

SONG OF SONGS

Introduction. This book is known by different titles. It is called the “Song of Songs,” the “Canticle of Canticles” (two English renderings of the same Hebrew expression), and the “Song of Solomon” (the unlikely author but the name most associated with Israel’s Wisdom literature). *Song of Songs* is a way of saying “*the best song.*”

In her introduction to this book, Renita Weems writes: “*To open the pages of this brief book of poetry is to leave the world of tribal conflict, political disputes, royal intrigue, religious reforms, and divine judgments and to enter the world of domestic relations and private sentiments. Filled with the language of sensuality, longing, intimacy, playfulness, and human affection, Song of Songs introduces the reader to the non-public world of ancient Israel*” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V, p.363).

Two unique features of this book are its unabashed exaltation of physical beauty and human sexuality and the absence of mention of God or any religious themes from Israel’s salvation history.

People ask how a book of love poems with several erotic images and that never mentions God could have gotten into the Canon of Scripture. It only got into the Jewish canon when the leading Rabbis were persuaded that the book, on a deeper level, was about God’s love for the chosen people. The Christians accepted the book without dispute because they interpreted it not only as a story about God’s love for the chosen people, but also about Christ’s love for his Church. Perhaps on a more basic level, we might say that the young lovers chasing after each other is a metaphor of God pursuing us and seeking to seduce us into a loving relationship with him.

Renita Weems adds: “*This book which tells of love, courtship, compassion, intimacy, longing, and mutual delight resounds with many of the elements that characterize God’s dealings with his people.... Seeing our relationship with God through the eyes of frustrated but desperate lovers, however baffling their behavior, forces us to ponder the powerful emotions underlying the divine-human bond: what it means to be demanding, yet fickle, desperate, but timid; what it means to wound those we love and to be wounded by love; what it means to disappoint those we love and to be disappointed by love; and*

what it means to be hopelessly attached to each other and trying to hear what the other is saying”(ibid, p.391).

Interpretation. The book has been interpreted on three levels: literal, allegorical and wisdom.

On the literal level, the book’s original context celebrates human love and sexuality. No other biblical text so beautifully and poetically expresses this reality.

On the allegorical (or extended metaphor) level, interpreters see a deeper meaning—God’s love for Israel and Christ’s love for the Church. “*The Song was a favorite book of St. Bernard who wrote eighty-six sermons explaining it. It was a commentary on the Canticle that engaged St. Thomas Aquinas in the last days of his life. St. John of the Cross used the theme and format of the Canticle to express his highest mystical teachings. And St. Alphonsus returned again and again to the text of the Canticle in the loftiest sections of his great ascetical works*” (Men and Message of the Old Testament, p.410).

On the wisdom level, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: *In this view the Song is indeed composed of popular love songs joined only by a whisper of a plot. Human love is good. It need not be justified by esoteric spiritual reasonings. The sages taught that God’s order and goodness pervade all; there is no such thing as the secular. The love of boy and girl is one of God’s beauties. Even so, it went far beyond emotion. One was aware of a secret, mysterious force, an uncontrollable power that might overwhelm. So we have the only explanation of the refrain which links together the various songs:*

*Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm;
For stern as death is love,
relentless as the nether world is devotion;
its flames are blazing fire.
Deep waters cannot quench love,
nor floods sweep it away.
Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love,
he would be roundly mocked(8:6-7).*

If one adopts this viewpoint, then the Song turns back the corner of the page of human love to reveal a deeper reality (p.790).

Since I will be relying a lot on the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* for my analysis, the following statement from its introduction should be noted. “*The overall interpretation adopted in this commentary is that the Song originated as somewhat isolated love songs, was arranged in the order in which it now stands to give a faint story line, which built up to the climax expressed in the wisdom saying in 8:6: ‘For stern as death is love’*” (p.791).

A final introductory note: The 1970 New America Edition of the Bible has letters on the side of the text to help the reader know who is speaking: B-Bride; D-Daughters of Jerusalem; G-Bridegroom.

