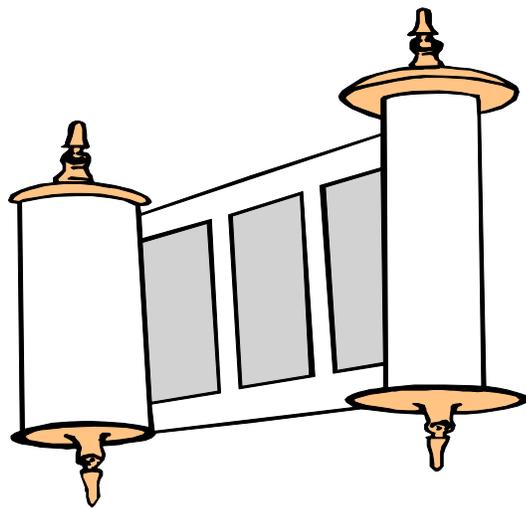


SONG OF SOLOMON



“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. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly destroyed.” (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

Lessons By: Rob Harbison

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author—Solomon (1:1). The story originates most probably in some event of his earlier life as king. Solomon was an avid songwriter (1 Kings 4:29,32).

Date—970-930 BC. Suggested date is 965-960 BC, before Solomon was drawn away from Jehovah by his 700 wives (cf. 6:8; 1 Kings 11:3-4).

Name Of Book—The Hebrew name, “*The Song of Songs*” is taken from 1:1 and is a way of expressing the superlative, making this the best or most exquisite of songs (whether Solomon’s or anyone else’s). As the “*song of songs*” (1:1) this one must have been the “*cream of the crop*.”

The more common title is “*The Song of Solomon*” which is also from 1:1. Sometimes the book is referred to as “*Canticles*,” which means a “series of songs” (Jensen) or “liturgical songs” (Webster). This is the name given by those who consider the book to be a series of love songs rather than a single, complete work.

Setting Of The Song—The peaceful settings in the royal court and throughout the countryside would suggest a period of peace and tranquility, which fits very well into the “golden age” of David and Solomon. Likewise, the mention of various mountains, cities, and geographical areas spread throughout Israel would suggest a time in Hebrew history before the division of the kingdom, after the conclusion of Solomon’s reign (931 BC).

The name “*Shulamite*” appears only once (6:13). The word is probably derived from the place called Shunem, which is just north of Jezreel, near the plain of Megiddo. It was located in the tribe of Issachar (Joshua 19:17-18; 1 Samuel 28:4; 1 Kings 1:3; 2 Kings 4:8).

Unique Characteristics Of The Book— It is one of the most misunderstood books in the Bible, and therefore, one of the most neglected. Written in the setting of a 3000 year old culture half a world away, we find many of the expressions confusing.

- The speakers and speeches are not identified by name in the song, which leads to various interpretations. We have the words without the settings identified.
- No other book emphasizes human love, between a man and woman, like this book.
- Only one direct reference to God is contained in the book (8:6), and that reference is not even found in the KJV or NKJV.
- No mention is made of sin, religion, or anything connected to the Mosaical law.
- The book is not alluded to by Christ, or quoted anywhere in the New Testament.
- The book is written especially to stir up feelings and emotions in God’s people (cf. 2:7; 3:5).

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SONG

The reason there are so many different interpretations of the Song is that the plot, backdrop, and speakers are not identified by name. Therefore, we must draw conclusions based on the setting, the tense of words, the gender of pronouns, and the overall feel of the Song.

The following four interpretations are the most widely accepted.

Anthology Of Love Songs— Some think of this Song as a collection of shorter songs of love. One source—Hannah’s Bible Outlines—sets the number at 13.

- *“Song of Songs is a short anthology of love poems of various lengths, sung by the bride, the bridegroom, and their friends”* (Pfeiffer, p.708).
- *“The book is an anthology of love lyrics and related poems rather than a collection of songs for a specific purpose, or a single lyrical or dramatic poem”* (Pfeiffer, p.711).

Allegory— Many believe the Song is an allegory, a non-historical story in which the characters represent some higher spiritual truth.

