

Interpreting the Song of Songs

If a person found the Song of Songs (sometimes called the Song of Solomon) in an archaeological dig with no Hebrew biblical context, one would treat it as a secular song of love.ⁱ In the Song of Songs there are no references to law, grace, sin, salvation, or prayer. There is not a single indisputable reference in the book to God.ⁱⁱ The reality is that the Song of Songs originated and was given to us not by some pop poet, but by the very people that in the Old Testament God worked through to reveal Himself.

Purpose of Song of Songs

If we are honest, we might ask, “why is this book in our Bible?”ⁱⁱⁱ To answer this question, we need to examine the purpose of the book. ***The purpose of the Song of Songs is to develop loving attitudes and practical expressions of love.*** It is written to destroy discouragement and bring back the paradise of Eden. It is not a doctrinal study about God, but it is a celebration of something God gave us.^{iv} The book is a collection of ancient Hebrew love poems celebrating the experiences of a lover and his beloved as they taste the beauty, power, agony, and joys of human love. But is human love, especially physical and sexual love, an appropriate topic for the Bible?^v Well 2 Timothy 3:16

Says: ***All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.***^{vi}

I think the purpose of the Song of Songs is to help *correct* a faulty understanding of human sexuality and then help *train* us in the appropriate understanding and practice of human love as originally designed by God. Correcting and training are two of the four purposes of scripture mentioned in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Song of Songs 1:1-3 (NIV) “*Solomon's Song of Songs. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth- for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you!*”

It's a Collection of Love Songs

The title of the book is taken from 1:1. “Song of Songs” is the Hebrew superlative and means “the greatest song of all.”^{vii} This speaks of the value of the book. It is a great love song. Songs have a way of capturing the feeling of love. This song is given to us by God. The song talks about love, even physical love, but it does not use slang, because that would cheapen love. It does not use medical terms, because that would leave a mechanical feeling to the whole thing. Instead, Song of Songs uses poetic terms.^{viii} The Song of Songs is not one song, but it is really several songs.^{ix} These songs are loosely connected by the theme of love between a man and a woman.

Understanding that this book is a loose collection of songs will help us understand the book. Songs and poetry use symbols to express a truth. The meaning is there, but the song writer prefers to cloak the meaning under poetic wording. Examples of poetic language outside the Song of Songs can be found in many of the poems in Psalms.

Song of Songs 1:3 uses a phrase, *your name is like perfume poured out*. This is a typical example of symbolic expression in the Song of Songs. How can a person's name smell good? Perfume smells pleasing, but a person's reputation or a person's character can also be pleasing in a different way. To better appreciate the Song of Songs, one must accept that the book is in the form of poetic literature rather than straight narrative.

Also it is important to understand that the Song of Songs is a *loosely connected* collection of songs.^x Because the book is not one song but several songs, there will not always be a strong connection in meaning from one chapter or paragraph to the next. In some ways the book is like Proverbs or Psalms. You have to learn a truth from each section and the truths do not always connect to the preceding truth or the forthcoming truth. The only connection many times is the one theme, human love.

Also, the word “song” in 1:1 is the generic term for a song that is usually glad as compared to sad.^{xi} The Song of Songs is not only a song, but it is a positive song. It would not make the Country and Western charts, because nobody is leaving or cheating. God may be telling us a great deal about marriage and intimacy by just the glad hearted, upbeat tone of the Song of Songs.

Solomon’s Connection to Songs

Now let’s consider the name *Solomon* which is found in the title. *Solomon’s Song* can mean Solomon is the author, he is the subject matter, or a certain form of writing.^{xii} Tradition has Solomon as the writer.^{xiii} The book mentions a variety of spices that would lead one to believe the book was written during the height of Israel’s trade with South Africa, in the lifetime of Solomon.^{xiv} 1 Kings 4:32 states that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs. Yet the Song of Songs pictures one man committed to one woman. Solomon does not seem to have the reputation of a one woman man (see 1 Kings 11:3 for Solomon’s 700 wives and 300 concubines).

Others believe the book is not about Solomon. They believe Solomon’s name is used in a generic way, like we would use Don Juan or Casanova. Our study will take this approach. The argument will go on for years, but at least it is safe to say that the knowledge of who wrote the book is not essential to the understanding of the book. Do you have to know the name of the writer or composer or who the song is about to appreciate and benefit from a song?

We have looked at Song of Songs 1:1 to give us some foundation in interpreting the book. Now let’s consider some of the challenging themes found in the book.

Major Themes in the Book

The book is about human love. But what does that love look like in the Song of Song. Let me list some characteristics of love in the Song of Songs.

1. The love is heterosexual. The key personalities are a man and a woman, not a woman and a woman, or a man and a man. Homosexuality is becoming more a part of our mainstream culture. The Song of Songs depicts the height of emotional and physical love between a man and a woman.^{xv}

2. Mutual physical intimacy is expressed without shame (See 1:2, 2:6, and 7:10)

3. The love is sentimental and romantic to the point of adoring and almost idealizing the other (see 1:15-17 for an example).

4. The love is emotional. The only emotion absent is jealousy.

5. The love is committed. In the Old Testament story of Hosea, the man is committed, but the woman is fickle. In the Song of Song both the man and woman are committed to loving

each other (see 8:6-7).^{xvi} The Song of Songs is about human love, especially physical human love. The rest of the Bible puts such love in the framework of marriage.

*“If just getting married and being married are the only goals you have,
you’re in for a disappointment.”^{xvii} - Ed Young*

Some men and women settle for average in their marriage. Their marriage can be described as normal. They have the normal amount of fights and the normal amount of love. They are together more out of necessity than pleasure. Yet, for a few couples, average is not good enough. Song of Songs brings a consuming passion to our love. It helps us see that there is something better than normal.^{xviii} The love found in the Song of Songs is anything but normal.

ⁱDennis F. Kinlaw, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary ed. Frank Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1208.

ⁱⁱIbid., 1202

ⁱⁱⁱIbid.

^{iv}Mike Gemme, Song of Love (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975), 7.

^vKinlaw, 1201.

^{vi}The Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), All following scripture is quoted from this source unless otherwise noted.

^{vii}Kinlaw, 1215

^{viii}Dillow, 87

^{ix}Marvin H. Pope, The Anchor Bible: Song of Songs (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1977), 34-7.

^xAthalya Brenner, ed. A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs (Sheffield England: Sheffield Academe Press, 1993), 76.

^{xi}Pope, 293.

^{xii}Kinlaw, 1215.

^{xiii}Ibid., 1210.

^{xiv}Ibid., 1209.

^{xv}Dillow, 27.

^{xvi}Ibid., 89.

^{xvii}Ed Young, Romancing the Home (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 41.

^{xviii}Gemme, 6.