

## The Poetry, Book 5

### Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon is the Bible's 5th and final book of poetry. It is also called "Song of Songs," and "Canticles." The title, "Song of Songs," is a Hebrew expression of the superlative (very best), which suggests that it was Solomon's favorite of all the 1,005 songs he had written<sup>1</sup>. "Canticles" simply means "Songs" (from Latin, "canticum" - a song). Song of Solomon, like Esther, contains no mention of God; these are the only two such books in the Bible.

This small book is an oriental love poem, rich in extravagant metaphor; it is about two young lovers who seem to be newlyweds, or who are betrothed and about to be married. Interpretation of the poem, which is a challenge at best, is complicated by the fact that it is difficult at times to know who is speaking.

#### 1. Cast of Characters:

a. Solomon.

b. The Shulamite Maiden. She is so identified only in 6:13, and this word, which would appear to refer to her home area or town, doesn't. In fact, it is a rather mysterious word, and may actually be a form of Solomon's own name. Some commentators believe that she is actually Abishag of Shunem, the virgin girl who lay in bed with David, to keep him warm as he was dying. It is reasonable to believe that Solomon would have married Abishag, if only to protect his throne<sup>2</sup>.

c. The daughters of Jerusalem. These are thought to be the members of Solomon's harem which, at the time, included 60 queens and 80 concubines.

2. Meaning. There are various interpretations of this book, in which, like Esther, God is not named, and which is quoted nowhere in the New Testament. All commentators agree that it is an oriental love poem; but opinions differ greatly as to its meaning. Of course, to secular commentators, and liberal theologians who do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible, it is simply an ancient oriental poem, written by an unknown author, and included in the Hebrew Bible sometime between the 4th and 1st Centuries BC. For commentators who believe that the Scriptures are inspired, however, the interpretations generally fall into three categories:

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 4:32.

<sup>2</sup> See the explanatory **NOTE** following Highlight 1.

a. That it is a beautiful Oriental love poem that was accepted into the Hebrew Canon prior to its closing by Ezra and the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem. But if so, how then could such a thing--something rather like a sanctified Kama Sutra--find its way into the Bible? The explanation of those who hold this view would be that such wedded bliss is a provision of God for His people, sanctified with His blessing.

b. That it is a literal story of Solomon and his love for a shepherd girl with whom he was mightily smitten, and of his desire to take her to Jerusalem and make her his queen of queens.

c. That it is allegorical.

(1) The Hebrew allegorical interpretation is that it is symbolic of the relationship with God as Heavenly Husband to the Israelites, beginning at the time of the Exodus, and continuing to this day<sup>3</sup>. God repeatedly warned, rebuked, and punished the Israelites for spiritual adultery, which He repeatedly expressed as "to go a-whoring after other gods<sup>4</sup>." For this reason, orthodox Jews read Song of Solomon at Passover.

(2). The Christian allegorical interpretation is that it is symbolic of the future relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church. This interpretation is strongly supported by Psalm 45, which is very suggestive of Song of Solomon, and which is directly quoted in Hebrews as speaking of Christ<sup>5</sup>.

So, which one of these interpretations is the correct one? I am inclined to believe that they are **all** correct.

**A. Author.** The book itself, beginning in the very first verse, identifies Solomon as the human writer, as does unbroken Jewish tradition. The book also reflects Solomon's vast knowledge of plants and animals, and his love of husbandry of flocks, orchards, gardens and vineyards.

**B. Place and Date.** Like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon was probably written at the palace in Jerusalem, about 1,000 BC. Its romantic idealism, and the apparent fact that, at the time of writing, Solomon's harem was relatively small (6:8), suggest that he wrote this book when he was a young king.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 31:32, et al.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:12-15, et al.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 1:8-9. This interpretation has a strong basis in the New Testament Scriptures. Also, I think, part of its appeal to conservative Christian interpreters is that it can be a means of dealing publicly with the discomfort of its obviously sensual content.

