

Introduction to Song of Solomon – Part 1

Daily Deep Dive:

Introduction to the Book:

The UCG reading plan states: “Following the book of Psalms we come to another song within the Writings division of the Old Testament—a rather obscure yet beautiful love song known as the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. In the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, this is the fourth book of the Writings, following Psalms, Proverbs and Job. It is the first of the series of five books known as the Megilloth (“Scrolls”)—denoting the festival scrolls (the others being Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). As such, the Song of Songs was read during the Passover season, eventually fixed in Jewish liturgy to the Last Day of Unleavened Bread. This association may have arisen from the springtime setting of the Song and perhaps something deeper, as Jewish interpreters read it as a historical allegory beginning with the Exodus and ending with the coming of the Messiah, as we will later examine.

Almost immediately, the Song of Solomon turns conventional expectation of scripture reading as staid, religious musing right on its ear, opening after the title in verse 1 with the words “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (verse 2). Is this the Bible or a romance novel? The Song is certainly different from other biblical books. And the surprises keep coming. The early Catholic theologians “Origin and Jerome tell us that the Jews forbade it to be read by any until he was thirty years old” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, introduction to the Song of Solomon). For maturity was deemed necessary to appropriately handle its

apparent focus on sexual intimacy. A hint at perceived early misuse comes from a rebuke by Rabbi Akiva (or Aqiba) around A.D. 100, as recorded in the Tosefta, a supplement to the Jewish Mishnah or Oral Tradition: “Whoever sings the Song of Songs with tremulous voice in a banquet hall and (so) treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come” (Sanhedrin 12:10). Akiva held the Song in the highest regard. On the notion of a question about its place in the Bible, he retorted: “God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, [saying] that it does not render the hands unclean [i.e., that it is not canonical—referring either to the need for ritual cleansing before approaching Scripture scrolls or, as some suggest, to the Scripture scrolls themselves being declared defiling to keep scribes from eating while copying, as crumbs would bring rodent damage]. For all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies” (Mishnah, *Yadayim* 3:5, quoted by Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 1990, *Hermeneia Commentaries*, p. 6). Why such a lofty view of love poetry, especially as there is no indisputable reference to God in the book?

This raises the question of the book’s purpose. Why is it in the Bible? That our introduction to it is much longer than that for other biblical books is not uncommon. As *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* points out: “It is interesting to note the tendency toward length of Song of Songs commentaries when compared with other books of the Bible. This highlights the importance of the decisions about genre [i.e., what kind of literature the Song is] in the interpretation of individual passages as well as the convoluted history of the interpretation of the book” (Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, 2001, p. 21 footnote). In many ways the book is an enigma, and interpreters have been all over the map in trying to unravel it. The 10th-century Jewish

sage Saadia wrote: “Know, my brother, that you will find great differences in interpretation of the Song of Songs. In truth they differ because the Song of Songs resembles locks to which the keys have been lost” (quoted by Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, 1977, *The Anchor Bible*, p. 89). We must be careful to not quickly jump to conclusions as we read the Song—and hold lightly those opinions about which we cannot be dogmatic.

Title and Authorship—Solomon or Someone Else?

The names Song of Songs and Song of Solomon are both taken from the first verse of the book, which is evidently a superscription, such as that appearing before many psalms. In Hebrew it reads: *Shir haShirim asher l'Shelomoh* (meaning literally “Song [of] the songs, which [is] of Solomon”). In Hebrew Bibles the heading of the book is written simply as *Shir HaShirim*, typically rendered in English as “The Song of Songs.” The Latin form of this name is *Canticum Canticorum*, from which derives another popular name for the book, *Canticles* (“Songs”). Some see in the name Song of Songs a general superlative—the best song. Others take it with the rest of verse 1 to mean the best of *Solomon’s* songs, as he wrote many others—or Solomon’s favorite song. Or this could just mean “A song of the songs of Solomon.” Still others see the phrase Song of Songs as signifying a song made up of shorter songs.

The title used in the King James Version and a number of English versions since, probably the most familiar English title, is the Song of Solomon—also derived from the first verse, as stated above. Though the book is traditionally ascribed to Solomon on the basis of this verse, there is dispute over the phrase *l'Shelomoh* or “of Solomon.” This can mean “by Solomon,” in the sense of authorship, but it could also signify “about Solomon.” Countering the latter idea is the fact that the Song does not seem to really be about him—at least primarily. Though he is named in the book seven times symmetrically—twice in the

opening section (1:1, 5), three in the middle (3:7, 9, 11) and twice at the end (8:11-12)—and may be the male lover in the story (though there is dispute about that, too), the book really revolves around the female lead, referred to in Song of Solomon 6:13 as the Shulamite (sometimes written as Shulamith).

