

Song of Solomon

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The Song of Solomon or “Song of Songs” is a short poetic song describing the wonders of human love. It is sometimes called “Canticles”, based on the title of the book in Latin, *Canticum Canticorum*.

The Song of Solomon can be interpreted as

- a portrayal of King Solomon’s romance with a poor girl from the country.
- a description of God’s love for Israel and/or for the Christian church.

Although God is not mentioned and the song is primarily about Solomon’s love affair, it has great meaning for us when it is seen a picture of the relationship between Christ and His bride – the Church.

Author The book opens with *Solomon’s Song of Songs* (1:1). This indicates that it was probably written for or by King Solomon. Solomon lived between 970–930 BC. Jewish tradition says that he was the author of the Song of Solomon.

Type Wisdom literature. This type of literature uses poetry, songs, stories and writings to teach about God and provide wisdom for life. Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are other Old Testament books classified as wisdom literature.

An important principle to recognize when reading the Song of Solomon is that it is a story written more than 3000 years ago. As such, it represents the ideas of its writer, and the prevailing culture of the time. The words in the book should not necessarily be seen as the words of God!

The Song of Solomon is a love story about two people from long ago. This means we can’t take isolated verses from the Song of Solomon and say “This is the Word of God”. What we can do, though, is glean from the book much inspiration that can encourage our personal love for the Lord, and for those who are precious in our lives today.

Date No-one knows when the Song of Solomon was written. If Solomon was the author it must have been written sometime before his death in 930 BC.

Message The Song of Solomon is primarily a poem about the love between a man and a woman. It shows that human love is a desirable and beautiful thing; truly a gift of God.

In an age where human love has been cheapened and debased the message of the Song of Solomon is extremely relevant and powerful. Love and marriage are beautiful, wonderful, and desirable because they are designed by God, and because they are a foretaste of the wonderful marriage that will one day occur between the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Bride. Revelation 19:6-10.

Canonicity There has been more dispute regarding the canonicity of the Song of Solomon than for any other Old Testament book. Scholars have questioned whether it belongs in the Bible due to its subject matter (human love), unclear purpose, poetic form, and especially that it contains no reference to God, worship, the Law, or to anything spiritual. That it has been accepted as part of the canon of Hebrew and Christian Bibles is most likely due to the allegorical interpretations regarding God’s love that can be made based on the human love between Solomon and the Shulamite maiden.

Ways of interpreting the Song of Solomon

To gain benefit from the Song of Solomon we must interpret the story and its imagery. There are many different ways that the Song of Solomon has been interpreted. Here are some of the major ways:

The Song of Solomon as an allegory.

This is the most common way by which the Song of Solomon is interpreted. The rich human love between King Solomon and the Shulamite maiden is seen as:

- a picture of the love between God and His people, Israel. Jewish rabbis to this day interpret the Song of Solomon in this way. Every year the Song is read in synagogues during the Feast of Passover. (The Song mentions the beauty of springtime in 2:11-13, so it is appropriate that it is read during Passover, which is held every spring).
- a picture of the love between Christ and the church. This interpretation was first put forward by St Augustine (AD 354–430). He believed that the marriage referred to in the song was an allegory of the marriage between Christ and the church. This approach influenced the translators of the King James Version of the Bible (1611) who inserted chapter headings like “1. *The Church’s love unto Christ*” even though headings are not present in the original Hebrew.

Bible teacher, Judson Cornwall, wonderfully develops the theme of the love between Christ and His church in his book *Relationship: The Key to Fulfillment in the Song of Solomon*. Tapes in which Judson preaches through the Song of Solomon exegetically are truly outstanding, but sadly, hard to find these days.

Allegorical interpretations give the Song of Solomon much spiritual meaning, especially when King Solomon is seen as a type of Christ, and the Shulamite maiden is seen as a type of the church. (Perhaps this was the reason why the book was accepted as part of the canon of Scripture?). All allegorical interpretations, however, are built around meanings attached by the interpreter to characters, events, situations and relationships. The links, “types”, messages and symbolism that are developed from these meanings may or may not be valid as interpretations of Scripture and should be evaluated accordingly.

The Song of Solomon as a drama.

This approach to interpreting the Song of Solomon has also been around for a long time. It is strengthened by the fact that the Song reads like the script of a dramatic play with a cast that includes a Bride, a Bridegroom, and a group of supporters. The headings identifying the members of the cast are included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but may not have been part of the original Hebrew text.

A problem with this approach is that there is no evidence that drama was an art form used by the Hebrews. (It became popular later on as part of Greek culture). A possibility is that (like Job) the Song of Solomon may have been written as a piece of dramatic poetry – a love story.

The Song of Solomon as a collection of poems.

This widely held interpretation sees the Song of Solomon as a collection of songs celebrating human love. It interprets the book literally and sees the different sections as individual poems, not as part of one poem. (Just as the Book of Psalms is a collection of unrelated psalms). In this interpretation there may be up to 29 different songs in the “Song of Songs”, some being just one verse in length.

Key verses

His banner over me is love. 2:4

My lover is mine and I am his. 2:16

My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. He is altogether lovely. 5:10,16

Many waters cannot quench love. 8:7

The story of the Song of Solomon.

Once upon a time a beautiful country maiden developed a desire for King Solomon. When the King saw the maiden he fell in love with her and brought her to his palace. There he gradually won the maiden’s heart in a luxurious setting, with beautiful food and many loving words. Whenever the King was away the maiden missed him terribly, and the King longed to be with her. They were so much in love, often expressing their love through tender and heart-felt words and actions. In time, the two lovers were married and their love grew even deeper. They returned to the countryside where the maiden had come from and lived happily ever after!



