

Introduction to Song of Solomon

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Name

The Hebrew name for the book means "Song of Songs," "the Greatest Song," or "the Most Excellent Song." The Vulgate (the Latin Bible) rendered it "Canticle of Canticles," while English translators used "Song of Solomon" because of the mention of Solomon in 1:1.

Date, Genre, and Authorship

Like some other books in the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament), Song of Songs was put into its final form relatively late (probably 4th or 3rd century BCE) but includes much older material. Its form is entirely poetic; how many poems there are varies by interpreter, ranging from as few as eight to as many as 30 or 31. In its final form, the material includes writing (and oral tradition) from a number of sources or authors.

Canonical Context

The Song of Songs is part of the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings. It is also one of the five Festal Scrolls, each of which is associated with and read during a Jewish Festival; Song of Songs is associated with Passover. Why this book came to be read at Passover is uncertain, though it may be that the vibrant and passionate tone of the book was considered a good way to balance the somber Passover themes of slavery and death.

Content and Interpretation

If Ecclesiastes is unique for skepticism, the Song of Songs is unique for its celebration of romantic and erotic love. Completely devoid of any sense of shame, the poems celebrate the human body, sexual attraction, and passionate romance. Its candid, at times almost shocking, language (particularly by ancient standards) created discomfort both for the rabbis and the church fathers, who overwhelmingly overlooked the plain (literal) sense of the text in favor of allegorical interpretations. The rabbis considered the book an allegorical representation of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, while the church fathers found a symbolic depiction of the relationship between Christ and the church.

These allegorical interpretations persisted for centuries (and still persist in some circles today). On the one hand, modern interpreters rightly acknowledge that the reader can find meanings in the text which weren't necessarily intended by the author. (This method is known as reader-response criticism, or phenomenology.) On the other hand, making an allegory out of Song of Songs is a strained effort, particularly because the book lacks a single reference to God, YHWH, religion, righteousness, or faith. The only other book of the Old Testament which doesn't explicitly mention God is Esther, but there are many references to "the Jews" (God's people), and there is explicit mention of prayer, fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, all of which belong to the spiritual and ritual life of Israel. The Song of Songs never hints at cultic life or religious expression. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that allegorical interpretations stem from religious and cultural discomfort rather than from anything which is present in the text.

Voices and Content

There are three voices/speakers/narrators in the book.

- One voice is male, variously referred to poetically as a lover, a groom, a king (sometimes King Solomon, though the identification is metaphorical and not literal), and a shepherd.
- One voice is female, variously referred to (again, poetically) as a lover, a bride, a queen, a shepherdess, and "Shulamite" (6:13), which means "the perfect one."
- One voice is corporate, functioning as a chorus, portrayed as friends of the woman and sometimes referred to as "daughters of Jerusalem." (A corporate voice representing the woman's brothers speaks briefly in ch. 8.)

The primary content is the intense attraction of the two lovers: they long for each other, they pursue each other, they flirt with each other, they entice each other with seductive words and actions, they offer unabashed declarations of their love, and they idealize each other. She compares him to King Solomon (the assumption being that the man with 700 wives and 300 concubines would be a great lover); he says to her, "You are altogether beautiful, my love;/there is no flaw in you." (4:7)

In some ways the imagery sounds familiar to modern, Western readers. There is the language of springtime, with its implications of beauty and fertility. There are images from nature, which both provide settings for romance and become the language with which the lovers' attributes (physical and emotional) are described. The man is likened to male animals (a stag, a gazelle), masculine and virile; the woman is likened to female animals (a dove, a fawn), beautiful and graceful. Both are compared to fauna—she is a lily among brambles (2:2), and he is an apple tree among trees of wood (2:3); each image suggests both greater attractiveness and greater fertility. The lovers are also likened to precious metals and valuable jewels and spices.