- *“An allegory is the description of one thing under the image of another. In an allegory we use the concrete to enforce the abstract, represent one thing in pictures or narrative in order to consider something else...”* (Griffis, pp.106-107).
- The Jews interpret the poem as setting forth Jehovah’s love for Israel as symbolized in other Old Testament passages (Isaiah 54:5-6; Jeremiah 3:1; Ezekiel 16:1-14; Hosea 1-3).
- Origen popularized the view among Christians that the Song prophetically represented Christ’s love for the church (Ephesians 5:22-33; 2 Corinthians 11:1-2; Revelation 19:6-9; 21:9). The details of the Song are subject to extravagant interpretations.

Typical—This view bridges a gap between more extreme positions. It holds that the story is historical, yet is a type, with the marriage of Solomon and the Shulamite foreshadowing the relation between Christ and the church in only a few conspicuous points. They see this explanation as justification for including an otherwise secular book in the canon of God’s holy word.

- *“The songs should be treated then, 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 for the joys of the communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the church and Christ.”* (Morgan, p.197).

Literal—The other prominent view holds that this is a real life story, representing human love without any higher complicated meaning.

One opinion is that there are two principle characters in the Song--Solomon and a Shulamite maiden. He woos her and wins her love and devotion, then she becomes the chief of all his wives and the real love of his life.

- *“The Song of Solomon deals with a love affair—I would guess, the one great love affair of Solomon’s life. Such an experience will be understandable if we assume that it took place when Solomon was yet a young man and before he glutted himself with wives and concubines. Reading the book in this light will leave us with mixed emotions—joy at the pure love between Solomon and Shulamith, but also a certain sadness at the tragedy of what Solomon must certainly have lost when he reached out for more. But even that tragedy ought to be instructive to us and make us wiser.”* (Mott, p.64).

A second opinion (and the one which guides this study) is that there are three principle characters in the Song—Solomon, the Shulamite maiden, and her shepherd-lover.

Solomon tries to charm her away from her shepherd with his money, power, and flattery. She is tempted by those outward trappings, but her heart remains loyal to the one true love of her life until she returns to him. Thus, the poem is made to address the triumph of pure love over lust.

- *“The poem is God’s commendation of true mating love and his condemnation of Solomon’s polygamy... Three principles lead me to accept this view: 1) The Bible is a complete book, and as such it must deal with all aspects of human experience. Mating love is a strong factor in life and unless this poem deals with it, it is omitted from God’s book. 2) The very structure and evidence of the poem. 3) If such a virtuous girl’s marriage to Solomon was the theme, then Solomon’s polygamy would be tacitly endorsed.”* (Hailey, p. 24).

Many people mistakenly claim that God endorsed polygamy and never condemned it among the kings of Israel. This Song—from the mouth of the most polygamous king ever—condemns polygamy and extols the virtues of monogamous marriage. Solomon shows himself to be the loser at love (8:7; cf. Ecclesiastes 7:28).

HUMAN SEXUALITY

Human Sexuality—Some people think that a literal view of the book, emphasizing passion and sensuality, is unworthy of any book that is included in the Scriptures. Such is the view of those who do not see the true beauty and purity of all of God’s creative acts—even the sexual act between husband and wife (Genesis 1:31; Hebrews 13:4).

- *“Although the poetic images are almost completely alien to modern tastes, the composition is never lewd or obscene, even by the standards of western civilization. In fact, Canticles reflects the traditional canons of sexual morality contained in the Mosaic law, and never countenances anything which could be described on such a basis as immorality. It reflects the traditions of Genesis 2:24... and its discussion of the whole range of the emotion of lovers is conducted at a high level of sensitivity and morality. The purity and beauty of human love as a divine gift is the dominant theme of the book.”* (ZPEB, Vol.5, p.493).
- *“The notion that Christianity views the body as evil and sex as nasty is traceable to religious folk who have mistakenly advanced such ideas and not to the Bible itself. The Bible has a very positive view of sexuality. It speaks candidly of the sexual nature of God’s human creatures (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:3-5; Hebrews 13:4). Song of Solomon encourages the cultivation of an exclusive (Song 4:12) and unconquerable (Song 8:6-7) attachment of two people to each other within legitimate marriage. It endorses physical love within this setting and makes sensuality and infidelity appear hateful.”* (Shelly, p.82).

Key Verses—*“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases”* (2:7; 3:5).

“My beloved is mine and I am his. He feeds his flock among the lilies.” (2:16; cf. 6:3).

“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. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised.” (8:6-7).

