

APPENDIX

1. A possible weekend format. We believe that the Song's fourteen sections divide nicely into four parts, and so we include outlines for four talks and also four sets of questions. They could be used, for instance, for Friday evening, Saturday morning and evening, and Sunday morning talks of 30-45 minutes each, followed by 45-90 minutes of group discussion.
2. A couple of written resources by the Potts
 - a. An overall introduction and summary of the Song of Solomon, contributing (hopefully!) to the vast amount of material already available.
 - b. An article written for *The Banner*, a monthly publication of the Christian Reformed Church, which could be easily adapted into a sermon.
3. A couple of excellent contributions from current commentaries:
 - a. An excerpt from *The Message of the Song of Songs* by Tom Gledhill
 - b. *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* by David Hubbard (The Communicators Commentary Series)
4. An excellent biography is supplied at the end, taken from *The Song of Songs* by Tremper Longman III (NICOT Commentary Series)

QUESTIONS AVAILABLE FOR A WEEKEND CONFERENCE FORMAT

I. The Centrepiece 3.6 - 5.1

1. How would you finish this statement, "A healthy marriage is one in which" (What purpose can you see in starting our studies in the centre of the Song and not the beginning?)
2. Focus on several ways in the passage in which the king helps his new wife feel secure.
3. List seven things, including his/her appearance and character which you value in your partner. Tell him/her at least one or two before the day is over!
4. What are the challenges and what are the rewards in "following the alphabet" of this Song: courtship, and then marriage, and then sex?
5. If married, what are your experiences in cutting ties with home, and yet affirming home?
6. When and how did you learn about the sexual dimension of marriage? When and how would you like your children to learn about this?
7. Describe fully your reactions to God's words in chapter 5, the last two lines of vs. 1?

II. The Courtship 1.1 - 3.5

1. Why did God "create them male and female" in Genesis 1 and 2?
2. What do (or did) you look for in a partner? What do (or did) you have to offer as a partner?
3. How do you know if/when a certain person is the "right one" for you? Can you love more than one person at the same time?
4. On a scale of 1 - 10, how would you rate yourself as a communicator? List at least three ways in which you could improve.
5. What are some characteristics of healthy communication, both verbal and nonverbal?
6. What is the difference between praise and flattery?
7. List some of the arguments against waiting for sex until marriage, and then try to answer each one sensibly and, where possible, scripturally?

III. The Conflict 5.2 - 6.13

1. What are some common problems in marriage? Which have you observed in your childhood home? Which is the most serious in your opinion, and why?
2. Recall the last time you had a disagreement with your partner. How did you get into it, and how did you get out of it?
3. How can gratitude help in healing a hurting or broken relationship?
4. Define forgiveness and share why it is so often hard to experience for oneself, or express it to others?
5. What role can and should others play in the conflict / healing process? Which "others" are the best candidates?
6. Critically evaluate this statement: "Men tend to use love to get at sex, whereas women tend to use sex to get at love."
7. As a discussion group give this statement some attention, too: "You should assume that singleness is God's will for you, unless He clearly shows you otherwise."

IV. The Concert 7.1 - 8.14

1. How does the restoration of the life partner in chapter 5 and 6 set the stage for the experience of having a sex partner in chapter 7.1-10?
2. What role can and should sex play in a healthy marriage?
3. Considering the Shulamith's initiative in 7.11ff, is there such a thing as male and female roles in a marriage? If so, what are they?
4. How have you seen the wife grow and develop both in her self-awareness and her relationship in the course of this Song (from 2.16 to 6.3 to 7.10)?
5. How would you define love, and what pictures could you add to the diamond of 8.5 - 7?
6. Which relationships should we invest in to prepare us for marriage? What dangers can you see in teenage or in "hurried" marriages?
7. What have you learned in the Song which could help someone you know understand and respond to the issue of AIDS?

P.S. An additional assignment which we highly recommend: find as many Christ as bridegroom and Church as bride comparisons as you can in the marital relationship portrayed in the Song.

BY HANK AND CATHY POTT



love in the song of songs

THE AFRICAN STUDENTS gathered around as I was showing a photo of my three (very attractive) daughters. Murmurs of approval were quite audible, and one young man peering over my shoulder said, "They're worth at least 11 cows each!" We had never heard this kind of comment before, but it was everyday bride-price language where that young man came from.

We learned of some other everyday realities too during our three-month stay last fall in South Africa, where we taught at the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa in Pietermaritzburg. We had heard of the epidemic effects of HIV-AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, but now we were there again (after an absence of more than 15 years), so we could hear and see for ourselves. In the province of Natal, where we were staying, the population was said to be about 30 percent HIV positive. The most common weekend activity for many people was funeral attendance. In a large neighboring city, a former student who was now the editor of the daily newspaper said to me, "Hank, when you leave this office and walk outside, every other head you see will have a death sentence hanging over it."

But in the midst of all this devastation—the young men and women dying in their prime, the orphans, the pain and suffering—we found a ray of hope.

That hope is right in the heart of the Bible, in the Song of Songs, which reveals God's heart as well as any other book of Scripture. In eight short chapters we find lots of ancient Middle Eastern nuptial imagery and strange figures of speech. But, oh, what a book, and what a message! And what an effective tool for sexual purity and against sexual perversity!

Even a brief overview of this song attributed to King Solomon, who lived nearly 1,000 years before Christ, unveils its amazing relevance in our postmodern world.

WHAT'S THE SPIRIT SAYING?

Take the song as an analogy. It deals with down-to-earth, everyday stuff we know about or at least dream about: courtship,

marriage, and sex. And it helps us understand and experience what we do not know so well: God's relationship with his Bride. I am aware that more commentaries have been written on this book than on any other in Scripture, and that means some people's views on the whole or on specific parts of it may differ from mine. And that's OK. But let's at least revisit this strangely forbidding and often forgotten part of God's Word together, and perhaps we'll learn something new.

Solomon wrote 1,005 songs, says 1 Kings 4:32. But this one (or this collection), is the only one the Holy Spirit saw fit to publish. Spirit, what are you saying to us through this song?

AS ISRAEL'S king, Solomon had quite a full schedule. So it must have been a great delight to get away from the palace once in a while to inspect some of his far-flung properties.

While we tend to focus mainly on the activity in the bedroom, the song focuses, rather, on the *language* in the bedroom.

It appears that one morning he donned casual clothes (perhaps like our khakis or blue jeans) and went for a look at the vineyards in the Mount Hermon foothills of Lebanon. These vineyards were leased to a recently widowed woman and her family. As Solomon wandered from row to row, his eye caught a shy and sun-darkened young beauty working among the vines. He stopped for a chat and soon determined that this part of the vineyard called for more trips and closer inspection.