As commentator Tom Gledhill points out: “The first voice that we hear in the Song is that of the girl. There is a surprising preponderance of her speech in the Song. Athalya Brenner [in *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 1985, pp. 46-50] has worked out that the female voices constitute 53% of the text, male voices 34%, the chorus 6%, and headings and dubious cases 7%. Certainly the girl bares her emotions much more than the boy. She voices her yearnings, her anxieties, her fears and her delights in a much more colourfully expressive way, and more frequently than her lover does. She is the one who invites him to intimacy, she is the one who so often takes the initiative. As a result, a number of commentators speculate on the possibility of the writer...being a woman” (*The Message of the Song of Songs*, 1994, *The Bible Speaks Today*, p. 93). This is possible, though a thoughtful man intent on portraying the woman’s perspective throughout the story of the Song could have written it, especially as inspired of God—as every book of Scripture is (2 Timothy 3:16).

It is conceivable that the phrase “of Solomon” means the Song was of Solomon’s court, written by someone else *for* the king. Alternatively, it could mean that the Song was among compositions of others that Solomon compiled as a collector and patron of wisdom poetry—the poet in such case being necessarily a contemporary of the king, given the mention of Solomon in the Song.

Of course, Solomon himself, blessed as he was with wisdom and insight from God, is certainly a viable candidate for having written the book. We are elsewhere told that he wrote 1,005 songs and

had extensive knowledge of the natural world (1 Kings 4:32-33), which the author of the Song demonstrates, referring to 21 species of plants, some from far-flung lands, and 15 species of animals. Furthermore, the poet displays a familiarity with royal luxuries, such as exotic spices, gilded work, alabaster, ivory and jewels, and employs literary styles and motifs from surrounding cultures—particularly Egypt, with which Solomon had close ties—along with a wide and cosmopolitan vocabulary. The structure of the Song, as we will see, is complex and ingenious, pointing to a brilliant and remarkably skilled wordsmith.

Among those who accept the biblical testimony of Solomon as a real historical monarch of the 10th century B.C., rejection of Solomonic authorship typically rests on the grounds of either a supposed late date for the language of the book or the perceived difficulty of a man who amassed a harem of 1,000 women in defiance of God’s will (1 Kings 11:1-3) waxing eloquent about the joys of monogamous love. We will consider both these matters in turn.

Date—Early or Late?

Regarding a supposed late date for the book, *The New American Commentary* notes in its introductory comments on the Song: “Some have dated the book very late on the basis of Persian and Greek loan words, Aramaic influence, and certain Hebrew forms alleged to be late. An example is the word for ‘palanquin’ [or ‘carriage,’ *appiryon*] (Song of Solomon 3:9), said to be based on a Greek original. The word may in fact not be Greek but a derivative from ancient [Indian] Sanskrit. The Hebrew word for ‘orchard’ [or ‘park,’ *pardes*] (Song of Solomon 4:13) is said to be based on a Persian if not a Greek original [the Persian *pairi-daeza* or the Greek *paradeisos*, from which derives our word ‘paradise’]. Again, however, this approach is misleading since Sanskrit and Assyrian analogies [i.e., linguistic parallels] have been found” (Dr. Duane Garrett, 1993). *The NIV Archaeological Study Bible* adds,

“Solomon’s commercial projects (see 1 Kings 5; 1 Kings 9:26-28; 1 Kings 10:22) involved numerous international contacts, a possible explanation for the international vocabulary” (2005, “The Authorship of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs,” p. 1021).

The New American Commentary continues: “Alternative interpretations of alleged Grecisms [i.e., words of Greek origin] are also possible. The vocabulary of frequently sung folk music often changes in the course of time, and the Song of Songs may also have experienced such revision. If so, its present vocabulary would provide no reliable information regarding the original date of composition. In addition, some words once thought to have been borrowed *from* Greek now appear to have been borrowed by the Greeks” (pp. 348-349). Regarding editorial revision, the Mishnah says that “Hezekiah and his colleagues [ca. 700 B.C.] wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes” (*Baba Bathra* 15a). With the exception of Isaiah (the prophet being a colleague of Hezekiah), “wrote” here probably refers to scribal and editorial work in scriptural compilation and transmission (compare Proverbs 25:1). And editorial updating of the Song’s text could have been done as late as Ezra during the Persian rule of Judea.