** The New King James Version was the text used for the outline and questions.

Text Analysis—The speaker and audience are identified according to the number, gender, and person of the Hebrew words (marginal note in NKJV translation).

The outline and synopsis of this lesson is taken from *Hailey’s Bible Class Notes—Wisdom Literature, Revised 1972*. Hailey in turn, follows William Elliott Griffis’ *The Lily Among Thorns*, and Albert Reville’s *The Song of Songs*, with a few variations.

ACT I – In The Royal Tents – Love Introduced

Chapter 1:1-3:5

SCENE 1

The Shulamite And The Daughters Of Jerusalem In The Royal Tent (1:2-8)

Shulamite (1:2-4a)

Daughters of Jerusalem (1:4b)

Shulamite (1:4c)

Daughters of Jerusalem (1:4d)

Shulamite (1:4e-7) [except for “*but lovely*” which is sung by chorus]

Daughters of Jerusalem (1:8)

Who does the Shulamite long for (1:2-4a)?

What does she think about her physical appearance (1:5-6a)?

Who does she blame for that condition (1:6)?

Who does she long to find (1:7a)? Where is she now, in contrast to where she would rather be (1:7b)?

What do the daughters of Jerusalem tell her about her choices (1:8)?

SCENE 2

Solomon And The Shulamite In The Royal Tent (1:9-2:7)

Solomon (1:9-10)

Daughters Of Jerusalem (1:11)

Shulamite (1:12-14)

Solomon (1:15)

Shulamite (1:16-2:1)

Solomon (2:2)

Shulamite (2:3-7)

What does Solomon see in this young maiden (1:9-10,15; 2:2)?

How does he intend to treat her if she will become his (1:10)?

Even though she is now at the king’s table, what does she remember in response to these fragrances of love (1:12-14)?

Even though she is among the king's royal tents, what does she long for (1:16-17)?

What are the "rose of Sharon" and "lily of the valley" (2:1)?

How does Solomon view this woman (2:2)?

How does this woman view her lover back home (2:3)? How does he treat her (2:4)?

What does she feel even though she is a part of Solomon's royal procession (2:5b)?

What truth does this woman express about love (2:7)?

SCENE 3

The First Song Of The Shulamite--Reminiscence Of Her Lover's Previous Visit (2:8-17)

Shulamite (2:8-17)

Shepherd (2:10-14) [she remembers how he spoke to her]

What does the maiden remember vividly (2:8-9)?

What does her beloved ask of her (2:10-13)?

What does the maiden mean to her beloved (2:14)?

What does the maiden need her beloved to do (2:15)?

Describe the relationship between this woman and her beloved (2:16)?

How did she respond to him the last time he came to her (2:17)?

Do you think she is having any regrets in Solomon's presence? What is she being torn between?

SCENE 4
In A Dream, The Shulamite Finds Her Lover (3:1-5)

Shulamite (3:1-5)

Where does she next see her beloved (3:1)?

Why is she troubled (3:1b-3)? What did she do?

How did she respond to him when she saw her beloved (3:4a)?

Where did she take him (3:4b)? What did she want to show him there? How did she want to show it to him?

What can other people never do (3:5)?

ACT II – The Royal Procession Entering Jerusalem

Chapter 3:6-11

SCENE 1

The Royal Procession Entering Jerusalem (3:6-11)

First Citizen (3:6)

Second Citizen (3:7)

Third Citizen (3:8-10)

Chorus Of People (3:11)

Describe the royal procession of Solomon.

What do we see in Solomon's home which is in stark contrast to the maiden's pastoral home?

What can such outer trappings stir up in many women (3:10b)?

What is the purpose of this procession into Jerusalem (3:11; cf. Isaiah 61:10)?

ACT III – In The Royal Palace – Love Tested

Chapter 4:1-8:4

SCENE 1

Solomon's Second Effort To Woo The Shulamite (4:1-5:1)

Solomon (4:1-5)

Shulamite (4:6)

Shepherd (4:7-15)

Shulamite (4:16)

Shepherd (5:1)

What do you see that is characteristic of Solomon's praise of the maiden (4:1-5)? What does he see in her?

Where is the Shulamite's mind (4:6; cf. 2:17)?

Who does she find there as she pictures this scene in her heart (4:7-8)?

Compare the words her shepherd-lover speaks (4:7-15) with the words Solomon speaks (4:1-5). They begin the same, but do these two men see the same thing in this young woman? What, if anything, is the difference?