She liked him too, but she must have been shocked to discover that her admirer had more than a casual wardrobe. Well, the courtship grew in Lebanese country and Jerusalem city settings, moving along at a steady pace to a wonderful wedding (1:1-3:11). Their first night together as husband and wife is described in disarming yet delicate detail (4:1-5:1), and then they lived happily ever after, right? Wrong.

A serious conflict is followed by mutual efforts to get the marriage on track again (5:2-6:13), and this leads to the couple's cel-

ebating their differences in sex and exploring their differences in areas of culture and vocation (7:1-8:14). The song moves in a gentle chronology from courtship to climax and on through conflict to a closing concert.

TWO DEEP LONGINGS

What lifts this song from being yet one more story of a faraway love affair in the royal harem is its profound ability to tap into two of the deepest longings of the human heart. We all need *intimacy* with heaven and *influence* on earth. We need to know that *who we are* really matters, really counts, with our heavenly Creator. And we need to know that *what we do* will make a lasting difference, a difference for good, on God's earth.

Solomon's friend was both his bride (learning and enjoying the intimacy of eye contact, conversation, and physical pleasure) and his queen (learning and enjoying the influence she could have over a vast empire). Serving with him as an enjoyable

and effective partner in the kingdom would require of her the practice of both "bedroom" language and "throne room" language. It's fair to say that she was comfortable with the first and confused about the second. Let's explore each of these in more detail.

"Bedroom" language fills the song's eight chapters, and while we tend to focus mainly on the activity in the bedroom, the song focuses, rather, on the *language* in the bedroom. This is the only book in the Bible that's entirely composed of conversation! Like *Cosmopolitan* magazine and the Kinsey Report, the Bible is interested, in some ways, in "sexual performance," but its concern begins with verbal and conversational skills.

On a relaxed outing in the country, the king says, "Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (2:14). In other words, let's pursue our relationship in the light, not in the dark, and let's do so with our voices and not with our hands. The agreements that some courting and engaged couples make to "keep four on the floor" and to "keep talk-

"They're worth at least 11 cows each!"

ing" are similar practical ways to address impatient hormones.

But these hormones are recognized! Three times in the song the young woman expresses her readiness and longing for full sexual expression (2:4-6; 3:1-4; 8:1-3). Three times she asks the women of the court to help her with restraint (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). And three times she experiences a wonderful reward (2:8-14; 3:6-11; 8:5-7). The fire is not denied or ignored but is firmly nudged toward the safety and enjoyment of the fire-place.

It's noteworthy that in the section on the wedding night (4:1-5:1), the king spends the first 15 verses talking to his bride. "All beautiful you are, my darling," he says; "there is no flaw in you" (4:7). So, to put it in a rather earthy way to male readers, the most important organ in developing a healthy sexual relationship is not below your belt; it's above your chin.

Solomon's ability to express himself creates an atmosphere in which sex can develop and grow. It's fascinating to me that the sex of chapter 7 is much deeper and more intimate than the sex of chapter 4. On the honeymoon in chapter 4, the king describes his bride in a sevenfold way from the head down, and in chapter 7 (after a serious conflict is resolved) he describes her in a tenfold way from the feet up.

Note also that in terms of "bedroom" language the lovemaking is mutual, and the wife is increasingly aggressive and creative in the relationship. Verses 10-13 of chapter 7 offer wonderful encouragement for couples in which an amorous husband and a reluctant wife are living in a silent clash of expectations.

THE KING'S COUNTERPART

While the theme of "throne room" language is not as easy to spot in this song, I'm convinced it is there. If we follow the trail of Jerusalem (his world) and Lebanon (her world) references, as well as the citations of shepherd (his world as "shepherd" of God's

people) and vinedresser (her world), it becomes easier to see the tension and tug-of-war this couple experiences.

The main dissonance in the song (5:2-8) may well result from the king's arriving late from some affairs of state. He addresses her with deep poetic affection, but she is unresponsive. It will take them two full chapters to sort this one out.

The young woman's most enjoyable scenes are the two in which she has persuaded Solomon to come home to her world in Lebanon (2:8-15; 7:10-8:14). The sights, sounds, and smells of home are wonderful; her family is nearby; and she is relaxed and playful.

But two groups of people repeatedly call her and support her in her "Jerusalem calling." The male watchmen make two appearances (3:1-4; 5:7), and the ladies of the court (the "daughters of Jerusalem") make several appearances. After the song's major conflict, these friends call her back to her lover and king in 6:13: "Come back, come back, O Shulammitte." This reference identifies her as counterpart to the king, Solomon (*Shulamo*). She is called to be queen, a role that certainly causes her much hesitation and anxiety. Her growth in this area is possibly hinted at in the play on words in 8:10: "Thus I [the Shulammitte] have become in his [Shulamo's] eyes like one bringing contentment [shalom]."

So this puzzling ancient love poem at the center of Scripture appears to hint clearly at these truths:

- A godly husband and wife have a relationship complete without children.
- Together they are called to explore and express private intimacy.
- Both are to be royal and complementary partners in public kingdom influence.

Without much effort we can also see some of the imagery here pointing to Jesus and his church, to the Bridegroom and his

Bride. The church needs to be both bride and queen, to learn both "bedroom" and "throne room" language. She needs very much to sit in Jesus' lap, to cuddle, and to hear his sweet somethings in her ear. She also needs the growing confidence of learning to rule the kingdom with him, judging angels and all the rest.

Intimacy and influence. Personal bride and public queen. Eyes locked with his and yet roaming the far reaches of creation. What a dance!

A WORD OF LIFE

And what a word of life to young people in South Africa and everywhere else who are making sexual choices in a world where sexual perversity and tragic results such as AIDS echo all around them.

The Song of Songs says, in effect, "Follow God's order (in a way like the alphabet): start with the C of courtship, which leads to the M of marriage, and only then may you open the door to the S of sex.

Or, as Cathy asked our 22 graduating students in a classroom last fall, "What would the South African future be like if, starting tomorrow, everyone would have sex only in a committed lifelong relationship of marriage?"



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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF THE SONG OF SOLOMON

I. Importance

- A. Very high on the church's agenda in our new century is helping people to experience courtship, marriage, and sex in a God-honoring way
- B. It is surprising that Scripture appears to address these issues so sparingly! But the main concern in the First Testament is first birth (the coming of the male descendent who would be the liberator or Messiah), and in the Second Testament it is second birth (our willingness to die to self, letting the liberator's life be born in us...)
- C. Genesis 1-4 addresses marriage issues, but only Song of Solomon focuses on them exclusively and completely. This little book at the heart of Scripture gives us a generous window on God's heart! After all, He came up with the idea of good courting, good marrying, and good sex.

