



SONG OF SONGS

AN INTRODUCTION



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WHO WROTE SONG OF SONGS?

At first blush, who wrote the Song of Songs could appear to be a simple question to answer. Verse 1, after all, says, “The Song of

Songs, which is Solomon’s.” However, it’s not that simple. While translated in the ESV as “which is,” the Hebrew literally says “to Solomon,” which is obviously ambiguous. The preposition with Solomon’s name could be translated “‘belonging to’ or ‘written by’ or perhaps ‘for’ or ‘dedicated to’ Solomon. . . . One could interpret the superscript to mean either that the book is anonymous but sponsored by Solomon or that it claims Solomonic authorship for the Song. In either case it indicates that the book came from the Solomonic period.”¹

Some biblical scholars have suggested that perhaps Song of Songs was written by a woman. The reasoning for this stands on the emphasis placed on the woman in the book. “The female in particular is the major character. She speaks first and last, and her words contain the most imperatives for her lover and for others.”² The feminist Old Testament scholar, J. Cheryl Exum, argues that

since men would have had greater opportunity to have been educated, the likelihood is greater that the Song was written by a man. But this does not rule out the possibility of an educated woman having composed the Song. Nor does it exclude the possibility that the poet drew on traditional materials, some of which were the products of women's culture. Indeed, love poetry, given its emphasis on a woman's point of view and its association with the domestic sphere, may have been a genre to which women made a special contribution.³

Still, even Exum concedes that "the sex of the author cannot be deduced from the poem."⁴

Regardless of who wrote Song of Songs, perhaps the most significant reason the book has been associated with Solomon is the genre of writing. In the Hebrew canon, Song of Songs finds itself within the *Ketuvim*, or the Writings (the other two sections being *Torah* [i.e., Law] and *Nevi'im* [i.e., Prophets]). In the Christian order of the Old Testament, Song of Songs is situated within the wisdom literature. On the surface, a love poem might not seem like "wisdom," but we should not miss what wisdom literature is supposed to do. "Wisdom literature as a whole is meant to instruct people in the complexities of creation so that we can live under God's blessing in his world."⁵

We also should not miss the seemingly purposeful connection to Proverbs 5:

Drink water from your own cistern,
 flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
 streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
 and not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
 be intoxicated always in her love.

The verbal links with the Song of Songs are striking; the words translated ‘drink’, ‘water’, ‘well’, ‘breasts’, and ‘love’ are all shared, and used in basically the same way. And the ‘loving doe’ and ‘graceful deer’ of this passage cannot but call to mind the ‘gazelles’ and ‘does’ of the Song. Both deal with the delight of sexual intimacy which properly belongs within a covenanted relationship between a man and a woman. What is explicit in Proverbs is implicit in the Song, and what is enjoyed by way of instruction in Proverbs is celebrated as an experienced reality in the Song.⁶

The wisdom of Song of Songs rests on “prepar[ing] young people for falling in love by communicating what the experience is like from the inside. . . . But part of the wisdom of the book is to show us that God’s plan for human romance reserves marriage as the context within which a sexual relationship flourishes.”⁷

No one more than Solomon himself is associated with wisdom in the Old Testament. Therefore it should be unsurprising to see Solomon associated with Song of Songs.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF SONG OF SONGS?

When studying any book in the Scriptures, both historical and literary context are important to understanding the book. Song of Songs is no different. Regarding the historical context, Song of Songs might seem like a book that stands alone, especially since nothing like it exists in the rest of Scripture. Nevertheless, Song of Songs isn’t the only ancient love song. Close parallels to Song of Songs from Mesopotamia as well as Egypt have been discovered.⁸

“Ancient Mesopotamian texts have a number of parallels to the Song of Songs, but unlike the Song, Mesopotamian love poetry almost always concerns the love affairs of the gods and tends to be hymnic or liturgical.”⁹ One parallel between these two types of songs is the use of gardens.

“In the Song and the Mesopotamian love poems, the garden is both the woman’s body and the place where lovers meet to enjoy the fruits of love.”¹⁰ Despite this parallel, “the love poetry of Egypt is much closer to the Song of Songs in content and form.”¹¹ One of the most unique features of Song of Songs is a feature found through ancient Arabic love songs. “Three times the Song describes the female’s body (4:1–78; 6:4–7; 7:1–7 and once the male’s body (5:10–16). These constitute a form known elsewhere to derive from an Arabic term for ‘description,’ that is *wasf*. A *wasf* is an Arabic love song in which the lover praises the physical attributes of the partner.”¹²

It is these features of ancient poetry that bring us to the literary context of Song of Songs. Simply put, Song of Songs is . . . a song! We see this even in the title of the book—*Song of Songs*. “In Hebrew, this is the way of expressing the superlative (e.g., the holy of holies = the most holy place). So the first verse designates this poem as ‘the best song.’”¹³ But other scholars see the title not only as superlative but as descriptive. They agree that it is

a song, but they think it is a song comprised of many songs. Here is how one scholar describes the Song: “If the Song of Songs is composed of individual poems, then it is either an anthology of love songs or a series of individual songs that are set within the structure of a unified book.”¹⁴ This view sees unity in both style and structure.

