

Notes on Song of Solomon

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Introduction

TITLE

In the Hebrew Bible the title of this book is "The Song of Songs." It comes from 1:1. The Septuagint and Vulgate translators adopted this title. The Latin word for song is *canticum* from which we get the word *Canticles*, another title for this book. Some English translations have kept the title "Song of Songs" (e.g., NIV, TNIV), but many have changed it to "Song of Solomon" based on 1:1 (e.g., NASB, AV, RSV, NKJV).

WRITER AND DATE

Many references to Solomon throughout the book confirm the claim of 1:1 that Solomon wrote this book (cf. 1:4-5, 12; 3:7, 9, 11; 6:12; 7:5; 8:11-12; 1 Kings 4:33). He reigned between 971 and 931 B.C. Richard Hess believed the writer is unknown and could have been anyone, even a woman, and that the female heroine viewed and described her lover as a king: as a Solomon.¹

How could Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3), be the same faithful lover this book presents? He could be if he became polygamous after the events in this book took place. That seems a more likely explanation than that he was polygamous when these events occurred and just omitted reference to his other loves. Probably he wrote the book before he became polygamous. We do not know how old Solomon was when he married the second time. The history recorded in Kings and Chronicles is not in strict chronological order. The Shulammitte was probably not Pharaoh's daughter in view of references in the book (1 Kings 3:1; cf. Song of Sol. 4:8). One writer contended that she was Pharaoh's daughter.² Another view is that "Shulammitte" is simply the feminine form of the name "Solomon."³ So Solomon could have written this book in his youth. Perhaps he wrote most of Proverbs in mid-life and Ecclesiastes in his old age. The contents of these three writings have suggested that order to many students.

¹Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, pp. 34-35, 39, 50, 53, 67.

²Victor Sasson, "King Solomon and the Dark Lady in the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 39:4 (October 1989):407-14.

³Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, p. 192.

GENRE AND INTERPRETATION

This book has received more varied interpretations than perhaps any other book in the Bible.⁴ Some writers believed it presents the reader with the "greatest hermeneutical challenge" in the Old Testament.⁵ One excellent exegete called it "the most obscure book of the Old Testament."⁶

"Among the books of the Bible, the Song of Solomon is one of the smallest, most difficult, yet one of the most popular with both Jews and Christians. Over the centuries hundreds of books and commentaries have been written and unnumbered sermons preached on these 117 verses."⁷

Bible students have understood the Song of Solomon as an allegory, an extended type, a drama with either two or three main characters, or a collection of wedding songs. Others have thought it is a collection of pagan fertility cult liturgies or an anthology of songs extolling love, to name only the most common interpretations.⁸ Quite clearly it is at least a love poem⁹ or a collection of love poems.¹⁰

"Although the Song is not an allegory, it may be admitted that it lends itself to allegorical interpretation."¹¹

Those who interpret the book allegorically—the majority of interpreters do—believe that what the writer said is only a symbolic husk for a deeper spiritual meaning that the reader must discover. Jewish interpreters took this deeper revelation to be God's love for Israel. Christian scholars have frequently seen it as Christ's love for the church. However, the text itself does not indicate that we should interpret this book differently than any other Bible book.¹²

⁴H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *The Servant of the Lord*, p. 197; Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, pp. 3, 4.

⁵Andre LaCocque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs*, p. xi.

⁶Delitzsch, p. 1.

⁷G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, p. 15.

⁸See Dennis F. Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 1202-5; J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:613 (January-March 1997):23-46; Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Utilizing the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:624 (October-December 1999):399-422; Gordon H. Johnston, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 2" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:662 (April-June 2009):163-80; and especially Paige Patterson, *Song of Solomon*, pp. 17-27, for brief but helpful discussions of approaches to interpretation.

⁹J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, p. 1; *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1097.

¹⁰Gordon H. Johnston, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:663 (July-September 2009):289-305; Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 292-93.

¹¹Exum, p. 77.

¹²See Parsons, p. 402; and Longman and Dillard, pp. 293-97.

"All things are possible to those who allegorize—and what they come up with is usually heretical."¹³

Another interpretive issue is whether the main characters were real people or composite figures, types of lovers rather than specific individuals. The book presents them as real people, and even most of those who view them as types admit that the characters "seem to take on distinct personalities as we get to know them."¹⁴ It has seemed to many interpreters, including me, that the book presents the Shulammitte and Solomon as real people.

Most conservative interpreters who view the book as an extended type believe the events recorded really took place, in contrast to the allegorical interpreters, but their primary significance lies in their illustrative value.¹⁵

"The shepherd is a picture of Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep. The Shulamite mirrors the Church or the individual believer devoted to Him. Solomon represents the prince of this world armed with all worldly pomp, power, and magnificence. The court women are those who admire him and who look askance at those who turn their backs upon the world, its system, and all that it has to offer in favor of an absent and, to them, unknown Beloved."¹⁶

The basic teaching such Christian interpreters see is Christ's love for the church. Yet again the text itself does not indicate that this book requires a different interpretation than the other books of the Bible.

"This view differs from the allegorical in that it tries to do justice to the actual language of the Song without seeking a special meaning in every phrase, as the allegorical view does."¹⁷

A careful analysis of the text has convinced most scholars that the Song of Solomon was not a Hebrew drama,¹⁸ though some have defended this view.¹⁹ There is no evidence that the Hebrews had dramas of this type in Solomon's day.²⁰ One writer believed in form the book is a drama, and in genre it is most likely an analogy, "an earthly model of heavenly love."²¹

¹³Warren W. Wiersbe, "Song of Solomon," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Wisdom and Poetry*, p. 542.

¹⁴Exum, p. 8.

¹⁵E.g., J. Hudson Taylor, *Union and Communion*; and Andrew Miller, *Meditations on the Song of Solomon*.

¹⁶John Phillips, *Exploring the Song of Solomon*, p. 9.

¹⁷Sierd Woudstra, "The Song of Solomon," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 595.

¹⁸See Parsons, pp. 403-4.

¹⁹E.g., Delitzsch, p. 9; and Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*.

²⁰G. Lloyd Carr, "Is the Song of Songs a 'Sacred Marriage' Drama?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22:2 (June 1979):103-114.

²¹Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, pp. 511, 512-13.

Some interpreters believe three main characters are in view, namely, Solomon, the Shulamite girl, and her shepherd lover.²² However, what some scholars have attributed to the shepherd lover can just as easily refer to Solomon. It was not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern literature to refer to kings as shepherds since they served a pastoral function in relation to their people. Furthermore, many of them did own many flocks (cf. 2:7).

Probably the Song of Solomon was a single love poem made up of several strophes (poetic paragraphs) that the writer designed to deal primarily with the subject of human love and marriage. This was the viewpoint of many ancient Jewish rabbis.²³ This is also the conclusion most conservative commentators have come to who have sought to interpret this book in the same way they interpret other Bible books (i.e., literally, historically, and grammatically). It is also the conclusion of some liberal scholars who have analyzed the structure of the book.²⁴ Love is an important subject of special revelation, and human love in particular is a central feature of it as well (cf. Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:36-39; John 13:34-35). Consequently it should not seem incredible that God gave us this book to help us understand this subject better.²⁵

However, it seems clear that this book also has spiritual value, specifically to clarify divine-human love.²⁶

". . . it is widely acknowledged that the Bible is a book of faith and theology, and there is no place in the canon for atheological literature. . . .

"The literal approaches of Dillow, Glickman, and others are much more faithful to the intent of the book [than other approaches]. The limitations of these strictly literal approaches are the tendency to see sexuality as a more prominent feature of the Song than is justified by the text and the propensity to overreact to the absurdities of the allegorical method to the extent of missing justifiable [spiritual] analogy."²⁷

"The Song fills a necessary vacuum in the Scriptures because it endorses sex and celebrates it beyond all expectation. Although abuse is possible and to be avoided, sex is not inherently evil, nor is it limited to a procreative function. Instead, sex enables an experience of love whose

²²E.g., F. Godet, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, pp. 151-75; W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, 1:119; Phillips, p. 8; et al.

²³See David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, p. 256.

²⁴E.g., J. Cheryl Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 85 (1973):47-79; and William Shea, "The Chiastic Structure of the Song of Songs," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980):378-96. See Gordon H. Johnston, "The Enigmatic Genre and Structure of the Song of Songs, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:661 (January-March 2009):36-52, for further discussion of the genre and structure of the Song.

²⁵For a summary of the doctrine of man in the Song of Solomon, see Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 254-55. For a study of "love," see Carr, *The Song . . .*, pp. 60-63.