Furthermore, commentator Dr. Lloyd Carr remarks: “The so-called ‘Aramaisms’ in the language do not necessarily indicate a late date. Aramaic became the common language of the Jews after their return from Babylon in the sixth century, but the Aramaic language itself was in use at least as early as the ninth century BC, and probably goes back to the nineteenth century” (*The Song of Solomon*, 1984, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 19). Moreover, Scripture attests that Aram, or ancient Syria, was absorbed into David’s empire, which Solomon’s inherited. In short, “linguistic evidence is not conclusive. Attempts to date the book from vocabulary and grammar are inherently weak because of our limited knowledge of the history of the Hebrew

language.... Assertions about the history and dialects of Hebrew are tentative, to say the least. In addition, the possibility that the present text of Song of Songs has been revised complicates further the possibility of dating the text on linguistic grounds” (NAC, pp. 349-350).

Yet there is much to support composition in the time of Solomon. As the *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* notes: “It is improbable that both Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs were written during the postexilic period, when Jerusalem was a poor, backwater town among the nations of the world, by no means awash in exotic spices and precious stones. The mention of [the city of] Tirzah in parallel with Jerusalem in Song of Songs 6:4 reflects a period before Tirzah’s selection as the early capital of the northern kingdom (c. 930 B.C.) [and before it was eclipsed by Samaria as the northern capital in the early ninth century]. In the tenth century B.C. Tirzah was beautiful and could easily have stood alongside Jerusalem as one of Israel’s two grand cities. In the post-exilic period, when many claim the Song was written, Tirzah no longer existed. Also, mention of localities in both the north and south (e.g., Jerusalem, En Gedi, Heshbon, Carmel, Hermon and Lebanon) suggest that the Song preceded the divided kingdom” (p. 1021).

Another “issue in discussions of the date of Song of Songs is the similarity between the biblical book and Egyptian love poetry of ca. 1300-1100 B.C. A number of these poems have been recovered.... These poems are remarkably like Song of Songs. Common formal elements and common literary motifs...strongly indicate that the biblical work was written by someone who was familiar with Egyptian poetry and who lived when the motifs common to both collections were current and appreciated. Indeed, the Song of Songs is most reasonably interpreted as being in the same genre as the Egyptian poetry. This again agrees with the supposition of Solomonic authorship since he

would have had sufficient knowledge of Egyptian literature to compose a love song in this style. Members of his court, however, may also have possessed such knowledge. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how an obscure Jewish songwriter in the Levant, working almost a millennium after this kind of love poetry was produced in Egypt, could have written a work of this type” (NAC, p. 350).

The Problem of Solomon’s Polygamy

Regarding the undeniable problem of Solomon’s abysmal record in his own love life, this in itself, though presenting an incongruity, does not preclude him from having written the Song—just as his flouting of wisdom culminating in his plunge into idolatry does not mean he did not write Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Some tackle the problem by attributing the Song to his early years as king—before he was corrupted through polygamous excess. “The Midrash Rabbah [in its commentary on the Song, dating from before the mid-ninth century A.D.], for instance, talks of the three main contributions of Solomon—Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—as belonging to three phases of his life, with the explanation that ‘when a man is young he composes songs; when he grows older he makes sententious remarks; and when he becomes an old man he speaks of the vanity of things.’ Thus, the Song is thought to be composed by Solomon in his youth, not only when his sexual energy was high, but also before his apostasy, which was motivated in large part by illegitimate lust [see 1 Kings 11:1-10]” (Longman, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 3).

A verse that may speak against such a conclusion is Song 6:8: “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines.” These are said to praise the woman of the Song (verse 9). Many take this to be a reference to Solomon’s harem—before it reached its later extent of 700 wives and 300 concubines. If Solomon already had 140 women when he wrote the Song, then it was well after his descent

into debauchery had begun. The problem is compounded in trying to see a polygamous Solomon as the male lover in the story. Some, however, contend that the 60 queens and 80 concubines represent women of the courts of surrounding nations in non-specific terms (60 and 80 being three score and four score respectively, as in the King James Version)—their praise of the woman of the Song being imagined or occurring during a visit to Jerusalem. If the women here are not Solomon's harem, then a composition early in his reign is certainly possible.

