

NAME

The title "Song of Solomon" is taken from the opening statement in the book. The expression "song of songs" (v. 1), is a Hebrew idiom for the most superlative song of all Solomon's 1,005 songs (cf. 2 Kings 4:32). In fact, this is the only song composed by Solomon that has survived. Indeed, "song of songs" is a fitting title because it deals with the theme of themes: Love!

The Hebrew title translates as: "The Song of Songs which is Solomon's." The Latin (Vulgate) is: "Canticles"

AUTHOR

WCBS Notes:

External Evidence:

Though never referred to in any other Bible book or in the Apocrypha, the Solomonic authorship has been practically uncontested by both Jewish and Christian writers.

Internal Evidence:

The local color, royal luxuries, etc., strongly suggest Solomon as the author. The opening verse declares it.

The usage of Persian and Greek words does not mitigate against Solomonic authorship, for Solomon had a vast acquaintance through his commerce and visitors.

Mitchell:

Although the first verse could be translated, "*The Song of Songs which is about Solomon,*" the book has traditionally been considered to have actually been written by Solomon. Since the contents of the book are fully in harmony with Solomon's great gifts of wisdom, there is no sufficient ground to deviate from this historic position.

DATE

Reign of Solomon: 970-930 B.C.

THEME

Type of Literature: Poetry

Halley page 43: "*Glorification of Wedded Love*"

Mitchell: "*The Purity, Power, and Permanence of True Love*"

Ideally, this is the kind of love that should exist between every married couple. Truly it is the kind of love that God has for His people both individually and collectively. Hopefully it approaches that kind of love each of us have for our Lord.

Ellison: "*The bliss of fidelity and pure marital love, Typifying the love relationship between the Lord and His people.*"

Mitchell:

The Song of Solomon is a parabolic poem. It consists entirely of the speeches of the various speakers of whom Solomon and the bride are chief. There is no narrative or description. The scenes and the speakers can be judged only by the words.

It has been well said that, *"The Song of Solomon tests the spiritual capacity of the reader."* Very few young preachers will ever teach or preach from this book (to date I have not - still young!). The Jews referred to it as the "Holy of Holies of Scripture" likening it to the Holy of Holies. According to Origen and Jerome, the Jews would not permit their young men to read it until they were thirty years of age.

Key Word (Nelson's): Love in Marriage - The purpose of this book depends on the viewpoint taken as to its primary thrust: 1) Fictional: To portray Solomon's attraction and marriage to a poor but beautiful girl from the country; 2) Allegorical: To present God's love for His bride Israel or Christ's love for His Church; or 3) Historical: To record Solomon's actual romance with a Shulamite woman. The various scenes of the book exalt the joys of love in courtship and marriage and offers a proper perspective of human love. (For a more detailed explanation see below: Interpretation [Mitchell]).

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (Song of Solomon 7:10).

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised" (Song of Solomon 8:7).

Problems: (Mitchell)

1. Determination of the speaker

Because the song consists entirely of speeches between the man and woman, it is difficult at times to determine exactly who is speaking. Actually this is the major problem in interpreting the poem. Several rules will prove helpful in this regard:

- a. The sense of the passage will often indicate the speaker. Certain statements would make no sense at all if the man were addressing the woman and vice-versa.
- b. The gender of the nouns. Like many languages, the Hebrew nouns and adjectives have masculine and feminine endings.
- c. The words of address. When the man addresses the woman, he uses the expression, "my love," and when the woman is addressing the man, she uses the expression, "my beloved."

2. Polygamy

Clearly this book pictures the delight of monogamy yet Solomon was a practicing polygamist. One need bear in mind that Solomon's marriages were doubtless largely political arrangements. Perhaps the relationship portrayed in this poem represents his first love when he was in his youth before he became entangled in subsequent polygamist political marriages.