The poetic language of Song of Songs also employs the pun, or double-entendre, that is found in most times and cultures. Modern readers will certainly recognize the sexual innuendo of pasturing, lying down, grazing, tasting, et al. This suggestive language is complemented by explicit talk of kissing, touching, body parts (breasts, thighs, legs, feet), entwined bodies, and going into the bed chamber.

At the same time, while some of the images transcend time and culture, other images may cause puzzlement for modern readers.

- In 4:4, the man tells the woman that her "neck is like the tower of David," perhaps not what a modern woman would want to hear. In that culture, however, a long, slender neck was associated with beauty.
- In chapter 1, the woman bemoans being dark-skinned (tanned) from working long hours in the vineyard. In our culture, tanned skin is considered attractive, but in ancient cultures (and even in Europe and America until recently), women desired to be fair-skinned. (Being fair-skinned was perceived as attractive but also suggested status, namely, that one had servants to work outside.)
- The man says that the woman has "hair like a flock of goats/moving down" a mountain (4:1), not a compliment offered very often in a modern context. But a reader who has visited Israel can imagine looking at a distant mountain and seeing a flock of goats winding their way cautiously down the hillside. The movement is strikingly similar to the way a woman's long hair tosses gently back and forth as she walks.

Two other puzzling features need special mention. (1) In 8:2 and 8:5, the setting for the lovers' interaction is a place—a bed chamber and under an apple tree (perhaps an outdoor spot, or perhaps a metaphorical place of fertility)—where one of the lovers was born. While modern readers don't want to think about (much less share the site of) their own conception or birth, these texts reflect the ancient belief that fertility could be more likely in certain locations, including places where others have conceived or given birth. (2) The woman refers to the man as both groom and brother, and the man refers to the woman as both bride and sister. None of these texts suggest, as one commentator says, "consanguinity" (incest). The sibling language connotes either closeness (see Prov 18:24) or the desire for openness and approval (by family and society). The woman says, "O that you were like a brother to me,/who nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you,/ and no one would despise me." She is simply saying that she wishes she and her lover could be open, not secretive, with their affection and relationship.

Song of Songs as Counter-Cultural

Students of the Bible will quickly recognize that there is nothing else like Song of Songs in the canon. The erotic language and imagery have no counterparts in scripture, and they had few counterparts in ancient Hebrew culture. The discomfort which the book has created for religious leaders, in both Judaism and Christianity, is evidenced by the allegorizing of the text, which seems the only way to mitigate the obvious and literal meanings. Perhaps less obvious but equally striking is that the romance and seduction are not necessarily contextualized by traditional marriage. Traditional interpreters leverage the spousal language to say that the man and woman are moving toward matrimony—or even looking back to the days before they were married—but these ideas are more assumed than present in the text.

What's more, while Esther and Ruth are known as the only two books of the Bible named for women, Song of Songs is, in many ways, more feminist and progressive. The woman speaks more often and more seductively than the man. She subverts the codes of her culture and defies the expectations of her family. In 8:8-10, her brothers try to define her as prepubescent and therefore too immature for a serious relationship with a man. What's more, they try to bribe her into conforming to their expectations (particularly related to chastity), and they threaten her if she doesn't (conform to their expectations). Yet she insists that she is mature enough, physically and emotionally, and that the only man whose opinion matters is her beloved, in whose eyes she is the bringer of *shalom*, peace and wholeness. One is hard-pressed to find a stronger woman not only in scripture but in ancient literature.

The Power of Love

While not shying away from the physical or sexual side of love, Song of Songs is finally more than a testament to passion. The lovers also convey the most lofty elements of love: they are tender in word and deed, they long for each on a deep emotional level, and they express singleness of devotion and commitment, nowhere more succinctly stated than in 6:3: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." What's more, love as an idea—or better, love as a reality—is finally exalted as the greatest power on earth (8:6-7). In a world where money was (as in our world) often considered the greatest aim in life, wealth is contemptible in the face of love. If love is thought of as a fire, it cannot be extinguished by the greatest flood. And while death seems to be greatest and most final power known to humans, there is one thing just as strong and just as lasting: love.