What does the phrase "my sister, my spouse" illustrate about the shepherd's feelings for this maiden (4:8-12)?

What has this maiden done to her shepherd (4:9)? What do her eyes do to him (cf. Proverbs 15:30)?

What does the shepherd desire more than the Shulamite's love (4:9-11)?

What has she guarded by locking her garden and shutting up her spring (4:12; cf. Proverbs 5:15-19)?

How does the shepherd describe the love of his life (4:12-15)?

What is she saving for him (4:16)?

What does he express to her that he has found in her love (5:1a)? What does he admit to other people that he has found with her (5:1b)?

Is the kind of sexual love that Solomon has been proposing pure in God's sight? What about the kind of love that the shepherd is proposing? What is the difference?

SCENE 2

Second Dream Of The Shulamite (5:2-6:3)

Shulamite (5:2-8)
Chorus of Ladies (5:9)
Shulamite (5:10-16)
Chorus of Ladies (6:1)
Shulamite (6:2-3)

What is the essence of her second dream (5:2-8)?

How was this dream (5:2-8) different from her first dream (3:1-5)?

How long has he been looking for his maiden (5:2b)?

Why does she not come to him (5:3)? What do you think has clouded her thinking?

What did it take to turn her heart back to him (5:4-5)?

Now her feelings have overcome Solomon's allurements, but what may have already happened (5:6)? Can she go to her shepherd (5:7)?

What did the watchmen do in her first dream (3:3-4)? What do they do in this dream (5:7)? What will obviously happen if she marries Solomon?

Has she lost the best thing that ever happened to her (5:8)?

She asks the daughters of Jerusalem to take a message to the shepherd. They wonder what is so special about him (5:9). How does she describe him (5:10-16)?

What else do lovers need to be to one another (5:16b)?

Where has her beloved gone (6:1-2)? Where will she have to go if she wants to be with him?

Can love be one-sided (6:3)?

SCENE 3

In The Palace—Solomon’s Third Attempt To Win the Maiden (6:4-8:4)

Solomon (6:4-9)

Chorus of Ladies (6:10)

Shulamite (6:12)

Chorus of Ladies (6:13a)

Shulamite (6:13b)

Chorus of Ladies (7:1-5)

Solomon (7:6-9a)

Shulamite (7:9b-8:4)

Has Solomon come up with any new lines (6:4-7; cf. 4:1-5)?

How does Solomon view the maiden (6:8-9)? How does her shepherd view her?

The wives and concubines are impressed with her beauty—what more do they want to know about her (6:10)?

How did this maiden say she got involved with Solomon (6:11-12)?

Now she is beginning to understand the attention of Solomon and his court. What does she do now that her eyes have been opened (6:13a)? What does she realize they want from her (6:13b)?

What do these queens and maidens praise about the Shulamite (7:1-5)?

What do these women know about Solomon’s reaction to her beauty (7:5b)?

What does Solomon finally show that he wants from this maiden (7:6-9a)?

*In his **lust** Solomon wants to have sex with her, but in her **love** she has decided she is going to save that for someone else—who (7:9b-10)? In contrast, what does her shepherd want from her (7:10b)?*

To what extent does she long to give herself to her shepherd-lover in marriage (7:10; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2-4)?

What does lovemaking between a husband and wife tell one another (sometimes more powerfully than words) (7:9b-10)?

What does the maiden finally see that she wants more than anything (7:11-13)?

What had her mother's love taught the Shulamite and the rest of her family (8:1-2; cf. Psalm 22:9; Isaiah 66:11-13)? What did she hope she would find in her new husband?

Did Solomon grow up in that kind of loving home (2 Samuel 11:2-12:24; 1 Kings 1:1-53; 2:13-25)? What could he possibly know about love and tenderness?

What did she find in her shepherd's loving embrace (8:3-4)?

ACT IV – In Issachar – Love Victorious

Chapter 8:5-14

SCENE 1

The Shepherd Lover And The Shulamite Approaching Their Mountain Home (8:5-7)

Chorus of Country People (8:5a)

Shepherd (8:5b)

Shulamite (8:6-7)

Has the Shulamite been dreaming of all the events in this story (8:5b)? Or does the shepherd mean he has awakened her affections for him? Whether a dream or real—what have these events reaffirmed for her?

