

Song of Solomon: *the Best of all the Songs*

A song for lovers.

Song of Solomon is called by the author "The Song of Songs," which means it is the most superlative, or best, of songs. Jack Deere says, "As a superlative the title may mean that this is the best of Solomon's 1,005 songs or, more likely, that this is the best of all songs. You will also see it referred to as "Canticles" taken from the Latin translation of the first word. This poem heads the list of five shorter scrolls known as the *Megilloth*. "Song of Songs" implies that this song is the choicest of all songs.

AUTHOR: The poem claims Solomon as its author (1:1), and ancient Jewish tradition ascribes it to him. The title in the Hebrew text ascribes the poem to Solomon. However, the relative pronoun employed in the title is different from that employed throughout the poem. The name of Solomon is prominent in the book (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11f). The writer is referred to as the king in 1:4, 12; 3:9, 11; 7:5. The book speaks of royal luxury and abundance, which the king would have enjoyed (1:12, 13; 3:6, 7-10; 6:12). Solomon could easily have written it since he authored 1005 songs (I Kings 4:32). Hebrew grammatical peculiarities found only in this book, and similar expressions and figures of speech suggest a single author. Modern scholarship questions the Solomonic authorship saying, "the book is about Solomon rather than by him." This is mainly from linguistic arguments, but there is little agreement among those who hold this theory. Verse 1:1 may be translated, "The Song of Songs which is about or concerning Solomon." However, there is no compelling reason for not accepting Solomon as the author.

DATE: If Solomon is the author the date would be about 965 B.C. The geographical references favor a date before 930 B.C. Gleason Archer, Jr. says, "The author mentions quite indiscriminately localities to be found in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms: Engedi, Hermon, Carmel, Lebanon, Heshbon, and Jerusalem. These are spoken of as if they all belonged to the same political realm. Note that Tirzah is mentioned as a city of particular glory and beauty, and that too in the same breath with Jerusalem itself (6:4). Tirzah would not have been mentioned in such favorable terms if this song had been written after the time the Kingdom divided when the city was chosen as the earliest capital of the Northern Kingdom. Judging from internal evidence, then, the author was totally unaware of any division of the Hebrew monarch into North and Southern, and would place the composition of the song some time before 931 B.C. Those who deny Solomonic authorship place the book much later. It is reasonable that Song of Solomon was written in the tenth century B.C. during king Solomon's reign (971-931 B.C.)"

STYLE: The book is lyric poetry, with a touch of dramatic spirit, and vivid descriptions of physical charms, which were an example of the love songs in wedding feasts in Bible lands. John R. Sampey notes: "It is not properly classed as drama, for the Hebrews had no stage, though much of the Old Testament is dramatic in spirit. The descriptions of the charms of the lovers were to be sung or chanted." It is a poem of love. Who the lovers are is the subject of keen debate in our time. The Song of Solomon discloses all the secret intimacies of wedded life without becoming obscene. The Oriental mind sees nothing improper in the intimate descriptions. The language of this beautiful song is considered eminently chaste.

The mode of expression is peculiarly Eastern. It is full of gorgeous colors, and high figures of speech. It is full of human interests. "The cool, calculating, mechanical man who dislikes this book has never been in love, and probably never will be."

It is a book of love. "I find that it reveals much concerning the nature of love which is of supreme importance. The foundation of love is laid bare. The strength of love is revealed. The methods of love are indicated. The experience of love is described," writes G. Campbell Morgan.

Jack Deere has skillfully argued that this book is not an anthology of unrelated love songs, but a unified whole. "The same characteristics are seen throughout the book (the beloved maiden, the lover, and the daughters of Jerusalem)."

PURPOSE: The book presents a healthy view of physical love within marriage. It demonstrates faithfulness between married lovers as worthy of a place in the Scriptures. Many Jews and Christians have drawn spiritual strength from

this song. However, there is no indication that the author thought of what he wrote in any other sense than literal. The book affirms God's design for sexuality between man and woman after marriage.

CANONICITY: There is no quotation from it in the New Testament. Its canonicity was debated as late as the Synod of Jamnia (c. 90 A.D.). Sections from Song of Songs were sung at certain festivals in the Temple at Jerusalem, prior to its destruction by Titus in 70 A.D. There is good evidence that it was included in the *Kethubhim* before the ministry of Jesus, and was for Him a part of the Scriptures. It entered into the canon because it celebrated the mysteries of human love expressed in the marriage festival. The Hebrew Scriptures were probably originally canonized into a two-fold division as the Law and the Prophets. By the second century B.C. a third division was added making the Hebrew Scriptures the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

THREE MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS

Allegorical Interpretation: The Jews rabbis viewed the poem as an allegory, presenting the Divine Lover, Jehovah, and His beloved bride, Israel. They taught that the poem celebrates a spiritual love. Nearly every verse was made to have a symbolic meaning revealing many details in Jewish history. It was read publicly at the Passover Feast, which celebrates Jehovah's choice of Israel to be His spouse. Rabbis preached from the book on the love of God for His people.

Origen introduced the allegorical interpretation into Christian thinking by changing the application from the history of Israel to Christ and His Church. He represented the bride as the church or the soul of the believer. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote 86 sermons on the first two chapters of Song of Solomon. Christians found it easy to follow the Jewish allegorical interpreters since the figure of wedlock is employed in the New Testament by Paul and John to represent the intimate and vital union of Christ and His church (II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9ff). The entire body of true believers is conceived of as the bride of Christ. No contemporary Christian scholar accepts the allegorical extremes of Origen.

