



An Introduction to the Book of Song

Author and Date

The questions of who wrote the Song of Solomon, when it was written, how to read it properly, and what it means as part of Scripture are intertwined, and have occasioned many disagreements.

Jews and Christians have traditionally taken 1:1 <<***The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's***>> to mean that Solomon, the son and successor to David, wrote the entire Song of Solomon, pointing to 1 Kings 4:32b <<***his songs numbered a thousand and five***>> for evidence of Solomon's authorial work. However, there are several reasons to hesitate on that matter. First, Song of Solomon 1:1 is grammatically ambiguous: it need not mean that Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon, only that it was written in his honour. Second, what is known of Solomon himself from 1 Kings raises problems with the suggestion that Solomon was the author. For example, 1 Kings Chapter 2 gives a concise summary of how Solomon's kingdom was established (1 Kings 2:46), which is followed immediately by the statement in 1 Kings 3:1 that: <<***Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt***>>. Pharaoh's daughter, however, could not have been the country girl, i.e. a Shulammitte, who is the heroine of the Song of Solomon, although some hold that Solomon might have married the Shulammitte before he married Pharaoh's daughter. Likewise, Solomon's full harem (1 Kings 11:1-8) makes him a very bad example of married love for Israel, although some have replied that the Song of Solomon reflects Solomon's wisdom that came from his chastened perspective as he reflected on his own life. Third, the book mentions Solomon but generally as a distant, even idealised figure.

If it is not entirely certain that Solomon wrote the book, one can still argue that the book was written during Solomon's reign (971-931BC). The book mentions him and seems to assume his glorious reign as a known fact. At the same time, the heroine is a young Shulammitte woman (6:13); most take this to mean that she comes from the village of Shunem (Joshua 19:18 and 2 Kings 4:8), which is in the

tribal inheritance of Issachar. Furthermore, the town of Tirzah is mentioned along with Jerusalem in comparisons of beauty (6:4). The towns of Shunem and Tirzah were located in what became the Northern Kingdom. These features make it likely that the book comes from the time before Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, which took place just after Solomon's death in 931BC.

Thus, the book was probably written sometime between circa 960BC, when Solomon's reign was well established, and 931BC, perhaps under Solomon's oversight.

Theme, Title, and Interpretation

The Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs (1:1), contains beautiful and sensuous poetry expressing romantic love between a young man, shepherd (1:7), and a young woman, a shepherdess (1:8) in ancient Israel. On this point there is general agreement; but agreement ends once the discussion moves to how the Song of Solomon works to convey its theme. The Song of Solomon has in fact been subject to a broader range of interpretation probably than any other book in the Bible. Thus the Song of Solomon was first understood by early Jewish interpreters as an allegory of God's love for Israel; and then, through many centuries of Christian interpretation, as primarily an allegory of Christ's love for the church, or as Christ's love for the soul. In contrast to this, most Christian interpreters since the 19th Century have understood the Song of Solomon as a beautifully crafted love poem describing either:

1. The relationship between King Solomon and his Shulammitic bride.
2. The relationship between a simple shepherd and the Shulammitic shepherdess.
3. A three-character relationship involving Solomon, a shepherd boy, and the Shulammitic shepherdess.

Still many others, since the beginning of the 20th Century, have understood the Song of Solomon as simply a collection of sensuous love poems on a common theme, rather than the unfolding of a single poetic love story. Given this wide range of interpretative diversity, it has seemed best in these comments to focus mainly on a single cohesive interpretation of the Song of Solomon, while at the same time acknowledging that other interpretations are also commonly held among Bible-believing Christian interpreters; refer to Alternative Interpretations.

Reading the Song of Solomon. These comments recognise that one needs a strategy for reading this book, and to follow one reading means that one does not follow others. The issue is especially acute in the Song of Solomon: the book reads very differently under the different reading strategies that scholars have offered, and there is no clear consensus among them as to which is the right one. The

approach taken in these comments then is to show why one particular strategy commends itself, and to mention briefly some other common strategies.

One may organise the interpretative disagreements among the scholars around the questions of coherence, characters, and consummation.

