

BIBLE SURVEY: OT WISDOM

WEEK 6: SONG OF SOLOMON

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- In this 6-week series, we are going to go through the Old Testament wisdom and poetry books.
- Our schedule for the next 6 weeks will be:
 - November 13th: Introduction and Job
 - November 20th: Psalms part 1
 - November 27th: Psalms part 2
 - December 4th: Proverbs
 - December 11th: Ecclesiastes
 - **December 18th: Song of Solomon**

INTRODUCTION TO SONG OF SOLOMON¹

- The Greek Septuagint (LXX) and Latin Vulgate (Vg.) versions follow the Hebrew (Masoretic Text) with literal translations of the first two words in 1:1—"Song of Songs."
 - שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה Literally says "Song of the songs which (are) to/for Solomon"
- Several English versions read "The Song of Solomon," thus giving the fuller sense of 1:1.
- The superlative, "Song of Songs" (cf. "Holy of Holies" in Ex. 26:33, 34 and "King of Kings" in Rev. 19:16), indicates that this song is the best among Solomon's 1,005 musical works (1 Kin. 4:32).
- The word translated "song" שִׁיר frequently refers to music that honors the Lord (cf. 1 Chr. 6:31, 32; Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 144:9).
- Solomon, who reigned over the united kingdom 40 years (971–931 B.C.), appears 7 times by name in this book (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12).
- In view of his writing skills, musical giftedness (1 Kin. 4:32), and the authorial, sense of 1:1, this piece of Scripture could have been penned at any time during Solomon's reign. Since cities to the north and to the south are spoken of in Solomon's descriptions and travels, both the period depicted and the time of actual writing point to the united kingdom before it divided after Solomon's reign ended.

¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB22/song-of-solomon>

- Knowing that this portion of Scripture comprises one song by one author, it is best taken as a unified piece of poetic, Wisdom literature rather than a series of love poems without a common theme or author.
- The Song of Solomon is no doubt the word of God but there is disagreement as to what this song is actually about. When we begin with a straight-forward reading of this song, we see the expression of love between a king and his bride. They are communicating their feelings for one another and sometimes with sexual references. This is the reason why many were forbidden from reading this book until they were mature to read it. James Durham (1622-1658) says that this song “and some other Scriptures, were of old refrained by the Jews from younger sort, that none should read them, but these who were at thirty years of age...”²

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK³

- The Song contains no preaching. No morals are drawn. There is no nationalism in the book. One theme is found throughout: love—pure, sensuous, youthful, passionate love. The immediate purpose of the Song is to bear testimony to, and thereby applaud, the steadfast loyalty of one maiden for her beloved. The ultimate purpose is to put God’s seal of approval upon the genuine love between the sexes.
- The literal purpose of the book has often been twisted by those who are not prepared to read frank and intimate expressions of love. This book undercuts the two main perversions of biblical sexuality: asceticism and lust. Asceticism views sexuality as an evil to be avoided; lust makes it the hub of life. Song pronounces the divine “it is good” upon sexual attraction which leads to lifelong commitment and fidelity.
- The aim of the book is to glorify true love which remains steadfast even in the most dangerous and seductive situations.³¹ If God created sexuality, why should the church stumble at the presence in her inspired canon of a song extolling the dignity and beauty of human love and sexual attraction?

OUTLINE⁴

I. The Courtship: “Leaving” (1:2–3:5)

A. The Lovers’ Remembrances (1:2–2:7)

B. The Lovers’ Expression of Reciprocal Love (2:8–3:5)

II. The Wedding: “Cleaving” (3:6–5:1)

A. The Kingly Bridegroom (3:6–11)

² <https://purelypresbyterian.com/2016/08/01/the-allegory-of-the-song-of-solomon/>

³ James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 831.

⁴ <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB22/song-of-solomon>

B. The Wedding and First Night Together (4:1–5:1a)

C. God’s Approval (5:1b)

III. The Marriage: “Weaving” (5:2–8:14)

A. The First Major Disagreement (5:2–6:3)

B. The Restoration (6:4–8:4)

C. Growing in Grace (8:5–14)

Another approach

Song 1:1 - Title and authorship

Song 1:2-3:5 - Courtship: Sexual desire expressed but restrained (**Anticipation**)

Song 3:6-11 - Procession for the Marriage

Song 4:1-5:1 - Marriage consummated: Sexual desires not restrained (**Consummation**)

Song 5:2-8:4 - Maturation in marriage (**Celebration**)

Song 8:5-7 - Conclusion

Song 8:8-14 - Epilogue

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

- All 117 verses in Solomon’s Song have been recognized by the Jews as a part of their sacred writings.
- Surprisingly, God is not mentioned explicitly except possibly in 8:6.
 - “Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol; Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.” (NASB)
 - “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.” (NKJV)
- No formal theological themes emerge. The NT never quotes Solomon’s Song directly (nor Esther, Obadiah, and Nahum).
- In contrast to the two distorted extremes of ascetic abstinence and lustful perversion outside of marriage, Solomon’s ancient love song exalts the purity of marital affection and romance.
- It parallels and enhances other portions of Scripture which portray God’s plan for marriage, including the beauty and sanctity of sexual intimacy between husband and wife.

