

SONG OF SONGS – SHORT VERSION

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).

SUGGESTED TEXTS TO READ

CHAPTER 2: 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 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.

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 “Shulammitte” 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).

CHAPTER 8:6: “Set me like a seal on your heart . . . For 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.