5—6
c. The Shulamite longs to be where her Beloved is.	1:7—8
2. Reflection at the banquet table: The Beloved and the Daughters of Jerusalem encourage the Shulamite and she graces the banquet of her Beloved.	1:9—14
3. Reflection in the bridal chamber.	1:15—2:7
a. The Beloved and The Shulamite exchange praise of each other’s beauty and desirability.	1:15—2:3
b. The Shulamite confesses her desire for her lover to the Daughters.	2:4—5
c. The Shulamite charges the Daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse love until it is right.	2:7
B. Earlier reflections during the courtship days.	2:8—3:5
1. Reflection on a springtime visit by the Beloved to the Shulamite’s.	2:8—14
2. Reflection on the little foxes: The Shulamite is troubled by a threat to their relationship and moves to secure the Beloved’s devoted attention.	2:15—17
3. Reflection on a past dream about separation.	3:1—4
4. The Shulamite charges the Daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse love until it is right.	3:5
II. Reflections on the wedding day.	3:5—5:1
A. The Shulamite reflects on Solomon’s wedding procession.	3:6—11
B. Reflection on the wedding night.	4:1—5:1
1. The Beloved praises his bride’s sexual desirability.	4:1—15
2. The Shulamite invites her husband to consummate their union.	4:16
3. The Beloved reflects upon their consummation	5:1
III. Reflections on post-wedding complications.	5:2—8:4
A. Reflection on a dream of love refused.	5:2—8

1. The Shulamite dreams that she has refused to answer her Beloved's knock and too late arises to seek him only to be mistreated by the watchmen in the streets. 5:2–7
2. The Shulamite charges the Daughters of Jerusalem to tell her Beloved that she is lovesick. 5:8
- B. Reflection on the Shulamite's tension over the Daughters. 5:9—6:13
 1. The Daughters trivialize the Beloved's uniqueness. 5:9
 2. The Shulamite extols the Beloved's excellence calling him friend. 5:10–16
 3. The Daughters mock at the "friend's" disappearance. 6:1
 4. The Shulamite defends the Beloved, and claims a unique relationship. 6:2–3
 5. The Beloved extols the Shulamite's beauty, setting her above the harem. 6:4–9
 6. The Daughters react to the Shulamite's exalted status. 6:10
 7. The Shulamite retires to the country where she feels special. 6:11–12
 8. The Daughters call for the Shulamite to return but are rebuffed. 6:13
- C. Reflection on the renewal of romantic ardor. 7:1—8:4
 1. The Beloved confesses his captivation with the Shulamite's sensual beauty. 7:1–9a
 2. The Shulamite responds to the Beloved's desire. 7:9b—8:2
 3. The Shulamite charges the Daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse love until it is right. 8:3–4
- IV. Rhetorical Refrain on the desired exclusiveness of married love. 8:5–14
 - A. The Question: "Who is this Shulamite? What has she obtained?" 8:5
 - B. The Shulamite requests that her Beloved would grant her an exclusive love. 8:6–12
 1. She expresses a proper jealousy for the sanctity of their union. 8:6–7
 2. Her brothers had protected her for an exclusive love. 8:8–9
 3. She had preserved herself for an exclusive love and given it to Solomon. 8:10–12
 - C. The Beloved and the Shulamite give themselves to each other. 8:13–14

Argument

Song of Songs is structured with the wedding and consummation of the king and his bride as the emphasized center of the book (3:6—5:1) bracketed by two dreams (3:1–5 and 5:2–8) with an opening and closing vineyard motif (cf. 1:6 and 8:12). There is much reflection and imaginings throughout, as is evident by the dream sequences.

Written from the standpoint of the Shulamite bride, Song is most understandably approached from her perspective. It is a reflection on marrying into the harem of king Solomon whom she passionately loves, and who passionately loves her in return. What begins very positively becomes more complicated and troublesome as the reflection proceeds, until the issue is finally verbalized in the concluding rhetorical refrain (8:5–14).⁴

I. Reflections during the pre-wedding phase (1:2—3:5).

As her wedding day approaches the Shulamite recalls her introduction to court life. Desire for her Beloved has brought her into the royal palace and into the presence of her husband-to-be's harem who are happy for her good fortune (1:2–4). She is self-conscious over her appearance and so longs to be with her Beloved (1:5–8). She is encouraged by the Beloved and his harem as they sit at banquet (1:9–14) but what she remembers most is her wedding night as she and her Beloved delight in each other's beauty and sexual desirability (1:15—2:7). Having introduced the poem as one of married love the scene now shifts back to the Shulamite's reflection on her days of courtship (2:8—3:5). Solomon had visited her area of the country, had been taken with her and invited her to come away with him (2:8–14). This raises troublesome thoughts about some threat to their relationship, symbolized by the little foxes that spoil the vineyards (2:15). Her desire is for the Beloved to give himself completely to her as the solution to the problem of the "little foxes" (2:16–17), later on more clearly specified as the Daughters of Jerusalem, that is Solomon's harem in their claim on his affections (cf. 6:8–

⁴ This analysis is based on Tanner, "Message," 142-61.

9).⁵ A past dream about her separation from her Beloved had ended pleasantly as she had arisen and gone out to find him (3:1–5). A later dream recollection will not end so pleasantly.

II. Reflections on the wedding day (3:5—5:1).

At the heart of the Shulamite’s reflection is the wedding day itself, and quite properly so in light of the genuine passion which they had shared for each other. The wedding procession had been unexcelled, a dream of every bride (3:6–11), and the wedding night had disappointed in no way (4:1—5:1). Her Beloved had expressed his desire for her sexually (4:1–15) and she had invited him to consummate the relationship (4:16) which he did (5:1). In symbol the physical love between a man and woman is described in a most beautiful, and appropriate, manner. However, this was not to be a “happily for ever after” kind of marriage. What has been hinted at in the opening reflection now comes to the forefront as the Shulamite expresses concern over their relationship.