CHAPTER 1: Invitation to a wedding

“*Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth. More delightful is your love than wine.*” (v.2)

Commenting on the first verses of the Song, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: “*This first song seems to be an invitation to a wedding. The bride is looking forward to wedding kisses. The invited “we” are presumably the bride’s party (“daughters of Jerusalem”); the king is the bridegroom, either in fantasy or as a title in wedding festivities. Some sort of exchange of voices in the song is indicated by the switch of speakers from “me” to “we” and by the marginal notations. This song introduces us to the setting of joy and praise for the bride and groom*” (p.791).

Verses 5-6. The bride’s description of herself as “dark but lovely” is interpreted by Renita Weems to mean “I am black and beautiful.” This is significant because we generally look upon all the characters in the Bible as white. Others think her darkness is a heavy suntan acquired from working in the vineyards.

Verses 7-8. This duet sings of the search for love. The young woman wants to know where her shepherd-lover is so she can avoid falling in with other shepherds. The shepherd’s reply implies that she knows well where to find him.

Verses 9-11. The young man compares his lady’s beauty to the rich adornment of the royal chariot of Pharaoh.

Verses 12-17 are a series of exchanges in which the young lovers tell each other how beautiful he/she is.

CHAPTER 2: A love duet

“*As a lily among thorns,
so is my beloved among women.
As an apple among the trees of the woods,
so is my lover among men.*” (vv 2-3)

“*Do not arouse, do not stir up love before its own time.*” (v.7)

Verses 1-7. The unit consists of a duet between the young lovers. “*The action here proceeds from the introduction of the girl as a lily of the valley (beautiful) and the boy as an apple tree (a symbol of sexual desirability in some way) to the bridal chamber and a desire for sexual union, but it ends with an admonition not to go too far*” (*Collegeville Bible Commentary*, p.791).

Verses 8-17—Springtime song of love

“*Hark! My lover—here he comes
springing across the mountains,
leaping across the hills.
My lover is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Here he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattices.
My lover speaks; he says to me,
‘Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,
and come!’*” (vv. 8-10)

This is one of the best known passages in the Song. The young woman seems to be confined to her home but longs to see her young lover. She images him coming from afar to visit her. Yet when he arrives, she does not go out to meet him. He has to gaze through the window and plead with her to come to him. “*Arise, my beloved and come*” (v.10). He then says: “*Winter is past, spring is here, flowers are appearing, the time for love is here.*” Why she does not go out to him is not revealed. Perhaps, she is playing “hard to get.” In verse 17, she puts off her rendezvous with her lover till the evening “*when the day breathes cool.*”

CHAPTER 3: “I looked but did not find him.”

“*On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves, I sought him but I did not find him.*” (v.15)

This chapter can be divided into two parts: (1) a song of seeking and finding (vv 1-5) and (2) a description

of a wedding procession (vv 6-11).The *Collegeville Bible Commentary*, interpreting this chapter as a dream fantasy, states:

The poem begins with a dream wish by the girl and ends with a picture of the king on the day of his marriage. That is what the dream is all about, and the wedding procession is a fantasy creation.

We left the girl in chapter 2 still confined to her home. Now in her dream she is wandering the streets of the city looking for her lover. The watchmen cannot tell her where he is, but love can. She finds him and holds him fast, but then the dream is restrained by the refrain and the admonition not to arouse love before its time. This is followed by another dream fantasy of a wedding procession in which her lover is King Solomon coming to his wedding couch in splendor. (p.792)

“Do not arouse, do not stir up love before its own time”(v.5) is an exhortation for restraint. Commenting on this chapter and specifically having in mind the above verse, Renita Weems writes:

The challenge for preachers and teachers alike is to use the Song of Songs as a way of reclaiming some of the virtue of patience, the wisdom of delayed gratification, and the joy of exploring each other’s hearts long before we explore each other’s bodies. This text is ideal for exploring new ways of discovering and building human intimacy, because it begins by celebrating and delighting in the human body. We are not asked, as in so much banal religious literature, to deny our need for physical contact and communion. Song of Songs takes the body seriously. But it also takes seriously that we are more than a body. Relationships cannot survive when they are based solely on physical attraction. Song of Songs, with its constant use of dialogue and conversation, riddles and allusions, reminds us of the importance of learning how to talk and how to listen to each other. Those who turn to this poetry for profound theological insight into the nature of God, the character of the divine, the lessons of the Christian faith (e.g., grace, mercy, free will, sovereign love) should not dismiss its teachings about what it means to live and to love as human beings. We can learn from the ancient audiences. One thing we can learn is to listen for the unspoken gestures of human communication. (ibid, p.398)

CHAPTER 4: “You are beautiful, my love.”

“You are beautiful, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you.” (v.7)

In this chapter, the male lover and future groom goes “bonkers” as he tries to describe to us the physical beauty of his future bride. While we today would not use his descriptive phrases (“*Your hair is like a flock of goats.*”), we must remember that the writer lived in a culture and time far removed from ours. The future groom admires his future bride’s eyes, hair, teeth, lips, rosy cheeks, neck, and breasts. This book of the Bible is surely unique since the way it celebrates *rather denigrates* the female body and human sexuality, something both the Catholic and Protestant faiths in times past had a difficult time doing. The young man uses garden imagery to describe his young lover.

“The garden is fragrant, fruitful, and full of delights. The beloved is called a ‘fountain sealed.’ The fountain of flowing water is a symbol of life. What is being spoken of, therefore, is a faithful and fruitful marriage.

“5:1 is an invitation to the friends of the bridegroom to eat and drink of the wine and love.” (Collegeville Bible Commentary, p.793)

CHAPTER 5:2 to 6:13

*“I was sleeping, but my heart kept vigil;
I heard my lover knocking.... (5:2)*

*“My lover is radiant and ruddy,
He stands out among thousands.” (5:10)*

The *Collegeville Bible Commentary* interprets this section as a dream sequence in which the young lady loses her lover and goes searching for her. As she makes her way at night through the city, the watchmen or police beat her, perhaps suspecting that she is an intruder or prostitute. Suddenly in the dream, the daughters of Jerusalem appear and there is an exchange of dialogue between them and the young lady. The daughters volunteer to look for the lost young lover, but wonder how they will recognize him. They ask: “What is so special about your lad?” (5:9).In 5:10-16, the young lady is crazed as she describes in detail the physical beauty of her man. He is one in a thousand. His head is pure gold. He is Michelangelo’s David. Renita Weems comments: *“Love by its very nature arouses lovers to see and hear each other in ways no other ever has” (ibid, p.417).*

6:1-3—Where is he? After hearing such wonderful description of the male lover, the daughters want to see him: “Where has your lover gone?” they ask, not once, but twice. The young lady says he is in the garden and that the two of them belong to each other.

6:4-10—One-of-a-kind beauty. The young shepherd once again gushes with hyperbole about his lover, using imagery that we saw earlier in 4:1-3. “Lovers everywhere boast that their beloved is somehow different from others. If the beloved is male, his courage and stature are unlike other men’s; if the beloved is female, her beauty, poise, and modesty are unparalleled”(Weems).

CHAPTER 7:1 to 8:14

“How beautiful you are, how pleasing,
my love, my delight!” (7:7)

“Come, my lover,
let us go forth to the fields....” (7:12)

“Set me like a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm;
for love is strong as death...
Deep waters cannot quench love,
nor floods sweep it away.” (8:6-7)

7:1. Scholars are not sure what the term “Shulammite” implies. It may be a feminine form of Solomon.