²⁶Hess, in his commentary, included a section of theological implications after his interpretation of each canticle.

²⁷Patterson, p. 25.

intensity has no parallel in this cosmos and serves as a signpost to point to the greater love that lies beyond it."²⁸

Evidence of unity within the book argues against its being only a collection of poems that had general similarity to one another that the writer later assembled into one song.²⁹

PURPOSE

Probably God's primary purpose in inspiring this book of the Bible was to give us revelation concerning the way love between a man and a woman should look.³⁰ The characters in the book usually behave toward one another the way men and women in love should conduct themselves in attitudes and activities.

"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. . . .

"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."³¹

"The prospect of children is not necessary to justify sexual love in marriage. Significantly, the Song of Solomon makes no reference to procreation. It must be remembered that the book was written in a world where a high premium was placed on offspring and a woman's worth was often measured in terms of the number of her children. Sex was often seen with reference to procreation; yet there is not a trace of that here. The song is a song in praise of love for love's sake and for love's sake alone. This relationship needs no justification beyond itself."³²

The love relationship between a man and a woman is an illustration of the love relationship within the Godhead and between God and Israel and between Christ and the church (cf. Hos. 3:1; Eph. 5:32). Therefore part of the purpose of this book seems to be the revelation of those more basic love relationships for *application* by the reader.

"The purpose of the book . . . is to describe and extol human marital love. . . . The love that exists between them also portrays love at the higher and more perfect level, that between God and the objects of His grace."³³

²⁸Hess, p. 35.

²⁹Robert Gordis, *The Songs of Songs and Lamentations*, among others advocated this collection of love songs view. For a fuller discussion of the complex history of the interpretation of this book, see S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers*, pp. 173-88. The Bible encyclopedias and the Old Testament Introductions also have information on this subject. See also other sources listed in the bibliography of these notes.

³⁰See Robert B. Laurin, "The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message," *Christianity Today*, August 3, 1962, pp. 10-11;

³¹J. Paul Tanner, "The Message of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:614 (April-June 1997):160, 161.

³²Kinlaw, p. 1207.

³³Merrill, p. 512.

"The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship of God to his people is almost universal in Scripture. . . .

"Human love is thus a good pedagogical device to cast light on divine love."³⁴

"In creating man—male and female—in his own image and joining them together so that they become one flesh, God makes us copies both of himself in his trinitarian unity and distinction as one God and three persons and of himself in relation to the people of his gracious election. Analogically, what is between Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and what ought to be and is and shall be between God and Israel and Christ and the Church, is also what is meant to be in the relation of man and woman and more specifically of husband and wife. Neither the intratrinitarian relationship nor the union between the heavenly bridegroom and his bride is a good copy of a bad original. Earthly marriage as it is now lived out is a bad copy of a good original."³⁵

"There is something proleptic and eschatological in human passion. We deal with symbols that image eternal realities here. Little wonder that this little book is in the canon."³⁶

CANONICITY

There have been three primary reasons that some scholars have thought this book does not deserve to be in the Bible. First, it does not contain the name of God. However, God's name may appear in 8:6. Furthermore, what makes a book theological or religious is not just the presence of the divine name. God's name does not appear in the books of Esther or Ecclesiastes either.

Second, the presence of frank language describing physical intimacies seems inappropriate in the Bible to some people. Yet the Bible presents marriage as sacred, including its physical aspects.

Third, the difficulty of interpretation has caused some readers to reject it as non-canonical. This criticism fails to recognize that finite and fallen human beings may not easily comprehend the revelations of an infinite and omniscient God.

"Like other portions of the Word of God, this book has its difficulties. But so have all the works of God. Is not the fact that they surpass our unaided powers of comprehension and research a 'sign-manual' of divinity? Can feeble man expect to grasp divine power, or to understand and interpret the works or the providences of the All-wise? And if not, is it surprising that His Word also needs superhuman wisdom for its interpretation? Thanks be to God, the illumination of the Holy Ghost is promised to all who seek for it: what more can we desire?"³⁷

³⁴Kinlaw, p. 1208. See also Longman and Dillard, p. 300.

³⁵Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *God and Marriage*, p. 77.

³⁶Kinlaw, p. 1209.

³⁷Taylor, p. 2.

The Song of Solomon is the first of the five "Megilloth," which are the five scrolls read by the Jews at various feasts. They read the Song of Solomon at Passover as a historical allegory beginning with the Exodus and ending with the coming of Messiah.³⁸ The Jews also read Ruth at Pentecost, Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, Esther at the Feast of Purim, and Lamentations on the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem. The Megilloth is Part II of the Writings division of the Hebrew Bible, the first part of which is the Book of Truth, which consists of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. The third part of the Writings contains Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The Law section contains the Torah or Pentateuch: Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Prophets contains the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and The Twelve minor prophets).

TEXT

The Hebrew text of the Song is sound, but the book is very difficult to translate. Words that occur only in this book (*hapax legomena*) comprise 9.2 percent of its vocabulary, and 11.3 percent of the words are unique to this book.³⁹

OUTLINE

There seems to be a progression in time that the successive songs that make up this book reveals. Franz Delitzsch was a proponent of this view, and I agree and have reflected it in the outline below. However, not all scholars believe that the individual songs are sequential.

- I. The superscription 1:1
- II. The courtship 1:2—3:5
 - A. The beginning of love 1:2-11
 1. Longing for the boyfriend 1:2-4
 2. The girl's insecurity 1:5-8
 3. Solomon's praise 1:9-11
 - B. The growth of love 1:12—3:5
 1. Mutual admiration 1:12—2:7
 2. Increased longing 2:8-17
 3. The pain of separation 3:1-5
- III. The wedding 3:6—5:1
 - A. The procession 3:6-11
 - B. The consummation 4:1—5:1
 1. The bride's beauty 4:1-7
 2. The groom's request 4:8
 3. The bride's love 4:9-11

³⁸Longman, p. 2.

³⁹Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 29. Longman, pp. 1-70, provided good discussion of many introductory subjects.

4. The bride's purity 4:12-15
 5. The bride's surrender 4:16—5:1
- IV. The maturing process 5:2—8:4
- A. The problem of apathy 5:2—6:13
 1. Indifference and withdrawal 5:2-8
 2. Renewed affection 5:9-16
 3. Steps toward reconciliation 6:1-3
 4. Restoration of intimacy 6:4-13
 - B. Communicating affection 7:1-10
 1. The wife's charms 7:1-6
 2. The husband's desires 7:7-9
 3. The ultimate unity 7:10
 - C. The wife's initiative 7:11-13
 - D. Increased intimacy 8:1-4
- V. The conclusion 8:5-7
- VI. The epilogue 8:8-14
- A. The past 8:8-12
 - B. The present 8:13-14

MESSAGE

Contemporary culture has affected the interpretation of this book more than that of most other Bible books. For many years, believers considered this book to be a revelation of God's love for the believer and the believer's love for God, expressed in vivid metaphorical language. This was the predominant viewpoint for centuries when most people did not talk about the intimacies of human physical love publicly. With the sexual revolution that began in the 1960s, there are now many interpreters who believe this book is a revelation of two human beings' love for each other exclusively. Some have even suggested that it is an inspired marriage manual that God has given us to enable us to develop strong marriages. Some Jewish rabbis in ancient times believed this was its purpose as well.

I believe God gave it to us so we could understand the nature of love primarily. I think God wanted us to *apply* that understanding: both in our love for our spouses, and in our love for our Savior. In other words, I believe the purpose is "both . . . and," rather than "either . . . or." This is also the view of many contemporary evangelical scholars, including Merrill, Hubbard, and Hess.

This book emphasizes the supremacy of love. *Human* life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of a man and a woman. *Spiritual* life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of a human being and God. Jesus Christ makes the fulfillment of love on both the human and the spiritual levels possible. He manifested God's love to humankind. Consequently, we can love Him, and we can love one another. Matthew 22:37-39 gives us the greatest

commandment, namely: to love God wholeheartedly and our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, our love for God and our love for other human beings are both very important to God. 1 John 4:17 says, "We love, because He first loved us." This book helps us love, which we can do as believers because God has shed abroad His love in our hearts (Rom. 5:5).

When Solomon originally wrote this book, it was a poem about the love of two people, a man and a woman, for each other. Consequently, what it reveals about love is applicable to human love. However, since God revealed and inspired it as part of Scripture, He also intended us to apply it to our spiritual lives, our relationship with God. That is the purpose of every other book of the Bible, and I believe that this was God's purpose in giving us this book as well. In Ephesians, Paul wrote that we should learn about Christ's love for the church from marriage (Eph. 5:32).

