

## Introduction to Song of Solomon – part 2

A further difficulty lies in the Song being full of similes and metaphors. As *Expositor's* goes on to explain: "Another problem is that the imagery used was a normal part of a culture that is very different from our modern world. The scene is pastoral and Middle Eastern. So the references to nature, birds, animals, spices, perfumes, jewelry, and places are not the normal vocabulary of the modern love story. The associations that an ancient culture gives to its vocabulary are difficult, if not impossible, for us to recapture. The list of plants and animals is illustrative: figs, apples, lilies, pomegranates, raisins, wheat, brambles, nuts, cedar, palms, vines, doves, ravens, ewes, sheep, fawns, gazelles, goats, lions, and leopards. So is that of spices and perfumes: oils, saffron, myrrh, nard, cinnamon, henna, frankincense, and aloes. The place names carried connotations some of which are undoubtedly lost to us: Jerusalem, Damascus, Tirzah, En Gedi, Carmel, Sharon, Gilead, Senir, and Heshbon. We understand the overtones of 'bedroom,' but when the lover refers to 'the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside' (Song of Solomon 2:14), to gardens, parks, fields, orchards, vineyards, or valleys, we are aware that the places of rendezvous were different for lovers in that world than in ours.

"The terms of endearment cause us problems. The metaphors used are often alien. When the lover likens his beloved to a mare in the chariot of Pharaoh (Song of Solomon 1:9), we are surprised. 'Darling among the maidens' (Song of Solomon 2:2) or even 'dove' (Song of Solomon 2:14; Song of Solomon 5:2; Song of Solomon 6:9) is understandable, or 'a rose of Sharon' (Song of Solomon 2:1). 'A garden locked up' (Song of Solomon 4:12), 'a

sealed fountain' (Song of Solomon 4:12), 'a wall' (Song of Solomon 8:9-10), 'a door' (Song of Solomon 8:9), 'beautiful...as Tirzah' (Song of Solomon 6:4), and 'lovely as Jerusalem' (Song of Solomon 6:4) are not our normal metaphors of love. Nor are our heroine's references to her lover as 'an apple tree' (Song of Solomon 2:3), 'a gazelle' (Song of Solomon 2:9, Song of Solomon 2:17), 'a young stag' (Song of Solomon 2:9, Song of Solomon 2:17), or 'a cluster of henna' (Song of Solomon 1:14)."

As to who is saying what, *Expositor's* continues: "To further complicate matters, it is not always certain who is speaking. One of the most difficult tasks is to determine who the speaker is in each verse. It is not even completely clear as to how many speakers there are. Our best clues are grammatical. Fortunately, pronominal references in Hebrew commonly reflect gender and number. In some cases, however, the masculine and the feminine forms are the same." Of course, English translations do not show all these grammatical distinctions. The King James Version does not note changes in speakers, which makes it difficult to follow. The New King James Version and many other modern versions do include notations as to who is supposedly speaking, though they may be in error in some cases.

Regarding the characters themselves, there are major questions as to whether there are two lovers (the man and the woman), whether these are Solomon and his bride or another couple, or if there are three principle characters involved in a love triangle, as some maintain (the woman, the man, often seen as a shepherd, and Solomon as the antagonist trying to woo the woman away from the shepherd). Some even think completely different couples are represented in different parts of the Song, the idea being that these segments were originally disconnected poems—an unlikely proposition, as we will see. There is evidently a female chorus singing as the "daughters of Jerusalem"—some deeming them Solomon's harem and others viewing them more generally. And

there may be a male chorus as well. We will later examine the possible characters and consider the pros and cons of the various views.