Verses 2-10a. A celebration of the female body. Readers of Song for the first time may be surprised, even shocked, by the young man’s preoccupation with his lover’s body parts. Three times in these verses does he describe his lover’s breasts. Rather than looking upon the young woman’s body parts as a source of lust, her lover celebrates and totally admires the female body. Commenting on these verses, Renita Weem writes: “By poeticizing her feet, thighs, and navel, the shepherd’s sweet talk has moved from blather to daring. If his daring details on her intimate places were without feeling, commitment, and genuine adoration for the maiden, his description would be pornographic. But he is not a voyeur, peeping vulgarly at a naked woman; he is a man smitten by a woman’s physical beauty”(ibid, p.425).

Verses 10b-14. The female interrupts her lover’s speech in verse 10 to state how she surrendered to him (“I belong to him.”) and he yearns for her. Then

she beckons him to come with her to the fields where she will give him her love (v.13). Renita Weems comments: “In verse 11 she openly beckons him to the fields and leaves no doubt in the audience’s mind as to her intentions: ‘There I will give you my love’ (v.12d). In a book filled with coded, figurative speech between lovers, this is perhaps the protagonist’s boldest, most open declaration. She recalls the image of the mandrake (v.14) as a recognized aphrodisiac in Israel’s national fiction (Gen 30:14-16)” (ibid, p.427).

8:1-3. Something still keeps the young lovers apart. She wishes that her lover was her brother (meaning perhaps a close relative)—then her culture would allow them to freely communicate with each other. In verse 4, the female lover reiterates an earlier warning not to rush into lovemaking. Everything has its right time. “Do not arouse, do not stir up love, before it’s our time”(8:4).

Verse 5. The daughters of Jerusalem speak. They ask: “Who is this coming from the desert leaning upon her lover?” The young lovers are pictured walking homeward enjoying the fulfillment of the desire which the girl expressed in 1:1. The groom speaks of their first meeting (NAB footnote, p.749).

Verse 6. “Set me like a seal on your heart.” The “seal” the maiden wishes to place upon her lover’s heart signals her desire to be inseparably united with her man by a sacred oath.

Verse 6. “Stern as death is love.” Renita Weems says: “Unwed, casual lovers who glibly take the book as divine permission for their unbridled sexual appetites patiently profane its purposes. Song of Songs is about neither romance nor sex, not entirely anyway. It is about love struggling against the odds” (ibid, p.431).

Concerning the phrase comparing love to death, Scripture scholar Diane Bergant writes:

In the midst of so many sensuous allusions, this metaphor is jarring; in a collection of poetry that celebrates life, this comparison is chilling. Still, it is not out of place in this passage, which is considered the culmination of the entire book. If the lavish poetry has left anyone imagining that love is mere emotional infatuation or physical excitement, the testimony of these verses dispels such misconceptions. There is no force on earth that can withstand the power of death. It is fierce and all-consuming. It brings every human

consideration down to the fundamental facts of life. Death has the final word. Therefore, if love is strong as death, it must possess comparable strength and fierceness; it must be unquenchable and inestimable.

The poems show that the lovers' passion is indeed fierce and all-consuming. It enables them to withstand personal disapproval (1:6) and restrictive social pressure (5:7; 8:1). It is plain to see that every other human consideration pales in the face of love; nothing can really compare with it. Since the bonds of love can endure even beyond the grave, it may well be that love is stronger than death. The Song of Songs shows that when all is said and done, love of itself and in itself is the fundamental fact of life. (Israel's Story, Part Two, pp 86-87)

Verse 7—“Deep waters cannot quench love.” Love is as strong as death; passion is as fierce as the grave. Love rages as flame: water cannot quench it, floods cannot drown it, and money cannot buy it. In the end, nothing matters but love.

Verses 8-14. Frankly, I didn't find the two commentaries I was following helpful when it came to these verses. Renita Weems says: *“This unit consists of disparate pieces of material that seem to lack any obvious coherence to one another and fail to show any connection to the unit that precedes it”* (ibid, p.432).

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary—The Old Testament
- The New Interpreters Bible – Volume V