What are the three lessons the Shulamite teaches us about love (8:6-7)?

- 8:6—
- 8:7a—
- 8:7b—

What does jealousy do to a person (8:6)? Why is it a foolish thing to attempt to make someone whom you love jealous? Do we do it though?

SCENE 2

The Bride And Her Brothers (8:8-14)

First Brother (8:8)

Second Brother (8:9)

Shulamite (8:10-12)

Shepherd-Husband (8:13)

Shulamite (8:14)

What do her brothers think they should do about their younger sister (8:8-9)?

What do they mean by describing her as a “wall” (8:9a)? What will they be able to do with her then?

What do they mean by describing her as a “door” (8:9b)? What will they have to do with her then?

Which kind of woman is the Shulamite (8:10)? How had she proven it (8:11-12)?

Solomon has wealth and prosperity, but what does she have (8:11-12)?

Do the Shulamite and the shepherd want to delay any longer in their commitment to one another (8:13-14)?

Does this story have a happy ending? For everyone?

THE BEAUTY OF LOVE

Praise Of Fidelity—It is sad to consider the pitiful King Solomon who with 700 wives could not buy real love... and with all he had, could not induce a young maiden to leave the poor man she really loved (8:7b; Ecclesiastes 7:28). Rather than being able to experience that kind of love, he had to learn about it “second hand.”

- *“It is the contest between the fidelity which is inspired by true love and the allurements of flattered vanity that the interest of the drama consists.”* (Reville, p.21).
- *“The Song does celebrate the dignity and purity of human love. This is a fact which has not always been sufficiently stressed... It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble pure love is.”* (Young, p.336).

Censure Against Lust—*“In the aftermath of Solomon’s polygamy, this song was produced as a censure on lust, polygamy, and infidelity. In the context of Solomon’s political marriages, the Shulamite taught him the beauty of monogamous love.”* (Shelly, p.80). A love he never found for himself!

Teachings About Love—This song teaches us the divine model of human love. Love and marriage are blessings for man to brighten his gloomy life (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Human and sexual love, in marriage, are pure and beautiful creations of God (Hebrews 13:4). Married couples need to express their love and appreciation for one another.

- Love Is Spontaneous (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). It cannot be bought or be excited by unnatural stimuli. It cannot be sparked through flattery, compliments, or gifts. Real love—without explanation—just happens. Solomon tried to buy her love but could not (8:7).
- Love Is Based On Mutual Satisfaction (2:16; 6:3; 7:10). The love of one supplements the love of the other, and serves to exclude the love of anyone else.
- Love Is Strong (8:6-7). It is an unconquerable force. Its grip is as strong as the grip of death and is an unquenchable fire that burns in one’s heart.

CHRIST IN THE SONG OF SOLOMON

Christ In The Song Of Solomon— Are there any references or allusions to Christ in this book? Since all of Scripture ultimately points to Christ, we might expect to find some higher fulfillment of the lessons of this book in the love of Christ for the Church (Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:44).

“By its very presence in the Canon (for, in the last analysis, it is God who has put these books in the Canon, not man), it reminds us that God, who has placed love in the human heart, is Himself pure. In my opinion, we are not warranted in saying that the book is a type of Christ. That does not appear to be exegetically tenable. But the book does turn one’s eyes to Christ. This is certainly shown by the history of interpretation in the Christian Church. The book may be regarded as a tacit parable. The eye of faith, as it beholds this picture of exalted human love, will be reminded of the one Love that is above all earthly and human affections—even the love of the Son of God for lost humanity.” (Young, p.336).

Conclusion— *“But if the Song is primarily a love song, and not an allegory, what reason is there for its inclusion in the sacred Canon? In answer we would say that God has placed this Song in the Canon in order to teach us the purity and sanctity of that estate of marriage which he himself has established. When we read the Song of Solomon, our hearts will be purer, and we shall realize all the more the heinousness of that temptation which would lead to unfaithfulness among those who are married. Since the purpose of the book is not mere entertainment, but is ethical and didactic, we may understand why God has given it to us. For even the faithful servant of the Lord is tempted to break the seventh commandment. In the polygamous ancient world and in the sophisticated modern world, unfaithfulness may easily be regarded as something light and trivial... So long as there is impurity in the world, we need, and need badly, the Song of Solomon.”* (Young, pp.336-337).

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