The values of this book are primarily two:

First, the Song of Solomon is a revelation of the true nature of human love. It reveals four things about human love.

It reveals the *foundation* of love. According to this book, the foundation of love is mutual satisfaction. The man and the woman in this book find perfect rest in each other. They satisfy one another in every way. Affection relates directly to this ability. We have affection for people who satisfy some need or desire in us. We have supreme affection for one who satisfies us ultimately. That supreme affection is the basis for marriage. God intended it to be so. This book also reveals that mutual satisfaction is not only complementary, but it is also exclusive. The man and the woman in this book each saw the other as the only one for them (2:2-3). For satisfaction to be complete, there must be a commitment to exclusivity. There is usually a promise to forsake all others in wedding vows. When love is not exclusive, it is diluted (cf. Gen. 2:24; 1 Tim. 3:2). The foundation of love, then, is mutual satisfaction that is both complementary and exclusive.

This book also reveals the *strength* of love. It is the strongest force in life (8:6-7). People will do for love what they will not do for any other reason. However, when mutual satisfaction breaks down, the strength of love grows weaker. People who want strong love in their marriage should commit themselves to satisfying each other more than themselves.

This book also reveals *how* to love. It shows Solomon taking the initiative in reaching out to his loved one with intensity, and protecting her. It also shows the Shulammitte responding to her beloved by yielding to him and trusting in him. These are the usual actions and reactions of the male and the female in love. Sometimes there is a reversal of roles, but not usually. God intended these methods of expressing love to be instructive for us. They are applicable in both our love for our spouse and in our love for God.

This book also reveals the *fruits* of love. These are three. In true love there is rest. There is a perfect contentment that turmoil outside or within cannot destroy. The home in which genuine love resides is a haven from the storms of life. In true love there is also joy. No matter what other conditions may exist (poverty, misery, etc.), real love fills the heart

with song and brightens the darkest day. And in true love there is courage. Both individuals gain strength from their love to face circumstances boldly, and to recover from their failures and go on. All three of these fruits of love are prominent in this book.

The second value of this book is that it reveals spiritual experience at its highest level. Some people these days have trouble seeing that the book has anything to say about our relationship to God. One could say the same thing about the Book of Esther. But here it is helpful to remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). We, too, can study the Scriptures and miss what they have to teach us about what is most important: God Himself. Every other book of the Bible teaches us about God, and so does this one.

Loving God was the ultimate intention of the divine Author. This conclusion finds support in the fact that this was the belief of Jewish interpreters, as well as Christian scholars, in both Old and New Testament times. Furthermore, the writers of Scripture used the example of a bride and groom, husband and wife, to describe God's relationship with His people in both Testaments (e.g., Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the bride of Christ; Eph. 5:25-32).

It is therefore important that we take these revelations concerning the nature of love, and apply them to our relationship with God, and not only to our relationship with our spouse. Do not confuse interpretation with application. On the interpretation level, the book was intended to teach us about human love. But we can and should apply this teaching to our love relationship with God.

The *foundation* of our love for God and His love for us is also mutual satisfaction. He satisfies our every need and our every want. Nevertheless, He also finds satisfaction in us. This is amazing! Zeph. 3:17 reveals that God rejoices in His people!

We see the *strength* of God's love for us when we look at Calvary. The strength of our love for God is the extent to which we respond to Him in obedience (1 John 2:3-6).

We see *how* to love as we observe God initiating love for us, reaching out intensely and protectively. We express our love for Him by yielding to Him and trusting in Him.

The *fruit* of love is the same in our relationship with God as in our relationship with another human being. We enjoy rest, joy, and courage. God does too. He experiences courage in the sense of encouragement.

Because of these revelations and emphases, I would summarize the message of this book as follows: human life and spiritual life find their greatest fulfillment in the experience of mutual love.

Love is the greatest experience in all human relationships and in our spiritual relationship. Consequently, God commands us to love Him and to love one another wholeheartedly (Matt. 22:37-39). We must give attention to loving. This is not how the world views love. The non-Christian world thinks you fall into it and out of it; it comes

and goes. The Bible says it requires continuing commitment and cultivation. Some people view commitment as the sum and substance of marriage, but there is more to it than that. There should also be affection, and lots of it. Christians who are committed to Christ, but do not love Christ, have a hard time continuing on with Christ.

This book also encourages us to view human love in the light of God's love for us, and our love for Him. A person who has experienced the love of God can know best how to express and receive love on the human level. Human love is the child of divine love. Christians should be the world's best lovers.

The opposite is true, too. We can find help in loving God by learning from our human love. Our passion, abandonment, and fidelity to our mate on the human level should help us practice these things in our relationship with God. I believe God created the family to help us understand our relationship with Himself. When we learn how to respond to one another, we learn how to respond to God, and vice versa. Children who have loving parents understand and appreciate God's love easier than those who do not have loving parents.⁴⁰

⁴⁰Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:73-87.

Exposition

I. THE SUPERScription 1:1

The writer of this book claimed to be Solomon.⁴¹ Solomon wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32), and this book appears to be one of them (cf. Pss. 72; 127). "Which is Solomon's" has led many interpreters to conclude that Solomon was the writer. Another interpretation follows.

"Here Solomon, as the king and symbol of wisdom and love, becomes an image for the male lover in the poem. Thus the female speaker, who dominates the poem, dedicates it to her Solomon, a figure who embodies her greatest desires for the fulfillment of love."⁴²

"Song of songs" means that this is a superlative song (cf. the terms "holy of holies," "vanity of vanities," or "King of kings"), not that it is one song made up of several other songs, which it is. The divine Author probably intended us to view this book as a superlative song, the best song. The lack of reference to God in the superscription does not, of course, rule out divine inspiration of the book.

"God's name is absent from the entire setting. But who would deny that his presence is strongly felt? From whom come such purity and passion? Whose creative touch can ignite hearts and bodies with such a capacity to bring unsullied delight to another? Who kindled the senses that savor every sight, touch, scent, taste, and sound of a loved one? Whose very character is comprised of the love that is the central subject of the Song? None of this is to allegorize either the minute details or the main sense of the book. It is about *human* love at its best. But behind it, above it, and through it, the Song, as part of the divinely ordered repertoire of Scripture, is a paean of praise to the Lord of creation who makes possible such exquisite love and to the Lord of redemption who demonstrated love's fullness on a cross."⁴³

Another peculiarity of the book is the absence of any identifiable theological theme. The Bible has much to say about marriage.

"But the Song of Songs is different. Here sex is for joy, for union, for relationship, for celebration. Its lyrics contain no aspirations to pregnancy, no anticipations of parenthood. The focus is not on progeny to assure the continuity of the line but on passion to express the commitment to covenant between husband and wife."⁴⁴

⁴¹See Delitzsch, pp. 11-12, et al.

⁴²Hess, p. 39.

⁴³Hubbard, pp. 273-74.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 268.

II. THE COURTSHIP 1:2—3:5

Perhaps the outstanding characteristic of this first major section of the book is the sexual restraint that is evident during the courtship. This restraint contrasts with the sexual intimacy that characterizes the lovers after their wedding (3:6—5:1 and 5:2—8:4). Before marriage a couple should restrain their sexual desire rather than indulging it.

Some scholars believe that the Song is not a sequential narrative.⁴⁵ Other writers have seen chronological progression in the experiences of the lovers in view.⁴⁶

A. THE BEGINNING OF LOVE 1:2-11

In the NASB, NIV, TNIV, NKJV and some other English translations, the translators identified the speakers in the various sections of the book. This is, of course, the interpretation of the translators, not part of the inspired text.

1. Longing for the boyfriend 1:2-4

As the book begins, the young woman and young man have already met and "fallen in love." In verses 2-4a the girl voices her desire for her boyfriend's physical affection. According to LaCocque, the main female character speaks 53 percent of the time and the male 39 percent in the book.⁴⁷

". . . there is no other female character in the Bible whom we get to know so well through her intimate and innermost thoughts and feelings."⁴⁸

"It is significant to this work that the girl speaks first. This young lady is not extremely diffident. She seems to see herself as of equal stature with the male. She longs to express her love to him, and she wants him to reciprocate. There is a sense in which she is the major character in this poem. This is one of the aspects of this work that makes it unique in its day. Much more of the text comes from her mouth and mind than from his. It is more her love story than it is his, though there is no failure on his part to declare his love and admiration for her."⁴⁹

Who was the Shulammite? No one knows for sure. It is possible that she may have been Abishag, the Shunammite (cf. 1 Kings 1:3-4, 15). "Shulammite" could describe a person from Shunem (cf. Josh. 19:18; 1 Sam. 28:4). The location of this Shunem was in lower Galilee, south of Nain, southeast of Nazareth, and southwest of Tabor.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Hess, p. 34.