II. Interpretation

- A. The Song of Solomon was probably written between 970 - 930 B.C. It is likely that Solomon wrote it as a young man, wrote Proverbs in middle age, and finished with Ecclesiastes as an older man.
 - 1. The Song was part of a 13-book collection known as "the Writings" (which, along with the Law and the early and later Prophets, comprised the Old Testament, see Luke 24.44)
 - 2. The Song was also one of the five Megilloth, which, along with Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, are still read annually at five significant occasions in the Jewish calendar. The Song was read at Pascha or Passover
- B. The early church understood it mainly as an allegory of the Christ-Church relationship. So did Bernard of Clairvaux (86 sermons on chapter 1-2 alone!) and so have more recent commentators such as Hudson Taylor and Watchman Nee
- C. Since this approach does not do full justice to the original context and intention, we are going to propose and pursue Song of Solomon as an analogy
 - 1. It is an analogy of something we know: the stirrings of love leading to courtship, marriage, and sex (in that order!), helping us to understand what we do not understand as well: the Bride's relationship with her heavenly Bridegroom
 - 2. The primary intent in these eight chapters is to sketch out the passion, the problems, and the progress of a very human male-female relationship. And to do this, the Song has a clear chronology

III. Insight into the flow of the Song

A. The first half (and three main themes)

1. Courtship (1.1-3.5)
 - a. A portrait of each lover (1.1-1.8)
 - b. Mutual conversation and appreciation (1.9-2.3)
 - c. First two of three cycles of wanting, waiting, and winning (2.4-3.5)
2. Wedding (3.6-11)
3. Wedding night, and Lovemaking One (4.1-5.1)

B. The second half (and three main themes)

4. Conflict and resolution (5.2-6.13)
 - a. Conflict (5.2-8)
 - b. Her move to resolution (5.9-6.3)
 - c. His move to resolution (6.4-13)
5. Lovemaking Two (7.1-10, spilling into 7.11-8.4)
6. Climax of story...and continuity (8.5-14)

IV. Issues in the Song of Solomon

- A. The two basic human needs are for intimacy (with heaven, but also on earth), and for influence (on earth, but also with heaven)
 1. Intimacy issues in the Song deal mainly with sexual adjustment. They are very private, "bedroom" issues
 2. Influence issues in the Song deal mainly with Jerusalem (his career) and Lebanon (her home) adjustments. They are very public, "throne-room" issues
 3. In session we hope to explore these sets of tensions at greater length. But it is good to be aware of them throughout our study!
- B. 1. The young Shulammitte girl is, in other words, both lover and queen! She needs to learn both bedroom and throne-room language
 1. And so does the Church, the Bride of Christ! There is ample and wonderful evidence in the New Testament that we are to grow in intimacy with our Saviour and Lover, and in influence (of the entire universe someday!) with our Lord and King. What an assignment!

V. Intimidating or Inviting?

- A. The Song of Solomon was written almost 3000 years ago. It is poetry and is full of strange language and puzzling figures of speech. The book contains 470 different Hebrew words, and 47 of those, exactly 10%, are unique to this book. For 96 others there are less than 10 references elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is at times so candid and explicit that we blush...And is at times so obscure and unconnected that we want to scream...
- B. One theologian has this to say, "Of all the books in the Old Testament none is so difficult to interpret as the Songs of Songs. About no other book has so much been written, and concerning no other are there such differences of opinion and such variety of interpretation" (Theophile Meek in the Interpreters Bible V, p. 91)
- C. But we believe that the Holy Spirit will use our curiosity and our hard work to teach us lessons that we will never forget, and that we can start to apply tomorrow.

The Message of the Song of Songs,
by Tom Gledhill, Downers Grove: IVP, 1994.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

How beautiful you are, my darling! (1:15)
 How handsome you are, my lover! (1:16)
 I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys (2:1)
 ... show me your face ... (2:14)
 How beautiful you are, my darling! (4:1)
 Your eyes behind your veil are doves (4:1)
 Your hair is like a flock of goats (4:1)
 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn (4:2)
 Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon (4:3)
 Your mouth is lovely (4:3)
 Your temples ... like the halves of a pomegranate (4:3)
 Your neck is like the tower of David (4:4)
 Your two breasts are like two fawns (4:5)
 ... there is no flaw in you (4:7)
 My lover is radiant and ruddy (5:10)
 His head is purest gold (5:10)
 His hair is wavy (5:10)
 His eyes are like doves (5:12)
 His cheeks are like beds of spice (5:13)
 His lips are lilies (5:13)
 His arms are rods of gold (5:14)
 His body is like polished ivory (5:14)
 His legs are pillars of marble (5:15)
 His appearance is like Lebanon (5:15)
 His mouth is sweetness itself (5:16)
 You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah (6:4)
 ... lovely as Jerusalem (6:4)
 ... majestic as troops with banners (6:4)
 Who is this that appears like the dawn? (6:10)
 Your graceful legs are like jewels (7:1)
 Your navel is a rounded goblet (7:2)
 Your waist is a mound of wheat (7:2)
 Your breasts are like two fawns (7:3)
 Your neck is like an ivory tower (7:3)
 Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon (7:4)
 Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon (7:4)
 Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel (7:5)
 Your hair is like royal tapestry (7:5)
 Your stature is like that of the palm (7:7)
 ... your breasts like clusters of fruit (7:7)

Discussion questions

1. Physical attraction is only one factor to be considered in a man/woman relationship. How important do you think this is?

For further thought

It has already been mentioned that the Song has a somewhat untidy structure with many repetitions and sudden changes of mood. The various themes with their colourful images jostle each other to form a beautiful complex fabric. It may be helpful in our study of the Song to disentangle a few of these strands which are tightly interwoven in the poetry. This is not to suggest that there is a progressive plot in the poem; it is merely a device to help our appreciation of the Song. The strands I have selected do in fact appear to have some sort of sequence, but this is not something to be imposed on the text as a whole. After the delineation of each theme, a number of questions are posed to stimulate discussion and to apply the message of the Song.

Many of the questions could be discussed in marriage-preparation classes. For a wider use in a mixed group discussion, it is recommended that the material is used selectively, bearing in mind the needs of a particular group and cultural sensitivities.

Themes

1. The attraction and articulation of beauty
 2. Joys and tensions
 3. Erotic arousal
 4. Betrothal and marriage
 5. Consummation
 6. The permanency of love
1. The attraction and articulation of beauty
 Dark am I, yet lovely (1:5)
 I liken you, my darling, to a mare (1:9)
 Your cheeks are beautiful with ear-rings (1:10)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

What other factors need to be taken into account about which the Song says absolutely nothing?

2. Read Proverbs 31:30 and 1 Peter 3:3-6. Do you think these verses downplay the importance of physical beauty?
3. Do you think it a mark of vanity that we should desire to enhance our physical attractiveness?
4. How would you define physical beauty or attractiveness?
5. In what ways can beauty be seen as threatening?
6. How far do you think norms of beauty are culturally determined?
7. How much of our self-image is determined by the consideration of our external appearance?
8. How can we learn to live with our own limitations or with how we think others perceive us in the area of physical attraction?
9. How easy do you find it to articulate your praise of the one you love? Is it important that those who feel inhibited in these matters should overcome their inhibitions or is the praise of the lovers in the Song purely an artistic device, with no correspondence to real relationships?
10. In what ways do you think it appropriate to enhance our physical appearance by dressing, hairstyle, cosmetics, etc.

