

SONG of SONGS

I. Identification

A. Names

1. Hebrew: “Song of Songs” = a Hebraism paralleled in the LXX
2. “Canticles” = abbreviation of Vulgate’s “Canticum Canticorum”
3. “Song of Solomon” implies tradition of authorship based on 1:1

- B. This book was read at the spring Feast of Passover, counted among the five books that were read at feasts.

There are significant Exodus/wilderness images in the Song of Songs. See 3:6 and 8:5 which are an exodus response to the book’s refrain in the previous verse.

3:6 “Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke?”

8:5a “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?”

The pillar of smoke and the incense may bespeak the Shekinah glory of God coming from the wilderness to the promised land of new beginnings.

The charge (refrain in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4) reminds us that for everything there is a season. The day of bliss will come with the response of a mature love of respect and dependency.

2:7 “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, By the gazelles or by the does of the field, Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.”

II. Authorship and Date

A. Solomonic era

1. Pastoral imagery suggests a time of extended peace in the land
2. Diverse geographic place names from the northern area of Mt. Hermon and Damascus to the south of Ein-gedi suggest that Israel has not yet been fractured.

Another indication of the united kingdom is that the north’s principle city of Tirzah (6:4) is named along with Jerusalem. By 880 b.c. Tirzah was replaced when Omri made Samaria the capital of the north.

- B. Tradition holds Solomon as the author.

1. The ascription in 1:1 is not dedicatory but indicates source.

2. The unique vocabulary and style are similar to Ecclesiastes (see Archer, *SOTI*)
3. Solomon's encyclopedic knowledge (I Kings 4:33 for Solomon's biological interests) would account for the profuse references to 21 kinds of flora and 15 kinds of fauna.
4. Knowledge of royal luxuries and exotic imports favors an insider (1:12,13; 3:6,9). Many of these items are technical terms (cinnamon is simply transliterated in 4:14 where seven spices are listed)
5. Solomon wrote 1,005 songs (I K. 4:32); this book was the "Song of Songs"
6. He would have written in the early to middle part of his reign.
 - a. He is still interested in romance.
 - b. He has not yet (6:8) attained his total of 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3). Cf. 8:11.

6:8 There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, And virgins without number

8:10 Then I became in his eyes As one who found peace. 11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon; He leased the vineyard to keepers; Everyone was to bring for its fruit A thousand silver coins.

C. Suggested non-Solomonic authorship from this era with a **northern provenance**

1. This view grows out of the three character approach which casts King Solomon in a bad light as the spoiled and self-indulgent king.

It would have been written toward the end of his reign by a northern sage who resented the king's decadence and policies of heavy taxation/impressment (8:7b, 12).
2. Other northern indications
 - a. Although there is no overt provincialism in the book, there is a significant mention of the northern city of Tirzah (6:4), as well as other northern sites like Sharon, Gilead, Heshbon, Mahanaim, and Bethrabbin.
 - b. The Shulamite herself was a Northerner, likely from the town of Shunem(?).

Godet believes that she finally meets her northern sweetheart at the end of book, warning him to flee to the Mountains of Lebanon when Solomon approaches (8:5,14).

- c. Copious **Aramaisms** need not indicate a post-exilic date, but rather may imply a northern provenance which was proximate to Aram.

Aramaisms have been found in Ugaritic literature pre-dating Solomon, as well as in the Amarna correspondence with the Canaanites of the 15th and 14th centuries.

3. **Rebuttal** to three character view

- a. Comparison of Sumerian (ca. 1700) and Akkadian (ca. 1000) love songs reveals that the lover-boy king was also cast as a shepherd, and that the lovers appear to leave their metropolitan environment for a pastoral setting without any dramatic notice of any change of scene. (S.N. Kramer, “The Biblical ‘Song of Songs’ and the Sumerian Love Songs” in *Expedition*, V, pp. 25ff.)
- b. This two character view still allows a variant theory that a northern sage in Solomon’s court wrote the Song when a particular maid, perhaps his sister, was espoused to Solomon.
- c. ESV Study Bible notes develop a reasonable description of the romance between two lovers, the Shulamite and a courtier. Under this perspective, Solomon still could have written Song of Songs even if he is not the male lover of the story.

