

A Canticle of Delight:
An Analysis of the Interpretation of Song of Songs,

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Introduction

“Know, my brother, that you will find great differences in interpretation of the Song of Songs. In truth, they differ because the Song of Songs resembles locks to which the keys have been lost.”¹ These words of the rabbinic sage, Saadia, are a fitting introduction to the task of exploring the various interpretive methods of the Song of Songs. Virtually every aspect of interpretation (author, genre, structure, theology, etc.) elicits division amongst scholars. Are the readers of this ancient text then incapable of rendering any meaning? Are the intentions of the old poet(s) forever concealed from those seeking to unveil its beauty? This brief treatment is unable to answer these questions to the measure they require. However, the following analysis will survey and interact with the primary historical, literary, and theological aspects of the Song of Songs and conclude with personal remarks in light of the various perspectives.

At the outset, a few necessary presuppositions must be outlined. First, this work assumes that the Song of Songs is a part of the holy canon of Scripture.² Therefore, it is presumed to be inspired by God, inerrant in its content, and infallible in its guidance. These preliminary views will serve a necessary framework for the discussion that follows.

History of Interpretation

One of the earliest commentators on the Song of Songs is Rabbi Aqiba who famously said, “God forbid! – no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the

¹ Quote taken from Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 21.

² It is recognized that the canonicity of Song of Songs has been a major debate by both Jewish and Christian scholars, however it is not the aim of this work to treat that matter.

Holy of Holies.”³ Aqiba penned this sentiment c. 100 A.D., and as will be discussed later, it is most reasonable to date the Song of Songs no later than the Persian period. That indicates that there are only the scantest hints as to how the earliest readers of this book would have interpreted it.⁴

The early church fathers, by vast majority, interpreted the Song of Songs allegorically. Bernard of Clairvaux, in one of his many sermons on the Song of Songs explicitly stated his allegorical interpretation in these words, “From there I had only one anxiety, to bring to light from the dense obscurity of these allegories the secret delights of Christ and the Church.”⁵ It is evident that Bernard saw his interpretive task as that of finding Christ and the Church within the text of Song of Songs.

The allegorical interpretation would continue beyond the patristics and would be the dominant hermeneutic until the middle of the nineteenth century.⁶ Even during the Reformation, with all of its hermeneutical and theological progress, theologians would largely utilize an allegorical method of handling Song of Songs. Matthew Henry, writing in the early eighteenth century, states this concerning the Song of Songs, “It is an allegory, the letter of which kills those who rest in that and look no further, but the spirit of which gives life. It is a parable, which makes divine things more difficult to those who do not love them, but more plain and pleasant to those who do.”⁷

³ Quote taken from Longman, *Song of Songs*, 21.

⁴ Longman suggests that the Septuagint translation shows no indication of allegorizing the text from the Hebrew to the Greek. He does, however, acknowledge that that is not a definitive reflection of the interpretive methods of the day. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 22.

⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. G. R. Evans, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 259.

⁶ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 34-35.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1056.

According to Tremper Longman III, the shift from the allegorical method to the literal interpretation is in part due to cultural transformation post Enlightenment, as well as developed hermeneutics stemming from archaeological advances that reached new heights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ The contemporary majority consensus today is to interpret Song of Songs in a literal manner. This literal hermeneutic is not the denial of rich meaning mined from the poetic devices of metaphor and imagery, but simply a rejection of words meaning something other than what they are.⁹

Cognate Love Poetry

As mentioned above, one significant factor in shifting from an allegorical interpretive method to a literal interpretive method has been the archaeological progress of the last two centuries. Excavations in the Ancient Near East have surfaced love poetry from the neighbors of Israel and is worth a brief word. If love poetry was a shared genre of literature, perhaps surveying samples of other nations' love poetry will shed light on how to study the Song of Songs, or how not to.

The *Nineteenth Dynasty Egyptian Love Poetry*, supplies a collection of about fifty fragments ranging from the thirteenth to the eleventh centuries B.C.¹⁰ These poems are monologues in their form and emphasize the sensual rather than the erotic.¹¹ Longman notes,

⁸ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 36-37.

⁹ An example of this would be Hippolytus' interpretation of the two breasts of the woman as the Old and New Testaments. This is an insertion of meaning without contextual indicators to make such a connection. See Longman, *Song of Songs*, 28.

¹⁰ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 83.