The danger for most readers comes when looking for an obvious narrative structure. For example, some believe the Song as a literary creation (i.e., song) “minimizes the importance of a coherent plot, a continuous narrative sequence running through the Song from beginning to end.”¹⁵ This means that “the Song is not a drama or a sequential narrative.”¹⁶ This makes sense in light of the form: “When we read lyric poetry, which is essentially a discontinuous form, we revel in words and images, and we normally do not expect the kind of linear unfolding of events that produces a plot.”¹⁷

Since the Song is a song that means that it “is not primarily intended to be preached or taught in a classroom, but to be *sung*.”¹⁸ Consider the following scenario as a possible context for the Song being sung:

Just as there were professional singers and musicians for temple worship (e.g., 2 Chronicles 29:28), so I envision professional singers and musicians poised to sing and play for these week-long weddings. And

each day as the bride and groom come out of their chambers, the wine is served, the music begins, and the singers sing. The soprano starts, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine” (1:2). Then, over the sweet strum of the harp, the tenor softly serenades, “Behold, you are beautiful, my love” (1:15). And throughout the song, as the soprano and tenor call back and forth, from time to time other voices join in—like a chorus in a Greek play or a choir in an oratorio. These voices are comprised of the young maidens, “the daughters of Jerusalem” as our text calls them. That’s what I envision day after day for *seven* days, a *perfect* celebration of the new creation of man and wife as one.¹⁹

The fact that Song of Songs is a poem, a song, should come as no surprise upon reading it. “Figurative language is used more prominently throughout the Song than anywhere else in the Bible.”²⁰

Significant emphases occur in the repeated images that dominate the poem. The images include auditory and visual as well as taste, smell, and touch. These images serve as vehicles to define the intimacy of the relationship. The female is enclosed as a locked garden (4:12), a vineyard (1:6; 8:12), a palanquin (3:7–10), a locked room (5:5), and a walled city (8:9–

10). She brings her lover into such an enclosure, the room of her mother (3:4). Around these images are scenes of protection: tenders of the vineyard (8:12), sixty warriors (3:7), sixty queens (6:8), watchmen and walls (5:7), lattice (2:9), locks (5:5), and towers (4:4; 7:4; 8:9–10).²¹

One of the other literary features of significance in the Song is the back-and-forth dialogue between the man and woman. “The emphasis on alternation between genders also becomes a key for understanding the basic structure. . . . Each new section begins with the lovers apart and concludes with them finding one another and coming together.”²² The importance of these literary features comes in our reading and interpretation of Song of Songs. In order to understand what is happening, we must read this book like we would a poem or a song.

WHY WAS SONG OF SONGS WRITTEN?

At the core of this question lies the purpose of Song of Songs, and when discussing purpose,

interpretation becomes the primary issue. After just one reading, it is apparent Song of Songs is like no other book in the Bible. Not only is the book different, Song of Songs

is also highly sexual. It should be no surprise that both Jews and Christians alike have struggled to understand why this book was written.

An interpretation that has been popular throughout history is allegory. Allegory refers to an interpretation where elements of the song refer to something else other than what they are. For example, in Judaism, “the male and female lovers become God and Israel” whereas in Christianity “they are Christ and the church.”²³ Of course, the allegory did not stop there.

From Origen of Alexandria to Charles Spurgeon of London, from the medieval mystics to the American Puritans—Christians allegorized every jot and tittle of the Song, each thigh and breast and kiss and consummation. For example, one commentator said that the phrase “while the king was on his couch” (1:12) referred to “the gestation period of Christ in the womb of Mary,” and the “sachet of myrrh that lies between [the bride’s] breasts” (1:13) symbolizes “Christ in the soul of the believer, who lies between the great commands to love God and one’s neighbor.”²⁴

It is understandable why anyone would be uncomfortable with such vivid sexual imagery; however, to skip over the language and go straight to allegory misses an important

point. While sex, like many of God's good gifts, has been abused, it is still a gift from God. "The Song fills a necessary vacuum in the Scriptures because it endorses sex and celebrates it beyond all expectation."²⁵ Of course, the Song not only celebrates sex; the book provides us the context in which sex is to be enjoyed. "This is a song *about human love set in the context of marriage.*"²⁶

