



The Song of Songs in Biblical Theology: How to Read the Most Sublime Song

Why is the Song of Songs in the Bible, and how are we to understand it? This Song's music calls us to a better life, and we hear the music through God's life-changing Word.

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, sings us right into reality. The mesmerizing Song captivates our attention, wooing our hearts and winning our minds, demonstrating that the way of life depicted in its poetry is more real than the world's version of the good life.

The Bible's overarching story is bigger and grander and higher and deeper and longer and wider and more significant than any other narrative human tongues can tell. The Bible's truth is solid, clear, and forceful, like a faithful foundation when philosophies fail, the house built on it tall and true when falsehoods fall.

Behold, too, the emotional range of the book: the statements of pain in Scripture plumb as deep as any suffer, and the Bible's depiction of love, particularly in the Song of Songs, shines brighter even than Shakespeare's lyric glory. The Song sings what we would long for in our hearts if we knew how to hope for heaven.

The Bible's presentation of life as it should be is better than life as we usually experience it. There are moments when we feel the love for God that we should, the power of His truth that we should, the love for the church and the lost that



we should, and the love for our spouses or the devotion to marriage that we should, but the Bible is constant. The Bible shows the way to a life more authentic, more appropriate, more true, more sorrowful, more joyful, and more loving than what mere fallen flesh could find for itself. The Bible is more real than the world, and the sublime music of the Song of Songs sings it is so.

The people of God need the Word of God, and we desperately need the Song of Songs today. Our time is notable for massive sexual confusion, distortion, and perversion. Pornography is pervasive. Adultery is celebrated in the culture at large, the devastation of divorce normalized, the fiction of same-sex marriage legalized—all satanic attempts to make immorality moral through the permission of the legislature. In this subverted moral universe, those who adhere to morality as the Bible asserts the Creator intended it are regarded as bigots, or worse.

As a result of the Fall, we who are Christians experience deeply distorted and destructive instincts and attitudes about sexuality. Even among the redeemed we can find broken and damaged marriages. Some members of the bride of Christ harbor unrealistic expectations about what marriage will be like, about what our needs are, and about how to achieve satisfaction.

How are we to straighten out our crooked thinking, find healing for old wounds, and be renewed in our minds when it comes to marriage and sex? God's Word is living and active. God's Word is relevant. God's Word is able to make us wise unto salvation. And I am confident that God has given us the Song of Solomon so that we will think rightly about sexuality. As we present the living sacrifices of our lives—even in our sexuality—to the One who showed us mercy (Rom. 12:1-2), the Song of Songs is one of the tools the Spirit of God will use to conform us to the image of Christ, to transform us from one degree of glory to another, to enable us to take every thought captive to the knowledge of Christ.

God has given us the Song of Solomon so that His glory in Christ will shine in our marriages and in our sexuality. We want the glory of God in Christ to shine in the way we think

about and live out the emotional and physical intimacy God intends for husbands and wives by the power of the Spirit.

The Song of Songs is inviting, exciting, and daunting, and God will use it to make us love Him, to make us long for Christ, and to make us better single people and better spouses, better adolescents and better adults, better children and better parents. The Bible is more real than the world, and the way to live in the Bible's account of reality, which *is* the real world, is to steep ourselves in it, to understand it, to relish it, meditating on it day and night.

This first chapter is on how to read and think about the Song of Songs. So I ask again: what is the Song of Solomon doing in the Bible, and how are we to understand it?¹

What is the Song of Songs?

Is this short book of poetry an allegory that has nothing to do with human love and everything to do with Yahweh and Israel or Christ and the church? Or is it to be read as though it is *only* dealing with the love between a man and a woman? Could it be *both* about God and Israel, Christ and the church, *and also* about love between a man and woman in marriage?

Is Solomon's a narrative Song, one that begins with betrothal, proceeds to marriage, moves on to the deepening intimacy of that marriage, ending with reflections on love?² Did Solomon intend this book to be an instruction manual for couples to increase their enjoyment of physical aspects of marital intimacy?

Does this book have anything to do with the Bible's big story, with earlier Old Testament narratives, prophecies, patterns, and promises? How are we to navigate these questions and find answers to them?

1. For a very detailed history of interpretation, see Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 89-229; see also the very important book by Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), particularly his case study on the Song of Songs, 159-64; and the most detailed and comprehensive analysis of virtually everything pertaining to the Song is the 1,300-page tome by Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003).

2. So Daniel J. Estes in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 292.

How Should We Read It?

The main point of this first chapter is that the *Song* of Solomon should be read as *what* it is *where* it is. That is to say, this book is a *Song* and it's *in the Bible*. Those may seem to be simple assertions, but my aim is to explain how those two assertions affect everything about how we understand this book. So I say again: the Song of Songs should be read as *what* it is *where* it is, a *Song* that is *in the Bible*. Let me explain.

First, this book is a Song: it's one poem. The first word of the book's title is in the singular: the *Song* of Songs. So we are *not* dealing with a collection of smaller songs. This book is not an anthology of short poems but *one unified piece of poetry*, and it should therefore be interpreted as a unit, as a whole. So the Song is *one poem*, not a collection of several poems, and the fact that it is a song means that its author *intended* it to be poetic and therefore evocative.