III. Unity and Literary Form

A. Beginning in the 16th century, the view began to surface that this book was merely a **collection of Hebrew love songs**, so that by our day, this approach counted from 6 to 28 to 31 songs that had been strung together.

1. At the beginning of the 1900s, the love songs theory was fine-tuned on the basis of a German diplomat’s observations of Syrian weddings. It was suggested that some of the songs were traditional pre-nuptial songs performed at Semitic weddings. Still, while the paeans of love and romance fit with the Syrian wedding songs, most of the lyrics of this book do not fit the pattern of these Syrian *wasfs*.
2. The problem with this view of a disjointed text is that it ignores an obvious unity of style and theme. There are repetitions woven throughout which implies a single composer. The most that can be granted is that the book is an adaptation of ancient folk song(s).

David Dorsey (*Literary Structure of the OT*) presents a wonderful structural description of Song of Songs showing the master plan of seven interlocking love poems crafted by one author. Devotees of SoS have been searching through the ages for such an outline.

B. According to R.K. Harrison, the book is an extended proverb (*marshal*) in the gnomic tradition of Hebrew wisdom literature. It may called the **Wisdom of Love**.

The bulk of the book is in the form of dramatic spoken parts, but this does not necessarily require that the Song was acted out like the ancient Greek plays. Rather, it was more lyrical and may have been sung (or spoken?) as a dramatic ballad.

IV. Canonicity

- A. Recognized and freely used by the church fathers

- B. Talmudic records indicate there was debate in Jewish circles by the Academy at Jamnia (ca. 90 a.d.) due to the erotic content and apparently secular nature of the Song. Two factors carried its recognition:
 - 1. Tradition of Solomonic composition
 - 2. Allegorical interpretation which gave it a mystical religious meaning.

Rabbi Aqiba (d. 135) made a splash by his fiat that “In the whole world there is nothing to equal the day in which the Song of Songs was given to Israel: all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.”

His corollary to this dictum was aimed at removing its use from the profane and secular: “He who trills his voice in the chanting of the Song of Songs in the banquet halls, and treats it as a secular song, has no share in the world to come.”

V. Interpretations

A. Critical

1. Cultic-Mythological interpretation

According to the critical view, Song of Songs is a Yawistic modification of Canaanite fertility songs and lore which commemorated Ishtar’s spring-time longing for Tammuz, absent since his death in the previous autumn. His rising in the spring was celebrated with song at a pagan Canaanite ceremony of the king marrying the cult goddess, thus depicting the divine king’s (Tammuz) taking fertility to himself again after destroying the drought and death of winter.

The critics play on the book’s terms of spring-time and the corresponding yearnings for love in the spring.

2. An edited collection of Hebrew folk love songs

B. Allegorical

- 1. Historically, this has been the popular method among Jewish and Christian interpreters, and it remains in vogue today among some RC expositors.
 - a. Modern scholars believe that, in the face of its non-religious, erotic content, it was largely two factors that carried the day for the Song of Songs during the Jewish debates over its canonicity:

- 1) the mystical interpretation (popularized by Philo), and
- 2) the tradition of Solomonic authorship

b. The church before modern interpretation

- (1) The ante-Nicene fathers, Hippolytus of Rome (200), and especially Origen all made ample use of the Song, following the lead of Jewish interpretation (Philo). These were followed by Jerome, Athanasius, and Augustine, but not by Theodore of Mopsuestia in the IV century.

“Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia, at the end of the fourth century wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs in which he rejected allegorical meaning and read it in its literal and plain sense, as an erotic song. Theodore theorized that Solomon’s subjects had criticized his marriage with an Egyptian princess and that the king responded to the protest by boldly singing of his love in this Song. Unfortunately, Theodore’s commentary did not survive and is known only from the attacks on it. His great learning, no doubt, discouraged debate during his lifetime. In little more than a century after Theodore’s death, at the Council of Constantinople in 550, his views were condemned as unfit for Christian ears.” -Martin Pope, *Song of Songs*, 1977, pp. 49-50.

