

Song of Solomon

Message

The Song of Solomon is a poetic presentation of God’s gracious design for marriage in all its physical and emotional beauty as presented through the lives of Solomon and his beloved Shulamite bride who celebrate their love for one another through their courtship (1:2–3:5), marriage (3:6–5:1), and maturation within marriage (5:2–8:4).



Title

The Hebrew title of this book is *shir has- sirim*, meaning “The Song of Songs.”¹ Merrill suggests that the full title may be best rendered “‘The Song of Songs pertaining to Solomon’ or, more likely, ‘The Song of Songs by Solomon.’”² The title comes from the opening words of 1:1 and represents the Hebrew superlative; that is, of all of Solomon’s 1,005 songs (1 Kgs 4:32), this is his most exquisite or best song of all. Both the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and Latin Vulgate versions also adopted this title. The English title, “Canticles,” is derived from the Latin Vulgate which uses the title *canticum canticorum*, meaning “the best of songs.” Some English translations have kept the literal title “Song of Songs” (e.g., NIV), while most others have changed it to the “Song of Solomon” because Solomon is identified as the author in 1:1 (e.g., AV, RSV, NASB, NKJV).

Author

The opening verse ascribes authorship to King Solomon (1:1). In addition, “It has been the uniform tradition of the Christian church, until modern times [and the rise of modern liberal criticism] that Canticles is a genuine Solomonic production.”³ The internal testimony of the book clearly supports Solomon’s authorship. Consider the numerous references to Solomon throughout the book (cf. 1:4-5, 12; 3:7, 9, 11; 6:12; 7:5; 8:11-12; 1 Kings 4:33). The writer mentions the fact that he enjoys royal luxury and imported good (1:11, 12, 15; 3:16; 5:15). The author evidenced a great interest in natural history (1:4; 2:13- 21), as well as an obvious technical knowledge of flora and fauna (1:14, 17: 2:2-3, 9, 12-13; 4:1-3; see 1 Kgs 4:33). The book describes geographical locations (i.e., the north and south) from the standpoint that the kingdom was still united (see for example: Jerusalem 1:5; 6:4; Carmel 7:5; Tirzah [which served as the capitol of the north] 6:4). The reference to queens and concubines in 6:8-9 reflects a time reminiscent of Solomon.

¹Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 488.

²Gene Merrill, “Song of Solomon,” in *Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word, 2001), 511.

³For issues related to both denying and supporting Solomonic authorship, see Archer, 489-91.

Lastly, there are many similarities in terminology with Solomon's two other books, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Date

Assuming that Solomon composed this work, it would be dated some time during his reign, namely between 971 and 931 B.C. Many Bible interpreters suggest that Solomon wrote this book early in his reign when his heart was still relatively "pure" and free from the idolatry and other pagan influences that resulted from his polygamous relationships with 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3).⁴ This seems a more likely explanation than that he was polygamous when these events occurred but just omitted reference to his other loves. The book may be dated early in Solomon's reign, say between 971–965 B.C.

Placement in the Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, Song of Solomon is the first of five *Megilloth* writings ("Five Scrolls"): Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.⁵ In the English Bible, Song of Solomon is the fifth of the five poetical books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Song of Solomon is the first of three Bible books purported to have been authored by King Solomon.⁶ The Song of Solomon is placed among the biblical books of wisdom and poetical literature, but stands in a class all its own.⁷

Theories of Interpretation

The Song of Solomon has posed somewhat of an enigma to scholars concerning its interpretive thrust. Is it to be understood according to an allegorical, fictional, or historical viewpoint? The following is a brief survey of the primary views of interpretation.⁸

⁴"Ironically, the sage who counseled young men against the wiles of the 'foreign' woman [Proverbs] was entrapped in her snares (himself)" (Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], 300).

⁵The *Megilloth* were read in conjunction with the various Jewish feasts. "Portions of the Song of Solomon were sung on the eighth day of the Feast of Pentecost, which was the Jews' first and greatest of the annual feasts" (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament*, [Chicago: Moody, 1978], 306).

