

*I am
my beloved's
and my beloved
is mine*
Song of
Solomon 6:3

The Anglican Parishes of Whittington, Weeford and Hints

*What the Lord requires of you is to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly
with your God*

The Love Song of Solomon

An Introduction to this sacred text



Whittington Parish, Hints, Weeford, Hints

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Song of
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Song of Solomon 2.10-13; 8.6,7

My beloved speaks and says to me:

'Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away;

for now the winter is past,

the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth;

the time of singing has come,

and the voice of the turtle dove

is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs,

and the vines are in blossom;

they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,



and come away.'

Set me as a seal upon your heart,

as a seal upon your arm;

for love is strong as death,

passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,

neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love

all the wealth of one's house,

it would be utterly scorned.



Introduction:

The Song of Songs (Shir ha-Shirim in Hebrew) is an unabashedly sensuous, even at times quite erotic, paean to love. Throughout its eight short chapters, an unnamed young man and young woman pursue one another through verdant fields and valleys lush with flowers. Their excitement to be together is palpable, captured in poetic stanzas like:

Behold my beloved, here he comes. He is leaping over the mountains, bounding through the hills. He is like a gazelle, a young stag ... and he calls to me: "Arise my darling, my perfect one, come away with me!" (*Song of Songs 2:8-10*).

Or this:

You have captured my heart, my own one, my bride. You have captured my heart, with one glance of your eyes, with one look at your décolletage. How sweet is your love, how much more delightful than wine! (*Song of Songs 4:9-10*)

The sheer delight this pair takes in one another can't help but stir in us memories of love's richness, especially when our lives were first touched with its magic. Indeed, the most famous line from the Song:

“Ani l’dodi, v’dodi li” – “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” (Song of Songs 2:16) are often the words on the lips of couples on their wedding day anticipating a life of loving partnership.



The Holy of Holies:

The **Song** of Solomon is called by the author "The Song of Songs," which means it is the best of songs.

You will also see it referred to as "Canticles" taken from the Latin translation of the first word.

For our Jewish brothers and sister, 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.

It is unsurprising, given the racy nature of the Song of Songs, that its inclusion in the biblical canon was a matter of some controversy. In fact, it seems that it would have been excluded from the Bible altogether, if it did not have a powerful champion: As the Sages debated which books were to be included in the Scriptures, it is said that Rabbi Akiva – certainly the greatest rabbi of his era (late first century, early second century) – weighed in that

"while all of the sacred writings are holy, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies!" (Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5).

The commentaries suggest that Rabbi Akiva's affinity for the Song of Songs stems from his metaphorical understanding of its contents, reading the Song as an extended allegory to the loving relationship between God and Israel. Indeed, the tradition of understanding the Song as a metaphor for the Divine Eros, rather than the human, would go on to deeply inform such mystical texts as the Zohar, as well as the writings of the philosopher and scholar Maimonides, who said:

What is the proper form of the love of God? It is that he should love

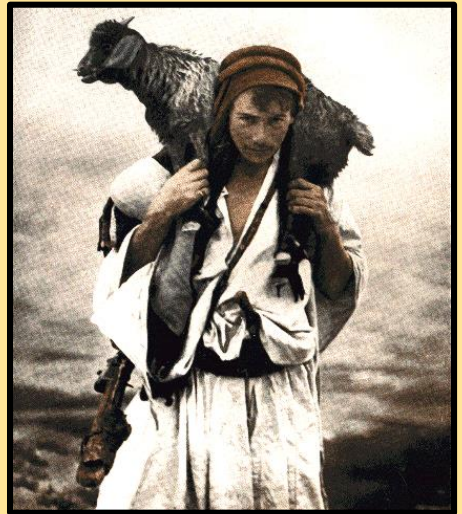
with a great, overpowering, fierce love as if he were love-sick for a woman and dwells on this constantly... And it is to this that Solomon refers allegorically when he says: 'For I am love-sick' (Song of Songs 2:5) for the whole of Song is a parable on this theme." (Hilchot Teshuvah, 10:3)

For many Jews and Christians this remains an important interpretation... but there is still room as well to read the Song in much more earthly terms, as a celebration of human partnership and an acknowledgement that physical love is not something base or ugly, but a gift from our Creator. Indeed the very first commandment given to the Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was that they should "be

fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), a charge not to be ashamed by their sexuality but to be ennobled by it. Sexuality is a gift of God in (our) creation.

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



favour 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 favourable 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 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.

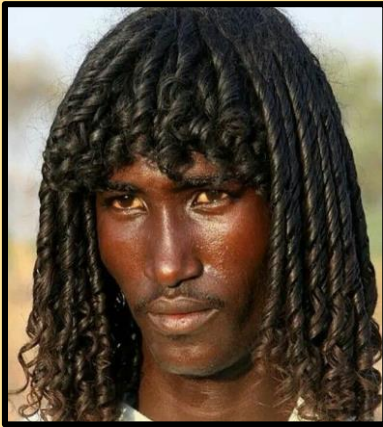
John R. Sampey notes: "It is not properly classed as drama, for the Hebrews had no stage, though much of the Old Testament is dramatic in spirit. The descriptions of the charms of the lovers were to be sung or chanted."

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 colours, 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 skilfully 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 of human sexuality

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 scriptures (*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. Few contemporary Christian scholars 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 God 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 God 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 for example. 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, Delitzsch 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 Shulammite woman. God created people 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.



PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS:

Song of Solomon is rendered a worthy place in the Bible because human sexuality, love and marriage are to be regarded as a gift from God.