However, there can be more to Song of Songs than just human love and sex without going overboard into allegorical interpretation. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments the relationship between God and his people is described in marital terms with God as husband and Israel as wife. For example, Isaiah 62:5 says, "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you," comparing God to a bridegroom and Israel as bride. In Hosea, Ezekiel (16:7, 8), Jeremiah (2:2, 19, 20), and Isaiah (54:5–8) Israel is described as a cheating wife. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the bridegroom (John 3:29) and husband (2 Corinthians 11:2). Perhaps no reference is more obvious that Ephesians 5:23: "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior." Here the church is the wife. Therefore what we are describing is not allegorical but rather christological.²⁷

Perhaps another way to consider Song of Songs is to see multiple levels of meaning. “One can discern the poetry of the Song working on multiple levels, describing a beautiful but ordinary human romance, while continually suggesting a supernatural love and delight which overshadows human love. In other words, the literal meaning of the text portrays ordinary human romance as reflecting divine love.”²⁸ Not only should the marital love of the man and woman in Song of Songs reflect the love between Christ and his church, but every marriage is charged to do this. “We should not think that Christ and the church are the metaphor in this passage, but the reverse. Christ and the church are the realities, and our Christian marriages are the metaphors.”²⁹

So, why was Song of Songs written? Song of Songs was written to celebrate erotic, sexual love within marriage, a love that ultimately points to God’s greater love for his people. This celebration, however, does have a teaching component. Don’t forget that the Song is wisdom literature! Three times in Song of Songs (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) we’re told not to rush love. “Without any way diminishing how wonderful love is, a major element of the wisdom of the Song of Songs instructs us in cautious patience.”³⁰

Much of this patience includes sex, an element of love reserved for marriage. “Their bodies are saying ‘yes.’

Their instincts for intimacy are saying ‘yes.’ Their suitors might even be saying ‘yes’ (or at least ‘please’). But they are admonished to say ‘no.’ The wisdom message to these young women is to wait. Virgins, stay virgins . . . not forever, but for now. Wait for marriage.”³¹

We could summarize the purpose then with three words: celebrate, educate, and illustrate. Song of Songs celebrates sexual love in marriage. The Song educates us in when such love should occur. Finally, marital love illustrates a greater love, the source of all love—God’s love for us.



WHAT DOES THE SONG OF SONGS TEACH?

Every book, including Song of Songs, has themes we can identify as we read the book as a whole. While more themes could be identified, four stand out:

Sex

It is no secret that Song of Songs emphasizes sex. However subtle, the Song talks about sex more than any other book of the Bible. Nevertheless this emphasis is important! Sex ties Song of Songs back to Genesis 1–2 when man and woman were created and told to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). “Acceptance of the beauty and significance of the sexual union of man and woman of necessity entails acceptance of the full meaning of the doctrine of creation.”³² We are then reminded that when God created everything, including sex, he declared it “good.” Marriage (and with it, sex) then is “nothing less than the crowning glory of the creation of the universe.”³³

Romance

But marriage is more than mere sex. “Song of Songs is filled with passion and desire from beginning to end. . . . What the Song therefore establishes is the legitimacy and beauty of a husband and wife experiencing heated desire for each other.”³⁴ Desire is matched by action. Not only do they want each other, but they pursue each other. We see desire and pursuit in both their words to each other and their physical pursuit of one another.

But if someone has been married for any amount of time they recognize the seemingly inevitable drift toward marital familiarity and boredom. “The Song is not teaching us to try and stay in the early stages of romance forever. . . . But the Song does instruct us that those early ardours need not be lost, and that God’s ideal for married couples is never to lose that captivation with each other (4:9).”³⁵ Whether newly married or celebrating decades of marriage, Song of Songs encourages us to desire and pursue our spouse continuously.

Marriage

That romance, however, should find its home in marriage. “Marriage is presented in the Song as the ultimate goal and full realization of romance.”³⁶ Sex and romance outside of the commitment of marriage are empty. In the Song it is important to note how joy is associated with marriage, not sex (3:11). “Sex won’t make you happy, and people who devote their lives to it can lead the emptiest existences. Only marriage gives that kind of deep happiness.”³⁷

However, part of the reason for that joy comes in the commitment of marriage. What Song of Songs is not encouraging is promiscuous sex. It celebrates sexual intimacy within the realm of marriage. The reason sex is so beautiful and enjoyable is because of the commitment between husband and wife. They know their relationship is more than just sex. This is exactly what Song of Songs 8:6 states:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the Lord.