⁶The three books authored by Solomon are Song of Solomon (written as a young man), Proverbs, (written as a middle-aged man), and Ecclesiastes (written as an elderly and possibly back-sliden man).

⁷Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, etc al. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 367.

⁸The following summary of views has been adapted from Jack S. Deere, "Song of Solomon," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 1009; Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 352–66; Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca sacra* 154 (Jan-Mar 1997):23-46.

A. *The Allegorical View*

1. *Jewish Allegorical View*—This is the view found in the Jewish Mishnah, Talmud, and Targum on the book. The Jews took the Song to be an allegory of Israelite history and an expression of God’s gracious love toward His people from the time of the Exodus to the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, the book teaches spiritual lessons with no historical factual basis. There never was a Shulamite or her beloved.
2. *Christian Allegorical View*—This was the primary view accepted by the church for most of her history. Again, like the Jewish allegorical view, the book is spiritualized to teach the love of Christ for his bride, the church (Eph 5:22-23). The book is not talking about the physical love between two real individuals. Origen, the father of allegorical interpretation, was the originator of this view.

Traditional Roman Catholic interpreters have interpreted the bride as Mary, the mother of

of Jesus. Still others have interpreted the bride as the state of Israel under Solomon’s rule. The allegorical approach is now widely acknowledged to be a false reading of the text, and has been abandoned for the most part in favor of a literal interpretation of Solomon’s beautiful love song.⁹

B. *The Extended Type View*

In this view Solomon typifies Christ and the beloved serves as a type of the church. The view differs from the allegorical approach in that the typical view accepts Solomon as an historical person and does not attempt to prescribe a mystical meaning for every detail in the book. The problem with this view is that the Scriptures gives no indication that the activities of Solomon’s life are to be viewed as typically messianic.

C. *The Drama View*

There are numerous variations of this view (the two character and three character drama are the most popular). However, the essential view interprets the Song as portraying a drama being acted out by Solomon and the Shulamite. Some add a third character, the shepherd. There is some merit to this view as the Song does have certain elements of a drama. The weakness of this view is that the speeches are too long and there is a lack of character and plot development needed to support this interpretation.

D. *The Dream View*

This view sees the Song as simply a dream rather than a true record of actual historical events. This interpretation is based mainly on certain references in the book to the bed, to sleep, and to “awakening.” This is a relatively new view. The main weakness of this

⁹See C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 232–54. See *Appendix A* for a humorous look at Solomon’s beautiful Shulamite maiden according to the literal description provided about her in chapters four and seven.

view is that there is no clear indication that the bulk of the book is a dream. There may be some “dream-like” episodes, but that is far from making the whole work a dream.

E. *The Mythological–Cultic View*

This view suggests that the Song is derived directly from erotic literature found in the pagan fertility cults of ancient Near Eastern mythology.¹⁰ The difficulty with this view is that the book was included in the Jewish canon. It is unlikely that they would have done so if the origin of the work was based on such pagan and immoral backgrounds.

F. *The Literal View*

There are several variations of this view. Some see the Song as a lyrical expression of human love (Carr, Glickman, Deere hold this view) and the various stages of the development of this love is seen in the Song. Others have interpreted the Song as a collection or anthology of love poems. They see the poems as expressing literal human sexual/romantic love.

It is probably best to view the Song of Solomon as a collection of love poems incorporated by Solomon into a Song celebrating the joys of God-ordained monogamous love and marriage. In the Song, Solomon expresses his love for his bride, and the Shulamite for him, in the context of courtship and marriage. The song was written (or originally sung) in two parts, the man’s (Solomon’s) and the woman’s (Shulamite), with a few choral responses (by the daughters of Jerusalem) sprinkled throughout.¹¹ Tanner writes that the literal interpretation—that views the Song as communicating a lesson on marital love—is the best approach to take and the only one that honors the grammatical-historical contextual hermeneutic. Tanner writes that,