G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

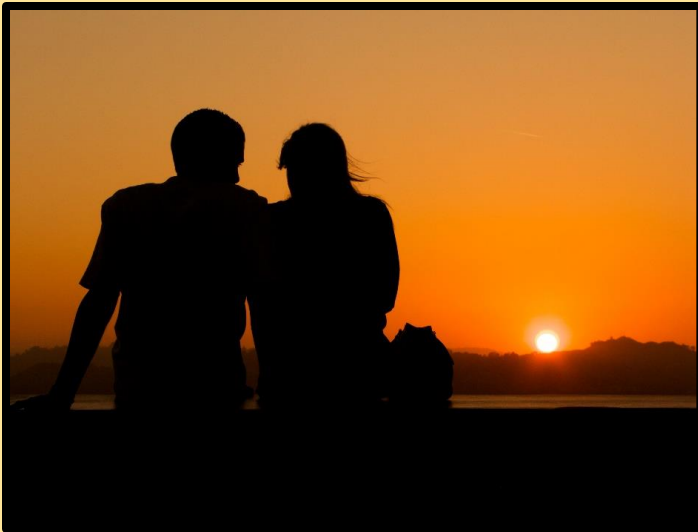
The songs should be treated first as simple and yet sublime songs of human affection. When they are thus understood, reverently the thoughts may be lifted into the higher value of setting forth the joys of the communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the Church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

To take this view of the Song of Solomon is to recognize the supremacy of love. Human life finds its highest fulfilment in the love (of two people). 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, 'for where there is love there will God be'



The Song of Solomon illuminates "the original Divine purpose of love (between two people) 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 God" (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."



The Song of Songs: The Shulamite Woman

*Like a crimson ribbon are your lips; when you smile, it is lovely.
Like a slice of pomegranate is the curve of your face behind the
veil of your hair.*

Possible areas for Exploration

What does the text tell us about the nature of women? What makes us whole? What is the relationship between body and soul? How integral our bodies to personhood? How sacred are bodies, life? What of the disabled body? The dying body? The wounded or violated body?

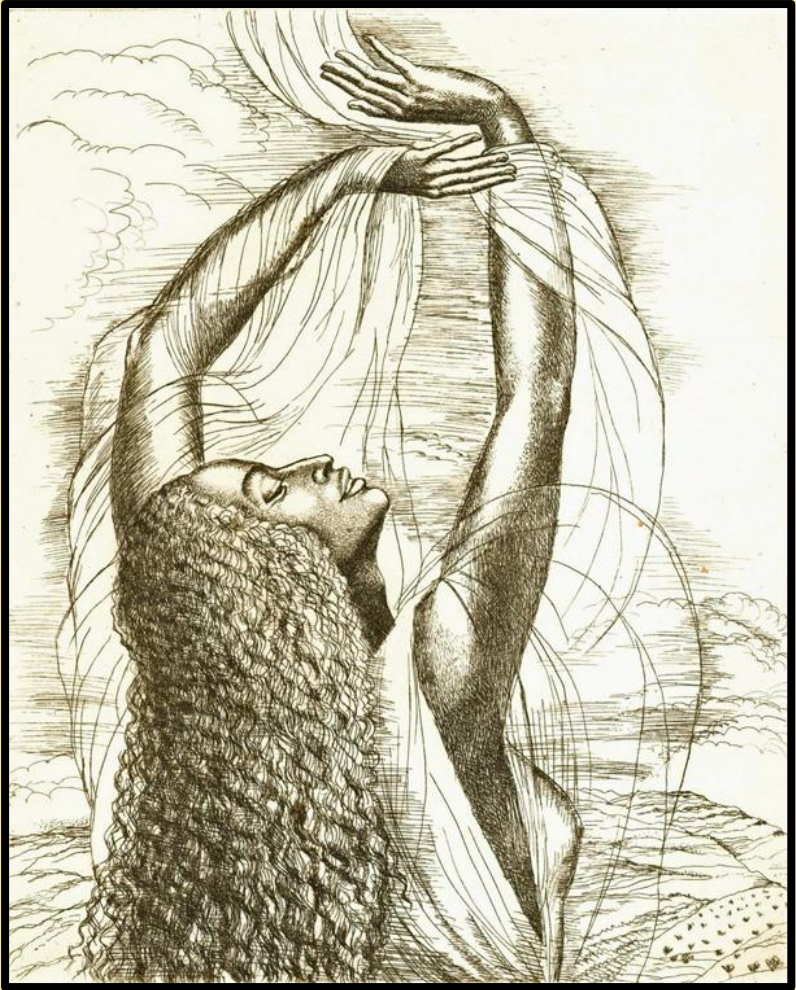
Is our sexuality a gift of God? How should this be expressed? Is sexuality at the heart of our identity? How should sexual love be celebrated/ or played down? What is sex for? How does sexuality reflect us being made in the image and likeness of God? What of same sex attraction? How should the church respond to homosexuality? Why is it so divisive in the Christian tradition? What is the purpose of marriage...what is the sacramental nature of marriage? Can there be same sex marriage in the Christian tradition?

How does the text of the Shulamite woman and her lover reflect the nature of God? How do God and humanity relate? Is God in relationship, involved in a love story with humanity? Is God's love for all?

For Your Own Reflection

- Who are you?
- How do you reflect the image and likeness of God?
- What is your relationship with God?
- How do you reflect Christ's love in the world?
- How intimate is your relationship with God?
- What is love for you?





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