2. Joys and tensions

Togetherness

My lover is to me a sachel of myrrh resting between my breasts (1:13)

I delight to sit in his shade (2:3)

My beloved is mine and I am his (2:16)

I belong to my lover and his desire is for me (7:10)

Take me away with you – let us hurry! (1:4)

Our bed is verdant (1:16)

He has taken me to the banquet hall (2:4)

Arise my darling . . . and come with me (2:10)

. . . in the hiding-places on the mountainside, show me your face (2:14)

Come with me from Lebanon (4:8)

Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside (7:11)

Aloneness

I went down to the grove of nut trees (6:11)

All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves (3:1)

I slept but my heart was awake (5:2)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Fears of loss

I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone (5:6)

I charge you – if you find my lover, what will you tell him? (5:8)

Which way did your lover turn, that we may look for him with you? (6:1)

I looked for him but did not find him (3:1)

I called him but he did not answer (5:6)

Hostility

My mother's sons were angry with me (1:6)

They beat me, they bruised me (5:7)

Barriers of separation

There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice (2:9)

My dove in the clefts of the rock (2:14)

. . . the rugged hills (2:17)

Teasing

I have taken off my robe – must I put it on again? I have washed my feet – must I soil them again? (5:3)

Catch for us the foxes (2:15)

Tell me . . . where you graze your flock . . . If you do not know . . . follow the tracks of the sheep (1:7-8)

Frustration

If only you were like a brother to me . . . I would kiss you . . . (8:1)

Discussion questions

1. In any relationship there has to be a compromise between togetherness and aloneness. How should courting couples apportion time spent alone as compared with time, for example, in wider Christian fellowship? How should married couples preserve their private moments from being lost in the busy-ness of life – working life, family life, church life?
2. Does absence always make the heart grow fonder?
3. How far are you able to tease one another in an intimate relationship? What are the dangers in this?

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

4. To what degree should we listen to the opinions of close relatives in considering the choice of a husband/wife?

3. Erotic arousal

The five senses are brought into play in the Song:

Taste

His fruit is sweet to my taste (2:3)
 ... and taste its choice fruits (4:16)
 I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey (5:1)
 ... your mouth like the best wine (7:9)

Smell

Pleasant is the fragrance of your perfumes (1:3)
 ... my perfume spread its fragrance (1:12)
 ... perfumed with myrrh and incense (3:6)
 ... the fragrance of your perfume (4:10)
 ... the fragrance of your garments (4:11)

Touch

... your love [caresses] is more delightful than wine (1:2)
 His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me (2:6;
 also at 8:3)
 I held him and would not let him go (3:4)

Hearing

... let me hear your voice (2:14)
 Listen! My lover is knocking (5:2)
 You who dwell in the gardens ... let me hear your voice! (8:13)

Sight

Do not stare at me because I am dark (1:6)
 ... show me your face (2:14)
 You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes (4:9)
 Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me (6:5)
 ... come back, that we may gaze on you! (6:13)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

A general state of arousal underlies the following verses:

... your love is more delightful than wine (1:2)
 ... resting between my breasts (1:13)
 ... his fruit is sweet to my taste (2:3)
 I am faint with love (2:5)
 ... he browses among the lilies (2:16; also at 6:3)
 Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be
 like a gazelle, or like a stag on the rugged hills (2:17)
 I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense (4:6)
 You have stolen my heart (4:9)
 ... my heart began to pound for him (5:4)
 ... my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh,
 on the handles of the lock (5:5)
 Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte as on the dance of Mahanaim? (6:13)
 I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit (7:8)
 The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every
 delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you (7:13)
 I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates (8:2)
 Under the apple tree I roused you (8:5)

Kissing is alluded to in several places:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth (1:2)
 He has taken me to the banquet hall (2:4)
 Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb (4:11)
 His mouth is sweetness itself (5:16)
 ... your mouth like the best wine. May the wine go straight to my
 lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth (7:9)
 I would kiss you, and no-one would despise me (8:1)

A state of *undress*. The following verses indicate, if not a state of undress, then at least a very strong imagination:

Your graceful legs (= rounded thighs) (7:1)
 Your navel (7:2)
 Your waist (lit. belly) (7:2)
 Your breasts (7:3)

The woman's initiatives

Let him kiss me (1:2)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Take me away with you (1:4)
 Tell me, you whom I love (1:7)
 ... turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle (2:17)
 I looked for the one my heart loves (3:1)
 I will get up now and go about the city (3:2)
 I will search for the one my heart loves (3:2)
 Let my lover come into his garden (4:16)
 I arose to open for my lover (5:5)
 Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night
 in the villages (7:11)
 ... there I will give you my love (7:12)
 Under the apple tree I roused you (8:5)
 I would kiss you (8:1)
 Come away, my love (8:14)

The man's initiatives

He has taken me to the banquet hall (2:4)
 Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me (2:10)
 ... show me your face (2:14)
 Come with me from Lebanon (4:8)
 My lover is knocking! (5:2)
 I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit (7:8)

The times of intimacy

... resting (= spending the night) (1:13)
 Until the day breaks and the shadows flee (2:17)
 Let us spend the night in the villages (7:11)
 Let us go early to the vineyards (7:12)

The places of intimacy

Let the king bring me into his chambers (1:4)
 ... where you rest your sheep at midday (1:7)
 The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters are firs (1:17)
 He has taken me to the banquet hall (2:4)
 ... over the hills (2:8-13)
 ... in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding-places on the mountain-
 side (2:14)
 I ... brought him to my mother's house (3:4)
 ... let us go to the countryside (7:11)
 I would lead you and bring you to my mother's house (8:2)
 Under the apple tree (8:5)
 You who dwell in the gardens (8:13)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

The need for restraint

Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires (2:7; 3:5; 8:4)

Discussion questions

1. Do you think that the Song undermines the gender stereotypes of our modern society?
2. What practical steps can be taken to ensure that we 'do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires'?
3. What degrees of intimacy are appropriate for particular stages in a developing relationship?
4. Are sexual fantasies always an indication of lust?
5. How far may we articulate to our spouses the particular intimacies which we find most pleasurable?
6. When does our desire for intimacy degenerate into a selfish desire for sexual gratification?