Yet even if the 140 women do represent Solomon's harem, it could still be that he wrote the Song—not likely in the midst of his years of depravity (though some think this) but perhaps, as may be the case with Ecclesiastes, late in life after realizing the worthlessness of life apart from God and His ways. His hard-knocks schooling in the vanity of polygamy could have helped him to appreciate the value of committed monogamy—and might even have impelled him to write the Song to mitigate the damage of his horrible example. Consider the instruction in Ecclesiastes 9:9: “Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.” Still, it is hard to imagine that the Song, as full as it is of youthful vigor and zest for life, was written by Solomon late in his ruined life.

In any case, while interpreting the 140 women to be Solomon's harem would not rule him out as the book's author, it *would* seem to rule him out from being the ideal lover described in it.

Nevertheless, a common conception is that Solomon, jaded with his harem—most of his marriages being political—at last for a brief period found true love with a country maiden he married and wrote the Song in celebration in the same period. There are, however, manifold difficulties with this idea. For starters, it ignores the many concubines having nothing to do with political alliances,

these collected women being meant instead for physical gratification and as a show of power and prestige. Moreover, it would not have been considered godly or acceptable to cast away or neglect former legitimate wives to shower love and marital privileges on a new wife. Why would this be a scriptural example of God-approved love and marriage, which the Song appears to portray? On top of that, a polygamous setting is contrary to the exclusivity implied in Song of Solomon 2:16 and Song of Solomon 6:3, the latter stating, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” And furthermore, this scenario presents the sad spectacle of a naïve bride thinking she is something special, the “only one” (Song of Solomon 6:9) and a seal on her husband’s heart bound to him in the jealous commitment of love Song of Solomon 8:6), while she pines away among a vast harem of unhappy wives that grows larger every year. Surely that is not what God intended to convey in placing this book in the Bible.

The next section of introductory comments will cover comprehending this difficult book and the unified, poetic framework of the Songs.”

[A Difficult Book To Comprehend](#)

This brings us to the issue of how we are to understand the Song of Songs. Let it be said up front that this is not a simple matter. Indeed, though short, this may well be the most inscrutable book in the entire Bible. It is hard to know who the characters are, who is speaking (the notes to that regard in modern Bible versions are not in the original), what is being said (translations are sometimes uncertain), what the plot is (if there is a plot), how to interpret the book (whether as precise historical narrative or drama, evocative semi-fictional love poetry, allegorical or typologically prophetic illustration of the relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the Church, or a combination of such perspectives), and just what the underlying message of the book is. Let’s consider these issues further.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary states in its introductory comments on the book: "Several problems confront the modern reader in the study of the text of the Song of Songs that make certainty in understanding and interpretation difficult to achieve. One of these is the matter of language. Ancient Hebrew is a primitive tongue. The syntax is quite different from ours. Verb tenses are different so that time sequences are more difficult to establish. Word order can raise problems. There is an economy of language that can be tantalizing. And then it is poetry. There is a succinctness of style that makes it almost telegraphic. The result is that the text is often more suggestive than delineative, more impressionistic than really pictorial. Much is left to the imagination of the reader rather than spelled out for the curious modern, who wants to know the specific meaning of every detail. Added to the preceding problems is that of vocabulary" (Dr. Dennis Kinlaw, 1990).

Regarding the last item here, Dr. Lloyd Carr (*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*) explains: "Although the Song is a relatively short book of only 117 verses, it has an unusually large number of uncommon words. Of the approximately 470 different Hebrew words it contains—a very high number for such a small book—47 occur only in the Song (some only once) and nowhere else in the Old Testament. Of the words which do appear in other parts of the Old Testament, 51 occur five times or less, 45 occur between six and ten times, and an additional 27 between eleven and twenty times, leaving about 300 common words in the Song. There is wide distribution of these [170] less common words. All but eighteen verses scattered through the Song have at least one of these unusual words; several have six or seven such words. Fifty verses contain at least one word not used outside the Song, and an additional twelve verses contain words which occur not more than three times in the whole Old Testament. In other words, more than one third of the words in the Song occur so

infrequently [in the Old Testament] that there is little context from which accurate meanings can be deduced, and two thirds of the [Song's] verses have uncommon words. Hence, many of the proposals made in the various translations and commentaries are, at best, educated guesses; particularly in the case of those words which are unique to the Song, they may well be incorrect" (p. 41).