- (2) In the 12th century, Bernard of Clairveaux preached 86 sermons on the first two chapters alone of this, his favorite book.

(3) Reformers

- (a) Calvin continued in the allegorizing tradition of Augustine
- (b) Luther decried the allegorizing of the Song:

“[The literal sense] alone holds the ground in trouble and trial, conquers the gates of hell [Matt. 16:18] along with sin and death, and triumphs for the praise and glory of God. Allegory, however, is too often uncertain, unreliable, and by no means safe for supporting faith. Too frequently it depends upon human guesswork and opinion; and if one leans on it, one will lean on a staff made of Egyptian reed [Ezek. 29:6].”
—cited by Kinlaw in *EBC*, p. 1203.

Luther still did not hold with modern scholarship on the literal interpretation, but took more of a mediating position: to Luther, the Song “...commends [Solomon’s] government to us and composes a sort of encomium of peace and of the present state of the realm.”

(4) Puritans

2. The general allegorical scheme has been based upon the love affair between the Shulamite and her beloved. Depending on the perspective, the Shulamite is Israel or is the Church, and the Beloved is God, or is Christ in His love for the Church.
3. The allegorical **method**, in reading between the lines to find all the deeper meanings, gives meaning to the **details** of the story, besides the general message. E.g., a Jewish Targum calls the “eyes like a dove” the wise men of the Sanhedrin and the “neck like a tower of David” the chief of the Academy.

4. The problem with this method of interpretation is that the literature does not present itself as allegory. Other OT passages where the male/female relationship is described allegorically are more clearly indicated (Hosea 1-3; Ezk. 16:3ff; 23:2ff.).

SONG of SONGS Excursus
Synopsis of Structural Analysis by David Dorsey,
The Literary Structure of the OT, (pp. 199-213)

The Book is a master poem comprised of seven poems woven together.

- While clear transitions are not always conspicuous to English readers, the beginning of each new unit is marked by "...shifts in scene, perspective [i.e., the speaker], and mood; and each closes with a refrain alluding to the lovers' union."
 - Each unit, except for the last, opens with the lovers apart, moving to an anxious search for the partner, and ending with the two united in tranquility.
 - The repetition of this cycle with the speeches alternating between the man and the woman, concluded in the last unit with a final, uninterrupted union of the couple, "...reinforces the poet's theme of love's reciprocity and mutuality" (p. 200).
- These seven sub-sections have in common an opening "...theme of desire and ending with the fulfillment of desire in the mutual possession of the lovers" (note, p. 199).
- These seven sub-poems form a symmetrical whole
 - the center poem is the climax of the book that celebrates the couple's wedding day and night (3:6-5:1).
 - Unlike the other units, this section begins and ends with dramatic words of the poet
 - Dorsey takes 5:1c as the high-water mark of the book's climax when the Song's auditors are invited to "eat..., drink..., drink deeply of love!"
 - Not surprisingly, the wedding is the centerpiece of the song
 - Significantly, while the name Solomon is found in the matching first and last units, it is found nowhere else in the Song except in this middle section (3:7,11).
 - Dorsey finds that most of the poems are themselves arranged in seven internal parts. Often there is internal symmetry that is flagged by repeated lexical terms or by questions.
 - Dorsey notes that "The centers of the chiasmuses in Canticles are not used as points of emphasis except in the book's overall chiasmus (note, p. 206). The book's centerpiece is the wedding song.
- The seventh and final section (8:5-14), unlike the previous units, "...not only ends, but begins, with the two lovers united. Anxiety of separation is past, and in a tranquil setting of rest the two speak mutual words of love to each other. Reciprocity is displayed, as neither lover dominates, and both initiate dialogue and gestures of admiration (p. 211). Note 1Cor 7.3-4: marriage partners have no power over their own bodies.