⁴⁶E.g., Delitzsch.

⁴⁷LaCocque, p. 41.

⁴⁸Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 25.

⁴⁹Kinlaw, p. 1216. See Harold R. Holmyard III, "Solomon's Perfect One," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:618 (April-June 1998):164-71.

⁵⁰Cf. Delitzsch, p. 119.

"This would explain Solomon's rather severe reaction to the plot of Adonijah and also partially explain the women of the court listed in 6:8 without the necessity of understanding them to have been actual consorts of Solomon."⁵¹

The use of both third and second person address ("he" and "you") is a bit confusing. Is she speaking *about* him or *to* him? This feature of ancient oriental poetry is common in other Near Eastern love poems that archaeologists have discovered. It was a device that ancient writers employed evidently to strengthen the emotional impact of what they wrote.⁵² Here the girl appears to be speaking *about* her love, not *to* him.

1:2 The Hebrew word for "love" (*dodim*) in verse 2 refers to physical expressions of love.⁵³ The girl found her boyfriend's physical affection very stimulating.

". . . figurative language is used more prominently throughout the Song than anywhere else in the Bible."⁵⁴

1:3 His "oils" (v. 3) were evidently the lotions he wore. Since the name of a person represented his character (cf. 2 Sam. 7:9), she meant his character, his whole person, was also as pleasing as oil to her and to other people. Her attraction was not due to physical factors alone. "Maidens" (Heb. *'alma*) refers to young unmarried women of marriageable age (cf. Gen. 24:43; Exod. 2:8; Isa. 7:14).

1:4a We could translate the words, "The king has brought me into his chambers," (v. 4) as, "May the king bring me into his chambers." This is an expression of longing for intimacy. Such a desire is normal and healthy (cf. Prov. 5:18-19). The king was Solomon, we believe. Taylor understood Solomon to be "a type of our LORD, the true Prince of peace, in His coming reign."⁵⁵ Longman believed that the woman only viewed her love as a king, but he was not really one.⁵⁶

1:4b The last three lines of verse 4 were evidently the words of the "daughters of Jerusalem" (v. 5; cf. 2:7; 3:5, 10, 17; 5:8, 11, 16; 8:4). These may have been hometown friends of the woman,⁵⁷ the female inhabitants of Jerusalem,⁵⁸ women who display the characteristics of city girls,⁵⁹ or the women of Solomon's harem (cf. 6:8-9).⁶⁰ Their words here show that they

⁵¹Patterson, p. 98.

⁵²Jack S. Deere, "Song of Songs," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1011.

⁵³Cf. G. Lloyd Carr, "The Old Testament Love Songs and their Use in the New Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24:2 (June 1981):101.

⁵⁴Hess, p. 29.

⁵⁵Taylor, p. 3.

⁵⁶Longman, p. 92.

⁵⁷William S. LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, p. 605.

⁵⁸Deere, p. 1012.

⁵⁹Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 77.

⁶⁰Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 152.

approved of the romance. According to Taylor's typology, they represent "those who . . . are for the present more concerned about the things of this world than the things of God."⁶¹

2. The girl's insecurity 1:5-8

1:5-6 The young lady felt embarrassed because she had very dark skin as a result of having to tend her family's grapevines. Her skin was dark because of the sun's rays, not primarily because of her race. Some readers have thought that she was a black woman made even darker by much exposure to the sun. This could be possible. Female courtiers did not work outdoors, so their skin was lighter than women's who labored in the fields. The "tents of Kedar" (v. 5) were apparently black and were probably animal skins. The Kedarites were nomads who lived in northern Arabia southeast of Damascus (cf. Gen. 25:13; Isa. 60:7).

"These words express humility without abjectness."⁶²

Her "own vineyard" (v. 6) refers to her personal appearance.⁶³ "Vineyard" is a frequent metaphor for the physical body in this poem (cf. v. 14; 2:15 [twice]; 7:12; 8:11 [twice], 12)

"She had not had available to her the luxurious baths and toiletries or fashionable clothing of the court. There had been no opportunity for her to take care of her hair, skin, or hands according to the obvious courtly style."⁶⁴

1:7 Solomon probably was not a shepherd. Ancient Near Eastern love poems commonly pictured men as shepherds.⁶⁵ The girl simply wanted to be alone with Solomon. If she could not, she would be very sad, like a woman who veiled her face in mourning.

"The girl is saying that she does not want to be mistaken for a cult prostitute, a good picture of which is seen in Genesis 38:13-15."⁶⁶

1:8 If this is Solomon's reply, he probably was kidding her and meant that she had no reason to feel he would disdain her. However, these are probably the words of the girl's friends (cf. v. 4b). They evidently meant that if she thought Solomon would not want her because of her dark skin and hard work, she was being ridiculous and should go back to her flocks. After all, she was a very attractive woman.

⁶¹Taylor, pp. 83-84.

⁶²Delitzsch, p. 25.

⁶³Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 79.

⁶⁴Patterson, p. 37.

⁶⁵Deere, p. 1013.

⁶⁶Kinlaw, p. 1218.

3. Solomon's praise 1:9-11

1:9-10 Here Solomon reassured his love. Stallions, not mares, pulled chariots. A mare among the best of Pharaoh's stallions would have been desirable to every one of them. In Solomon's day Egyptian horses were the best, as Arabian horses later were the best.⁶⁷

"A passage from Egyptian literature demonstrates that mares were sometimes set loose in battle to allure and distract the pharaoh's chariot-harnessed stallions."⁶⁸

Solomon meant his love was a woman whom all the best men of his court would have pursued.

". . . the comparison of the female lover with a mare would first and foremost emphasize her nobility and her value."⁶⁹

"This is the ultimate in sex appeal!"⁷⁰

Solomon's praise would have bolstered his beloved's confidence that he loved her. This encouragement is often necessary and is always appropriate in such a relationship.

"We have forgotten what a thing of beauty a horse can be when compared to other animals. We are also unaware what valuable creatures they were in the ancient world. They were beautiful in themselves, and the ancient royal courts insisted on brilliantly caparisoning [adorning with rich trappings] the ones that pulled the king's chariot. The beloved's jewelry, earrings, and necklaces make him think of such."⁷¹

"Such a comparison was not at all unusual in ancient literature. Theocritus, for example, compared 'the rose complexioned Helen' to a 'Thessalian steed.' For Solomon the horse was more a cherished companion than a beast of burden. His praise of Shulamith recognized her beauty and her graceful movements."⁷²

1:11 Her friends volunteered to make more ornaments for her so she would be even more attractive to Solomon.

⁶⁷Delitzsch, p. 33.

⁶⁸Parsons, p. 416.

⁶⁹Hess, p. 64.

⁷⁰Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 83.

⁷¹Kinlaw, p. 1219.

⁷²Patterson, p. 39.

B. THE GROWTH OF LOVE 1:12—3:5

If there is indeed a chronological progression in the telling of this love story, as seems likely, this section relates the development of the love that Solomon and his loved one experienced before their wedding.

1. Mutual admiration 1:12—2:7

In this section, the love of Solomon and his beloved continues to intensify.

Praise of one another 1:12—2:6

1:12-14 The Shulammitte girl (6:3) described the effect that seeing Solomon had on her as he reclined at his banquet "table." She wore nard (spikenard, "perfume" NASB, NIV; cf. Mark 14:3; John 12:3), which was an ointment that came from a plant grown in northern and eastern India. He was as sweet to her as the fragrant myrrh sachet that hung around her neck.

"Hebrew women often wore small bags of myrrh between their breasts."⁷³

He was as attractive as henna at the refreshing Engedi oasis that lay on the west coast of the Dead Sea. Henna plants bore white blossoms, but their leaves produced a reddish-orange cosmetic dye.⁷⁴

1:15 Solomon returned her praise by commending her beauty and tranquil character. Doves were examples of tranquillity in eastern literature (cf. Gen. 2:18-25).