Here is what the Song is saying:

Make me near and dear to you forever. Wear your wedding ring proudly, so that everyone can see your loyalty to me. For this love we share is powerful in its finality and permanent in its demand, like death itself. In our one-flesh marriage, I am giving myself to you in a way I can never take back. The power of our love burns too intensely to be betrayed without extreme pain, and the Lord himself is the one who made it so. Our love is *sacred*. It must not be violated. It is worthy of all. Our romance came down from above.³⁸



Love

Of course, the reason the man and woman are married is not sex but love. They love each other deeply, seen in both their desire for and commitment to one another. Therefore, we should learn something about what love should look like in the context of marriage. Husbands and wives should read Song of Songs and be challenged to cultivate the kind of desire and commitment the man and woman have for one another.

But, as we discussed prior, we cannot miss God's love in Song of Songs. This is no allegory. It is, however, a beautiful reminder that the love between a husband and wife should illustrate the love of God for his people, the love of Christ for his church. "The Song hints at a greater Love standing behind human romance and the total commitment with which he relates to us, a Love stronger than death, jealous beyond the grave, unquenchable, fierce, not to be denied."³⁹ When we reflect on our love for our spouse we should recognize God's love for us as exponentially more.

HOW IS SONG OF SONGS STRUCTURED?

This structure is called a chiasm, It demonstrates how throughout Song of Songs the book mirrors itself. The emphasis is placed on the middle—D. This is the heart of the Song of Songs.

A) Prologue: Desire unfulfilled (1:2–2:7)

B) “Come away with me!” (2:8–17)

C) A dream of searching and finding (3:1–5)

D) Love and marriage at the heart of the Song (3:6–5:1)

C’) A dream of searching and not finding; eventual reconciliation (5:2–6:3)

B’) “Come away with me!” (6:4–8:4)

A’) Epilogue: recognizing the relationship; desire unfulfilled (8:5–14)⁴⁰

WHAT ARE SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES TO BETTER UNDERSTAND SONG OF SONGS?

Online Resources

Bible Project
Song of Songs Overview

Video

Song of Songs Bible Project Guide
Song of Songs: Semi-Erotic Love Poetry

The Gospel Coalition
Commentary

12-week Bible Study

Philip Ryken on Teaching Song of Solomon
Song of Solomon Course

Commentaries

Introductory

The Song of Songs by Iain Duguid

The Message of the Song of Songs by Tom Gledhill

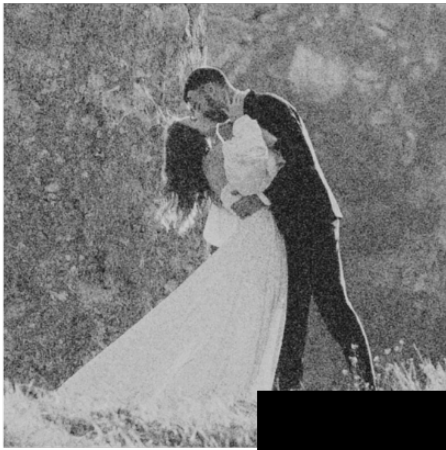
The Song of Solomon by Douglas O'Donnell

Academic

Song of Songs/Lamentations by Duane Garrett and Paul House

Song of Songs by Richard Hess

Song of Songs by Tremper Longman III



ENDNOTES



¹Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23b, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 23–24.

²Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Old Testament Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 21.

³J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, The Old Testament Library, edition. William P. Brown, Carol A. Newsom, and Brent A. Strawn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 65.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Eric Ortlund, “The Wisdom of Song of Songs: A Pastoral Guide for Preaching and Teaching,” *Themelios* 45, no. 3 (2020), 495.

⁶Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 29–30.

⁷Ortlund, “The Wisdom of Song of Songs,” 505–6.

⁸Exum, *Song of Songs*, 48–49.

⁹Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 47.

¹⁰Exum, *Song of Songs*, 59.

¹¹Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 49.

¹²Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 502–3.

¹³Hess, *The Old Testament*, 494.

¹⁴Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 27.

¹⁵Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, rev. ed., The Bible Speaks Today, J. A. Motyer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 3.

¹⁶Hess, *Song of Songs*, 34.

¹⁷Exum, *Song of Songs*, 42.

¹⁸Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *The Song of Solomon: An Invitation to Intimacy*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 17.

¹⁹O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 17.

²⁰Hess, *Song of Songs*, 29.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 31.

²³Hess, *The Old Testament*, 497.

²⁴O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 20.

²⁵Hess, *Song of Songs*, 35.

²⁶O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 18.

²⁷Ibid., 22.

²⁸Ortlund, "The Wisdom of Song of Songs," 510.

²⁹Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. Dane C. Ortlund and Miles Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 100.

³⁰Ortlund, "The Wisdom of Song of Songs," 497.

³¹O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon*, 24.

³²Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 118.

³³Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 32.

³⁴Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 102.

³⁵Ortlund, "The Wisdom of Song of Songs," 497.

³⁶Ibid., 500.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 71–72.

³⁹Ortlund, "The Wisdom of Song of Songs," 511.

⁴⁰Ibid., 501.