¹¹ Ibid.

regarding these Egyptian love poems, that they are characterized by speaking about one another rather than to one another.¹²

While Egypt provides examples of love poetry south of Israel, Sumerian and Akkadian love poetry has been discovered to the north of Israel. The Sumerian, *Dumuzi and Inanna*, is a collection of poetic and liturgical literature including love poems. Concerning the content of these texts, Walton says, “These texts relate to fertility and the sacred marriage rituals, and are known primarily from the Ur III period.”¹³ Sumerian poetry is more prevalent than Akkadian, however there are connections between Akkadian texts and the Song of Songs.¹⁴

In every direction from Israel, love poetry is found. Regarding this universality of a genre of literature, Longman insightfully notes,

The ancient parallels to the Song from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and India demonstrate that the language of love crosses national and linguistic boundaries. We are not suggesting any kind of direct borrowing of songs between these cultures, but there was likely an awareness of love songs from other countries, at least among the elite, similar to the awareness of wise sayings from abroad (1 Kings 4:29-34).¹⁵

While there is similarity in content, there is also a notable distinction between the Song of Songs and its cognate texts. The non-Hebrew love poetry tends to be monologue or description, and in the case of the Egyptian examples, is intended as entertainment whereas the Song of Songs is intended for teaching. The significance of exploring the cognate examples of love poetry surrounding Israel is to see that there is a precedence of the genre when the Song of Songs was written, and that there is a cross-cultural recognition of the value of the topic, yet there is an undeniable distinction of the Song of Songs that sets it apart as a unique work.

¹² Longman, *Song of Songs*, 50.

¹³ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 83.

¹⁴ Longman makes this case and treats each connection within his commentary as parallels arise. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 52-53.

¹⁵ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 54.

Authorship

The authorship of the Song of Songs has a significant role in the interpretive process. While it is not essential to know whether or not Solomon was the author, an interpreter's conclusion on the matter will invariably impact his or her understanding of the text's use of "Solomon", the "king", and the number of characters in the song (see *Literary Form* below for commentary on these issues).

Historically, Solomonic authorship has been affirmed. However, scholars note that the Hebrew *lamed* preposition is able to translated a number of ways. Longman offers the following translations that theoretically could be the use of the prefixed preposition, "To Solomon", "By Solomon", "Concerning Solomon", and "Solomonic".¹⁶ While Longman acknowledges the legitimate possibility of Solomonic authorship for some of the poems, he nevertheless concludes, "Fortunately, little is at stake in terms of authorship of these poems."¹⁷

Duane Garrett, though he does not hold the view, articulates the case for a later date of the book as evidenced by Persian and Greek loan words along with an Aramaic influence on the Hebrew.¹⁸ However, after articulating the case he concludes, "Linguistic evidence is not conclusive."¹⁹ Another perspective on authorship is that of feminine authorship due to the dominance of the female voice. A. Brenner, speaking of certain poems in the Song claims that they, "are so essentially feminine that a male could hardly imitate their tone and texture successfully."²⁰ While the discussion of authorship is difficult to make a conclusive defense

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 7. Longman suggests partial authorship because he holds to an anthology perspective. A topic that is treated under "Literary Form".

¹⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Vol. 14. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 348.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Quote taken from Longman, *Song of Songs*, 8.

upon one theory, as mentioned above and will be treated below, there are interpretive implications based upon one's stance.

Genre

There is obvious agreement that the primary genre of the Song of Songs is Hebrew poetry. It has all of the marks of poetry: terseness, parallelism, imagery, and even chiasmic structure at points.²¹ The debate ensues when secondary genres are proposed. The most common and agreed upon secondary genre of the Song of Songs is that of wisdom literature. However, what the wisdom is and how it is best understood is contested.

An allegorical interpretation will likely leap to the wisdom of God found in His covenantal love for His people. A literal interpretation will tend to emphasize the wisdom of God as found in His prescription for marriage and sexuality. Yet others, seeing the warrant of both perspectives will seek to harmonize both emphases arguing that they are not mutually exclusive but primary and secondary meanings. Norman Geisler would promote this latter perspective as he suggests a *historical purpose* teaching of the sanctity and beauty of marriage, a *doctrinal purpose* teaching love and oneness as God's ideal, and a *Christological purpose* teaching that Solomon's love for his bride is analogous to Christ's love for His bride, the Church.

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One quality of the Song of Songs that indicates that it is wisdom literature is the garden imagery replete throughout the book. Tracing the garden motif throughout the Old Testament and especially in the Song of Songs, Lloyd Carr states, "The strong eschatological note that runs through the Old Testament picks up this theme, for the great promises of God to redeem and

²¹ Each of these qualities are expanded on and defended by Longman. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 9-15.

²² Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977), 221.

restore his people are often presented in terms of the Edenic paradise, where gardens and vineyards become symbols of peace and security.”²³ Barry Webb agrees as he argues for distinct connection between the Song of Songs and Genesis 1-3 stating, “There are a number of ways in which this connection is suggested: by the tension between idealism and realism, in the Song, but the centrality of the garden motif, and especially by the way the Song as a whole resonates with the climax reached at the end of Genesis 2.”²⁴ The parallels between Song of Songs and the marriage ideal in Genesis 2:25 appeared so strong to Karl Barth that he viewed the Song as a poetic commentary on the verse.²⁵ If these connections are accurate between the Song of Songs and the creation narrative of Genesis 1-2, then the wisdom of the Song becomes evident in the creation ideal and original design that God intended in the marital covenant.

Literary Form

Another debated aspect of the Song of Songs is the literary form of the book. Is it an anthology of love poems sharing common features at times? Or is it a single drama? Suggesting an anthology, Longman discredits the dramatic approach as, “overly eisegetical.”²⁶ His preferred view is to “conclude that the Song is an anthology of love poems, a kind of erotic psalter.”²⁷ Carr makes, what may be an over exaggeration, as he claims, “Almost without exception, contemporary commentators reject the idea that the Song of Songs is a single composition.”²⁸ While Longman and Carr agree to an anthology perspective, both recognize that the divisions of

²³ G. Lloyd Carr, *Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 60.

²⁴ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 55.

²⁷ Ibid, 43.

²⁸ Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 47.

each individual song is extremely varied from commentator to commentator. In Longman's commentary he cites scholars who suggest six poems, fourteen poems, and even each verse as its own poem, while he argues for thirty-one poems.²⁹ Carr maintains that there are five main sections that are represented in the Song.³⁰

Contending for a single dramatic interpretation, Webb provides a thorough defense of the unity of the Song of Songs culminating in his statement, "Rightly understood, then, the Song is a single poem about a love relationship between two people, in which fantasy and reality, idealism and realism, are held together in a delicate balance."³¹ He suggests that the title indicates one single song, not a collection. He views the recurring refrain directed at the "Daughters of Jerusalem" as creating anticipation and suspense awaiting the climax. Webb sees the climax at the end as "anticipated consummation has been reached."³² Keil and Delitzsch agree stating plainly of the Song of Songs, "The Song is a dramatic pastoral."³³ They go on to suggest that the drama plays out in six acts.

While those who hold to an anthological perspective to the Song of Songs can easily avoid the dilemma of the male role, the dramatic perspective cannot. If the Song is one unit, then is it a two-character story between the male and female lovers? Or is there a male, a female, and Solomon? In part, one's conclusion will be impacted by whether or not Solomonic authorship is affirmed. Webb suggests that if one holds Solomonic authorship, then a two-character approach is common, Solomon and the Shulamite. However, if one is persuaded

²⁹ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 43.

³⁰ Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 47

³¹ Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 26.

³² Ibid, 22-26.

³³ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 502.

that Solomon is not the male lover due to the negative language surrounding Solomon in the Song, especially at the end where he appears to be characterized as someone who buys love, then Solomonic authorship is not necessary. In this three-character view, verse one would be considered in the wisdom tradition of Solomon not authored by Solomon.³⁴

Final Analysis

As the survey has thus far made apparent, the Song of Songs is a complex book with a variety of conclusions made about it. While it would be presumptuous to conclude with decisive convictions as if they were the final authority, it is nevertheless important that each interpreter make his or her own conclusions about the matters detailed above. Regarding authorship, it appears most conservative scholars agree on a pre-exilic time period that likely could be Solomonic. While the time period could likely be Solomonic, holding Solomonic authorship has literary tension. James Smith articulates the dilemma well stating,

Solomon is mentioned in the book seven times. This would seem to support the claims of the heading. Nonetheless, Solomonic authorship does present some problems. How does the love described in this book fit the picture presented in the historical books of a Solomon with many wives? Why does the book seem to look at Solomon at a distance? How is the rebuff of Solomon in 8:11–12 to be explained? These problems have caused some conservative scholars to argue for only a partial Solomonic authorship as in Proverbs. Other conservatives think the book is anonymous, but comes from the Solomonic period or shortly thereafter.³⁵

The conclusion of this work finds the best resolution to consider the Song of Songs as in the wisdom of Solomon, and allow for Solomon as author to be possible but inconclusive and likely not the case.

³⁴ Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 19.

³⁵ James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), So.