**C. Theme.** The theme is idealized wedded bliss, the love shared by a husband and wife<sup>6</sup>. Some interpreters find a fourth party in the story: a young shepherd who is the maiden's true love, and to whom she finally returns, with Solomon's blessing, having rejected Solomon's proposal of marriage. This idea makes for a nice story, one of the faithfulness of the two young lovers, of Solomon's unselfish nobility in giving her up, and of the ultimate triumph of true and pure love; however, the young shepherd cannot be found in the story, except by inference, for he does not literally appear anywhere in the text. This idea has its appeal, and some passages are difficult to explain in any other way; and yet, with the inferred shepherd boy assumed, other passages are made more difficult to explain. The only players who literally appear in the text are Solomon, the young maiden, and the "daughters of Jerusalem."

**D. Highlights.** Song of Solomon is a love poem with extravagant poetic language, consisting of eight small chapters. Unless we assume the existence of the lover the shepherdess left behind, there really is no plot; it is just a love poem with almost no events. Since I am not willing to make the assumption of the inferred shepherd boy, it is difficult to select highlights. With this caveat in mind, consider the following:

1. Introducing the Shepherd Girl. The heroine appears in Chapter 1, as a farm girl who is "black, but comely." This use of the word "black" is not to be taken, either literally or figuratively, to mean that she is African, for the following verses explain that her skin is tanned from exposure to the sun. Women in that day considered being tanned to be a detriment to beauty (and, in some cultures, this is true today). Creamy, pale skin was what was desired; and to be tanned by the sun was a sign of the peasant class, a woman who worked outdoors. It appears from the following verses that she was the youngest child in her family, and that her older siblings gave her the undesirable (outdoor) jobs, such as tending the flocks and working in the vineyards. (Chapter 1)

**NOTE:** *There are, as we have seen, various theories about the identity of this Shulamite girl. A common one, and one with considerable merit, is that she was Abishag, the young Shulamite maiden who lay in David's bed to keep him warm as he was dying. Although there was no sexual intimacy between her and David, by the standards of the day she may have been thus*

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<sup>6</sup> Because this book, if read with no understanding of the Scriptures, can seem indecent, the rabbis since ancient times have discouraged its reading by anyone under the age of 30.

*set apart and unable to marry in the usual way. Remember that after David's death Solomon's elder brother, Adonijah, wanted to marry Abishag; but Solomon saw his request as a move to replace him as king. This strongly implies that Abishag had acquired some sort of regal status, and could only marry a king or prince; thus, the theory that she became Solomon's bride, and is the Shulamite maiden in Song of Solomon, is reasonable<sup>7</sup>.*

2. Young Love in the Springtime. It is Springtime, and the maiden's lover is away. She describes him in extravagant poetic images, as the fairest of the fair. In so doing she utters expressions that have appeared in hymns, poems and choruses<sup>8</sup>.

The heroine longs to see him, and in extravagant metaphor she asks him to hurry back to her, leaping and skipping across the mountains that separate them, as if they were merely stepping stones. (Chapter 2)

3. King Solomon's Portable Bed. The heroine is missing her lover, sleeping alone at night. Unable to sleep, she walks in the city at night, asking the watchmen if they have seen any sign of his returning. She finally finds him, and gives orders that he is not to be disturbed; he is to sleep as long as he likes. She takes him "into my mother's house" and holds him in her arms as he sleeps<sup>9</sup>. It is here that we first encounter what seems to be Solomon's portable bed--an elaborate, beautifully furnished thing to be carried by men, even as he slept, like the litters of the orient in which important people were (and in some places still are) carried about. In verse 9, the Hebrew word rendered "chariot" in the KJV is *appiryon*; it can mean a cart or chariot with wheels, or a conveyance carried on poles. In the context here it seems to refer, not to a wheeled vehicle as in a chariot, but to a litter-like conveyance, enclosed in curtains, comfortable enough for sleeping, and one carried by strong men. Thus we might think of it as a luxurious, highly decorated, portable bed. (Chapter 3)

4. Solomon's Ode to His Beloved's Beauty. Chapter 4 is a poetic speech by Solomon concerning the beauty and perfection of his lover (they seem to be espoused or engaged to marry, but not yet married). His descriptions of her are expressed in terms of orchards, shorn sheep, mountains, flowing waters, gardens and spices; such word pictures were not only things universally understood by the Israelite people of his day, but they also reflect

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<sup>7</sup> I Kings 2:13-25.

<sup>8</sup> Two of these expressions, rose of Sharon and lily of the valley, have often been used to refer to Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> To take a lover into one's mother's house (or tent) seems to have been symbolic of marriage. See in this regard the account of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24:67).