"According to Rabbinic teaching, a bride who has beautiful eyes possesses a beautiful character; they are an index to her character."⁷⁵

"The dramatic image is that of the couple staring deeply and lovingly into one another's eyes."⁷⁶

1:16-17 The girl probably spoke both of these verses. "Pleasant" refers to Solomon's charming personality. The references to "couch," "beams," "houses," and "rafters" probably allude to a place in the countryside where the lovers liked to meet and talk, perhaps a country house.⁷⁷ "Luxuriant" implies a grassy area, and the other terms seem to indicate that trees overarched it.

⁷³Woudstra, p. 597.

⁷⁴Kinlaw, p. 1220.

⁷⁵S. M. Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," in *The Five Megilloth*, p. 4.

⁷⁶Hess, p. 72.

⁷⁷Glickman, p. 39.

2:1 The Shulammitte described herself as a rather common, albeit attractive person. The "rose of Sharon" probably refers to the crocuses (possibly narcissuses, lilies, or meadow saffrons) that grew on the plain of Sharon that bordered the Mediterranean Sea south of the Carmel mountain range. Other less likely locations are the area in Galilee between Mt. Tabor and the Sea of Galilee,⁷⁸ or the Sharon in Transjordan (cf. 1 Chron. 5:16). Lilies grew and still grow easily in the valleys of Israel. She did not depreciate her appearance here as she had earlier (1:5-6), though she was modest. Perhaps Solomon's praise (1:9-10) had made her feel more secure.

2:2 Solomon responded that in comparison with the other single women, she was not common but a rare beauty.

"It is the essence of poetry that it employs *symbolism* to express nuances beyond the power of exact definition. This is particularly true of love poetry."⁷⁹

2:3-6 The girl responded that Solomon, too, was a rare find. He was as rare as an apple (or possibly quince or citron) tree in a forest of other trees: sweet, beautiful, and outstanding.

"*'Shade,' 'fruit,' 'apple tree'* are all ancient erotic symbols, and erotic suggestions are what she has in mind (2:3-4). . . . *'Shade'* speaks of closeness."⁸⁰

". . . if the lotus [lily, v. 2] enhances the pleasure of visual form and beauty, the apple tree stimulates the taste and olfactory senses."⁸¹

"The shadow is a figure of protection afforded, and the fruit a figure of enjoyment obtained."⁸²

Jody Dillow understood the phrase "his fruit is sweet to my taste" (v. 3) as referring to the girl having oral sex with Solomon.⁸³ However, "fruit" never appears elsewhere in the Old Testament as a euphemism for the genitals, and neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Egyptian love literature refer to oral sex.⁸⁴ Probably simple kissing is what is in view.

The metaphors that follow show that Solomon satisfied three needs of this woman: protection, intimate friendship, and public identification as her beloved. A woman's lover must meet these basic needs for the relationship to flourish.

⁷⁸Delitzsch, p. 40.

⁷⁹Gordis, p. 37.

⁸⁰Hubbard, p. 286.

⁸¹Hess, p. 77.

⁸²Delitzsch, p. 42.

⁸³Joseph Dillow, *Solomon on Sex*, p. 31.

⁸⁴The NET Bible note on 2:3.

The word "banner" in "his banner over me" may be from an Akkadian word that means "desire" or "intent." If so, the clause may mean "his intent toward me was lovemaking."⁸⁵

"Lovesick" means faint from love. She needed strengthening (vv. 5-6; cf. 5:8). She felt exhausted from her love for her loved one.

"In the Song, as in much of the other ancient Near Eastern love poetry, the woman is the one who takes the initiative, and who is the more outspoken. Similarly, in the Mesopotamian Ritual Marriage materials, much is placed on the girl's lips. Our contemporary attitude, where the girl is on the defensive and the man is the initiator, is a direct contrast with the attitude in the ancient world."⁸⁶

The refrain 2:7

This charge by Solomon occurs again later (3:5; 8:4) and serves as an indicator that one pericope has ended. The point of Solomon's words is that others desiring the kind of relationship he and his beloved enjoyed should be patient and "let love take its natural course."⁸⁷

"Wait for love to blossom; don't hurry it."⁸⁸

The gazelle is a member of the antelope family, and the hind is a female deer. Both animals are skittish, and anyone who wants to get close to them must wait patiently. One cannot approach them aggressively. Similarly a man cannot awaken a woman's love clumsily.

2. Increased longing 2:8-17

Whereas the setting so far had been Israel, it now shifts to the Shulammitte's home that was evidently in Lebanon (cf. 4:8, 15).

2:8-9 The girl described her young lover coming for a visit in these verses. He was obviously eager to see her.

2:10-13 She related his invitation to take a walk in the countryside. His invitation, "Arise . . . come along," (vv. 10, 13) brackets a beautiful description of spring that was as much a feeling in Solomon's heart as a season of the year.

"Whenever any couple falls in love, it is spring for them because their lives are fresh; everything in life has a new

⁸⁵Hubbard, p. 286; Pope, p. 376; and Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 91.

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 94.

⁸⁸Longman, p. 115.

perspective; what was black and white is now in color;
what was dark is light."⁸⁹

- 2:14 The desire to be alone with one's lover is both natural and legitimate. Unfortunately it sometimes departs after marriage.
- 2:15 Probably the Shulammitte began speaking here. She was evidently urging Solomon, poetically, to deal with some problems in their relationship, rather than telling him to clear literal foxes out of her family's vineyards. "Foxes" may refer to "the ravages of the aging process that can sap the beauty and vitality of persons (the '*vines*' or vineyards)."⁹⁰ They may refer to the other women in Solomon's life and court.⁹¹ Probably they refer generally to hostile forces that could spoil their love.⁹² All couples encounter some potentially destructive situations in their relationships that need dealing with occasionally. Often the woman senses these first, as here, but the man should take the initiative in dispelling them and thus protect his loved one.
- 2:16-17 Even though they faced problems, the Shulammitte rejoiced in the security of her beloved's love and in the assurance that he would take care of his responsibilities to her (v. 16b).

Verse 17 probably looks forward to their wedding and to its physical consummation. "Bether" is a transliteration rather than a translation. Since no Bether mountains apparently exist in this part of the Middle East, it seems preferable to translate the Hebrew word (*bater*) as "cleavage" or "separation." The mountains of cleavage then may be an allusion to the Shulammitte's breasts. Another possibility is that Bether refers to the cleft in the mountains where the deer suddenly appears.⁹³

"Contrary to some commentators, the Song does not portray sex as the great and final goal in order to experience true joy. Nor does it suggest that mutual admiration of the lovers, their physical bodies and sensuality, is the source of joy. Rather, the Song directly associates the joy of the heart with the final commitment of marriage. It is only within this commitment that all the joys of the male and female lovers come together, for it is only here that they realize the freedom to express those joys without restraint, knowing that the marriage bond seals their love in a lifetime commitment to each other."⁹⁴

⁸⁹Glickman, pp. 46-47.

⁹⁰Hubbard, p. 293.

⁹¹Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 149.

⁹²Kinlaw, p. 1224; Delitzsch, p. 54; Glickman, pp. 49-50; Hess, p. 97; and Longman, pp. 124-25.

⁹³Patterson, p. 57.

⁹⁴Hess, p. 123.

3. The pain of separation 3:1-5

Another incident unfolds in this pericope (vv. 1-4) and concludes with the repetition of Solomon's refrain (v. 5).

The Shulammite's nightmare 3:1-4

The Shulammite narrated an experience she had had "on her bed," namely, a dream (v. 1). She dreamed she could not find Solomon even though she searched everywhere for him. After much distress, she did find him and then took him to the most secure and intimate place she knew: her mother's bedroom. Her strong love for her beloved comes through in the recurring phrase "whom my soul loves" in each one of the four verses. Such fears are common during the courtship. Will the marriage finally take place? She dreams of consummation, but she wants the consummation to be proper.

The refrain repeated 3:5

Here the refrain marks the end of the section on the courtship (1:2—3:5) as well as the Shulammite's nightmare (3:1-4). Solomon and the Shulammite's patience were about to receive the desired reward. Their marriage was now at hand. Some interpreters take this verse as a strong warning against premarital sex.⁹⁵

III. THE WEDDING 3:6—5:1

Weddings in Israel took place in front of the local town elders, not the priests (e.g., Ruth 4:10-11). They transpired in homes, not in the tabernacle or temple (or synagogue, in later times). They were civil rather than religious ceremonies.