III. Reflections on post-wedding complications (5:2—8:4).

The second dream sequence (“I sleep, but my heart is awake”) reveals a not so pleasant experience. The Shulamite refuses her husband’s request for admittance and then chases him into the night only to be mistreated by the watchmen in the streets (5:2–7). Though something is amiss in the relationship she wants her Beloved to be assured that she is still deeply in love with him (5:8). The exact nature of the difficulty begins to become apparent as the Shulamite engages the Daughters of Jerusalem concerning the uniqueness of her and her Beloved’s relationship (5:9—6:13). They trivialize her Beloved’s uniqueness (5:9) which she defends both from the standpoint of his physical

⁵ See *ibid.*, 150-52.

attractiveness (5:10–15) and his friendship (5:16). The harem seems to mock her Beloved's disappearance (6:1) to which she responds that they have a unique relationship (6:2–3) something that every one of Solomon's wives and concubines would certainly have hoped for herself and perhaps even imagined from time to time. However, the Beloved backs up his bride's claims, praising her beauty and exalting her status as his favorite of them all (6:4–9) which brings a reaction from them (6:10). At that the Shulamite retires to the country where she feels special (6:11–12), rebuffing pleas for her to return (6:13). The ardor of romance is renewed as the Beloved confesses his captivation with his bride's sensual beauty (7:1–9a) and she responds to his desires (7:9a—8:2). She has been assured that she is Solomon's favorite and that he still ardently desires her; and yet there is still an aspect of married love that is missing.

IV. Rhetorical Refrain on the desired exclusiveness of married love (8:5–14).

A rhetorical question, from no one identified in the poem thus far, seems to be asking Who is this Shulamite? and What has she obtained? Ultimately her mother had born her to become a wife and mother herself according to the divine design for marriage; but had that happened? In terms of the delights of love and physical union it had. However, in terms of God's design of monogamy it had not. Hence, the Shulamite requests that her Beloved would grant her that exclusive love, setting her as a seal upon his heart (8:6–7). Hers was a proper jealousy for the exclusive relationship that God had intended to exist between husband and wife (and which Solomon as the king had been expected to observe—cf. Deut 17:17). Her brothers had protected her virginity for such a love (8:8–9), as had she (8:10–12), and now she had given herself exclusively to her

Beloved. Her desire was that Solomon would do the same, though she will continue to love him to the extent possible in such a situation (8:13–14).

Conclusion

In the beginning the Lord made mankind as male and female intending that they should marry and enjoy the bliss of conjugal love. However powerful erotic love may be, it can never replace or make up for the commitment of a man and woman to each other to the exclusion of all other relationships. Sensual love can be great in a fallen and imperfect world. However it can only be its best when experienced in the context of exclusivity. The Shulamite had been taught this from childhood and had come to believe it deeply. Had Solomon hearkened to the plea of his favorite wife, they both could have entered into the most profound of relationships, that of husband and wife to the exclusion of all others.⁶

⁶ Tanner's summary is well worth noting in full:

Solomon was a man of many lovers, and the Song of Songs is a record of one of the relationships that stood out above all others. A fiery love developed between Solomon and the unnamed Shulamite woman referred to as the bride. Their background was remarkably diverse. He grew up in the kingly courts of Jerusalem, while she was accustomed to labor in the vineyards beneath the blistering sun. He had known many women (nor had his father David been monogamous), whereas she had been kept a virgin under the careful scrutiny of her brothers.

Solomon could offer her a life in the royal courts, but she had something much greater to offer him. She could teach him about a godly love based on commitment, a love that needed to be mutually exclusive to experience its highest attainment. Such love was costly (8:7). It was more than money could buy, more than even Solomon was capable of. So, she becomes the heroine of the book, and she (rather than Solomon) renders the moral homily in the book's conclusion.

Unfortunately Solomon followed the way of many worldly kings, establishing a large harem to propagate a large royal lineage. As a result too many women—the “daughters of Jerusalem”—were vying for his attention. She made an earnest attempt to love him in such a context, but she knew there was a higher level to which their relationship could ascend if only they could be exclusively each other's. That is what led her to request, “Put me like a seal over your heart” (8:6). The development of her life had been one of moral purity, retaining her virginity for the exclusive satisfaction of the one who would become her husband. She was prepared to be exclusively his. He, however, had a great obstacle to overcome. He needed to recognize the detrimental effect his lifestyle imposed on the development of their relationship.

In this literal-didactic view, the relationship of Solomon and his bride should be understood literally (speaking approvingly of their marital bliss), but it also presents an important lesson: There is a level of love far beyond sexual satisfaction, a love that is exclusive and possessive, having no room for intruders. Only two may ascend alone, but in so doing they will find that “its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord” (8:6). The Song of Songs hearkens back to God's prototypical design in the Garden of Eden of one man and one woman, in marriage, a relationship God designed to be mutually exclusive. This book, then, presents a most relevant and urgent message for today

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Zuck, Roy B. "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs." In *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*. Edited by Roy B. Zuck. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.
- Tanner, J. Paul. "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (January-March 1997): 23-46.
- Tanner, J. Paul. "The Message of the Song of Songs." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April-June 1997): 142-61.
- Parsons, Greg W. "Guidelines for Understanding and Utilizing the Song of Songs." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October-December 1999): 399-422.
- Bullock, C. Hassell. *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1979.