

Old Testament Survey—Song of Solomon

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. Do you believe that? Do you believe it is ALL profitable? This evening, as we continue our journey through the Old Testament book by book, we come to a book that, as far as I can recall, I have never heard a sermon from, or a Sunday School lesson. The book? The Song of Solomon.

Why is that? For various reasons which we'll consider. One is related to the overall question of how we view the Old Testament.

Discuss: What are some typical ways people view the Old Testament? I've heard some speak of "the old book" and "the new book." Others view the OT as being kind of "second class" revelation. Yes it's from God, but for a former generation and not for us.

Why did God give us this book? That's not easy to answer, but we can assert the undeniable. The book is good and it is profitable (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Interesting Features of the Song of Solomon:

--It's name is taken from 1:1, "The Song of Songs which is Solomon's" (it means "the greatest song"). An alternate name, "Canticles," is derived from the Vulgate.

--It is assigned by the Jews to be read at Passover.

--It is poetic literature and appears in the "Writings" section of the Hebrew Bible (after Ruth, before Ecclesiastes).

Who wrote the book?

--"Solomon" is mentioned throughout the book (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11). This may indicate that Solomon wrote the book, or that it was written later in the style of Solomon.

--Problem: The book expresses love and loyalty from the husband to his wife, which doesn't fit the pattern of Solomon's plurality of wives and concubines.

When was the book written?

--10th century B.C. (however, the lack of historical references in the Song make its dating difficult)

Why was the book written?

Scholars disagree over the purpose of this book perhaps more than any other Old Testament book. Suggested interpretations (L.H.B., 606ff.):

1. *Allegorical* -- The author intended an allegory, not a love story. The Jews said the Song is a portrait of God's love for Israel. The early Church Fathers saw the book as a story about Christ's love for the Church or individual believers.

Note: In early Jewish interpretation, they saw two or three levels of meaning in Scripture. The lowest level was the "surface meaning" which they saw as least important. The highest level was theology. For the Song of Songs, the surface meaning is love poetry (the Council of Constantine condemned a man for seeing the book as mere love poetry!). But the rabbis taught the only important aspect of the book is the theology portrayed.

Note: In God's sovereignty, the allegorical interpretation is responsible for this book's presence in the canon. Until recently, most people rejected the literal, surface meaning of the book.

2. *Typical* -- This method is related to allegory, but seeks to avoid some of the subjectivity of it by stressing major themes (love and devotion) rather than the details of the story. For example, see Christ and the Church in the book.

There's no question that generations of Christians and Jews have gained devotional insight from allegorical and typical interpretations of the book. The question, however, is whether this is what the human author (and God) intended when he wrote the book.

The problem with allegory and type is that it's so subjective. E.g.--Christian typologists have said that the reference to the woman's navel refers to the baptismal font, and that other body parts refer to the temple or to the Messiah. In early Christianity, there were enormous amounts of commentaries on Song of Songs. They used the book as a springboard for saying anything they wanted to say!

Question: Is there allegorical literature in the Bible? Yes (Isa 5; Ezekiel; etc). But when we read these we immediately understand they are allegories. We don't have to look for a higher level of meaning.

3. *Dramatic* -- This approach sees the book as a Drama, either as:

a. Two character drama (an actual experience in Solomon's life with a Shulamite woman)

b. Three character drama (Solomon is the bad guy who is trying to destroy a love relationship between a shepherd and his beloved).

So a drama is an attempt to tell a literal story which happened.

4. *Nuptial Songs* -- Used in wedding ceremonies

5. *Liturgical rites* -- influenced by pagan cultic liturgy

6. *Love Song* -- an actual event in Solomon's life; This view sees the book as a poem or a collection of love poems, perhaps but not necessarily connected with wedding celebrations or other specific occasions.

Other comments about the book:

"The book probes the mystery of human love within the created order (Childs, 576)."

According to L.H.B. (605), "The book's impact lies in the warmth and intensity of the love depicted, especially in the rich and graphic imagery. These very qualities which are the poem's source of strength present problems to western tastes. The vividly detailed descriptions of the lovers' bodies and their frankly acknowledged, passionate desire seem too highly spiced. But they are the product of a distant time and place. They are vivid but not lurid, and the open honesty of their approach may put them a cut above the innuendo sometimes found in their contemporary western counterparts."

Some of the metaphors even sound uncomplimentary to us. For example:

1:9 "I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh."

4:4 "Your neck is like the tower of David ."

4:1 (also 6:5) "Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead ."

How is that a compliment? To our western mindset, it's not, but Orientals fix the eye on one single striking point (L.H.B., 606). When he says her hair is like a flock of goats, he doesn't have in mind the wiry, matted coat of an individual coat, but pictures an entire flock. The graceful, wavelike motion of a flock of goats moving down a distant slope provides an image of grace and beauty that reminds the man of his beloved's tresses falling in gentle waves upon her shoulders.

What is the outline of the book?

(adapted from G. Lloyd Carr)

I. Anticipation (1:2-2:7)

II. Found, and Lost--And Found (2:8-3:5)

III. Consummation (3:6-5:1)

IV. Lost--And Found (5:2-8:4)

V. Affirmation (8:5-14)

What is the message of the book in one sentence?

The Song of Songs is a poetic picture which illustrates the beautiful gift of love as God intended it in the marriage relationship.

What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?

1. *God created us as both physical AND spiritual beings.*

The physical is not bad, just marred by the fall. God doesn't just save "souls," but He redeems the entire person (one day He will give us a glorified body).

What did God say after He created the male and female in Genesis 1:31, "God saw all that he had made and it was very good." And at the end of Genesis 2, we're told of Adam and Eve (2:25), "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."

We have been more influenced by Plato than the Bible in many respects. Platonic thought said the body is evil and only the spiritual is good (the gnostics later said it doesn't matter what you do with the body since its evil). The Bible teaches otherwise.

God wants us to glorify Him with our bodies (1 Cor 6:19). How do we do that? God tells us in His Word. In the Song of Songs He illustrates the beauty He intends for a man and woman to enjoy to His honor, in the commitment of a marriage relationship.

Schofield note: "The book is the expression of pure marital love as ordained by God in creation, and the vindication of love as against both asceticism and lust--the two profanations of the holiness of marriage."

Discuss: What is asceticism? To the other extreme, what is lust? How is biblical love in marriage unlike either?

2. *Love has high value (see 8:7).*

"Many waters cannot quench love..."

See also: 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4

3. *Love is more than physical. It is a total relationship.*

The Song of Songs focuses on the physical, but more than that. It focuses on "oneness" in the marriage bond. Oneness involves the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual union.

Discuss: How does the world's conception of a relationship between a man and woman distort this? The world suggests it's possible to enjoy physical oneness without any consideration for the emotions, the intellect, the spiritual. The consequences are severe.

The Song of Songs shows us that from God's perspective, sexual attraction is normal and good, but it must be exercised within the guidelines God established in marriage.

The book also shows us that love includes humility, modesty, loyalty, regard for the interests of one's partner, as well as the physical. Our culture is in great need of the message of the Song of Songs.

How so?

Other Texts: Eph 5 (the marriage relationship); 1 Cor 7 (God's guidelines for intimacy in marriage)

Discuss: Our children need for us to give them God's perspective on the physical relationship. Why is this difficult for parents?

