

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 38

Song of Songs

I. Background

What is the Song of Songs?

The Song of Songs is either a collection of love poems or a single love poem placed in the Old Testament. It is one of five Old Testament books the Jews read at five major feasts (or fast, in one case). Song of Songs is read at Passover; Ruth is read at Pentecost; Ecclesiastes is read at the Feast of Tabernacles; Esther is read at the Feast of Purim; and Lamentations is read on the fast on the ninth of Abib (the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem).

Who wrote the Song of Songs? When?

The author and date of writing are both unknown. The Song of Songs references Solomon many times, including in the title. These references do not necessarily reflect authorship. The first verse is translated in the NIV as “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” The Hebrew word Solomon precedes the Hebrew letter “L”, which can mean “to” as in “dedicated to” or, in a sense, “inspired by” or “dedicated to.” By the same token, the letter “I” can also mean that the book is actually by Solomon.

There are several things in the Song of Songs that would make one think the authorship was, at least in part, very early in the history of the Jewish monarchy. For example, the reference in 6:4 to Tirzah as a parallel to Jerusalem likely indicates that this portion of the Song was composed prior to the time of King Omri who abandoned Tirzah and built Samaria as his capital in the north (885-873 B.C.).

Some argue there is a much later date of composition because there are several Hebrew words in the text that seem to come from either Greek or Persian words. For example, in 3:9 the word for “carriage” seems to have been co-opted from the Greek word for “chariot.” In 4:13, the Hebrew word for “orchard” seems to derive from the Persian word for “orchard.” While this could indicate a late time for authorship, it does not necessarily do so. It could also reflect the later editing of the book using the contemporary form of the words at the time of editing.

Why is it called the Song of Songs?

The title itself is the actual first two words in the Hebrew text (*Sheer hasheerim*). *Sheer* is the Hebrew word for “song.” The second word is also *sheer* but with some additions. The “*im*” at the end is the Hebrew plural (like an English “s”). We would understand the “*ha*” at the beginning as making the word “of” in this sense (a “genitive”).

By using the same word twice, and by making the second a genitive plural, you have the Hebrew way of referring to something as the absolute best. Hence, this means the best song of all or the Song of all Songs! This Hebrew usage is seen in both the Old and New Testaments in other passages with other words [*Holy of holies* (Exodus 26:33), *King of kings* (Ezekiel 26:7), *God of gods* and *Lord of lords* (Deuteronomy 10:17), *Hebrew of the Hebrews* (Philippians 3:5), the *Heaven of heavens* (1 Kings 8:27)] .

The Septuagint (LXX) translated the title as *Asma Asmaton*, which also means “Song of Songs.” The Latin translation (Vulgate) used the Latin words for “Song of Songs” entitling the book *Canticum Canticorum* and from this translation we get the alternate English title “Canticles.”

II. What is the Book About?

As mentioned above, the book is a love poem (or poems) that are a bit difficult to put into a full sense of understanding. There are apparently three principle people in the story line. The book itself, however, does not follow any real discernable plot. Another unique feature of the book is an apparent lack of any clear religious themes.

The book does contain a number of fairly clear erotic lyrics, as well as a number of not so clear erotic references! Those that would classify as easily discernable include 1:2; 1:12-13; the descriptions in 4:1-5; etc. Those that are a bit less noticeable to us today would be the metaphors found in 2:5; 2:16; 4:6, 12; 6:2, etc. The NIV Study Bible does a good job pointing out some of these metaphors in appropriately tactful language. Understanding that the metaphors are present, allows one to read the poetic verses with a fairly good picture of what the poem is actually saying.

Scholars have used a number of approaches in attempts to express the meaning of the Song of Songs beyond its mere romance and erotic references. Before looking at those, it is important to pause and

appreciate not only the bluntness of the references to the physical aspects of the love relationship but the import of the fact that such is in Holy Scripture. Romance, physical attraction, indeed eroticism itself, is not unholy or wrong. In the right relationship and expression, it is actually one of God's most holy and precious gifts. God made man and woman to find a joint relationship based not primarily on convenience or political necessity, but on love – in the full sense of the word “love.” That full sense includes commitment, longing, and private sharing of the most intimate fashion in a marriage. Having set out the beauty of physical love within marriage, let us look at the various approaches of scholars throughout the ages.

A. *Allegorical*

Both Hebrew and Christian scholars have seen in the Song of Songs an allegorical reflection of God's love for his people. The Jews, of course, interpret this as reflecting God's gracious love to his people, the Jews. Christian scholars have seen the allegorical interpretation of Christ and his love for his bride, the Church. The Christian allegory is seen as furthered in Ephesians where husbands are admonished to love their wives as Christ loved the church!

B. *Dramatic*

This approach has taken various roads of interpretation over the centuries, but it basically reads the text as a dramatic story of either two or three characters. This approach attempts to discern and explain a plot in a poem that has either no plot at all, or one that is at least very difficult to follow!

C. *Literal*

This approach sees the Song as a collection of love songs, a collection of songs used in weddings, or merely one long expression of love in verse. This approach has caused some interesting responses in the past. Rabbi Aqiba (first century) uttered a curse upon anyone who would read or sing the Song of Songs as a mere secular love song. A literal view of the Song as erotic poetry was even rejected as heresy at a Roman Catholic council in 553 A.D. (the Second Council of Constantinople).

Some have compared the Song of Songs to Syrian wedding poetry that has been discovered and translated. This view has led some to believe that the Song of Songs might originally have been an actual collection of songs to be sung at Jewish weddings.

D. Liturgical

In the 1920's, some came out with the idea that the Song was an ancient liturgical expression of pagan Israel, celebrating the union of the pagan goddess Ishtar with Tammuz. By the 1940's, at least one of these scholars changed his mind and repudiated this view. Reading the reasons given for this view does not do much to persuade one of its accuracy!

E. Didactic-moral

This view does not exist in opposition to other views. This perspective can easily be a part of a comprehensive view of the book that sees the depth of the book as offering several valid approaches to usage and understanding. Under this view, the book offers a teaching of the purity and wonder of true love. In this regard, the book could be historical, allegorical, dramatic, or all of the above!

The book still teaches that there is dignity, and God-given beauty to true human love. This teaching is especially useful in a world of extremes on this issue. The extremes range from those who would have us understand that true physical love is somehow "base" and "lesser" than the heights of intellect. That somehow pure human love does not include the "animalistic longings" of physical desire. To this idea, the scripture says, "Wrong!" Full human love in a marriage relationship gives a position of dignity and honor to the physical attraction of spouses. The other extreme reduces physical attraction to a base pornography, devoid of the spiritual loving aspect. Either extreme is rejected in the Song of Songs. Physical love takes its rightful place as an expression and part of the union of heart and mind in the marriage.

III. Points to take Home

- A. Marriage is God's gift to his people.
- B. Marriage should be holy, pure and fun!
- C. The physical aspects of marriage are God's gift to his people.
- D. The physical aspects of marriage should be holy, pure and fun!