- The Song rightfully stands alongside other classic Scripture passages which expand on this theme, e.g., Gen. 2:24; Ps. 45; Prov. 5:15–23; 1 Cor. 7:1–5; 13:1–8; Eph. 5:18–33; Col. 3:18, 19; and 1 Pet. 3:1–7.
- Hebrews 13:4 captures the heart of this song, “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

SOLOMONS THREE BOOKS

- Song of Solomon was written first.
 - The joy of a committed marriage and love between a man and his wife.
- Proverbs was second.
 - Watch out for married women and harlots, they are going to lead you astray and they are only going to bring death.
- Ecclesiastes was third.
 - No matter what you do, if it is done without God, it is futile.
 - All that the world has to offer, money, riches, wisdom, etc. is worthless and only God should be sought after.

VIEW OF INTERPRETATION

- There are five hermeneutical approaches which are commonly taken to interpret the Song of Songs.

Allegorical (most popular in history)

- For the first sixteen hundred years or so, the allegorical hermeneutic was the most popular. This method of interpretation allows for the reader (or interpreter) to subject his own thoughts and feelings upon the text to make the text say what he deems it to say.
- Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text.
- For the Jews, it was a picture of God’s love for their nation and the Christians saw it as His love for the church. To do this with this book is to take it out of the context of the Bible as a whole.
 - For centuries the Jewish people read the Song of Songs aloud in preparation for the Passover. In the Song of Songs they saw more than wisdom for marital living, they saw something of God’s covenantal love for his people, “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer” (Isa. 54:5).⁵

⁵ <https://www.9marks.org/article/songofsongs/>

- That means that if one applies special meanings to words in this book, they would be out of sync with the rest of those same words in Scripture.
- All things are possible to those who allegorize...and what they come up with is usually heretical

Typological

- Secondly is the typological interpretation which allows for a literal historical meaning of Solomon's love for the Shulammite woman, but often it is seen as a foreshadow of Christ's love for the church.
- This approach seeks to keep the literal sense of the text, avoiding the subjective approach. But, this interpretation can lead to missing the original message to the original hearers.
- This theory falls apart because Solomon is not a good representation of Christ because of all his wives and concubines. Also, there is nothing which asserts a typological interpretation.

Dramatic

- Thirdly is the dramatic theory. This theory posits that because there are dialogues between people, soliloquys or speeches from individuals and choruses which sing, it must be a drama.
- This drama would include at least two, but possibly three main characters. With the two-character scenario, it is the 'cinderella story' where the woman is an unnoticed beauty who is rescued by her 'prince charming.'
- The three-character scenario adds a common shepherd to the mix, making it a basic love triangle. The main issue with this view is there is no evidence that this book is a drama, one would have to read into it.

Literal-historical

- The fourth interpretation is the literal-historical view. This view will typically combine the dramatic view alongside a real-life romantic encounter in Solomon's life.
- This means the book is a literal account of Solomon and the woman.
- The main issue with this method is that there are no historical accounts to the Shulammite woman being a real person.

Love-song

- The final interpretation espouses the love-song view. This view does not see Solomon and his lover as real people in the story, but simply as representations of people in love.
- This view is primarily based upon extra-biblical resource material which also contains love poems and songs. The main weakness is the usage of 'king' to denote a male lover and 'queen' to denote the bride in the book as this is not common usage.

A Faithful Interpretation

- The Song has suffered strained interpretations over the centuries by those who use the “allegorical” method of interpretation, claiming that this song has no actual historical basis, but rather that it depicts God’s love for Israel and/or Christ’s love for the church.
- The misleading idea from hymnology that Christ is the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys results from this method (2:1).
- The “typological” variation admits the historical reality, but concludes that it ultimately pictures Christ’s bridegroom love for His bride the church.
- A more satisfying way to approach Solomon’s Song is to take it at face value and interpret it in the normal historical sense, understanding the frequent use of poetic imagery to depict reality.
- To do so understands that Solomon recounts 1) his own days of courtship, 2) the early days of his first marriage, followed by 3) the maturing of this royal couple through the good and bad days of life.
- The Song of Solomon expands on the ancient marriage instructions of Gen. 2:24, thus providing spiritual music for a lifetime of marital harmony. It is given by God to demonstrate His intention for the romance and loveliness of marriage, the most precious of human relations and “the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7).
- The allegorical view does not see any of the song as historical fact concerning King Solomon. It is entirely a picture of the love between Christ and the Church.
- In the 19th century, theologians began to favor a non-allegorical view. Most commentaries and preachers that you will find today favor a non-allegorical view (e.g. R.C. Sproul, Keith Mathison, John Piper, John MacArthur, Tremper Longman, etc.).