3. Flashbacks

Because the entire contents of the book consist almost entirely of intimate conversations between two lovers, they often reflect upon past instances in their relationship. At times they reflect upon their initial meeting, and at other times they reflect upon their wedding night, etc. If the possibility of these "flashbacks" be kept in mind, it will aid in interpreting the poem. Flashbacks are typical of parabolic poems of this nature.

4. Poetic exaggerations

Typical of poetry in general, you will find frequent usage of hyperbole (literary exaggeration). For instance, the young lady pictures her lover as a gazelle leaping from one mountain top to another. She is not thereby trying to tell us that he is the "bionic man." It is part of poetic exaggeration.

Interpretation: (Mitchell):

1. Literal or naturalistic

This view construes the poem as a picture of human love without any higher or spiritual meaning. It pictures the triumph of pure love over lust (so prevalent in Solomon's time - and not today). This view leaves inexplicable its being included in the canon.

Some contend that this poem was written to celebrate the marriage of Solomon to the daughter of Egypt's Pharaoh. This interpretation makes this wonderful poem a commemoration of direct violation of God's will.

Some say that it depicts the devotion of two poor young people in spite of Solomon's efforts to win the girl away from her shepherd lover. This is commonly called the "Shepherd Hypothesis" and was first set forth by the liberal critic, Heinrich Ewald. The biggest objection to this theory is that it asks us to believe that Solomon wrote his greatest song concerning a romantic defeat. This seems highly unlikely. The theory must assume a great deal without any basis in the song itself. To be sure, Solomon had his faults. But nothing in the Bible suggests that he was the monster of wickedness that this hypothesis suggests.

2. Allegorical

This view sees the story as being figurative without an historical basis. It represents Jehovah's love for Israel in the Old Testament and Christ's love for His church in the New Testament. This view lends itself to great extravagances in interpretation. Others say that it is simply a collection of several poems dealing with wedded love. If this is true, we need not look for nor expect a unifying theme or plot (which there is).

3. Typical or historical

The typical view recognizes the historical background and avoids the extravagances, since the type adumbrates (indicates faintly) the antitype in only a few salient points. It avoids the secularism of the literal and the extravagance of the allegorical. It is true to the literal method in both grammar and history. Obviously, the Jews saw a spiritual meaning as well as the historical.

The intimate conversations depicted in this poem have a real basis in fact. They give us an account of a real romance Solomon had with a beautiful young lady from the Lebanese hills whom he subsequently took to his palace in Jerusalem and married. Yet, is no doubt typical of the love that exists between Jehovah and His people.

Setting:

Mitchell:

The most satisfactory explanation of possible setting of this idyllic drama is one set forth by Dr. H. A. Ironside. King Solomon had a vineyard located in the hill country of Ephraim (8:11). He leased it out to share croppers consisting of a mother, two sons (1:6), and two daughters - the Shulamite (6:13), and a little sister (8:8). The Shulamite (older daughter) was the "Cinderella" of the family (1:5), naturally beautiful but unnoticed. Her brothers were possibly half brothers (1:6). They made her work extremely hard tending the vineyards, so that she had little time to care for her personal appearance (1:6), as did the wealthy ladies of the land. She pruned the vines, set traps for foxes

(2:15), and kept the flocks. Leading this type of life she became bronzed by the rays of the sun.

One day a handsome stranger came to the vineyard. It was King Solomon in disguise. He was attracted to her and she became embarrassed concerning her personal appearance (1:6). She thought him to be a shepherd and inquired concerning his flocks (1:7). He answered evasively (1:8) but began to court her with words of love (1:8-10), and promised her rich gifts (1:11). He won her heart and left with the promise that some day he would return. She dreamed of him at night and he filled her thoughts in the day. Finally he did return in all his kingly splendor to make her his bride (3:6,7).

While Solomon is well known the Shulamite woman is not. In the plot, Solomon marries the Shulamite Woman. She is the most alluring woman that Solomon ever saw (6:8-9). The Bible does not say that she was an Ethiopian, but it does say she was as black as the tents of Kedar, which are usually made of black goats hair. The Shulamite woman was beautiful in her peasant's garb out on the farm. She was given the worst job assignment by her brothers of chasing the foxes away from the vineyard. As Solomon's bride arrayed in royal finery she became the most breathtakingly beautiful woman in the kingdom.