Coherence: Is there a single plot line from beginning to end? Traditional interpretations have said yes, the plot describes the love between the shepherd and his betrothed. Starting in the 20th Century, however, it became common for some scholars to deny that there is a coherent story, understanding the Song of Solomon as a collection of love songs. By this scheme, the title of the book means that it is a song composed of multiple songs. The commentary here, however, will argue that there is indeed coherence: first, because one can follow the story of a romantic love from the initial longing right through to the marital enjoyment; and second, because the characters have consistent patterns in how they speak to and about one another. Hence, it is better to see the title ‘Song of Songs’ (1:1) as describing this as the best of songs, just as ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’ refers to the best king and lord, rather than as a collection.

Characters: How many are there, and who are they? In the Song of Solomon there are four main characters: a young woman (She in the headings and referred to as ‘My love’); the shepherd boy whom she loves (He, referred to as ‘beloved’); King Solomon; and a chorus-like group (Others). It is generally possible to identify the speakers and addressees based on the gender, masculine or feminine, and number, singular or plural, of the Hebrew words. Traditional interpretations have seen Solomon and the shepherd boy as the same person, but in light of 1 Kings 3:1 and the way that the rest of 1 Kings portrays Solomon, this assumption seems to raise significant difficulties.

Consummation: When does the couple engage in a sexual relationship? Traditional readings have seen the couple’s love leading to marriage, and only after that to a sexual relationship, in accord with biblical standards. Thus traditional readings have understood the wedding procession and wedding day, as confirmed by Song 3:11, to be described in 3:6 through 4:16a, with the sexual consummation of the marriage being reflected in 4:16b and 5:1. However, some studies now suggest that the Song of Solomon is simply a collection of love songs that do not address the question of marriage, and that a sexual relationship are implied at a number of places in the Song of Solomon. In contrast to the collection interpretation, the understanding represented in the following notes views all of 3:1-6:3 as a dream in anticipation of the marriage and its consummation. Therefore, on this understanding, 5:2-8 is part of the dream: <<*I slept, but my heart was awake*>> (5:2), and Chapter 7 is an eager anticipation of the enjoyment the couple will have once they are married in Chapter 8. In any case, the fact that the Song of Solomon is in the canon of Scripture, and the fact that it harmonises with Proverbs 5:15-19 in commending sexual delight within marriage, lends further support to the

conclusion that the consummation occurs only after the couple is married. The reading adopted in these comments then is that the actual marital consummation is reflected in Song of Solomon 8:5. This is supported by the consistent refrain urging restraint, i.e. <<**do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready**>> (2:7). Thus, immediately following the last occurrence of the refrain (8:4), in 8:5b the woman declares: <<**Under the apple tree I awakened you**>>, which is the only place where she is said to have (sexually) awakened her lover.

Purpose

As has been indicated, it is preferable to read the Song of Solomon as a single literary whole rather than a collection of love poems, telling the story of two betrothed Israelites who look forward to their marriage and the pleasure of their union.

It is common to group the Song of Solomon with the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, and this finds support in the connection with Solomon and in the parallels with Proverbs 5:15-19. Like other Wisdom Literature, the Song of Solomon assumes that the covenant God of Israel, i.e. 'the Lord' (Song 8:6b ESV) is the one true God, Maker of heaven and earth. The purpose of the redemptive covenants is to restore fallen, damaged creatures, i.e. humankind, to the proper functioning of their humanity. Therefore obedience to the Lord's commands is the right way to enjoy the world God made, and it also displays to the rest of the world how refreshingly attractive it is to know the true God. The picture of the two lovers in the Song of Solomon is an ideal one, as are the character portraits in Proverbs: the picture provides the pattern into which God wishes to shape his faithful people, which is also the pattern toward which they will freely give themselves to be shaped. Indeed, one function of wisdom literature is to make that pattern attractive, as the Song of Solomon does in full measure.

Key Themes

1. God's covenant, which commands sexual purity, provides just the right framework, i.e. marriage, within which his people may properly enjoy the gift of sexual intimacy, as confirmed by Genesis 2:23-24. Thus God's people honour him and commend him to the world when they demonstrate with their lives that obedience in such matters brings genuine delight.
2. Marriage is a gift of God, and is to be founded on loyalty and commitment, which allows delight to flourish. As such, it is a fitting image for God's relationship with his people, in both the OT and the NT.

History of Salvation Summary

The fall of mankind damaged every aspect of human lives, and God's work of redemption aims to restore every aspect to its proper functioning. God's goal is

that romantic love, with all its potential pain and degradation, should be an arena of enjoyment for his redeemed people.