- **CONCLUSION**

- Structure of the Book: Dorsey suggests that the author of Song of Songs "...intensively reshaped the material of the song [seven poems] from beginning to end. The sophistication and homogeneity of the Song's surface-structure design strongly suggests a unified poem that was composed by a single author" (p. 213.)
- Scheme: there are two lovers, not three
- Thematic emphasis: "The author's structuring designs [i.e., songs that alternate between him and her; parity in the final song] reinforce... the idea of the reciprocity, or mutuality, of the lovers' love" (p. 213).
- Application: this rare display in Near Eastern literature of mutuality and egalitarianism in romantic love:
 - reveals God's intent for a delightful reciprocity in the marriage relationship, and
 - promotes a high view of woman as opposed to contemporary surrounding cultures

Chart 21.9: Symmetrical arrangement of the Song of Songs

- a opening words of mutual love and desire (1:2-2:7)**
 - seven speeches, alternating between the young woman and the young man
 - Solomon mentioned by name
 - young woman's vineyard contrasted with brothers'
 - brothers mistreat(?) the young woman; her self-assurance regarding her beauty
 - apple tree as a place of intimacy
 - ends with refrain: his left arm ...
- b young man's invitation to the young woman to join him in the countryside; three stanzas (2:8-17)**
 - description of the renewal of spring and nature
 - flowers and grapevines; vineyards in bloom
 - he comes to her home to invite her to come out with him
 - ends with refrain: my lover is mine ...
- c young woman's nighttime search for the young man (3:1-5), phps her dream, per ESV notes**
 - begins: young woman in bed at night, yearning for her absent lover
 - she goes out to search for him, but is found by the guards who go about the city
 - refrain: my lover is mine... (immediately precedes the unit's beginning)
- d CENTER: their anticipated wedding day (3:6-5:1, framed by poet's words)**
- c' young woman's nighttime search for the young man, and their speeches of admiration and longing (5:2-7:10 [5:2-7:1-11])**
 - begins: young woman in bed at night, yearning for her absent lover
 - she goes out to search for him, but is found by the guards who go about the city
 - ends with refrain: I am my lover's...
- b' young woman's invitation to the young man to join her in the countryside; three parts (7:11-8:4 [7:12-8:4])**
 - description of the renewal of spring and nature
 - flowers and grapevines: vineyards in bloom
 - she would bring him to her home
 - refrain: I am my lover's ... (immediately precedes the unit's beginning!)
- a' closing words of mutual love and desire (8:5-14)**
 - seven speeches, symmetrically arranged, alternating mainly between young woman and young man
 - Solomon mentioned by name
 - her vineyard contrasted with Solomon's others
 - brothers belittle(?) the young woman; her self-assurance regarding her beauty
 - apple tree as a place of intimacy
 - refrain: his left arm... (immediately precedes the unit's beginning)

Chart 21.8: Point-counterpoint in the Song of Songs (p. 211)

- a **young woman initiates:** she is the primary speaker, longing to join the young man in his home (1:2-2:7)
 - b **young man initiates:** he is the primary speaker, longing for her to come out of her home and join him in the countryside (2:8-17)
- a **young woman initiates:** she goes out, finds the young man, and brings him to her home (3:1-5)
 - b **young man initiates:** he praises and yearns for her (3:6-5:1)
- a **young woman initiates:** she yearns for him and praises him (5:2-6:3)
 - b **young man initiates:** he praises her and longs for her (6:4-7:10 [6:4-7:11])
- a **young woman initiates:** she invites him to countryside and longs for him (7:11-8:4 [7:12-8:4])
 - c **the two lovers are together:** no predominant initiator (8:5-14)

Here is an alternative structure of Song of Songs that also finds the crux of the Song in chapters 4 & 5:

- A 1:1–4a “Take me away”
- B 1:4b Friends speak
- C 1:5–7 “My own vineyard”
- D 1:8–14 “Breasts,” “silver,” “we will make”
- E 1:15–2:2 “House”
- F 2:3–7 “His left arm” “daughters of Jerusalem ... so desires,” “apple,” “love”
- G 2:8–13 “Fragrance,” “come my darling,” “blossoming”
- H 2:14–15 “Vineyards,” “show me”
- I 2:16–17 “My lover is mine”
- Ja 3:1–5 “The watchmen found me”
- Jb 3:6–11 Description of carriage, “gold,” “Lebanon,” “daughters of Jerusalem”
- Jc 4:1–7 Description of girl, “Your eyes ... hair ... teeth”
- K 4:8–15 “Myrrh,” “spice,” “honey,” “honeycomb,” “wine,” “milk”
- L 4:16 “Into his garden”
- L’ 5:1a “Into my garden”
- K’ 5:1bc “Myrrh,” “spice,” “honey,” “honeycomb,” “wine,” “milk”
- Ja’ 5:2–9 “The watchmen found me”
- Jb’ 5:10–6:1 “Gold,” “Lebanon,” “daughters of Jerusalem”
- Jc’ 6:4–11 Description of girl, “Your eyes, ... hair ... teeth”
- I’ 6:2–3 “My lover is mine”
- H’ 6:13–7:9a [10a] “Vines,” “wine,” “that we me gaze on you”
- G’ 7:9b–13 [10b–14] “Fragrance,” “come my darling,” “blossom”
- F’ 8:1–5 “His left arm,” “daughters of Jerusalem ... so desires,” “apple,” “love”
- E’ 8:6–7 “House”
- D’ 8:8–9 “Breasts,” “silver,” “we will build”
- C’ 8:10–12 “My own vineyard”
- B’ 8:13 “Friends”
- A’ 8:14 “Come away”¹

END EXCURSUS

C. Typological (parabolic) interpretation (see Archer)

The book is a love song based on historical events, yet with an esoteric message of God’s higher love depicted by a pure human love. This position is similar to that of the allegorical approach, except the focus is not on the details, but on the overall message. Support is found in such NT refrs. as Matt 22:1ff.; John 3:29; Eph. 5:22; Rev. 19:7-9; 22:17.

This approach emphasizes “the wisdom of love.” Following the lines of OT theology, creation began with a marriage and will end with a marriage (Rev. 19). Marital love has eschatological implications for the ultimate fulfillment of the soul in union with God.

¹ Garrett, D. A. (1993). *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. (14:375). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

D. Literal Narrative Interpretation

1. This literal understanding focuses on the beauty of human romance and the virtues of monogamous marriage as opposed to polygamy and promiscuity.
2. Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 429) was posthumously condemned for aborting the allegorical interpretation in favor of the plain sense Semitic romance.
3. Besides the typological approach, this is the preferred interpretation of most modern exegetes. Archaeological discoveries of similar love songs from contemporary cultures (Ugarit, Egypt, Mesopotamia) helped support a plain sense interpretation.

There is disagreement whether there is a love triangle in the book, or just two main characters, the Shulamite and the Shepherd-King.

4. Three principal characters?
 - a. As opposed to the two character approach of the traditional literal school, the three character view was first developed by the German critic Ewald and it has been refined by Godet and Bullock.
 - b. Like Ecclesiastes, a key to the “three character” interpretation may be found in the book’s conclusion. 8:6,7 may imply that there was a jealous rival (Solomon) who was in a position to buy her affections.

8:6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, As a seal upon your arm; For love is as strong as death, Jealousy as cruel as the grave; Its flames are flames of fire, A most vehement flame. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, Nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love All the wealth of his house, It would be utterly despised.

If the Shulamite may be identified as a particular “Shunnamite” of the North (cf. Bullock, p. 232), viz., Abishag the Shunnamite (I Kgs. 1:3), then the satire on Solomon’s overtures to her takes on fuller political significance (I Kgs 2:22,23).

Solomon may have inherited Abishag as part of David’s harem (cf. Song 6:8, which may indicate a young Solomon who does not yet have 700 wives and 300 concubines). She, however, longs to return to her original rustic lover of Esdralon after having served King David (I Kgs 1:4).

- c. The three character view prefers non-Solomonic authorship since the king is indicted in this approach. Nonetheless, the more recent delineation of the book’s macro-structure calls for a unified focus on two lovers.
- d. Rather than a three character view of two lovers and a powerful male rival, the ESV Study Bible offers a cogent two character view (the two lovers) without making Solomon a rival. This approach allows the traditional Solomonic authorship.