*Expositor's* further notes: "Nor are we fully comfortable with the literary genre of the whole or the parts. Is Song of Songs a single composition from a common source, or is it a collection of songs that originally circulated independently? Is there a progression of a story line in the material? Is it a drama? All these questions affect interpretation. Some of the text seems to be 'stream of consciousness' material where the dialogue takes place as it might in dreamlike material. Or is it all to be taken as actually occurring in normal consciousness? We do not know enough about Hebrew literature in the second millennium to answer all these questions dogmatically. For this writer the Song does contain an inherent unity that causes him to see it as a body of material from a single source. There is a bit of a story line. In chapter 4 the lover begins to speak of his beloved as his bride. In ten verses (4:8–5:1) he calls her his bride six different times. This is climaxed in Song of Solomon 5:1, which seems clearly to be a euphemistic account of the physical culmination of the relationship. It seems, furthermore, that much of the material represents the world of wonder in the imagination of the maiden rather than actual happenings. Thus a time line on the progress of the relationship is very difficult. But it all fits together to make a whole. The passages starting at Song of Solomon 3:1 and Song of Solomon 5:2 may represent dream sequences. No theory answers all the questions."

I ended this introduction just before the section "Unity & Poetic Framework of the Song". To read the rest of this sections introduction, you can read it here:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-2>

Part 3 through 11 of the introduction dealing with many of the different views and interpretations of the book can be found here:

Part 3:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-3>

Part 4:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-4>

Part 5:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-5>

Part 6:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-6>

Part 7:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-7>

Part 8:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-8>

Part 9:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-9>

Part 10:

<https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-commentary/bible-commentary-introduction-to-song-of-solomon-part-10>

Part 11:

[“An Evocative, Entertaining Tutorial in Love](#)

Though some books on practically applying the Song to courtship and marriage can be helpful (see the bibliography), *The New International Commentary* properly notes: “In much recent writing, the Song has been correctly understood as love poetry but incorrectly used in order to promote specific dating or sexual

practices. It is important to remember that the Song is not a dating guide or a sex manual. It is not a 'how-to' book, but rather poetry intent on evoking a mood more than making mandates to the reader concerning specific types of behavior. Nonetheless, the Song's passionate and intimate descriptions of sensual touch may serve the purpose of freeing married couples to experiment and experience a physical relationship they wrongly thought proscribed by their Christian commitment" (p. 60).

The evocative nature of the Song is in some ways like that of watching a good romance movie. Frankly, such a movie wouldn't be very good if all it did was quote maxims and principles about how to love. It would certainly have poor entertainment value—but consider that it would also have poor educational value in teaching the principles of love. For there would be no feelings engendered and no illustration through dialogue of how love is supposed to operate—how those in love are to interact.

Like a great romantic movie or play or love song of modern times, the Song of Songs is in a certain sense entertainment. Dr. Fox gives such an assessment: "To call the Song 'entertainment' is not to trivialize it. Great music has been composed and great literature written to serve no social or religious function other than entertaining audiences. It is possible to entertain people by arousing finely nuanced and complex emotions, engaging their intellects, conveying new insights, and promulgating significant ideas [—all of which are present in the Song]. Still, we should not exaggerate the gravity of the Song's aims. It is full of fun, erotic allusions, sensual word-paintings of the lovers and their worlds, and heart-warming sentiments. It diverts the mind from everyday cares by inviting the audience to share the fresh, sensuous world of the young lovers and their erotic adventures" (p. 247).

He has a point here. While there is certainly instructive value in the Song, the more we press the point of its instructional nature, the less we experience its intended enjoyment. Those who would

stress the Song as a deep theological treatise—whether on human or divine love—are really missing the boat. For consider your own marriage if you are married or have been—or what you want married life to be if you are still single. Can you imagine romance and lovemaking to be some solemn, weighty endeavor? That is not the goal by any means. And if it becomes that, you will never experience romance.

Certainly the Song has instructive messages for us—but one of the main ones is to impress upon us that marital love and sexual relations are good and wholesome and intense and, yes, enjoyable. Is it right in studying the Bible that you could be entertained? Think on this: Is it right in the sacred duty of love to your spouse that you could derive enjoyment? These factors go hand in hand. That is why we must be careful, as Fox properly notes, to not exaggerate the gravity of the Song's aims. It has been placed in Scripture to make us *feel* good about sex in a marital context—countering Satan's attempts to make us feel dirty about it.