Literary Features and Structure

The best label that can be assigned to the book is love poetry, in which the lovers are shepherd and shepherdess and the setting is a flowery and fruitful rural landscape of which a vineyard is the prime example. If a love poem celebrates the occasion of a specific wedding, it is called an epithalamion, and that is what takes place here.

The Song of Solomon is most remembered for its extravagant comparisons; for example, the woman is compared to a horse in Pharaoh's court (1:9), and her hair to a flock of goats (4:1). The conventions within which the ancient poet wrote yield these ground rules for interpreting the comparisons:

1. The primary correspondence is not visual, and often there is no visual correspondence at all.
2. The comparisons are figurative rather than literal.
3. What the beloved has in common with what he or she is compared to is a certain quality, usually the quality of excellence, or of being the best of its kind.
4. The carryover is the value of the two things that are compared, e.g. the woman is like a mare among Pharaoh's chariots in being the best that it is possible to be.

The author has presented the Song of Solomon as a series of exchanges, mostly between the shepherdess and the shepherd, with the chorus-like 'others' sprinkled in. These others usually pick up items from the lovers' speeches and urge the two forward in love. There is also a refrain: <<**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, ... do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready**>> (2:7), spoken by the shepherdess, which is understood as her urging the other women not to push this love too fast, in order to let it reach its consummation at the right time, that is, the marriage bed, which seems to begin in 8:5.

According to the reading followed here, the middle section of the book (3:1-6:3) describes the shepherdess' dream, anticipating the consummation of their love. This is suggested by 3:1a <<**Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves**>>, and 5:2 <<**I slept, but my heart was awake**>>. The content is what one expects in such a dream: sexual longings, fears of loss, nightmarish scenes (5:7), and an imaginative transformation of the beloved into a Solomon figure (3:6-11). The dream expresses the eager erotic desires that the young man and woman have for each other; within the context of biblical morality, this longing is a part of God's good gift, looking forward to the consummation of their love.

The lovers speak in different ways, reflecting the difference between how a man and a woman experience being in love. The man's speech focuses entirely on the woman: he does not address anyone else in the Song of Solomon; he frequently addresses the woman directly, praising her admirable qualities; and although he does occasionally speak about himself, readers learn only how fully his thoughts about the woman have taken over his imagination.

The woman is not nearly as exclusive in her speech, addressing 'the daughters of Jerusalem' as well as the man. Of course, that does not make her distant: when she speaks to others, it is often about her beloved, e.g. 2:8-9, his admirable qualities (5:10-16), and her desire for him (2:5 and 5:2-8). She describes what her beloved means to her (1:13-14), and her desire to be with him and give herself to him (7:12-13). She finds pleasure in the way her beloved desires her (7:10). The Song of Solomon portrays the young woman with sympathy and subtlety; she is perhaps the most clearly drawn female character in the Bible.

Alternative Interpretations

As noted above, perhaps no book in the biblical canon has had a greater diversity of interpretative strategies. In the interest of completeness, it will be helpful to describe briefly the following four diverse approaches that other interpreters have commonly taken.

1. Allegorical interpretation. The sensuous descriptions in this book have provided motivation to read the Song of Solomon as an allegory, namely, as an extended picture of the love between Israel's God and his people, and then between Christ and his bride, either the church or the individual soul. This approach, in fact, dominated exposition of the book until the 19th Century. The limitation of such an approach, however, is that it runs the risk of diminishing the wisdom character of the Song of Solomon and its endorsement of God's good work of creation as evidenced in marital love. However, even though virtually all scholarly interpreters today see the book primarily as a celebration of love and the gift of sexual intimacy, some would add that the Song of Solomon, by showing the pure and passionate love of the man and the woman in the story, can also enable believers to appreciate more deeply the intensity of the spiritual love-relationship between God and his people as, for example, this is further reflected in the picture of marriage depicted by Paul in Ephesians 5:22-33.
2. Anthology interpretation. This interpretation views the Song of Solomon as a collection or anthology of interrelated love poems or lyrics, arranged around a common theme of intimate love between a man and a woman in celebration of love's longing, ecstasy, joy, beauty, and exclusivity. This understanding, adopted by many interpreters beginning in the 20th Century,

rejects the idea advocated here that the book contains a narrative plot. For criticisms of this approach, see Theme, Title, and Interpretation.