4. Betrothal and marriage

Look! It is Solomon's carriage ... the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced (3:7-11)
 ... my bride (4:8, 11)
 My sister, my bride (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1)

Discussion questions

1. Is it helpful for single people to fantasize about their own possible future marriage?
 2. What can we do to keep our own marriages from falling into a rut?
 3. Is 'falling in love' a necessary prerequisite for a successful marriage?
 4. What are the advantages of an arranged marriage?
 5. What is the purpose of a wedding as a public ceremony?
 6. In our secularized western culture, cohabitation is becoming increasingly prevalent. In the light of Scripture what would you say to such an unmarried couple?
- 5. Consummation**
- Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits (4:16)
 I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride (5:1)
 ... there I will give you my love (7:12)

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Discussion questions

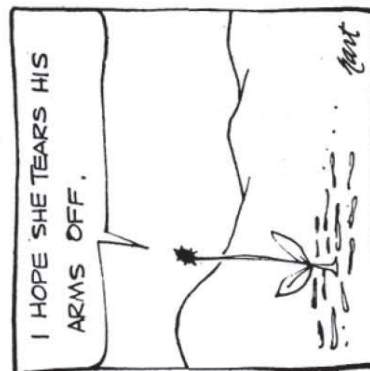
1. Make a list of the biblical passages which endorse marriage as the only legitimate context for sexual intercourse.
2. If the Bible regards the sexual act as a God-given part of creation, should we be embarrassed by it?
3. The Song says virtually nothing about the procreation of children. Do you find anything significant in this?
4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of books about techniques?
5. Why did Adam and Eve cover themselves with fig-leaves? What is the connection between sexual self-consciousness and sin?
6. What importance should be attached to sexual satisfaction in a married relationship?
7. Discuss the capricious, whimsical nature of the sexual instinct.

6. The permanency of love

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal over your arm; for love is as strong as death (8:6)
Many waters cannot quench love (8:7)

Discussion questions

1. Do you think that love is primarily an emotion, or is it an act of the will?
2. How is it possible to maintain love if physical attraction wanes?
3. In what ways ought human love to mirror the love of God?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. In what sense does love 'remain' when other things pass away?
5. 'Love comes from God' (1 John 4:7). What is *this type* of love whose origin is Divine? Does all love have its origin in God?
6. What is the difference between love, passion, desire, lust, infatuation, affection and friendship?



INTRODUCTION

have understood them. Their use and significance is dealt with throughout the commentary. A brief listing of them here may be helpful.

- *Descriptive Songs* (he describes her: 4:1-7; 6:4-7; she describes him: 5:10-16; daughters of Jerusalem describe her: 7:1-5) portray the beauty and strength of the partners as part of the stimulation for the lovemaking of marriage.
- *Self-descriptions* were used by the woman (1) to disclaim her worthiness and in turn call attention to the fact that her lover had chosen her (1:5-6; 2:1); (2) to boast in her chastity and maturity (8:10).
- *Songs of admiration* focus on the loved one's dress, ornamentation, or general attractiveness rather than on the physical attributes (1:9-11, 12-17; 2:1-3; 4:9-11).
- *Songs of yearning* express one lover's ardent desire for the other, both when they are apart (1:2-4; 2:5-6; 8:13) and when they are together (7:6-9a; 8:1-3, 6-7).
- *Songs of invitation* voice a strong request for the loved one to come and join the partner in intimacy (he: 4:8; she: 2:17; 4:16; 8:14).
- *Formula of mutual possession* is used by the woman to indicate the depth and commitment of the relationship in which each belongs to the other (2:16; 6:3; 7:10).
- *Search narratives* describe what may be dreams, in which the woman leaves her room to seek her lover in the streets, once with success (3:1-4), once with failure (5:2-7).
- *Calls to oath* pledge the daughters of Jerusalem to do the urgent bidding of the woman, whether in refusing to stimulate love before the occasion is right (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) or in telling the absent husband of his bride's lovesickness (5:8).
- *Teasing songs* catch the banter between the lovers as they express their eagerness to be together (1:7-8; 2:15) and add notes of playfulness to the relationship.
- *Boasting songs* convey the pride that the lover has in his partner (6:9-10; 8:11-12) or that she has in her purity, maturity, and influence (8:10).

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This reading of the Song shies away from any *allegorical* handling of the text, since it contains no clue as to hidden or spiritual meanings of its various characters, components, or details. Even a *typological* approach that sees the Song as an expression of divine love for Israel or for the church without trying to find deep mysteries in the language goes beyond what the book itself warrants; the New Testament, which does not quote or refer to it, gives no support to attempts to spiritualize the book.⁴ *Dramatic* theories are ruled out both because of the shadowy nature of the plot, if there really is one, and because the most prevalent of these theories complicates the situation unreasonably by adding a third figure, Solomon, and imposing on the poems a triangular shape that has the two men (shepherd and king) vying for the woman's hand. Attempts to connect the poetry with pagan *liturgical rites*, fairly common in the ancient Middle East, where the marital union of god and goddess are featured in mythological literature, seem to be refuted by the Israelite abhorrence of the fertility cult and its rituals. A recent explanation of the poems as descriptive of *funeral feasts* in which drinking and lovemaking were featured as a way of affirming life's continuity and joy in the face of death seems to be forced on the Song rather than derived from it. Any one of these approaches may shed light on a passage or two, but none of them can offer a reading of the book as consistent, sustained, and direct as the one we have followed, which has to support it an increasing consensus of both European and American scholars, though, of course, there is a great deal of variety as to the meanings of words and the understanding of details.

The best clues as to the message and movement of the book are the *types of songs* of which it is comprised. The recognition of the literary form has largely determined the outline of each of the six poems as I

An Outline of the Song of Solomon

Title: The Royal Relationship: 1:1

Poem I. Longing and Discovery: 1:2-2:7

- A. Song of Yearning for the Absent Lover (Beloved): 1:2-4
- B. Self-description of Modesty (Beloved): 1:5-6
- C. Teasing Dialogue Imaginatively Seeking an Encounter (Beloved; Lover): 1:7-8
- D. Song Admiring Her Worth and Beauty (Lover): 1:9-11
- E. Song of Admiration in Reply (Beloved): 1:12-14
- F. Song of Admiration in Dialogue (Lover; Beloved; Lover; Beloved): 1:15-2:4
- G. Song of Yearning for Intimacy (Beloved): 2:5-6
- H. Call for Patience with Love's Course (Beloved): 2:7

Poem II. Invitation, Suspense, Response: 2:8-3:5

- A. Description of the Lover's Approach and Invitation (Beloved): 2:8-14
- B. Teasing Response Turned Serious by Affirmation of Mutual Possession (Beloved): 2:15-16
- C. Invitation to Intimacy (Beloved): 2:17
- D. Description of Frustration and Fulfillment (Beloved): 3:1-4
- E. Call for Patience with Love's Course (Beloved): 3:5

Poem III. Ceremony and Satisfaction: 3:6-5:1

- A. Dramatic and Admiring Description of the Groom's Arrival (Beloved): 3:6-11
- B. Description of the Bride's Beauty: (Lover): 4:1-7
- C. Invitation Song to Bride (Lover): 4:8
- D. Admiration Song to Bride (Lover): 4:9-15
- E. Invitation Song to Groom (Beloved): 4:16
- F. Song of Eager Response (Lover): 5:1a
- G. Song of Encouragement (Daughters of Jerusalem): 5:1b