Solomon's knowledge of, and love for, nature and the husbandry of plants and animals. In the last verse, the maid speaks in reply. (Chapter 4)

5. Lover and Friend. Chapter 5 is an ode to the physical perfection of the maiden's lover, and expresses her being thrilled at the very thought of him<sup>10</sup>. She is so love-sick that when she wakes and he is gone, she wanders around in Jerusalem searching for him. Since respectable women were not on the city streets at night, the watchmen mistake her for a prostitute and treat her roughly<sup>11</sup>. Her description is idealized and unrealistic, but in keeping with her extremely romantic thoughts of him. Physical beauty, no matter how perfect, is lost in time, and so it seems to be that, with divine wisdom, the final verse expresses a vital and fundamental principle: that one's spouse should be not only one's lover, but also one's best friend. (Chapter 5)

6. The Women of the Harem Speak. In Chapter 6 both Solomon and the maiden speak, and both continue to speak in poetic superlatives. In this chapter Solomon's harem appears, and the women join Solomon in praising the maiden's beauty<sup>12</sup>. They also seem to be speaking with her (verses 1, 13). It is difficult to know what is taking place, for it seems that he is away and she is wishing he would hasten to return; yet in the last verse the women seem to be wishing that the maiden would return. Where she has gone, we aren't told; but she is probably still searching for him. (Chapter 6)

7. Mutual Adoration. Chapter 7 is like an exchange of love letters--very personal, and very passionate, in which first Solomon, and then his lover, describe the physical beauty and desirability of the other in some very personal detail. In the last four verses, as the maiden speaks, she also speaks of her desire to go with Solomon, out into the fields, orchards and vineyards, and make love there, amid the beauty and sweet scents of those places that Solomon loves. In the last verse she speaks of the sweet aroma of the various fruits, both fresh and dried, that she has stored for Solomon. In this statement she also mentions mandrakes as having a pleasant scent. The mandrake, since ancient times, has been thought to have power to enhance sexual desire and fertility. This is one of only two places in the Bible where the mandrake appears; the other is in Genesis, in the strange dealings of Rachel, Leah and Jacob<sup>13</sup>. (Chapter 7)

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<sup>10</sup> Verse 4 is a classic example of the unfortunate changes in the meaning of words between Elizabethan times and the present.

<sup>11</sup> Verses 1-8 seem to represent a dream; v 7 seems to demand this interpretation.

<sup>12</sup> The relatively small size of his harem (compared with the 1,000 women it eventually included) suggests that this book was written early in Solomon's reign.

<sup>13</sup> See the study guide to Genesis Chapt 30.

8. The Pain of Separation from Her Lover. The final chapter is definitely a difficult one, with the maiden and the women of the harem speaking alternately; there are many possible interpretations. It speaks of the maiden's pain in being separated from her lover and, in the process, she makes some eloquent observations concerning human nature. In the first two verses she seems to be saying that she misses him so acutely that she wishes she only loved him like a brother, so that the separation would not be so painful. This changes abruptly in the next verse, as she begins to speak of Solomon, and charges the other women not to disturb his sleep. In the verse that follows, the other women seem to speak with approval of the maiden's love for, and dependence on, Solomon. In verses 6 and 7 the maiden speaks; in two amazing verses she speaks eloquently of the burning, destructive power of jealousy, of the indestructible nature of true love, of the fact that love cannot be destroyed by external things, and that it cannot be bought. In the following verses the women of the harem speak of a young sister, still a child, but destined to become a treasured woman in a palace of inexpressible riches and beauty; this may speak of the Church, which exists as yet only in the mind of God, and which will, in the future, grow up to become the bride of Christ. Meanwhile, the Shulamite maiden seems to be saying that she will be Solomon's lover, and she wishes that he would hasten to return to her. (Chapter 8)

**FINAL NOTE:** *As we see by now, for many parts of this small book there are almost as many interpretations as there are interpreters. As usual, I have endeavored to steer a middle course; I have no favorite interpretation of my own to promote; I have consulted several major commentators who have differing viewpoints, and I have attempted to make a complex, somewhat mysterious, book as simple as possible. The reader may take what I have written as a starting point and go as deeply as he wishes, in the directions of his choice. I do, however, have a word of caution: remember that you are dealing with the inspired Word of God, and be careful that you do not lightly take liberties with its meaning.*