3. *The Shepherd Hypothesis*. In the 19th Century the ‘Shepherd Hypothesis’ became popular, whereby the young woman and the shepherd boy are two simple country folk in love, and King Solomon seeks to win the woman’s consent to become part of his harem. The woman resists all his flattery and returns home to marry the shepherd. A number of evangelical interpreters now advocate this interpretation. Although this approach might be edifying, and could account for the problem of fitting the song with Solomon’s known shortcomings, its weakness is that it does not supply any way for the reader to know when the shepherd speaks and when Solomon does. In fact, the speech patterns of the main characters, e.g. the descriptive titles they use for each other, the grammar by which they speak, and what they talk about, favour the conclusion that there are only two lovers, the woman and the shepherd. Another weakness of the Shepherd Hypothesis is that it seems unlikely that Solomon the king would be treated as an interloper in a work that is dedicated to Solomon himself. According to the interpretative strategy adopted in the notes below, Solomon is understood not as an intruder but as a somewhat distant figure, whom the woman brings into her dreams as her idealisation of the young man she loves.

The following outline shows how advocates for the Shepherd Hypothesis might understand the structure of the book:

- I. Title: The Best of Songs (1:1)
- II. Solomon Meets the Shulammitte in His Palace (1:2-2:7)
- III. The Beloved Visits and the Shulammitte Searches for Him in the Night (2:8-3:5)
- IV. Solomon Displays His Wealth and Sings of His Love (3:6-5:1)
- V. The Shulammitte Yearns for the Beloved (5:2-6:3)
- VI. The King Fails in His Pursuit of the Shulammitte (6:4-8:14)

4. *The Solomon-Shulammitte interpretation*. Another common interpretation also views the Song of Solomon as a unified love poem with a two-character plot, the two primary characters being King Solomon and the unnamed young Shulammitte woman. Following this line of interpretation, Chapters 1-2 lead up to the wedding; 3:1-5 is a dream; 3:6-11 recounts the wedding procession; Chapter 4 praises the bride’s beauty; and the consummation of the marriage is reflected in 4:16-5:1, possibly followed by another dream in 5:2-8. The rest of the book is understood, then, as recounting first a period of separation and marital difficulty (5:2-6:3); which is then resolved, resulting in the reaffirmation of their love for each other (6:4-8:4); followed by a brief concluding section of reflections and affirmations

(8:5-14). Following this understanding, the structure of the book may be outlined as follows:

- I. Title: The Best of Songs (1:1)
- II. The Lovers Yearn for Each Other (1:2-3:5)
- III. The Wedding (3:6-5:1)
- IV. Temporary Separation and Reunion (5:2-6:3)
- V. Delight in Each Other (6:4-8:4)
- VI. Final Affirmations of Love (8:5-14)

Although 1 Kings 3:1 seems to indicate that Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter immediately after he established his kingdom (1 Kings 2:46), some advocates of the Solomon-Shulamite interpretation suggest that the Song of Solomon is a poetic retelling of the courtship and early days of Solomon's first marriage after which, of course, Solomon abandoned the monogamous standard of Scripture, with grave consequences. In light of the way in which the rest of 1 Kings portrays Solomon, however, the assumption of an earlier marriage to the Shulamite seems to raise significant difficulties.

Outline

The following outline corresponds to the arguments presented in the introduction above and provides the structure for the interpretative strategy followed in the commentary:

- I. The Song of Songs (1:1)
- II. The Lovers Yearn for Each Other (1:2-2:17)
 - a. Colloquy of Bride and Friends (1:1-8)
 - b. Colloquy of Bridegroom, Friends, and Bride (1:9-2:7)
 - c. Springtime Rhapsody (2:8-17)
- III. The Shepherdess Dreams (3:1-6:3)
 - a. A Dream of Love (3:1-5)
 - b. The Groom and His Party Approach (3:6-11)
 - c. The Bride's Beauty Extolled (4:1-5:1)
 - d. Another Dream (5:2-8)
 - e. Colloquy of Friends and Bride (5:9-6:3)
- IV. The Lovers Yearn for Each Other Again (6:4-8:4)
 - a. The Bride's Matchless Beauty (6:4-13)

- b. Expressions of Praise (7:1-8:4)
- V. Homecoming (8:5-14)