On the other hand, the point is not to merely be entertained by reading of amatory encounters. The marital context is important, as is the emotional side of sexuality. Murphy points out: “What this poetry celebrates is not eroticism for its own sake, and certainly not ribaldry or promiscuous sex, but rather the desires of an individual woman and man to enjoy the bond of mutual possession (Song of Solomon 2:16; Song of Solomon 6:3; Song of Solomon 7:10...). It is all the more striking, therefore, that even when nuptial motifs come into view (Song of Solomon 3:11; Song of Solomon 4:8–5:1) no reference is made to the important familial ‘business’ of Israelite marriage—contractual arrangements, dowries, child-bearing, inheritance, and the like. The poetry allows us to suppose that these are matters for others to attend to and on other occasions. For the moment we, as audience, are invited by the poet to appreciate the qualities of

tenderness, joy, sensual intimacy, reciprocal longing and mutual esteem, all of which are socially desirable and beautifully mysterious dimensions of human sexual love” (pp. 97-98).

There is, of course, a focus on physical pleasure within the relationship but not exclusively. And this is handled in rather delicate, picturesque language. As Murphy observes: “Although the poetry is explicitly erotic in its appreciation of sexual love, it never becomes prurient or pornographic. What the poet depicts for us so vividly are the emotions of love, not clinical acts of love-making” (p. 102). Often points of sensuality are conveyed through “shades of meaning that attach to certain words or actions. This may be termed double entendre in the best sense of the term. The language of love is precisely that by its very nature. But it is important to preserve the double entendre, and not destroy it by a clinical translation or paraphrase” (p. 102 footnote). This is a wise prescription.

The main focus of the book is not so much on sexual acts as it is on romance. Indeed, this is what people need to be taught. For once the goodness of marital sex is established, as it needs to be and is in the Song, jumping into sexual acts is all too easy. Commitment and romance, though, don't come as naturally. In presenting some lessons and concepts that may be derived from the book, *The New American Commentary* says this first: “Song of Songs is not stark eroticism but is indeed a highly romantic book. The point is so obvious from the imagery and language of the book that it might be thought hardly worth mentioning, but it is often ignored. Note that the lovers speak to and of each other frequently and in great detail. They relish their pleasure in each other not only with physical action but with carefully composed words. Love is, above all, a matter of the mind and heart and should be declared. The lesson for the reader is that he or she needs to speak often and openly of his or her joy in the beloved, the spouse. This is, for many lovers, a far more embarrassing

revelation of the self than anything that is done with the body. But it is precisely here that the biblical ideal of love is present—in the uniting of the bodies and hearts of the husband and wife in a bond that is as strong as death. Many homes would be happier if men and women would simply speak of their love for one another a little more often” (p. 379). This is certainly valid, although we should remember that the Song is poetry, which in itself demands carefully composed words. Still, a little poetry in love never hurts! Another point to take away from the Song is that of monogamous marriage as the only acceptable context for sex. We earlier noted reasons to understand the couple in the Song as being married in at least the passages concerning sexual intimacy—such as the mentions of “spouse” or “bride” in chapter 4. *The New American Commentary* here adds: “It is hard to imagine anything more likely to blemish the romantic yearnings of the lovers for each other than the notion that they may have an ‘open relationship.’ ‘I belong to my lover and his desire is for me’ (Song of Solomon 7:10) [or ‘I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine’ (Song of Solomon 6:3), as was noted earlier], if it means anything at all, means that the two belong to each other exclusively. More than that, as demonstrated previously, there is adequate evidence to assert that the theme of the Song is the love felt between a man and a woman as they approach and experience their wedding. The ideal of marriage, exclusive love, is everywhere present. [As was also noted previously, exclusivity would seem to rule out a polygamous setting for the Song.] In the same way, the text speaks against other forms of sexual behavior (homosexuality, etc.) not by decree but by example. The Song of Songs portrays how the sexual longings of man and woman ought to be fulfilled” (p. 379).