Outline

Throughout the Song of Solomon readers are like eavesdroppers listening in to the conversations taking place between the characters. The NIV identifies these characters, primarily based on the gender of the words used.

- **Beloved** refers to the Shulamite maiden who became Solomon's lover. She came from the small town of Shulem and was a beautiful but ordinary country girl. She would never have expected to meet the King, let alone have a love relationship with him.
- **Lover** refers to King Solomon. 1 Kings 11:3 tells us that Solomon had *seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray*. While Solomon's life and example has done little to further the cause of faithful marriage, his expression of love for the Shulamite has inspired many in their marriage relationship.
- **Friends** refers to friends of the maiden or to ladies from Solomon's court.

This outline follows the divisions in the NIV. Other versions and interpretations may be quite different.

1:1. This is *Solomon's Song of Songs*.

1:2-7. The Shulamite desires King Solomon.

The Shulamite recognizes that she is a country girl and *dark, but comely*. While she is self-conscious about this she still cries out for her beloved: *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth - for your love is more delightful than wine*. Encouraged by her friends she wants to know where her beloved is so that she can be with him, and her intentions are clear: *Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends*. She wants an intimate relationship with the King!

1:8-17. Solomon and the Shulamite come together.

The friends tell the Shulamite where her lover is and they meet for the first time. The handsome King acknowledges the Shulamite's beauty and brings her into his palace. They have a meal and then come together as lovers. No longer separate they now have *our bed, our house and our rafters*.

2:1-7. Solomon and the Shulamite describe each other.

The King describes his maiden as being *like a lily among the thorns*, and the Shulamite describes the king as being *like an apple tree among the trees of the forest*. Their relationship is now one of awakening love, so much so that the maiden cries out that *his banner over me is love*, and charges the friends not to stop love's arousal.

2:8-13. The Shulamite calls on Solomon to come to her.

The young maiden watches as her beloved runs across the countryside. The *winter is past* and the new life of spring is emerging. In the same way their love is growing so she calls on him to come to her saying *Arise, come, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me*, and Solomon joins her

2:14-3:5. The lovers are separated.

When they are separated the King longs to see his beloved's face and hear her voice *for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely*. The maiden recognizes that her *lover is mine and I am his*, and she longs for him while he is away. When they got back together she *held him and would not let him go*.

3:6-11. Solomon's wedding procession.

The maiden observes as King Solomon approaches for their wedding. Solomon is surrounded by a procession of *sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel*. His carriage is beautifully made as is befitting of a king, and all the daughters of Jerusalem look on in wonder. *On the day of his wedding Solomon's heart rejoiced*.

4:1-5:1. Solomon praises his bride for her beauty.

Solomon uses many vivid metaphors to describe his beloved and her beauty. She has eyes *like doves*; hair *like a flock of goats*; teeth *like a flock of sheep just shorn*, lips *like a scarlet ribbon*, temples *like the halves of a*

pomegranate, a neck *like the tower of David*, and breasts *like two fawns*. She is *all beautiful*, and *altogether lovely*. There is *no flaw* in her! (Some of the metaphors Solomon uses may seem strange to us, but would have been meaningful in the culture of the day). He recognizes that his beloved's beauty was *like a garden locked up*, but is now released for all to see and is now *like a garden fountain*; like a *well of flowing water*. The maiden interrupts to invite her beloved to come in to his garden and taste its choice fruits, and he responds accordingly.

5:2-6:3. The Shulamite misses Solomon.

One day Solomon was out in his garden. The Shulamite's heart shrank at his departure and when she called for him he *didn't answer*. She asked her friends to inform him that she was *faint with love* for him. When the friends asked her why her beloved was better than others she describes him as *outstanding among ten thousand*, and *altogether lovely*.

6:4-7:9. Solomon again describes the Shulamite's beauty.

Solomon addresses his beloved saying *You are beautiful... Lovely as Jerusalem*. Once again he describes her beauty using a range of vivid metaphors. Each part of the maiden's body is exquisitely beautiful in his eyes. *How beautiful you are* he says, *and how pleasing, O love with all your delights*.

7:10-8:14. Solomon and the Shulamite reflect on their love.

The maiden now knows that *I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me*. They want to go into the countryside and give each other more of their love. Their relationship is now so close that it is *like a seal over the heart*; *like a seal on the arm, for love is as strong as death*. Nothing they go through can quench their love; *rivers cannot wash it away*. The maiden has become in his eyes *as one bringing contentment*.

The song finishes with the maiden's call for her beloved to *come away* with her, and we can imagine them tripping off together over the mountains filled with unquenchable love.

Discussion questions

What is wisdom literature? Why is the Song of Solomon classified as wisdom literature? What other books in the Bible are classified as wisdom literature? How does this influence the way we interpret these books as part of the Bible and as revelations of God's word?

What is the main theme of the Song of Solomon? How is this theme expressed in the relationship between Solomon and the Shulamite maiden? What can you learn from their relationship that can help you in your relationship with those you love?

Explain how the Song of Solomon could be an allegory for the relationship between God and His chosen people Israel, and for the relationship between Christ and the church. What do you learn from this about God and about God's love for His people?

Choose 10 favourite verses from the Song of Solomon. Explain why you like these verses and how they help you in your Christian life, and in your personal life and relationships.

What have you learned from your study of the Song of Solomon? How will you apply this in your life in future?