These interpretive schemes (referring to all the views above with the exception of the last) are guilty of reading too much into the meaning, rather than allowing the text to speak for itself. With no further guideline from the New Testament, the best approach to take—the one, most consistent with a grammatical-historical contextual hermeneutic—is the literal one in which Solomon and his bride are used to address the topic of the romantic and sexual experience within God-ordained marriage. The book, however, seems to be saying something more in light of the ‘hints’ and moralistic lesson found in chapter 8, the climax of the book. Hence the literal-didactic view (i.e. the Song is communicating a lesson on marital love that goes even deeper) seems to be the best approach to take.¹²

Historical Purpose

¹⁰Garrett provides a good summary of the major weakness of this view (*Song of Songs*, 361–62).

¹¹“Song of Solomon,” in *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 332.

¹²Tanner, “The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” 45-46.

The historical purpose of the Song was to describe and extol the delights of human marital love as modeled by Solomon and his beloved Shulamite maiden. They express a pure and intimate relationship with one another, which is a gift of God.¹³ Merrill suggests a secondary purpose accomplished by the Song, “the love that exists between Solomon and his beloved portrays love at a higher and more perfect level, that between God and the objects of His grace.”¹⁴ *There is also the constant reminder to the young to wait patiently for the time when they too can experience the joys derived from marital love.*

Outline¹⁵

The Superscription 1:1

- A. Title: The Song of Songs 1:1a
- B. Author: Solomon 1:1b

Act I: The Courtship of the Lovers 1:2–2:7

Scene 1: The Expression of Love by the Shulamite 1:2-7

1. The Shulamite longs for her lover, the king 1:2-4
2. The Shulamite reveals her insecurity 1:5-7

Scene 2: The Expression of Love to One Another 1:8–2:7

1. Solomon alleviates his lover’s fears about acceptance 1:8
2. Solomon affirms his lover’s beauty 1:9-11
3. Shulamite affirms Solomon’s features 1:12-14
4. Solomon’s acclamation of his darling’s beauty 1:15
5. Shulamite’s acclamation of Solomon’s handsome features 1:16–

2:1

6. Solomon’s affirmation that his darling is a lily among her maidens 2:2
7. Shulamite affirms that all could see Solomon’s love for her 2:3-7

Act II: The Continual Seeking and Finding of the Lovers 2:8–3:5

Scene 1: The Lover’s Arrival: Spending Time Together 2:8-17

¹³As mentioned above, the song was written (or originally sung) in two parts, Solomon’s and the Shulamite’s with a few choral responses by the daughters of Jerusalem chior sprinkled throughout.

¹⁴Gene Merrill, “Song of Solomon,” in *Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word, 2001), 512.

¹⁵The outline presented here is adapted from Gene Merrill who divides the book into six acts comprised of two scenes per act. Merrill bases his division “On the assumption that the piece is a dramatic composition, its outline may be viewed in terms of acts and scenes” (“Song of Solomon,” in *Old Testament Explorer*, 513). Garrett outlines the book as a presentation of “lyric poetry,” that is “poetry which was probably sung to some kind of music, however it was performed in the ancient world” (*Proverbs Ecclesiast-*

1. Shulamite describes their relationship 2:8-13
2. Solomon desires to know everything about his fiancée 2:14-15

Scene 2: The Beloved's Search for Her Lover: A Fearful Dream 2:16–3:5

1. Shulamite desires to always belong to her beloved 2:16-17
2. Shulamite describes a dream she had of losing her fiancée 3:1-5

Act III: The Consummation of the Wedding Proper 3:6–5:1

Scene 1: The Wedding Procession 3:6-11

(Solomon's glorious procession is extolled)

Scene 2: The Consummation of Their Love 4:1–5:1

(Solomon extols the beauties of his bride)

1. The bride's beauty 4:1-7
2. The groom's request 4:8
3. The bride's love 4:9-11
4. The bride's purity 4:12-15
5. The bride's surrender 4:16–5:1
 - a. The bride to Solomon 4:16
 - b. Solomon to his bride 5:1a
 - c. God to the couple 5:1b