The Song, then, teaches the beauty, excitement and delight in exclusive, monogamous, heterosexual love—as God intended. In the words of Roland Murphy: “Human sexual fulfillment, fervently



sought and consummated in reciprocal love between woman and man: Yes, that is what the Song of Songs is about, in its literal sense and theologically relevant meaning. We may rejoice that Scripture includes such an explicit view among its varied witnesses to divine providence” (p. 103).

### [Illuminating the Relationship Ideal—Both Human and Divine](#)

“But,” Murphy then asks, as we should too, “does the marvelous theological insight that the Song opens up have broader significance?... Having reappropriated the literal meaning [after centuries of wildly errant allegorical imaginings], can we still give any credence to those who have heard the poetry speak eloquently...of divine-human covenant as well as male-female sexual partnership, of spiritual as well as physical rapture?.... [For in] scriptural expression is the recognition that human love and divine love mirror each other” (pp. 103-104).

Indeed, even if we reject the Song as being an allegory or extensive typological representation of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church, that still does not rule out some typology and *application* of the Song to Christ and the Church. After all, human marriage is but a type of that higher marriage. So if we have a Song in Scripture that applies to ideal human marriage, it is natural to assume that it would apply—in at least some respects—to the perfect divine marriage relationship and the spiritual courtship and betrothal leading up to it. And such application would not be mere coincidence, but part of God’s overall intent to begin with.

Lloyd Carr quotes Reformed theologian John Murray, who stated this thought well: “I cannot now endorse the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon. I think the vagaries of interpretation given in terms of the allegorical principle indicate that there are no well-defined hermeneutical canons [i.e., interpretive rules] to guide us in determining the precise meaning and application if we adopt the allegorical view. However, I also

think that in terms of the biblical analogy the Song could be used to *illustrate* the relation of Christ to His church. The marriage bond is used in Scripture as a pattern of Christ and the church. If the Song portrays marital love and relationship on the highest levels of exercise and devotion, then surely it may be used to exemplify what is transcendently true in the bond that exists between Christ and the church. One would have to avoid a great deal of the arbitrary and indeed fanciful interpretations to which the allegorical view leads and which it would demand” (pp. 23-24, from *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, March 1983, p. 52).

Gledhill concurs while raising a caution noted earlier: “There is... considerable biblical evidence to show that the human marriage relationship can be used as a vehicle to illustrate spiritual realities. Although no New Testament writer quotes or uses the Song of Songs in this way, many commentators have felt that they have sufficient biblical precedent to pursue a spiritual interpretation. It is argued with some justification that reflection on human love and intimacy leads inevitably to reflection on the ways of God with humankind. Thus various commentators have seen in the relationship of the two lovers in the Song an illustration of the relationship between God and Israel, or between Christ and the church, or between God and the individual believer. The many differing behaviour patterns of the lovers have been used as illustrations of the spiritual walk of the believer: the desire for and the consolations of intimacy, the articulation of praise, the pain of absence, the clouding of fellowship, the restoration of communion and so on. But we must be rather careful in our use of such analogies. For the believer’s relationship with Christ is never at an erotic level. The language used may be that of love, but it must be remembered that whilst God is eternal spirit, we are earthly bodily creatures. To speak of rapture and consummation and so on uses the vocabulary of love, but the metaphysical relationship between

the believer and Christ is at an entirely different level from that between two lovers. To confuse the two types of relationship can lead to heretical notions and spiritual disaster” (p. 33).