On the issue of genre, love poetry is an unquestionable element of the Song. The use of parallelism and imagery are indisputably evident. The use of the Hebrew cola is clear. What seems to be the matter is the presence and nature of wisdom genre. The garden motif and allusions back to the Genesis 2 marital design is a persuasive argument for creation wisdom being conveyed through poetic device, similar to that of Job.³⁶ The wisdom found in Song of Songs, in this opinion, is the joyful covenantal relationship of husband and wife as designed by God in the creation order. However, it is clear in Scripture that God relates to His people through the marriage metaphor and that there is therefore something to be learned about God's relation to His people by understanding the marriage covenant through the wisdom of the Song of Songs. This is not an allegorical interpretation, but an application of the wisdom of marriage applied to God's marital relation to His people. On a hermeneutical point, that means that the imagery and metaphor of the poetry in the Song should be understood through proper exegetical means; and then the truths discerned, that are first applicable to the human covenant of marriage, can be appropriately used to understand God's covenantal relationship with His people.

In response to the form, Webb proved most compelling in advocating for a single work with three-characters. The wide disparity of views of how to classify each poem amongst scholars who hold the anthological view brings question to the validity of the position. The heading indicating the singular song above all other songs indicates singularity, as well as the recurring characters and phraseology. Garrett reproduces R. L. Alden's chiastic structure in his commentary, which supports single unity and goes as follows,

- A 1:1-4a "Take me away"
- B 1:4b Friends speak
- C 1:5-7 "My own vineyard"
- D 1:8-14 "Breasts," "silver," "we will make"

³⁶ Keil and Delitzsch make the comparison of Job and Song of Songs as dramatic lyric poetry. Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 502.

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| E | 1:15–2:2 | “House” |
| F | 2:3–7 | “His left arm” “daughters of Jerusalem ... so desires,” “apple,” “love” |
| G | 2:8–13 | “Fragrance,” “come my darling,” “blossoming” |
| H | 2:14–15 | “Vineyards,” “show me” |
| I | 2:16–17 | “My lover is mine” |
| Ja | 3:1–5 | “The watchmen found me” |
| Jb | 3:6–11 | Description of carriage, “gold,” “Lebanon,” “daughters of Jerusalem” |
| Jc | 4:1–7 | Description of girl, “Your eyes ... hair ... teeth” |
| K | 4:8–15 | “Myrrh,” “spice,” “honey,” “honeycomb,” “wine,” “milk” |
| L | 4:16 | “Into his garden” |
| L’ | 5:1a | “Into my garden” |
| K’ | 5:1bc | “Myrrh,” “spice,” “honey,” “honeycomb,” “wine,” “milk” |
| Ja’ | 5:2–9 | “The watchmen found me” |
| Jb’ | 5:10–6:1 | “Gold,” “Lebanon,” “daughters of Jerusalem” |
| Jc’ | 6:4–11 | Description of girl, “Your eyes, ... hair ... teeth” |
| I’ | 6:2–3 | “My lover is mine” |
| H’ | 6:13–7:9a [10a] | “Vines,” “wine,” “that we me gaze on you” |
| G’ | 7:9b–13 [10b–14] | “Fragrance,” “come my darling,” “blossom” |
| F’ | 8:1–5 | “His left arm,” “daughters of Jerusalem ... so desires,” “apple,” “love” |
| E’ | 8:6–7 | “House” |
| D’ | 8:8–9 | “Breasts,” “silver,” “we will build” |
| C’ | 8:10–12 | “My own vineyard” |
| B’ | 8:13 | “Friends” |
| A’ | 8:14 | “Come away” ³⁷ |

This chiastic structure provides the unity that is often argued as missing from anthological proponents. In this structure, “Into his garden” is the climactic point of the poem, where the sexual oneness is at its height. If one considers the garden motif as significant to the Biblical theology of the book, then this chiastic structure proves quite useful in that regard as well.

The three-character approach is compelling because of the way the Song distances Solomon and in the coda, appearing to juxtapose Solomon’s “buying” love against the lovers’ monogamous covenantal love. While this is the approach advocated for here, it is acknowledged that it is a difficult conclusion to arrive at, with many scholars advocating for the two-character form.

Stephen Dempster makes this conclusion about the Song of Songs as he traces the development of theology throughout the Hebrew Bible,

Shorn of its literary context, the song could be almost pornographic. But the context of the canon both restricts the meaning to the context of marriage and expands it to include the relationship between Yahweh and Israel... There is the reminder of the passionate and fiery love that Yahweh had for his people before the crisis... The little text of the Song of Songs looks to the end of the larger Text, of which it is a part, when ‘Yahweh and His people are together and are one flesh’ (Barth 1958:315).³⁸

³⁷ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 375.

³⁸ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Perhaps this is why the Song of Songs became the liturgical reading during the Passover; because of the beautiful depiction of covenant love. The love expressed in the Song of Songs is more than knowledge, it is knowledge intertwined with blissful experiential joy. It is in this, that every interpreter can find common ground.

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