Poem IV. Frustration and Delight: 5:2-6:3

- A. Report of a Vexing Dream (Beloved): 5:2-7
- B. Call for Urgent Help (Beloved): 5:8

- C. Teasing Question (Daughters of Jerusalem): 5:9
 D. Description of Lover's Beauty (Beloved): 5:10-16
 E. Teasing Question (Daughters of Jerusalem): 6:1
 F. Response of Delight and Commitment (Beloved): 6:2-3
 Poem V. Pomp and Celebration: 6:4-8:4
 A. A Descriptive Song with Touches of a Boast (Lover): 6:4-10
 B. A Fantasy Experience of Separation (Beloved): 6:11-12
 C. A Plea to Return (Daughters of Jerusalem): 6:13a
 D. A Teasing Reply in Question Form (Beloved): 6:13b
 E. A Description of the Dancing Woman (Daughters of Jerusalem): 7:1-5
 F. A Yearning Song for Intimacy (Lover): 7:6-9
 G. An Invitation to Fulfillment (Beloved): 7:10-8:3
 H. A Call for Patience with Love's Course (Beloved): 8:4
 Poem VI. Passion and Commitment: 8:5-14
 A. A Question Signaling the Couples' Return (Daughters of Jerusalem): 8:5a
 B. A Seductive Reminder of Love's Continuity (Beloved): 8:5b
 C. A Yearning Song of Chastity (Beloved): 8:6-7
 D. A Test of Chastity (Beloved, speaking for her brothers, vv. 8-9): 8:8-10
 E. A Boast of Chastity (Beloved): 8:11-12
 F. A Yearning Song to Hear Her Voice (Lover): 8:13
 G. An Invitation Song to Take His Fill of Love (Beloved): 8:14

CHAPTER ONE

Title: The Royal Relationship**Song of Solomon 1:1**

The Bible is about marriage. At the beginning it pictures the union of the first woman and the first man. It was a union accompanied by shouts of delight: *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,"* (Gen. 2:23). It was a union solemnized with a binding command: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"* (Gen. 2:24). It was a union marked by attractive innocence: *"And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed"* (Gen. 2:25).

The Bible is about marriage. At the end it depicts the consummation of all that God intended, as he guided the course of history with a redeeming hand, in terms of a marriage celebration:

Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.

And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'"

Rev. 19:7-9

The Bible is about marriage. Throughout its movement from beginning to end, it highlights its central themes with metaphors of marriage. Israel is Yahweh's spouse, bound to him as he is to her in covenant commitment, as Hosea's profound and painful experience helps us to understand. Isaiah (62:4) looks to a day when Judah and Jerusalem, called Forsaken and Desolate in judgment, will be renamed My Delight is in her (Heb. *Hepzibah*) and Married (Heb. *Beulah*) to signal their salvation. Jesus' presence as the Bridegroom

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fills the pages of the New Testament with ribbons and rice, as he encourages his friends to enjoy the party while he is yet with them (Matt. 9:14-15; 25:1-13; John 3:29). The apostle Paul saw our human marriages as demonstrations of *the* marriage of Christ to the church (Eph. 5:21-33).

The Bible is about marriage. And at its heart the Spirit of God has placed a collection of wedding songs. They contain no liturgy of worship, no statutes or commandments, no hymn of a psalmist, no oracle of a prophet, no vision of a seer. The are love songs pure and simple, bursting with passion, bright with desire, explosive with longing for physical love. As such, they are different from any other part of the Old Testament. From Genesis 4 and 10 to the end of Malachi, sex is for begetting. Procreation is its aim, and the perpetuation of Abraham's seed in fulfillment of God's promise is its goal. We are led to laugh and weep with Sarah as she waits month by month for Isaac's conception. We "amen" barren Hannah's stammering prayers in Shiloh's shrine as she pleads for a son to surrender to the Lord's service. In those stories we find no clues of the quality of the relationship between husband and wife; we ask no questions about romantic feelings, erotic delights.

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. "Eros without shame" was how Karl Barth described the tone of the Song. He saw it as a poetic commentary on the wide-eyed wonder with which the first man and woman admired each other as they stood face to face, naked and unashamed (Gen. 2:25).

That relationship in Eden was a royal one. That first pair came untarnished from the hand of God, humanity as it ought to be. And they shared the Creator's hegemony over the rest of creation. The man named the animals as a symbol of his regency. Made in the divine image, male and female, that pair enjoyed dominion over the garden in which they had been planted. Their communion with their Maker and with each other modeled what human life should look like. All of that is found in the first two chapters of Genesis. Then came chapter 3, with the vile serpent, the rebellious eating of the fruit, the guilty hiding from God, the blaming of each other, and the

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shameful clutching at leaves to cover their nakedness. From that hour to this, the human family has struggled to cope with its sexuality. Brokenness not wholeness has been our lot. And the forms of that brokenness have been legion: priggishness or prudishness that shuns sexuality at worst and tolerates it at best; perversion or exploitation that takes pleasure in the pain of others and treats sexual relationships as contests to be won or territory to be conquered.

The Bible, which cares so much about sexuality and marriage, amply documents how bad the situation became after Eve and Adam violated their God-mandated responsibilities and, in the process, corrupted the meaning of their sexuality. Their very maleness and femaleness in some sense reflected their relationship to God. They were made in his image, male and female (Gen. 1:27). Their capacity for strong interpersonal bonding with each other was a reflection of their union and communion with God. When by disobedience they violated that heavenly union with their Lord, they became disoriented and confused in their earthly relationships to each other. And they passed that confusion on to all their offspring.

The tragedies at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-19:29) or at Gibeah (Judg. 19) document the depths to which broken sexuality can sink. The command against adultery built into the heart of the Decalogue is a reminder both of the sanctity of the marriage covenant and our human proneness to play fast and loose with it. The royal relationship, established by divine blessing at the beginning, was capable of almost infinite forms of degradation once its primary purpose to mirror God's eternal love for his people was obscured by lust and license.

The Bible is about marriage—not only marriage that is pure and joyful at the beginning and ending of the story but marriage that needs redeeming along the way. No part of Scripture sheds more light on what redeemed marital love can mean than the Song of Songs. Its very title lifts it above the lurid, the lustful, even the romantic and sets it apart from all other lyrics in the Old Testament, which contains a magnificent collection of poetic artistry.

1:1 The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

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The Bible is about *singing* as well as marriage. Biblical faith is personal. It calls for our engagement in it as persons; it grips our lives at

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their center and evokes a response from the depth of our beings. There is no way better for us to voice that total response, that full commitment to the truth of who God is and what he has done, than by singing. The great historical breakthroughs in the salvation of Israel were celebrated in song. Just listen to Moses and Miriam at the edge of the Red Sea (Exod. 15). Hear the Lord's triumphs sounded by Deborah and Barak at the defeat of the Canaanites (Judg. 5). Give ear to the epic praise of David on the heels of his rescue from the hands of his enemies, including Saul (2 Sam. 22). Great songs all! Personal and powerful.

