

A Brief Reflection on Song of Songs

Years ago, while teaching thru the Old Testament, I declared that I'd never teach this book of the Bible because its content is too – *how shall I say it?* – delicate. And because it's so strange, mysterious, puzzling. But I've reconsidered. It's in our Bibles for a reason, so let's look at it.

Commentators have attributed all kinds of meanings to this short book. Most believe it's just a collection of love poems, idealized human love. OK, but it's surely more than that. Some see it as an allegory, and that's good; yes, it's probably that. The scribes and rabbis of ancient times (I think correctly) saw this as an allegory of God's love for Israel. I suspect, however, that it's even more than that. For this lesson, I'm going to simply present my own understanding, which is the right one (I think). My approach is canonical. That is, all Scripture is an integrated whole; so the correct way to understand this (or any) book is to see how it fits into the Bible's overall meta-narrative.

First, observations. The structure of the book is notoriously difficult to analyze. It is an anthology of love poems, indeed, a song comprised of songs (hence its title). Yet it has structure! And for its structure, I follow the scheme developed by David Dorsey in his book, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*. (There are lots of other schemes, but they don't add understanding; they only confuse.) The Song seems to be a series of speeches (monologues, actually) alternating between a young man and young woman, clustered into 7 units. Interposed here and there are brief comments by others (titled "friends" in the NIV, serving perhaps as a chorus). Each successive speech seems to be a response to the one preceding, except the 4th unit. In other words, the text seems to be a dialogue between two lovers, in which each is affected by what the other says. This responsiveness indicates mutuality of their love. The first unit is 1:2 to 2:7. The 2nd unit is 2:8-17; in this unit the young man invites the woman to join him in the countryside. The 3rd is 3:1-5, with a night-time search for the man. The 4th unit is 3:6-5:1. The 5th is 5:2-7:11, again with a night-time search. The 6th is 7:12-8:4; and in this unit the young woman invites the man to join her in the countryside. The last unit is 8:5 to 8:14. There seems thus to be chiasmic structure with the 4th unit, at the center, the climax of the book, a wedding. Solomon's name is at the outset of the book, at its close, and in the 4th unit, the center of the book.

Several things are remarkable about this book. (1) Notice the unusually elevated status of the young woman. The man is not domineering or patriarchal, as one would expect in ancient Near East culture. The woman seems to be his equal. Yes, the man is king, and she isn't, so there is that asymmetry. That's obvious. Yet they share their love equally and are equal in their marital union. Each of them equally bears the image of God.

(2) The love that's expressed should represent what God created, *viz*, that marital sexual union is a *sacred* relationship. Clearly in the background of this book is Genesis 2:24 and the union of Adam and his wife in the Garden before the Fall. In their marital union Adam and his wife reflect something of extreme importance to all of Scripture, which is why it's there in that early text.

(3) There also seems to be a problem. The young man seems to want lots of wives ('daughters of Jerusalem,' mentioned half a dozen times in the book). The young woman wants an exclusive relationship with Solomon, as God intended love and marriage. But Solomon seems reticent. From other Scripture (1 Kings 11), we know that Solomon had very many wives (700 of them) and concubines (300), and the text says that he loved them all (1 Kings 11:2c).

(4) The love that's in view here is *exceedingly* costly. See the key verse at 8:7. For this love **"all the wealth of his house would be utterly scorned."** The love that's in view here is more precious, more valuable, than all the wealth of the wealthiest man alive. And perhaps Solomon is incapable of such love.

Something more ultimate, something higher than physical intimacy, seems to be at issue in this book. I am suggesting that this book is really an extended metaphor. Godly dedicated love is expected. An ideal marriage is intended. But there are problems. This reflects the story of the Old Testament! Solomon probably represents the Nation of Israel. The marriage in the background of this book may represent the faithful love relationship

intended between God and His chosen people. But Israel was reluctant to love God in a dedicated, committed relationship. Always looking at and preferring the idols and the gods of the surrounding nations, Israel was, like Solomon, incapable of such costly, exclusive love.

Nevertheless, the love relationship exists and continues to the end, suggesting there's hope in the future for such a faithful, committed marital union. The book therefore anticipates the ideal marital relationship Paul describes in Ephesians 5:22-33. And it surely anticipates the final marriage at the end of the Book of Revelation, between Christ and His saints.

We live in a wicked, godless era in which sexual freedom has become the highlight of our culture. Marriage as a sacred union is mocked. Westerners freely engage in non-marital, non-procreative sex as if it were just entertainment. We have no-fault divorce, "open" marriages, serial marriages, gay marriages, culturally acceptable adultery and living together apart from marriage, and pornography. We have in our modern American culture the whole spectrum of *porneia*, and our society wallows in it, exults in it, even celebrates it. And there must be no consequences to these ungodly physical unions, which is why free access to abortion has been made a necessity. The Song of Songs emphatically teaches that such "love" is not only worse than what God intended, it is absolutely defiant of God's will for humanity. Sexual sins are always at the top (or second when idolatry is at the top) of the Bible's vice lists. Sexual sins are abhorrent to God. Those who are judged because of rebellion against God have been given over to sexual sins to confirm them in ultimate, dreadful condemnation (Romans 1:18-27). But this book, Song of Songs, is here as Scripture for another reason.

Why is the love in this book so precious (Song of Songs 8:7)? It's actually more than just precious. It's something from God. "Like a mighty flame" (NIV) literally reads, "like the very flame of the LORD." We need to think about love, which is the essential theme of this book. But let's think not of human love, which is really desire and self-gratification, but God's love. It's really God's love that this book wants us to reflect on. God's love is transcendent, unlike human love. It's a love that gives, that seeks to bless or in some way enrich the recipient of His love. Because God is love (1 John 4), all who love [that is, all who express God's love] have been born of God. **"Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him"** (1 John 4:16b). In other words, because we're in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are able to express God's love. How? By our deeds (1 John 3:18), by our obedience to God's Word: **"This is love for God: to obey his commands"** (1 John 5:3).

Belief in Christ is not an insurance policy, something that's been decided and then put in a drawer or file cabinet for later use, and that can be safely ignored until the day comes when it's needed; as if we take it out of the drawer every Sunday morning to confirm its validity. No. This portion of Scripture is here for the Church to understand that love is mutual, or it isn't there. God has already shown His love for us in all that He did in Christ to redeem us (1 John 4:10). And He expects us to love Him in return. **"We love Him because He first loved us"** (1 John 4:19). God redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt and expected that nation to love Him in return. That's the message of Deuteronomy (see Deuteronomy Chapter 6 and especially 30:16). Sadly, *tragically*, Israel failed. May we not fail!!!

What God expects of us is not mere mental assent to the basic propositional truths of the Gospel message, but for us to love Him. The great commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and might" is for *us*! And how do we do that? How do we love God with all our being? By serving Him faithfully and self-sacrificially, as He has revealed we're to do that. By obeying His demands and commands regardless of the risk or cost. By so trusting in His promises that they form the essence of our lives. Love is as love does.

This short book by wise King Solomon, understood canonically, compels us to think deeply about, and to live our lives based on, love. That is, the love that God has for us, the love we have for Him, and the love we express for others. All that that love looks like in the nitty-gritty of life is developed all thru the Word of God, which is why we need to know and reflect deeply and often on the Word. That's what life is all about; and it should be what we want more than anything. Because to miss it is death (Deut 30:15-20 and 1 John 3:14). Don't miss it!