John R. Sampey made these observations regarding allegorical interpretation: What justification is there for the theory that Canticles is an allegory of love between Jehovah and His people, or of the love of Christ and the church, or of the love of the soul of the believer and Christ? It must be frankly confessed that there is not a hint in the Song itself that it is an allegory. . . . In the forefront of our answer we must recall the fact that the great prophets frequently represent the mutual love of Jehovah and Israel under the symbolism of marriage (Hos. 1-3; Jer. 3; Eze. 16; 23; Isa. 50:1; 54:5, 6). ”

Care in interpretation must be taken because allegorical interpretation requires a spiritual counterpart for every physical detail in the song. It is objectionable to equate Solomon and his harem to Christ and his church. Moreover, the allegorical approach is subjective with no way to verify that any of the interpretations are correct. The Song of Songs nowhere gives an interpreter that suggestion that it should be understood as an allegory, observes Deere.

Typical Interpretation: The poem presents the courtship and marriage of Solomon with the background essentially historical and the words literal. In types, mystical meaning for every detail is not required as in the allegory. The love of Solomon and the bride are seen as typical of the love of Christ and His church. The love of marriage is made to illustrate the love between Christ and His Bride. Compare the New Testament picture of Christ and His Bridegroom in Ephesians and Revelation. According to John R. Sampey, Delitzch is perhaps the ablest of the typical interpreters.

Historical Interpretation: The poet sings of praises of true love, and its joys in courtship and marriage. It is viewed as a literal love song, used to praise faithfulness in marriage. The Oriental mind sees nothing improper in the intimate descriptions of the poem. It is a historical record of the romance of Solomon with a Shulammitte woman. God created man and woman, and established and sanctioned marriage (Gen. 1:27; 2:20-24). It is refreshing to know that God has included a book in the Bible that gives His endorsement of marital love in a wholesome and pure presentation. What a striking contrast with the self-destructive life styles and philosophy in many societies. Andrew Hill and John Walton remind us, The Bible gives no place to premarital or extramarital behavior, whether heterosexual or homosexual (Exo. 20:14; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Matt. 5:27-28; Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:13, 18; Eph. 5:3). Scriptural warnings are plain enough: God will judge all who are sexually immoral (1 Cor. 6:9, 18-20; Heb. 13:4b). ”

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS:

Song of Solomon is rendered a worthy place in the Bible because marriage is to be regarded as a gift from God. The book is not rendered unworthy of a place in the Bible, unless marriage is to be regarded as a fall from a state of innocence. Sampey adds, "The two young lovers in Paradise need not fear to rise and meet their Creator, should He visit them in the cool of the day."

G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

The songs should be treated first as simple and yet sublime songs of human affection. When they are thus understood, reverently the thoughts may be lifted into the higher value of setting forth the joys of the communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the Church and Christ.

To take this view of the Song of Solomon is to recognize the supremacy of love. Human life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of man and woman. The supreme thing in religion is love between the soul and God. The highest realization of that supreme experience of love between God and the soul is created by Christ. In Him, God came near to man in order to woo him. In Him, man came to know God and to love Him. Therefore, I can sing the songs of Solomon, as did the mystics, as setting forth the relationship between Christ and His Bride.

In the first place, this was undoubtedly a love-song, but it was very pure and very beautiful. Morgan writes, "To those who live lives of simple purity, these songs are full of beauty, as they utter the language of human love; and finally, in spiritual experience, they express the relation of such as have been wooed by God in Christ, and thus have come to know and love Him. "

The Song of Solomon is a revelation of the true nature of human love, but it also unveils the highest religious experience.

The Song of Solomon illuminates "the original Divine purpose of love between man and woman as the basis of marriage. . . . That supreme and all-inclusive truth of the strength of love is illustrated throughout the whole of these songs" (Morgan).

"If this, then, is only a human love song, would to God that those who know its strength would sing it in the highways and byways, to recall men and women from superficial and frivolous thinking about love, to a true conception of its height and depth and beauty" (Morgan). Again, Morgan notes, "In the presence of the glory of love it warns them not to trifle with the most sacred thing in life."

"It is when we thus see the beauty of it in its first application that we discover how wondrously it flashes its light upon the vaster spaces, and inevitably becomes the unveiling of religious experience at its highest and best. I do not hesitate to affirm that I believe this was the ultimate intention of the writer. . . . If Solomon wrote of human love, he nevertheless sang before Jehovah" (Morgan).

The Hebrew prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the apostles Paul and John apply the principles of the marriage relationship to God and His intimate relationship with His people.

"Thou, O Christ, art all I want,
More than all in Thee I find."

That is a reminder of our satisfaction in an intimate relationship with Christ. "Even if today we fail to see the glory of His perfected work in us, it is nevertheless true that in His redeemed at last He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied. That mutual satisfaction is the very foundation of love. . . . I am satisfied in Him, and He is satisfied in me; not in me as I now am, but in that which He will make me, in that which I shall be, when His work is perfected in me" (Morgan).

"Our love to Him has the same note of intensity in proportion as we yield in whole-hearted abandonment to the appeal of His. His love of us is ever that of the overshadowing and protective One."

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