There do indeed seem to be parallels between the relationship development in the Song and that of Christ and the Church—in the wooing, the romance, the longing, the tenderness, the commitment, the anxiety, the wedding, even the sublime joy of intimacy and consummation in a general sense. Paul, as we saw earlier, even compared becoming one flesh in sexual union to becoming one spirit with the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:16-17). Again, however, we must not press the analogy too far in eroticizing the Christ-Church relationship, for that is not the point here. Yet it would certainly help all of us in our walk with Christ to think of our relationship with Him as an intimate “romance” of sorts. Consider all the musing, daydreaming, thoughtfulness, caring, time together and incessant communicating that is involved in human romance. How much more ought these things to be involved in the higher romance?

As we understand human courtship and the marriage relationship to typify our relationship with Christ, so the Song of Songs, which celebrates marital love, can contribute in some respects to how we live out our affectionate spiritual romance with Him. In this regard, perhaps one lesson of the intimacy in the Song is that we need to be very receptive, yielding, and responsive to Jesus Christ’s wooing, initiatives, influence and leadership as He comes into our hearts and minds through the Holy Spirit. Another lesson would be, as Gledhill pointed out, to articulate praise—to say great things about Jesus Christ, both in prayer as we speak to Him (along with the Father) and as we speak to others about Him. None of this is to say that such a use for the Song was Solomon’s (or another human author’s) intent at all. Yet this is God’s intent with any good marriage—so it would seem to be with this story of one in His Bible as well (perhaps even particularly).

*The New International Commentary* sums up this issue well: “Earlier we criticized an allegorical approach to the Song that read a theological meaning onto the surface of the book, and in its place we argued support for the idea that the Song is...[intended to] celebrate and caution concerning human love. However, we now come full circle in order to affirm the legitimacy of a theological reading of the book. Read within the context of the canon, the Song has a clear and obvious relevance to the divine-human relationship. After all, throughout the Bible God’s relationship to humankind is likened to a marriage.... The allegorical approach was not wrong in insisting that we read the Song as relevant to our relationship to God. The more we understand about marriage, the more we understand about our relationship with God. More than any other human relationship marriage reflects the divine-human relationship.... The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First, allegorists suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and, second, they pressed the details in arbitrary ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text.... As with any metaphor, the reader must observe a proper reticence in terms of pressing the analogy. Nonetheless, from the Song we learn about the emotional intensity, intimacy, and exclusivity of our relationship with the God of the universe” (pp. 67, 70).

Still, as valuable and helpful as this aspect of understanding the Song is, we must not concentrate on it so much that we lose sight of the Song’s obvious intent to glorify physical, human love and marriage. Gledhill properly states regarding his own commentary: “In this exposition, the main emphasis is on the natural interpretation of the Song as a warm, positive celebration of human love and sexuality in the context of marriage. I do not pretend that this exhausts the meaning of the Song, but I do maintain that this is its primary emphasis” (p. 33). And indeed, this should also be our focus.

Glickman sets up the book well: “The lovers of the Song help us see not just what our partners should *be* like, but what our relationships should *feel* like: the role of emotion, longing, and sexual attraction; the foundation of friendship, respect, and commitment; the experience of intimacy, certainty, and forgiveness. The lovers put flesh and blood on these words in their unforgettable romance. Love broke through, and the artist captured it! Whether viewed simply as great art or great art that rises to the level of sacred art, the Song of Solomon is a love song for all time. It can touch our hearts, awaken our deepest longings, and provide ideals to guide us. Ideals like the stars in the sky, by which we, like mariners of the sea, may set our course” (p. 14).

With all this as background, we are now better prepared to read through this most remarkable and mysterious book of Scripture, the Song of Songs. You will observe that our comments on the reading sections of the book, though a bit long in themselves in some parts, are relatively short compared to our lengthy introduction. Yet it is best that we have sufficiently examined the important interpretive issues up front, instead of getting bogged down with them in going through the Song. Before getting into the book, we first offer some resource recommendations to those interested in further individual study.” [END]