**Introduction**

The Song of Solomon is a poetic and intimate celebration of love and desire between a bride and groom. This unique book of the Bible uses vivid and passionate language to explore the beauty and depth of marital love, reflecting both human and divine affection.

**Interpretation and Structure**

(1) The Song is not primarily to be read as an allegory of the reciprocal love between God and his people (Israel or the church). While this has been the historically favoured way to read the book, this method of interpretation carries several significant problems:

* There is no explicit internal or canonical evidence to take it this way.
* If the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense. The plain sense that the book is a love poem extolling intimacy within marriage makes sense!
* There is no guard on how to interpret the details:

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| Writer (date) | Interpretation |
| The Targum (1st- 3rd Century) | Israelite history in 5 movements |
| Cyril of Alexandria (d.444) | Breasts = O.T and N.T. |
| Origen (d.253) | The kisses = word of the God |
| Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153) | Breasts = church’s nurturing doctrine |
| Rupert of Deutz (d.1135) | Shulamite = Virgin Mary |
| Most Jewish theologians | The love between God and Israel |
| Most pre-modern Christians | The love between Christ and the Church |

(2) The Song is not to be read as a drama. While it contains some dramatic episodes, the book does not follow the usual pattern expected in biblical narratives. Those who consider it a drama tend to ‘read between the lines’ to make a coherent story. Also, does it have 2 or 3 main characters if it is a drama? Is it a story about Solomon and the Shulamite, or is Solomon the bad guy in a story about the Shulamite and her beloved?

(3) The Song is not to be read primarily as a marriage manual. While the Song contains obvious and significant marriage applications, it’s not a ‘how to’ or ‘self-help’ book!

(4) The book is not to be taken over literally. Like all poetry, the Song uses many metaphors. Often, these metaphors are significantly culturally nuanced.

Rather, the Song of Solomon should be read as poetry that celebrates the intimacy of romantic love within marriage. It seems best to take it as a single love poem with seven stanzas. David Dorsey (The Literary Structure of the O.T., p.212) has the following structure:

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| Structure |
| 1. Opening words of mutual love and desire
 | 1:2-2:7 |
| 1. His invitation to the countryside
 | 2:8-17 |
| 1. Nighttime search for her lover
 | 3:1-5 |
| 1. Their wedding day
 | 3:6-5:1 |
| C’ Nighttime search for her lover | 5:2-7:10 |
| B’ Her invitation to the countryside | 7:11-8:4 |
| A’ Closing words of mutual love and desire | 8:5-14 |

The units are designed so that each new unit begins with the two lovers apart and concludes with the two together-except the final unit, which begins and ends with the two together. This rhythm ties the entire Song into a cohesive whole with a highlighted conclusion:

 a apart-together

 b apart-together

 c apart-together

 d apart-together

 e apart-together

 f apart-together

 g together-together

(David Dorsey, The Literary Structure of the O.T., p.212)

**Significant Themes**

(1) The beauty of sexual love between a man and a woman (husband and wife)

“…sex is good and pleasurable. It is not evil when enjoyed within the parameters of marriage.” (Dillard, 265) Kinlaw writes, “The prospect of children is not necessary to justify sexual love in marriage. Significantly, the Song of Solomon makes no reference to procreation. It must be remembered that the book was written in a world where a high premium was placed on offspring and a woman’s worth was often measured in terms of the number of her children. Sex was often seen with reference to procreation; yet there is not a trace of that here. The song is a song of praise of love for love’s sake alone. This relationship needs no justification beyond itself.” (Expositors Bible Commentary, 5:1207)

“The lovemaking that takes place in the garden (2:3-13; 4:12-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:11; 7:10-13; 8:13-14) should remind us of the Garden of Eden…[before man fell there was intimacy with no shame cf. Gen 2:25, after the fall there was shame cf. Gen 3:7]…When we turn to the Song of Songs, we see the man and his wife in the garden naked and feeling anything but shame! As Trible puts it (1978, 144), ‘The Song of Songs redeems a love story gone awry.’ The book pictures the restoration of human love to its pre-Fall bliss.” (Dillard, An Introduction to the O.T., 265). Or as Bullock (Handbook on the Poetical Books, p.207) puts it, “Underlying the Song of Songs is the basic loyalty of woman to man (Gen 2:23) and a man to woman (Gen. 2:24), and the mutual interdependence they enjoy (Gen 2:25).”