Act IV. The Conflict and Resolution: The First Marital Quarrel 5:2–6:9

Scene 1: The Conflict: The Bride Rejects Her Beloved and He Departs 5:2–6:3

1. The bride refuses her beloved's sexual advances 5:2-4
2. The bride regrets her foolish action but Solomon is gone 5:5-6a
3. The bride searches for her beloved 5:6b-8
4. The bride reaffirms her fond affection for Solomon 5:9-16
5. The bride's search for her beloved leads to his spice garden 6:1-3

Scene 2: The Resolution: The Lover Returns and Affirms His Love for His Bride 6:4-9

1. The bride's beauty is extolled 6:4-7 (cf. 4:1-2)
2. The bride is unique among Solomon's growing number of women 6:8-9

Act V. The Conflict and Resolution: The Second Marital Quarrel 6:10–8:4

tes Song of Songs, 384); see Garrett's unusual outline on pg. 383. Others view the book as a presentation of thirteen Canticles—"love songs;" see *the handout at end of these notes* for an example of this arrangement.

Scene 1: The Conflict: The Shulamite Departs from Her Husband for a While 6:10-13

Scene 2: The Resolution: Solomon Expresses His Love for His Bride and the Marriage

Deepens 7:1–8:4

1. Solomon extols his wife’s physical beauty 7:1-9
2. Shulamite expresses her passion for Solomon 7:10–8:4

Act VI. The Couple’s Commitment to Love One Another 8:5-14

Scene 1: The Couple Visits the Shulamite’s Home Where Their Love Began 8:5-9

1. Solomon reminisces over his first meeting with his lovely wife 8:5
2. Shulamite reaffirms her love for Solomon 8:6-7
3. Shulamite recounts how her brothers advised her to remain virtuous 8:8-10
4. Shulamite request that Solomon remember her meager family 8:11-12

Scene 2: The Couple Commits to Love One Another 8:13-14

1. Solomon invites his wife’s commitment to love 8:13
2. Shulamite invokes her beloved to hurry to her 8:14

A Final Word

Having concluded with this—my first serious—study of the Song of Solomon, it seems that the outline and argument provided by Charles C. Ryrie, although not incorporated in the above presentation, appears to be the best overall treatment of the argument of the book. Ryrie presents the book as a “lyric poem in dialogue form,” with three main characters: Solomon, the Shulamite, and the daughters of Jerusalem.¹⁶ This particular arrangement appears to offer the best overall development of the various poetic dialogues.



¹⁶See Ryrie, “Song of Solomon,” in *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Moody, 1978), 1000–1.

“Solomon’s Thirteen Canticles”¹⁷

Canticle 1—“A Song of Longing for the Bridegrooms Affection” 1:2-6

Canticle 2—“A Song for Her Lover’s Identity” 1:7-8

Canticle 3—“A Song of Mutual Admiration” 1:9-17

Canticle 4—“A Song of Perfect Love” 2:1-7

Canticle 5—“A Song of Happy Visitation” 2:8-17

Canticle 6—“A Song of Fearful Separation” 3:1-5

Canticle 7—“A Song of a Glorious Wedding Procession” 3:6-11

Canticle 8—“A Song of Intimate Love” 4:1-7

Canticle 9—“A Song of Marriage Proposal and Acceptance” 4:8-5:1

Canticle 10—“A Song About the Bridegroom” 5:2-6:3

Canticle 11—“A Song Praising the Shulamite’s Superior Beauty” 6:4-7:10

Canticle 12—“A Song of a Homesick Bride” 7:11-8:4

Canticle 13—“A Song of the Bride’s Homecoming” 8:5-14

¹⁷The above outline has been adapted from that of C. E. Mason, “The Song of Solomon” (unpublished class notes presented in conjunction with his course on the poetic books, Philadelphia School of the Bible).