We do not even know her name. Yet, she is chosen by God to represent His people in this account of love. She is not portrayed as having great wisdom or faith. She was not a prophet. Yet, she powerfully reveals what the grace of God is all about. By her life she demonstrates the highest standard of love in this life for her husband. Real love from grace is not bestowed due to the merit of the recipient. It is bestowed from the Divine love of the Giver.

Outline:

This arrangement of 7 Idylls (or pastoral pictures) was done by Richard C. Moulton (WCBS Notes)

I. IDYLL #1 - THE WEDDING DAY 1:1-2:7

1. The bridal party outside the palace
2. The bridal party inside the palace
3. The procession to the bridal chamber

II. IDYLL #2 - THE BRIDE'S REMINISCENCES OF THE COURTSHIP 2:8-3:5

1. Her lover came to her in springtime
2. Her happy dream of seeking him and finding him

III. IDYLL #3 - THE DAY OF BETROTHAL RECALLED 3:6-5:1

1. King Solomon comes with his royal retinue
2. King Solomon pours forth his love to the Shulamite
3. King Solomon's proposal and the acceptance

IV. IDYLL #4 - THE BRIDE'S TROUBLED DREAM 5:2-6:3

1. His coming by night and the brief delay
2. His withdrawal and the fruitless search
3. Her interchange with the daughters of Jerusalem

V. IDYLL #5 - THE KING'S MEDITATION ON HIS BRIDE 6:4-7:9

1. The king muses on her beauty
2. He recalls the surprise of their first meeting
3. He continues to muse on her beauty

VI. IDYLL #6 - THE BRIDE'S LONGING FOR HER HOME IN LEBANON 7:10-8:4

1. She invites her lover to Lebanon
2. She charges the daughters of Jerusalem

VII. IDYLL #7 - THE RENEWAL OF LOVE IN THE VINEYARD OF LEBANON 8:5-14

1. The arrival in Lebanon
2. The words of her brothers in early life recalled
3. She renews her vows to her husband

RECIPIENTS

God's people - specifically the Hebrews...and us. Possibly the "Daughters of Jerusalem" - note the repetition of the phrase: "*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem*" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

Mitchell:

The literal/historical interpretation of Song of Solomon allows for many valid interpretations:

1. Example of married love: Truly it sets forth the glory of wedded love. It declares the sacredness and beauty of the marital relationship between a man and a woman. It certainly needs to be reiterated today that marriage is a Divine institution. The Jews taught that this poem illustrates the heart of a satisfied husband and a devoted wife. It depicts an uninhibited love freely expressed between a husband and wife. In this day of marriage problems and confusion many valuable lessons on how to maintain a successful love relationship after the wedding can and should be applied from this book.
2. Allegorically: This poem can and has been legitimately applied to God's love for His people (both Israel and the New Testament church). This application has been traditionally advanced by the Jewish Scribes and Rabbis as well as Christian commentators.
3. Spiritually: This song can be applied to the love relationship that should exist between the individual believer and Jesus. Taken in this manner, this poem can be viewed as a love letter between you and your Lord. This is apparently the manner in which many giants of the faith have taken it (Moody, Taylor, Rutherford, et. Al.) How much time do we spend telling God that we love Him?

It was first among the Megilloth or rolls and was read in the synagogue at the eighth day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover). The Megilloth are five scrolls of the Hebrew Bible read in conjunction with the five Jewish festivals. They are:

1. Ecclesiastes - read at Tabernacles
2. Esther - read at Purim
3. Lamentations - read at 9th of Ab (commemorating the destruction of the Temple)
4. Ruth - read at Festival of Weeks
5. Song of Songs - read at Passover (month of Abib - first month of Sacred Calendar)

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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