Dorsey believes the book emphasises the ‘reciprocity, or mutuality of the lover’s love…the two lovers are equally in love, adore one another, and are equally ready to initiate, suggest, and invite. The idea conveyed…is an egalitarian and mutuality in romantic love…In a world that was strongly patriarchal…the Song of Songs represents a surprisingly high view of women and a remarkable vision of the ideal of equality and delightful reciprocity in the marriage relationship.” (p.213)

(2) God’s Desire for Marriages

While the Song is not a marriage manual, the book's message and themes strongly indicate what God desires the marriage of believers to look like. God desires marriage (which can only be between a man and a woman), have the following traits:

* Love and passion (see Ephesians 5:25, Titus 2:4)
* Joy and delight (see Proverbs 5:17-19)
* Faithfulness and commitment (see Hebrews 13:4)
* A desire for intimacy (see 1 Corinthians 7:1-5)
* Holiness and purity (see Ephesians 5:21-33)

If these are achieved, at least to some degree, the marriages of believers will reflect the beauty of God well.

(3) God’s Character

The desire that God has for marriages reflects the very character of God himself. Thus, while the Song of Solomon doesn’t mention God’s name, it reveals that he is (to name but a few character traits):

* Loving (see 1 John 4:8)
* Joyful (see Isaiah 62:5)
* Faithful (see I Thessalonians 5:24)
* Beautiful (See Psalm 27:4)
* Pure (see 1 John 1:5)

(4) The relationship between God and his people

Marriage imagery is strong in the O.T. “God has a covenant with his people much like the marriage covenant: it promises and requires exclusive allegiance…” (Dillard, 265). Thus, marital intimacy is designed to reflect the love between God and Israel and between Christ and the Church (cf. Hos 3:1; Eph 5:32). While this is not the primary teaching of the book, the inference is strong.

(5) The relationship within the Godhead

Many also see the intimacy reflected in the Songs as a reflection of the unity and distinction within the Godhead (1 Cor 11:1-3). Bromiley writes (God and Marriage, p.77):

In creating man-male and female in his own image and joining them together so that they become one flesh, God makes us copies both of himself in his Trinitarian unity and distinction as one God and three persons and of himself in relation to the people of his gracious election. Analogically, what is between Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and what ought to be and is and shall be between God and Israel and between Christ and the Church, is also what is meant to be in relation of man and woman and more specifically of husband and wife.”

Again, while this is not the primary teaching of the book, the inference is strong.

**Motifs of Songs of Songs**

LOVESICKNESS – “the lover claims that he (she) is so filled with longing for the beloved that it has made him (her) ill.” (e.g. Song 5:8) (Garrett, Songs - New American Commentary, p.371)

THE DOOR – “The door represents both obstacle and opening…A particular submotif that sometimes occurs here is that of frustration. Either the door will not open or when the door is opened the beloved is found to be angry or absent.’ (e.g. Song 5:5-6) (Garrett, 372)

THE BREASTS – “attests to the tenderness and affection associated with the breasts in the Israelite understanding.” (e.g. Song 1:12; 8:10) (Garrett, 372)

THE AUTHORITY FIGURE – “The authority figure [be it the mother, brothers or a civil authority such as guards] stands as an obstacle to the uniting of the lovers.” (e.g. Song 5:7) (Garrett, 373)

THE GARDEN OR VINEYARD – “Sometimes the garden is a metaphor for the woman’s body” (e.g. Song 4:6) (Garrett, 373)

HORSES AND CHARIOTS – “The imagery prompts feelings of valor and manly splendour.” (e.g. Song 3:7) (Garrett, 374)

**Authorship**

The superscription designates Solomon as the author. The difficulties with this position include:

* the description of his womanising in 1 Kings 11 seems to run contrary to his view of marital love as described in the Song;
* “Those passages that mention Solomon by name seem to look at him from a distance (3:6-11; 8:10-12);
* there…is a contrast between 3:6-11, which extols Solomon, and 8:10-12, which rebuffs him.” (Dillard, 264)

Evidence in favour of Solomon being the author includes:

* the title indicates Solomon is the author (1:1);
* the references to about thirty-six varieties of flora and fauna, as well as many expensive imported items, both of which Solomon was more than familiar with (cf. 1 Kings 4:32);
* the similarity with Egyptian love poetry dated between 1300-1100 B.C. fits as Solomon would have been acquainted with such;
* place names in the Song span the north (e.g. Tirzah, Sharon, Lebanon etc.), south (e.g. Jerusalem, Engedi) and trans-Jordanian (Heshbon, Gilead) regions of Israel, implying composition when the country was united and at its greatest extent (Garrett, 351)
* “the atmosphere of luxury and wealth in the song agrees better with the Solomonic period than with any other.” (Garrett, 352)