Biblical faith is imaginative as well as personal. Our imaginations are gifts of God, the result of our creation in his image. Through our imaginations we unlock the mysteries of God's ways as we contemplate the word-pictures God has given us of himself—parent, judge, husband, farmer, shepherd. As God's Spirit activates our imaginations, corrects their foolish or wicked tendencies, strips them of their dullness, heals their blindness, we begin to grasp the reality of God's person and activities through the poetry in which he has described himself in Scripture and in which others have described God in the hymnody of our Christian faith.

Singing opens our eyes and ears to what we have not earlier understood. It draws out of us responses of which we have been previously incapable. It heads us into the heart of wonders and mysteries which only poetry is capable of capturing. The author of the Song of Songs knew this and deliberately called the attention of his people to it by naming his collection of love lyrics "*The Song of Songs*." The title is superlative like king of kings (Dan. 2:37). It means the best of songs, the outstanding song.

A haughty title that seems to be, in a book that specializes in magnificent poetry. The Targum, which translated and interpreted the Old Testament into Aramaic, took seriously this claim to superiority, listed ten great songs, from Adam's thanksgiving for pardon to the song of the exiles returned to their land, and concluded: "Ten songs were uttered in this world. This song was the best of them all."¹

THE BEST SINGERS

The Song of Songs has an outstanding cast: a woman, usually called the *beloved*; a man, referred to as the *lover*; a group of women

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friends known as the *daughters of Jerusalem*. The entire scenario can be understood as the words of these two persons and the accompanying group. More complicated lists of *dramatis personae* are sometimes suggested by translators and commentators, but the text itself can best be handled by assigning its words to this three-part cast, although there are a few places where it is not easy to tell whether the man or the woman is speaking. We shall note these places along the way.

The singers are remarkable. Their literary flair, shaped in part by the conventions of a culture which valued love and gave attention to preserving and transmitting expressions of it in elegant, vivid, and sonorous language, would be sufficient to warrant the superlative title of the Song. They are fine singers.

But beyond that, they are fine persons who do the singing. The woman is honest and forthright in her declarations of love. Her yearnings and frustrations she relates to her friends, along with her joys and anticipations. Her modest, even self-effacing descriptions of her person (1:5-6; 2:1) actually enhance her attractiveness and help to evoke the florid and graphic language with which the lover extols her beauty (4:1-7; 6:4-9; 7:1-9). He, in turn, is kind, considerate, encouraging, affirming, and responsive, with no trace of machismo or need to dominate. The daughters of Jerusalem are persons we would all enjoy as friends. They are supportive of the lovers, cheering them on as they enter the delights of total intimacy (5:1). They are trustworthy in their commitment to protect the leisure and privacy which lovemaking deserves (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). They are full of ready humor as they gently tease their eager friend about the merits of her lover (5:9-6:1). The best of songs merits its name; it has the best of singers.

THE BEST SUBJECT

In the Song, *love* is mapped out as the road to royalty. The whole Solomonic motif seems to have as its point the celebration of the elegance, the dignity, the nobility of love. It is the regal virtue. Those who practice it are engaged in a royal relationship.

The final phrase of the Title sets the tone for the book: "*which is Solomon's*." The Hebrew wording is capable of several meanings: *authorship*—written by Solomon (see Introduction); *dedication*—belonging to or written for Solomon; *character*—composed in the manner or

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style of Solomon; *subject*—dealing with Solomon. The approach of this Commentary leans toward the last two interpretations of the phrase. The Solomonic tone and the references to royal and palatial settings ought not to be taken literally, as though Solomon, David's son and king of Israel, were a chief character in the book. To see him as such almost inevitably calls for a triangular plot in which a shepherd-lover competes with Solomon for the affections of the beloved. The weaknesses of this theory are listed in the Introduction.

The royal language with which the Song is laced plays two main roles. First, it glorifies the lovers and their love by treating them as though they were kings and queens, basking in the elegance of each other and of their noble life together: the beloved calls her man the king (1:4, 12; 3:9, 11) and he echoes that language of himself (7:6); the woman's strength and beauty call for regal language as the only argot adequate to depict them—"my filly among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9), "your neck is like the tower of David" (4:4), "beautiful as Tirzah" (the ancient capital of the Northern Kingdom), *lovely as Jerusalem*" (6:4), "queens and concubines (saw her) and they praised her" (6:9), "O prince's daughter" (7:1); the beloved's name Shulamite (6:13) may refer to her hometown or may be a play on Solomon's name—*Solomoness*, a coy way of featuring her queenliness. Second, the use of Solomon's name sets up a contrast between the complexity, affluence, and polygamous character of his life as described in 1 Kings 1-11 and the simplicity, rusticity, and monogamy of the couple's lifestyle in the Song (6:8-9; 8:11-12). Their persistent and singular commitment to each other was truly more royal than a king's opulent profligacy.

The regal character of marital love was not just an ancient idea. It has persisted through the centuries and is reflected in our contemporary marriage customs. On the morning of the wedding day a modern bride may make her nuptial preparation clad in sweat shirt and cut-off jeans and crowned with curlers as elaborate as a television antenna. But at wedding time, there she is with flowing gown, graceful veil and train, delicate tiara. Every one rises as she enters the church to be greeted by a groom immaculate in tails and white tie. The next day, the sweat shirts and cut-offs reappear, but for those shining moments as they basked in the admiration and goodwill of family and friends, they were royalty. Biblical lovers know that and aim to make those moments last a lifetime. The best of songs is

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rightly named; its subject is the royal relationship—love strong as death and too fiery for any stream to quench (8:6-7).

THE BEST SETTING

The Song is superb because the best of singers, two lovers and their friends, celebrate the best of subjects, love, in the best of settings, a joyful covenant of mutual commitment to the lasting welfare of each other. The formula of mutual possession

My beloved is mine, and I am his.
2:16; 6:3; 7:10

signals the binding nature of the relationship to which each partner is permanently pledged. The context breathes no hint of momentary dalliances, of fleeting liaisons, of fickle self-indulgences. Neither the beloved nor the lover has a roving eye. Whether together in full enjoyment or apart in fervent longing, their thoughts are fixed on the beauty, the character, and the passion of the other.

Indeed, the setting of the Song is so sacred that Rabbi Akiba (c. A.D. 100) honored it in extravagant language: "for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs are the Holy of Holies."² Though the Rabbi's original intent was to suppress all the arguments raised against its presence in the Hebrew Canon, his intuition was sound. A document that elevates the beauty and purity of marital love is surely charged with holiness. So idyllic is the mood of the Song that it sounds like a return to Eden. Nothing foul, vile, filthy, nor selfish tarnishes the scene. The fall that triggered such lust and fear and perversion in our human attitudes to sexuality seems suspended. Sin appears to be excluded. What once was, what again can be, in the pure desire of one partner for another, is described.

