

## Comment on the Song of Solomon

### LOVE POETRY IN THE BIBLE

Some people wonder what place the Song of Solomon has in the Bible. Many people seem to consider that love poetry is somehow unworthy of God's Word. On the one hand, Jesus said that the Old Testament Scriptures testify to Him, Perhaps we wonder how this fits in. On the other hand, the Song of Solomon is not quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Most people agree that it belongs to the class of Old Testament writings called "Wisdom Literature", like Proverbs. Proverbs 5: 15-20 is similar, at least. The word for "wisdom" in Hebrew is feminine, and it has been easy to understand the feminine voice, the beloved, in the Song of Solomon as an invitation to people to be drawn to God in the subtle and mysterious ways in which a man is drawn to a woman. Many theologians have tried to interpret the book as an allegory of Jesus Christ's relationship to His church. Mystics have tried to understand the book allegorically as a dialogue between an individual's soul and Christ. The communion hymn "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness" takes its imagery from the Song of Solomon in this way.

The simplest way to understand the book is joyful acceptance that God endorses love in marriage as part of His creation, which He has pronounced good. The Song of Solomon celebrates a loving relationship in all its physical and emotional beauty. For example, the gazelle (SSol 2:8) is known for its form and beauty. The sensuous aspects of love are compared to a gazelle "browsing among the lilies."

More-recent translations of the Bible make the text easier to understand by inserting who is speaking each section, with sub-headings such as "The beloved", "The lover" and "Friends."

These inspired words of Scripture express the charm and beauty of one of God's choicest gifts. God intends love within marriage to be exalted as a precious part of His creation. This love is exclusive. The beloved says, "My lover is mine and I am his" (SSol 2:16). This love is characterised by strong desire. The lover tries to catch sight of his beloved while she is preparing herself for their meeting. This love has a spontaneous quality. The loved person says, "I charge you... do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." This love is very aware, like the awareness of a new mother, who sleeps with an ear open to her baby's slightest whimper (SSol 5:2).

The love poetry in the Song of Solomon is subtle, and avoids any hint of crudeness. It uses indirect comparisons to aspects of nature that are beautiful, in food, drink, cosmetics, and jewellery. The beloved compares herself to a garden with tasty fruits, which invites a lover to feast. There is a string of references to the first signs of spring, and these are regarded as the time of love: "For look! The winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The blossoms have appeared on the ground, the time of singing has come, and the cooing of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has been sprouting her green figs, and the blossom-clusters on the grapevines have been giving out a fragrance. Get up, my love, my beautiful one, and come away!" (SSol 2:11-13).

In many places, a string of similes and metaphors illustrates sensuous aspects of love: "Like doves by the water streams", "cheeks like beds of spice yielding perfume", "lips are like lilies", and so on.

Parts of the Song of Solomon picture the beloved as a shepherdess, who has to find out where her lover is by joining the shepherds in the fields.

Most people agree that 8:6-7 is the climax of the Song of Solomon: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on our arm; for love is as strong as death; its jealousy is as unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If a person were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned." The feeling of belonging is expressed by the reference to a seal. Seals were precious to their owners, and were very personal, rather like a person's name. The comparisons depict love as very strong. It is as intense as a blazing fire, and not even the ocean depths can overcome it. It is precious. No one can buy it with all his wealth; and nothing can be exchanged for it.

In this song of love, the beloved has the first word, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine." She also has the last word: "Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains." She is one who knows that she is loved, and she expresses her love in return.

The book refers to Solomon seven times as the author, and three verses refer to "the king." However, the Hebrew preposition for "of" in Song of Solomon" can mean "to" "for" (belonging to or ascribed to), as well as "by." 1 Kings 4:32 says that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs. The name "Shulammit", or "Shelomith" for the beloved (SSol 6:13) may mean "Solomon's girl."

In those days, brothers often functioned as guardians for their sisters, especially in arranging their

marriages. The beloved's brothers say, "If she is a wall, we shall build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we shall enclose her with panels of cedar" (SSol 8:9).

The Hebrews called this book "The Song of Songs." It means "The greatest song." It is a superlative expression, rather like "God of gods," "Lord of lords", and "King of kings."