E. Dumbrell summarizes the worth of the manifold interpretations

“Largely discredited today is the **allegorical** interpretation of the Song of Songs. To avoid the difficulties which the Song poses, Jewish and Christian expositors had viewed it as an allegory of Yahweh and Israel or of Christ and the church. Such allegorical approaches, however, tend to be impositions upon the material and not exposition of it. The **cultic-mythological** approaches, popular earlier this century, which saw the Song as based upon fertility-cult parallels, are also not appealing. The parallels cited are tenuous and fanciful, and what is alleged to be the principal point of connection (the motif of a dying and rising God) is nowhere to be found in the Song. The **wedding-week** theory, which makes the book a cycle of seven descriptive love songs (Arabic *wasfs*) in praise of the physical features of the partners, each song to be sung on a particular day of the wedding week, founders on the fact that we cannot discern seven clear sections into which the Song is divided. In addition, there is a time gap between such relatively modern customs and the biblical period. The once-accepted **dramatic** theory, popular in the last century, presupposes the use of a form unknown to Israel in the biblical period.

“The best approach views the Song of Songs as a collection of lyrics linked by interrelated themes and characterized by repetition of motifs, a lack of progression, and abundant symbolism. Erotic images are commonly employed. While we must recognize Israel’s restraints upon premarital sex and adultery, the sheer unabashed nature of the book indicates that the whole subject of human love could well be presented biblically with a freshness and an absence of inhibition that are uncharacteristic of modern presentations.” —*The Faith of Israel*, pp.234-35

VI. Theology

A. **Monogamy** appears to be the ideal pattern reflecting the teaching of the Torah (Gen. 2:24).

“The richness of human love is a microcosm of the larger love of God.” — R.K. Harrison.

“The frank character of its language echoes the somewhat similar language used by Israel’s prophets in describing the covenant relationship. We may fairly conclude that the marriage relationship is being depicted as a microcosm of what the covenant was intended to produce within the people of God as a whole.” —Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 238

It is fitting that “...a book which expresses the spiritual and physical emotions on which matrimony rests should be given a place in the Canon of Scripture.” —Rowley in Bullock, 210.

This emphasis on monogamy is an argument used against Solomonic authorship.

Also, if monogamy depicts God’s higher love, then this book may also be taken as a polemic against the spiritual promiscuity of polytheism, a snare that Solomon’s polygamy led him into; ctr. 6:9 with the polygamy of 6:8.

6:8 There are sixty queens And eighty concubines, And virgins without number.

9 My dove, my perfect one, Is the only one, The only one of her mother, The favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters saw her And called her blessed, The queens and the concubines, And they praised her. 10 Who is she who looks forth as the morning, Fair as the moon, Clear as the sun, Awesome as *an army* with banners?

Still, Solomonic authorship is possible when understood from the perspective of King Solomon’s desire to return to the original design of paradise: open communication between man and woman as one flesh and one heart. Rather than finding fulfillment in his harem, Solomon may have longed for the covenant communion found in loving monogamy (Eccl 7.28-29).

- B. **Nature** in the OT is generally understood to be a manifestation of the Creator's power, and not a pantheistic end in itself.

This one book, through its imagery of romance joining in with the exultation of a renewed earth in a time of natural vitality, teaches (along with Ecclesiastes) that man as God's steward may enjoy nature and life as gifts from the loving Father (cf. I Tim. 6:17; Heb. 13:4).

Heb. 13:4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

In fact, medieval Jewish exegetes and a few modern commentators (Landy, in *Bible Review*, I:1:18) approach the Song as the poet's answer to the loss of Paradise on earth. "For him, the Song is an inversion of the Garden of Eden narrative." (Dumbrell observes that 7:10 reverses the curse language of Gen. 3:16).

7:10 "I am my beloved's, And his desire is toward me."

Gen. 3:16 "Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

For example, the Song speaks extensively in garden imagery (esp. 4:12ff.). The dove is common image (e.g., 2:14, 6:9) which depicts blessing as opposed to the cursedness of the serpent; there is freedom and bliss in the fulfilling presence of the Beloved, but anxiety and a sense of incompleteness in the time of forced separation.