There were three parts to a wedding in the ancient Near East. First, the groom's parents selected a bride for their son. This involved securing the permission of the bride's parents and the approval of both the bride and the groom themselves. Though the parents of the young people arranged the marriage, they usually obtained the consent of both the bride and the groom. Second, on the wedding day the groom proceeded to the bride's house accompanied by a group of his friends. He then escorted her to the site of the wedding ceremony, and finally took her to their new residence accompanied by their friends. Physical union consummated the marriage the night after the wedding ceremony took place. Third, the couple feasted with their friends—usually for seven days following the wedding ceremony.⁹⁶

In the section before us (3:6—5:1), the writer mentioned the wedding procession (3:6-11) and the consummation (4:1—5:1).

⁹⁵E.g., *The Nelson* . . . , p. 1102.

⁹⁶See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Cultural Aspects of Marriage in the Ancient World," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:539 (July-September 1978):241-52.

". . . the book is framed by an inclusio involving the 'brothers' and the 'vineyard,' and at the heart of the book is the wedding day, framed by two 'dream' sections with noticeable parallels."⁹⁷

A. THE PROCESSION 3:6-11

3:6 The marriage procession of King (or Prince) Solomon would have been unusually splendid, as this description portrays.

"The pomp and beauty of this procession were wholly appropriate in light of the event's significance. The Scriptures teach that marriage is one of the most important events in a person's life. Therefore it is fitting that the union of a couple be commemorated in a special way. The current practice of couples casually living together apart from the bonds of marriage demonstrates how unfashionable genuine commitment to another person has become in contemporary society. This violates the sanctity of marriage and is contrary to God's standards of purity."⁹⁸

3:7-8 The 60 warriors were Solomon's chosen friends. Normally the groom's friends accompanied him to the house of his prospective wife. These friends were very likely members of Solomon's bodyguard. His example of providing protection for his bride is one that every new husband should follow. This might include a measure of financial security for her.

3:9-11 Solomon provided his bride with the best he could afford. This self-sacrificing attitude shows his genuine love for her. Solomon's crown was a special one his mother Bathsheba gave him for this occasion. It evidently represented his joy as well as his royalty. This may have been a crowning that preceded Solomon's coronation as king, since the high priest crowned him then (cf. 1 Kings 1:32-48; 2 Kings 11:11-20).⁹⁹

"Crowns, usually wreaths of flowers rather than royal crowns, were frequently worn by the nuptial couple in wedding festivities."¹⁰⁰

B. THE CONSUMMATION 4:1—5:1

Our attention now turns from the public procession that took place on the wedding day to the private union that followed that night.

⁹⁷Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 152. See pages 152-57 for further discussion of the Song's literary structure.

⁹⁸Deere, p. 1017.

⁹⁹Kinlaw, p. 1227.

¹⁰⁰Patterson, p. 65.

1. The bride's beauty 4:1-7

His bride's beauty ravished Solomon. His praise in verses 1 and 7 frames his description of her in verses 1-6.

4:1 Women in Solomon's culture did not always wear a veil. Before their wedding they put one on and did not take it off for some time after that (cf. Gen. 24:65; 29:19-25). From a distance, a herd of black goats descending from the mountains at dusk was very attractive and reminded Solomon of his beloved's long black locks rippling and tumbling freely.

"The hair of goats in ancient Israel was commonly black or dark colored, whereas that of sheep, used for comparison in the next verse, was commonly white."¹⁰¹

4:2-3 Her teeth were white and evenly matched. Her mouth had a beautiful color and shape. Her temples were rosy with robust health, like the outside of a pomegranate. Carr rendered the Hebrew word for temples "the sides of her face," and noted that cosmetics were common in the ancient Near East.¹⁰²

4:4 A long neck, which gives a stately appearance, may have been a mark of beauty in the ancient world.¹⁰³ On the other hand, this may be a figurative description designed to compliment. It was customary for soldiers to hang their shields on the towers belonging to the lords to whom they pledged allegiance (cf. Ezek. 27:11).¹⁰⁴

"Her neck would hold much of the jewelry that a woman might wear. Such jewelry was often layered, where strands of jewelry were placed one on top of the other. This formed a layered appearance that could ascend from the shoulder and reach as far as the top of the neck."¹⁰⁵

What "tower of David" this was, we do not know. It was not David's "citadel," that now stands on the west side of old Jerusalem, because that tower did not exist then. The idea is that many of the best people loved and stood by the bride. She enjoyed popular acceptance by Solomon's subjects.

4:5-6 Fawns are soft and lovable. The "mountain" and "hill" are also metaphors for the girl's breasts. Myrrh and frankincense were expensive perfumes, so Solomon may have meant his wife's breasts were precious to him as well as attractive.

¹⁰¹Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 162.

¹⁰²Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 116.

¹⁰³Kinlaw, p. 1229.

¹⁰⁴Deere, p. 1018.

¹⁰⁵Hess, p. 134.

4:7 Perhaps she was not really as perfect as Solomon claimed here (cf. 1:5-6). "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." She was perfect to him.

Probably Solomon drew comparisons between his bride and things common in pastoral settings, because rural life was her background and was dominant in Israel. She would have understood his meaning easily.

2. The groom's request 4:8

Solomon appealed to his bride to put all thoughts of her former life away. These included both the pleasant thoughts—such as those of the beautiful mountains of the Anti-Lebanon and Hermon ranges in Lebanon, from which she had come—and fearful thoughts, such as those of wild animals. He urged her to give him her attention on this their wedding night.

3. The bride's love 4:9-11

In these verses, Solomon evidently praised his bride for giving herself wholly to him as he had asked.

4:9 "Sister" was an affectionate term for wife (cf. vv. 10, 12; 5:1-2; Tobit 7:16; 8:4, 7).¹⁰⁶

4:10 Again the word translated "love" means physical expressions of love (cf. 1:2). Her "oils" were her perfumes.

4:11 Milk and honey not only connote sweet delicacies but also the blessings of God (cf. Exod. 3:8). Lebanon was fragrant because of the many cedar trees that covered its hills.

". . . it is probably better to understand that the sweetness of the passionate kiss is in view."¹⁰⁷

4. The bride's purity 4:12-15

4:12 Solomon praised his bride's virginity also. She had kept herself a virgin for the man she would marry.

4:13-14 She was like a garden full of beautiful and pleasing plants that was now open to Solomon.¹⁰⁸ These spices, fruits, and flowers probably represent her whole person rather than her individual parts.

"The most obvious feature of the Song of Songs is the sexually explicit nature of the material, sensitively guised in figurative language."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Longman, p. 151; J. G. Westenholz, "Love Lyrics from the Ancient Near East," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4:2474.

¹⁰⁷Patterson, p. 74.

¹⁰⁸See the subject study on "garden" as used in the Song of Solomon in Carr, *The Song . . .*, pp. 55-60

¹⁰⁹Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 145. Cf. Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 176.

4:15 Though she had kept her most intimate parts from others in the past, they were now open to Solomon, and he experienced full satisfaction with her love.

5. The bride's surrender 4:16—5:1

4:16 The Shulammitte invited Solomon to take her completely. She called on the winds to carry the scents to which Solomon had referred so he would find full satisfaction (cf. vv. 13-14).

5:1 Solomon exulted in the joy that union with his beloved had brought him, and he commended it to others. This interpretation seems preferable to the views that "the onlookers[?!] and guests,"¹¹⁰ or God,¹¹¹ or the poet (not Solomon)¹¹² spoke the words, "Eat . . . O lovers." The metaphors used express the fully satisfying nature of his sexual experience (cf. 2 Sam. 13:15).

"Biblically, when a lover gives himself to his beloved as these two have done, the relationship of each has changed to all the rest of the human race. That is why traditionally in our culture a wedding cannot be performed without witnesses. That is the reason behind the publishing of wedding bans [i.e., proclamations]. The taking of a woman by a man is a public matter.

"Furthermore, what one does with one's sexuality is of concern to God (Exod 20:14). Likewise, it is a concern to everyone else. The woman now belongs to the man and the man to the woman. This changes all other personal relationships. Thus the witnesses present at weddings represent the larger society. This is why weddings are considered legal matters.

"Self-giving love between the sexes is of social significance. Society must know. How else can marriage be a witness and testimony to the relationship of Christ and the church? One Savior, one spouse!"¹¹³

"These bold but tender scenes from Song of Solomon point up a major difference between the world's concept of love to what was created and endorsed by God. In the former case the focus is on self-gratification. In the latter the emphasis is on the well-being of the loved one and the

¹¹⁰Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 129.

¹¹¹Deere, p. 1020.

¹¹²Glickman, p. 163.