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

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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.

Lovers have always known that song was the only adequate expression for feelings so strong, delight so high, commitment so deep. Only poetry with its combination of excess and austerity, of release and discipline can capture the aspirations and frustrations of love. Overwhelmed by our desire to give ourselves away for the sake of another and to receive from that other more than we dare ask, we do not derive a formula, concoct a recipe, recite a ritual, draw a map, lay out a graph. We sing a song. In the Song treasured in Holy Writ, we sing the best song possible.

NOTES

1. For translation, see M. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 296 (see Bibliography for full publishing information).
2. Cited by R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs*, p. 1 (see Bibliography). The original quotation was from the Mishnah, Yad. 3:5.

The Song of Songs by Tremper Longman III. (NICOT Commentary Series).

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The allegorical approach was not wrong in insisting that we read the Song as relevant to our relationship to God. The more we understand about marriage, the more we understand about our relationship with God. More than any other human relationship marriage reflects the divine-human relationship. There are only two relationships that are mutually exclusive to humans. We may have only one spouse and only one God. Accordingly, these are the only two relationships where jealousy can be a positive emotion.¹⁹⁷ The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First, allegorists suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and, second, they pressed the details in arbitrary ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text.¹⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

In summary, then, the Song of Songs has a large, but often neglected, contribution to make to the religious community and to society. In the first place, it affirms love, sex, and, if read properly within the context of the canon, marriage. Second, it warns readers that such an intense emotion has its dangers. Though the Song's surface meaning is clearly concerned with human sexuality, a canonical reading offers at least two other major avenues of understanding the Song. (1) Human sexuality is part of the story of the creation, fall, and redemption of human relationships. God created marriage (Genesis 2), but that relationship was harmed by sin (Genesis 3). Yet the Song holds out the promise of healing, though complete harmony in relationships awaits the eschaton. (2) Throughout the Bible relationship with God is described by the metaphor of marriage. As with any metaphor, the reader must observe a proper reticence in terms of pressing the analogy. Nonetheless, from the Song we learn about the emotional intensity, intimacy, and exclusivity of our relationship with the God of the universe.

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¹⁹⁷. See the discussion of this in Song of Songs 8:6.

¹⁹⁸. See examples above, for instance, Hippolytus reading Song 1:13 and understanding the sachet of myrrh to refer to Jesus and the breasts to the Old and New Testaments.

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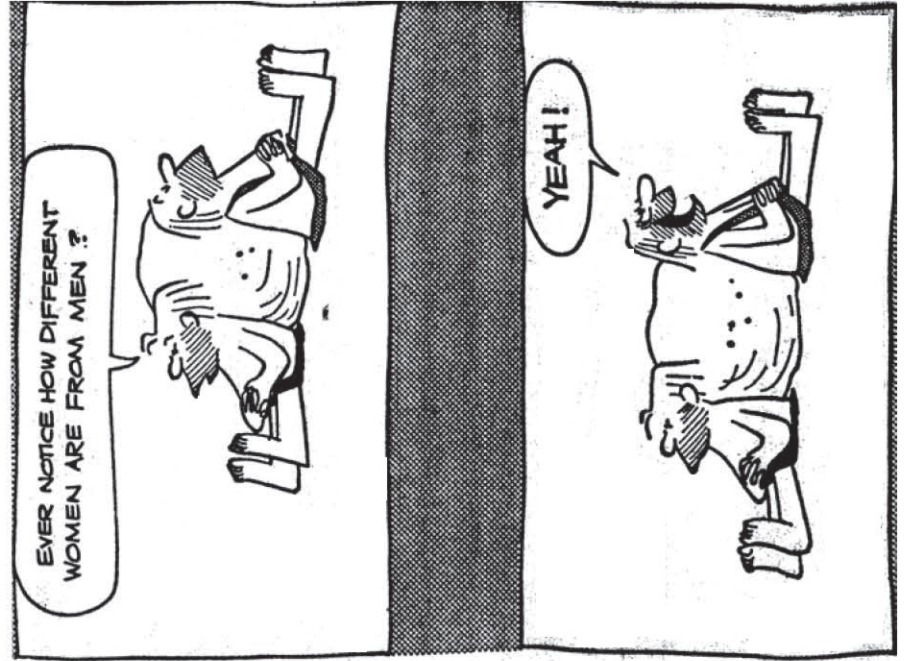
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“I Just Wanna Be Mad for Awhile”

by Teri Clark

Last night we went to bed not talking
'cause we'd already said too much.
I faced the wall, you faced the window
Bound and determined not to touch.
We've been married seven years now,
Some days it feels like twenty one!
I'm still mad at you this morning -
Coffee's ready if you want some.
I've been up since five
thinking about me and you
I've got to tell you the conclusion I've come to -

Chorus:

I'll never leave I'll never stray,
My love for you will never change
But I ain't ready to make up - we'll get around to
that.
I think I'm right, I think you're wrong,
I'll probably give in before too long.
Please don't make me smile,
I just want to be mad for awhile!

Well now you might as well forget it
Don't run your fingers through my hair
Yeah, that's right - I'm being stubborn
No I don't wanna go back upstairs
I'm gonna to leave for work without a goodbye kiss
But as I'm driving off, just remember this -

Chorus

“Love me Like a Song”

Sung by Kimmie Rhodes and Willie Nelson

Put your arms around me
Listen to my heart beat now
If you want to love me
Baby I can show you how

Chorus: Love me like a song
Sweet as a melody
Learn all the words to me
And sing along
And the harmony, the rhythm and the rhyme to me
On and on, all night long
Love me like a song.

I want to be the melody
You can't get out of your head
Think of me as words of love
A poem I have seen

Chorus: Think of me as a song
Sweet as a melody
Learn all the words to me
And sing along
And the harmony, the rhythm and rhyme to me
On and on, all night long
Love me like a song....

Reprise: Sing la la la...la la la
Love me like a song

Unity

Written by Cyara Pott

(for her sister Cami's wedding on 30 May 2003)

Two hearts, one woman and one man
The Father's guiding hand
The Father's plan has come
One day, a daughter's hand is freed
Her heart has found its childhood dream
Two lives are joined as one

Chorus:

And I pray for every joy the world may know
For every hope and dream to grow
As this new life starts, Lord, join these hearts as one
And I know that He will keep you in his peace
Will turn despair into relief
He'll give His gift of love, out of two whole hearts He'll bring.
Unity

They'll come, those days when time stands still
Tears will fall, the wind will chill
Darkened skies will threaten rain
God's strength is bigger than your own
His plans bring future, life and hope
This three-fold cord can bear the strain

(Chorus)