Some interpretations throughout the years.

- “Other books of Solomon lie more obvious and open to common understanding; but, as none entered into the holy of holies but the high priest (Lev. 16:2; Heb. 9:7), so none can enter into the mystery of this Song of songs, but such as have more near communion with Christ. Songs, and specially marriage songs, serve to express men’s own joys, and others’ praises. So this book contains the mutual joys and mutual praises between Christ and his church.” Richard Sibbes, *The Love of Christ*
- Many reformers and puritans believed in singing the Psalms exclusively, but James Durham makes the case for singing the Song of Solomon in worship.
- The main reasons are because God inspired it as the greatest of all songs and because it is about the love between the church and her Lord, therefore meant for it to be sung.
- George Burrowes says, “It is an allegorical illustration of the operations of love in the bosom of the saint and of the Redeemer” (A Commentary on the Song of Solomon (1853), pg. 32).

- Matthew Poole (1624–1679) says that the mysteries in this song are “breathing forth the hottest flames of love between Christ and his people; most sweet, and comfortable, and useful to all that read it with serious and Christian eyes.”
- The Westminster Assembly also held to this interpretation. In the Assembly’s commentary of the Bible, the song is explained this way:
 - “...look upon it, as generally it is acknowledged, that is, not as an history, or prophecy (as some conceive it) but as a divine Parable, wherein naturall and visible things allegorize things supernaturall, and under the figures of Solomon and his Love, is shadowed the true Prince of peace, and his rich affections to his Church and people.”
- G. Campbell Morgan offers a balanced view - "The song should be treated first as a simple and yet sublime song of human affection. When it is thus understood, reverently the thoughts may be lifted into higher values of setting forth the joys of communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the church and Christ. Therefore, I can sing the Song of Solomon as setting forth the relationship between Christ and His bride."⁶
- The Early Church Father Origen wrote 12 volumes allegorically explaining the Song.
- Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) died after he had delivered eighty-six sermons on the book and only reached the end of the second chapter. Clairvaux's disciple Gilbert Porretanus carried forward the allegorical absurdity for 48 sermons only to reach Chapter 5:10 before he died.
- Another classic example of allegory is 7:2a which reads “Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.” According to some allegorists, this represents the sanctuary of a church where the communion “wine” is always present.⁷
- The early Christians considered this book dangerous. Jerome once wrote a letter to his disciple Paula to give her a Bible reading plan for her daughter’s proper education. She should start with the Psalter, then proceed to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. The Gospels should come next, then Acts and the Epistles. She should then study the prophets, the Pentateuch and Old Testament historical books. “When she has done all these she may safely read the Song of Songs but not before: for, were she to read it at the beginning, she would fail to perceive that, though it is written in fleshly words, it is a marriage song of a spiritual bridal. And not understanding this she would suffer from it.”⁸

⁶ https://www.preceptaustin.org/song_of_solomon_commentary

⁷ James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 827.

⁸ Ibid.

WHO WAS THE SHULAMMITE WOMAN?⁹

- Some speculate that it was Abishag, a young Shunammite who served King David in his old age (1 Kings 1:1–4, 15; 2:17–22). It is plausible that Abishag is the Shulammite; we know she was from Shunem, which could be the same place as Shulem.
- Also, as David's servant, Abishag would have been known to David's son, Solomon. Solomon's half-brother Adonijah attempted to have Abishag as his own wife, and Solomon prevented the union (1 Kings 2:13–25).
- Solomon uses passionate language to describe his bride and their love (Song 4:1–15). Solomon clearly loved the Shulammite—and he admired her character as well as her beauty (Song 6:9). Everything about the Song of Solomon betrays the fact that this bride and groom were passionately in love and that there was mutual respect and friendship, as well (Song 8:6–7).
- This points to the fact that the Song of Solomon is the story of Solomon's first marriage, before he sinned by adding many other wives (1 Kings 11:3). Whoever the Shulammite was, she was Solomon's first and truest love.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION¹⁰

- Our world is confused about marriage. The prevalence of divorce and modern attempts to redefine marriage stand in glaring contrast to Solomon's Song. Marriage, says the biblical poet, is to be celebrated, enjoyed, and revered. This book provides some practical guidelines for strengthening our marriages:
 - Give your spouse the attention he or she needs. Take the time to truly know your spouse.
 - Encouragement and praise are vital to a successful relationship.
 - Enjoy each other. Plan some getaways. Delight in God's gift of married love.
 - Do whatever is necessary to reassure your commitment to your spouse. Work through problems and do not consider divorce as a solution.
 - God intends for you both to live in a deeply peaceful, secure love.

⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Shulammite-woman.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Song-of-Solomon.html>