¹¹³Kinlaw, pp. 1230-31.

extolling of his or her virtues. No wonder Jewish and Christian interpreters alike have seen this kind of love as a type of God's great love for His own dear ones."¹¹⁴

IV. THE MATURING PROCESS 5:2—8:4

In this last major section of the book, the married love of Solomon and the Shulammitte is in view.¹¹⁵ This stage of love is not without its share of problems. However, the king and his bride worked through them, and these chapters provide insight into dealing effectively with basic marriage difficulties.

"Here we are given the beloved's perspective. Of the 111 lines, 80 in this section are the words of the girl. This is really *her* book."¹¹⁶

A. THE PROBLEM OF APATHY 5:2—6:13

Sometime after the wedding, the Shulammitte failed to respond encouragingly to Solomon's demonstration of affection. This led him to withdraw from her. Shortly after that, she realized that a gap had opened up between them. They were no longer as intimate as they had been.

1. Indifference and withdrawal 5:2-8

5:2 Again the woman dreamed (cf. 3:1-4). In her dream, her husband came to her—having been outdoors in the evening. His mind appears to have been on making love in view of what follows.

5:3-4 However, she had lost interest. She gave a weak excuse: she had already gotten ready for bed (and may have had a headache!). When he tried to open her door but found it locked, he gave up and went away. It may be that "the opening" is a euphemistic reference to the entrance into the woman's private parts.¹¹⁷ If so, this is probably only an implied allusion, a double entendre, since the hole in a literal door is clearly evident in the context. It was not long before she knew she had erred in discouraging him.

"An ancient keyhole would form a large enough opening to place an adult's hand through because the key would be large."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Merrill, p. 515.

¹¹⁵Delitzsch, p. 91.

¹¹⁶Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 130.

¹¹⁷See Pamela J. Scalise, *Jeremiah 26—52*, p. 120, listed in the bibliography under Keown, Scalise, and Smothers; and Carr, *The Song . . .*, pp. 134-35.

¹¹⁸Hess, p. 172.

5:5-7 She went to the door and found that he had been ready to make love (v. 5; cf. Prov. 7:17; Song of Sol. 4:6, 5:13). She opened it but discovered he had gone. The fact that in her dream the watchmen beat her may indicate that she subconsciously felt that someone should punish her for refusing him.

"If the *redid* ["shawl"] was a loose cloak that was removed by the watchmen, they may be pictured here as gazing on the 'wall', *i.e.* the girl in her state of semi-nakedness."¹¹⁹

5:8 She told her friends to tell her husband, if they saw him, that she wanted his love again (cf. 2:5-6).

"*Lovesick*' here seems to describe frustration from sexual abstinence rather than exhaustion from sexual activity (cf. on 2:5).¹²⁰

2. Renewed affection 5:9-16

This pericope contains the most extensive physical description of any character in the Old Testament, namely: Solomon. Of course, it is poetic and so not a completely literal description.

5:9 We might hear this attitude expressed in these words today: "What is so great about him? Surely you could find someone who would treat you better than he does!"

5:10-16 Nevertheless, the Shulammitte still loved Solomon very much, as is clear from her description of him here. The comparisons illustrate his value and attractiveness to her, more than just giving us a picture of his actual physical appearance. For example, his hand (v. 11) was not the color of gold, but his dealings with her symbolized by his hand had been of the highest quality. Some features in her description may be purely physical, such as his black hair (v. 11). These verses show that a woman has the right to enjoy her husband's body (cf. 1 Cor. 7:4).

"A normal person finds the erotic ultimately meaningful only if there is trust and commitment, delight in the other's person as well as in the body."¹²¹

3. Steps toward reconciliation 6:1-3

6:1 The Shulammitte convinced the daughters of Jerusalem that her love for her husband was deep and genuine. They agreed to search for Solomon with her.

¹¹⁹Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 137.

¹²⁰Hubbard, p. 317.

¹²¹Kinlaw, p. 1234.

6:2-3 Having expressed her love for her husband, the Shulammitte now knew where to find him. Solomon loved his gardens (Eccles. 2:5). This may be an allusion to the "garden" of his *work* as the king of Israel, which, like a garden, needed tending.¹²² Perhaps the catharsis of verbalizing Solomon's praise had healed the Shulammitte's emotional estrangement, and in her dream the knowledge of his whereabouts popped into her mind.

4. Restoration of intimacy 6:4-13

6:4-10 Solomon's first words to his beloved were praises. Verse 4c probably means Solomon felt weak-kneed as a result of gazing on his wife's beauty, as he would have felt facing a mighty opposing army. Her eyes unnerved him, too (v. 5a). By using some of the same flattering comparisons he had employed on their wedding night (vv. 5-7), he assured her that his love for her had not diminished since then. The other women (vv. 8-9) were, perhaps, the women who frequented his court. Some commentators have taken them to be the members of Solomon's harem.¹²³

"If . . . the relationship of Solomon and Shulamith was monogamous at the outset, then the 'queen's concubines and virgins without number' must refer to those attached to the court of the king but not a part of his personal harem."¹²⁴

Solomon used these women for comparison to show how highly not only he but many other people regarded his beloved. Her beauty had grown and was still increasing in his eyes (v. 10).

6:11-13 Verses 11-12 are probably the Shulammitte's words. She had gone down to Solomon's garden (v. 2), more to see if his love for her was still in bloom, than to examine the natural foliage (v. 11). Immediately, because of his affirmation of his love (vv. 4-10), she felt elevated in her spirit, as though she were chief over all the 1,400 chariots in Solomon's great army (1 Kings 10:26). Evidently, in her fantasy, she rode out of the garden in a chariot accompanied by Solomon. As she did, the people they passed called out to her to come back, so they might look on her beauty longer (v. 13a). However, Solomon answered them, "Why should you gaze at the Shulammitte as you do at the dance at Mahanaim?" Perhaps he was referring to a celebration held at that Transjordanian town that drew an especially large crowd of onlookers. However, we have no record that such an event took place there.

This ends the Shulammitte's second dream (5:2—6:13; cf. 3:1-4).

¹²²*The Nelson . . .*, p. 1105.

¹²³Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, p. 66; George A. F. Knight, *The Song of Songs*, pp. 11-12; Kinlaw, p. 1235; and Delitzsch, p. 112.

¹²⁴Patterson, p. 98. Cf. Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 148.

B. COMMUNICATING AFFECTION 7:1-10

This section, which provides a window into the intimate relationship of Solomon and his wife, shows how their love had matured since their wedding (cf. 4:1-11).

1. The wife's charms 7:1-6

7:1-2 These verses contain both physical and metaphorical compliments. Verse 1 seems to refer to the Shulammitte's body, but verse 2 goes beyond that. It seems to convey the idea that she was Solomon's drink and food, "that her physical expressions of love nourished and satisfied him."¹²⁵ The Hebrew word translated "navel" may refer to one of her private parts.¹²⁶

7:3-4 Heshbon was a Moabite city famous for its refreshing ponds.

"The soft glance of her eyes reflects the peace and beauty of the Heshbon pools."¹²⁷

Bath-rabbim is unknown for certain today, though some claim it was a gate of Heshbon.¹²⁸ The tower of Lebanon was evidently a beautiful tower that marked the unusually attractive city of Damascus. Similarly, the Shulammitte's nose attractively represented her total beauty.

7:5-6 Mt. Carmel was majestic (cf. Isa. 35:2; Jer. 46:18), as was she. In Solomon's day, people considered purple threads most beautiful, precious, and regal.

2. The husband's desires 7:7-9

Even today we speak of "graceful palm trees." Verse 9b voices the wife's eager response. All these verses reflect the increased freedom in sexual matters that is a normal part of the maturation of marital love. A husband has the freedom to enjoy his wife's body (cf. 5:10-16; cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-5), though not to abuse this privilege, of course.

"This is a sexual image that has its basis in the pollination of palm trees. To fertilize a female palm tree, the gardener climbs the male tree and takes some of its flowers. Then he climbs the female tree and ties the pollen-bearing flowers among its branches."¹²⁹

3. The ultimate unity 7:10

The Shulammitte exulted in her complete abandonment to her husband and in his complete satisfaction with her (cf. 2:16; 6:3). These joys increase through the years of a healthy marriage.

¹²⁵Deere, p. 1022.

¹²⁶Carr, *The Song . . .*, p. 157.

¹²⁷Lehrman, p. 26.

¹²⁸E.g., Woudstra, p. 602.

¹²⁹*The Nelson . . .*, p. 1106.

"Far from being the objectionable condition alleged by many women today, Shulamith obviously basked in her position of subordination. This does not suggest that her personality had been dissolved in Solomon's like a drop of honey in the ocean or that she considered herself mere chattel. This is apparent from her self-assertiveness documented in 5:3. However, it does suggest that she found in her position sustaining comfort."¹³⁰

C. THE WIFE'S INITIATIVE 7:11-13

Secure in her love, the Shulammitte now felt free to initiate sex directly, rather than indirectly as earlier (cf. 1:2a, 2:6). The references to spring suggest the freshness and vigor of love. Mandrakes were fruits that resembled small apples, and the roots possessed narcotic properties.¹³¹ They were traditionally aphrodisiacs (cf. Gen. 30:14-16).

"The unusual shape of the large forked roots of the mandrake resembles the human body with extended arms and legs. This similarity gave rise to the popular superstition that the mandrake could induce conception and it was therefore used as a fertility drug."¹³²

D. INCREASED INTIMACY 8:1-4

The Shulammitte's desire for her husband's love continued to increase throughout their marriage (vv. 1-3).

8:1 Ancient Near Easterners frowned on public displays of intimate affection unless closest blood relatives exchanged them. It was perhaps for this reason that the wife wished that her husband was her brother.

8:2-3 Here the wife pictures herself playfully leading her husband as an older sister or mother would lead a younger brother or son. Solomon and the Shulammitte were close friends as well as lovers (cf. 5:1, 16). As his wife she desired his caresses (v. 3).

"Pomegranates are not to be thought of as an erotic symbol; they are named as something beautiful and precious."¹³³

8:4 Solomon again urged his wife's friends not to try to awaken her love for him artificially but to let love take its natural course (cf. 2:7; 3:5). Her love was now fully alive and needed no further stimulation.

This section (5:2—8:4), that began with estrangement, ends with the lovers entwined in each other's arms.

¹³⁰Patterson, pp. 109-10.

¹³¹Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 242.

¹³²The NET Bible note on 7:13.

¹³³Delitzsch, p. 139.

V. THE CONCLUSION 8:5-7

These verses summarize the theme of the book.

- 8:5a Evidently these are the words of the daughters of Jerusalem. The couple is coming up out of the wilderness. The "wilderness" connoted Israel's 40 years of trials to the Jewish mind. The couple had emerged from their *trials* successfully, too (i.e., insecurity, 1:5-6; the "foxes," 2:15; and apathy, 5:2-7). The "wilderness" also symbolized God's curse (cf. Jer. 22:6; Joel 2:3). The couple had likewise overcome the curse of disharmony, which God had placed on Adam and Eve, by their love for one another (cf. Gen. 3:16).
- 8:5b The Shulammitte reminded her husband (masculine "you" in Hebrew) of the beginning of their love. The apple tree was a symbol of love in ancient poetry because of its beauty, fragrance, and sweet fruit. She had given him a type of new birth by awakening him to love. This may refer to their first meeting; he may have found her sleeping under an apple tree.
- 8:6-7 She asked to be his most valued possession; she wanted him to be jealous over her in the proper sense (cf. Prov. 6:34).

"The word 'seal' (*hotam*) refers to an engraved stone used for authenticating a document or other possession. This could be suspended by a cord around the neck (over the heart) as in Genesis 38:18. The word *hotam* can also refer to a 'seal ring' worn on the hand (in Song of Songs 5:14 'hand' is used to mean 'arm'). The *hotam* was something highly precious to the owner and could be used symbolically for a person whom one valued [cf. Jer. 22:24; Hag. 2:23]. . . . The bride was asking Solomon that he treasure her, that he regard her as a prized seal."¹³⁴

She next described the love they shared. It was as powerful as death, as controlling as the grave, as passionate as fire, as irresistible as a river, and priceless. Such love comes from God and is "the . . . flame of the Lord" (v. 6).

"There are only two relationships described in the Bible where jealousy is a potentially appropriate reaction: the divine-human relationship and the marriage relationship. These are the only two relationships that are considered exclusive."¹³⁵

¹³⁴Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 158.

¹³⁵Longman, p. 211.

No one can purchase love. It is only available as a gift. This (vv. 6b-7) is the only place in the book that reflects on the nature of love itself.¹³⁶

"With this homily, the bride has delivered the great moral lesson of the book. . . .

"The affirmation that love is strong as death in vv. 6-7 is the climax of the poem and its *raison d'être* [reason for being]."¹³⁷

"She was prepared to be a loyal and faithful wife, but Solomon ultimately had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). No wonder she, not he, delivers the moral lesson of the book. He was totally unqualified to speak on the issue of godly dedicated love. He knew the physical side of it, but apparently he did not know the love she cherished."¹³⁸

VI. THE EPILOGUE 8:8-14

Verses 8-12 flash back to the Shulammitte's life before meeting Solomon and their first encounter. Verses 13-14 reveal their final mature love.

A. THE PAST 8:8-12

- 8:8-9 These words by the Shulammitte's older brothers (cf. 1:6) reveal their desire to prepare her for a proper marriage. Comparing her to a wall may mean that she might use self-restraint and exclude all unwarranted advances against her purity. If she behaved this way, her brothers would honor her by providing her with various adornments. However, if she proved susceptible to these advances, as an open door, they would have to guard her purity for her by keeping undesirable individuals from her.
- 8:10 She had proved to be like a wall rather than a door. Consequently she had become a great delight to Solomon.
- 8:11-12 The site of "Baal-hamon" is unknown. Evidently Solomon leased part of his vineyard to the Shulammitte's brothers who put her to work in it (1:6). There she met Solomon. Her own vineyard probably refers to her own person (cf. 1:6). Another view is that the Shulammitte is the garden in view in both verses¹³⁹ In this case, Solomon would have let out his vineyard (the Shulammitte) to her brothers for them to care for her. Solomon might not have been aware that he was doing this, but this is really what he was

¹³⁶M. Sadgrove, "The Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature," in *Studia Biblica 1978*, p. 245.

¹³⁷Exum, *Song of . . .*, p. 245.

¹³⁸Tanner, "The Message . . .," p. 159.

¹³⁹E.g., Patterson, p. 120.

doing since she grew up under their care. The Shulammitte promised to give all of herself to Solomon freely, whereas he needed to pay wages to those who worked in his literal vineyard.

B. THE PRESENT 8:13-14

These verses reflect the desire that Solomon and the Shulammitte still felt for each other. Solomon seems to have spoken verse 13 and the Shulammitte verse 14. The mountains probably refer to her breasts (cf. 2:17; 8:14).

The narrative closes with a call for the lover to return to his beloved. Many students of the Bible have noted the similarity with how the whole Bible ends: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰E.g., J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon*, p. 160.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of the book seems to be to present an example of the proper pre-marital, marital, and post-marital relationship of a man and a woman. This example includes illustrations of the solutions to common problems that couples face in these phases of their relationship.

The book reveals several facts about sex. Sex is a proper part of marital love, but we should reserve it for marriage (2:7; 3:5), and we should practice it only with our marriage partner (6:3; 7:10; 8:12; cf. Gen. 2:24).

In a day when the "sexual revolution" has led multitudes of people away from God's revelation concerning what is best in this area of our lives, we need to expound this book. It can be very helpful if we explain it tastefully in public and use it as a private guide for marriage preparation and enrichment.¹⁴¹

"In a world awash with the debris of broken homes, crushed spirits, and fractured dreams, God's people need the message of the Song of Solomon as never before. The Song is a righteous antidote to a licentious society that has prostituted the sacred nature of human love. Hope exudes from its pages. If ever a book was written with a message more salient for a later generation, Solomon's ode is that book."¹⁴²

Hebrew poetry generally contains many figures of speech, and the Song of Solomon in particular contains an unusually large number of them. It is therefore often difficult to know whether we should interpret a particular statement literally or whether it is a poetic description of something else. These judgments require skill in interpretation.

"In no other book of the Hebrew Bible does the imagery figure so prominently as it does in the Song of Songs."¹⁴³

As we continue to read the text and the comments of others who have studied it, we need to ask God to open our minds so that we will understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). Biblical interpretation is an art that any Christian can perfect, though it requires much practice as well as divine enablement.

¹⁴¹Tom Nelson's series of sermons "Love Song: From Attraction to Faithfulness" is one example of effective popular exposition of the book, though he makes few applications to the believer's relationship with Christ. For guidelines for utilizing the Song of Solomon, see Hubbard, pp. 260-61; and Parsons, pp. 419-22.

¹⁴²Patterson, p. 9.

¹⁴³Carol Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):209.

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