Other forms of writing (genres) are used when authors intend to be precise, technical, and specific, but when authors write poetry the use of language tends to suggest multiple interpretations, sometimes even multiple layers of interpretation. We must let the genre—the fact that we are reading *poetry*—inform how we read this book: we should not close down the possible meanings a poem awakens but explore them. This does not mean every possible meaning will have equal value. We should pursue the meaning(s) intended by the author, which leads from *what* this book is to *where* it is.

Second, this Song is in the Bible. That means that we should read the Song in light of the bigger story that is unfolding in the whole Bible. We should read the Song as summarizing and interpreting the big story of the Bible, contributing to it, depicting it in verse.³

This means that the Song of Songs sings the Bible's love story. Reflecting on these realities will help us tune our ears so that we can listen more closely to the Song. In the rest of this chapter we consider the broader story being summarized and interpreted in the Song before we give it a close listen. We

3. For a large-scale look at the Bible's big story, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), and for a shorter version, with some attention to the way the Bible's imagery and symbolism summarizes and interprets the big story, see Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*

want to know more effectively how to deal with the imagery that will be used, so that it might be less befuddling and more inspiring when we encounter it.

To that end, we will consider the setting, plot, hero, and meaning of the Song. The four parts are as follows:

The Song's Setting: Thorns and Thistles, Rivered Garden

The Song's Plot: Garments of Skin, Exposed and Unashamed

The Song's Hero: David's Son, the new Adam

The Song's Meaning: Poetry, Allegory, Typology, Oh My!

Before plunging forward, however, a word is in order about the music other books of the Bible make. We should think of the Song of Solomon as one movement in the grand symphonic poem of the Bible. It's a beautiful movement. Its title claims it is the most sublime Song, but it's not the only music in the Bible that deals with these themes.

The Song of Songs has music of intimacy and fervor, and there are other parts of the Bible that depict other things we need to know about love and marriage. For instance, near the Song, the book of Ecclesiastes balances the message of the Song by telling us there is a time for everything (Eccles. 3:1-8), and that in all things we must fear God and keep His commandments (12:13-14). In Proverbs 5:15-23, husbands are warned against seeking marital delights outside of marriage (cf. also Prov. 7, etc.). As the exemplary father in Proverbs addresses his instruction to his son (cf. 'My son ...' in Prov. 2:1; 3:1, etc.), we see a husband who has become a father who is obeying the instructions in Deuteronomy 6:7 for fathers to teach their sons diligently.⁴ And then Proverbs 31 presents us with an exemplary wife and mother doing many things to bless her husband and children.⁵

The Bible speaks to all aspects of what it means to be a husband or a wife, a father or mother. There are parts of the Bible that sing a song of singleness (e.g., Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:7, 32). So if you're not at an age to be married yet, or

4. On this, see further James M. Hamilton Jr., 'That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,' *Journal of Family Ministry* 1 (2010): 10-17.

5. On which, see James M. Hamilton Jr., 'A Biblical Theology of Motherhood,' *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 2, no. 2 (2012): 6-13.

if you're at the age and unmarried, or if you're a widow or a widower, or if for whatever reason you're inclined to think that maybe this book isn't singing your song, let me encourage you to lend your ear anyway. I know that other parts of the music might be more directly relevant to where you are at the moment, but I'm confident that listening to this part of the music will only make the rest of it better.

All Scripture is 'breathed out by God and profitable,' and it will all be used to 'complete' and equip us (2 Tim. 3:16; Eph. 4:11-16); it's all written for our instruction to give us hope (Rom. 15:4), and the Lord will use this part of His Word to help us long for Christ and enable us to feel the meaning of Revelation 22:17, where 'the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.' And we'll join John in the words of Revelation 22:20, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'

We begin with the physical setting of the Song.

The Song's Setting: Thorns and Thistles, Rivered Garden

The setting of the Song of Songs is remarkably reminiscent of Eden,⁶ where all the women really would have been strong, the men good-looking, and all the children above average. There once really was a Camelot, but the iconic innocence of the place wasn't in an England ruled by an Arthur. No, it was a place where everything was very good. No Lancelot lurked to lead Guinevere astray, though came a day when a serpent scorned the Word of God, tempted the woman, and man fell into sin. Before we get to sin, though, meditate for a moment on the very good land that was.

Think back through the curses of Genesis 3:14-19, starting with the last first: can you imagine an *uncursed* land? I think

6. I am convinced that Solomon, the author of the Song, intended to evoke Eden, so I disagree with Garrett's suggestion that 'Relating the Song to Genesis 2-3 is ... extraneous,' that the 'ties [to Gen. 1-3] are of dubious value,' and that 'when an interpreter repeatedly turns to Genesis to find the meaning of the Song, it is obvious that the alleged meaning is not germane to the Song at all,' in Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 99. If we approach the text from the perspective that Solomon was a biblical theologian whose view of the world was shaped by earlier Scripture, it is natural to read the text in its canonical context, summarizing and interpreting the broader biblical story.

you can. It's what you picture being beyond the rainbow, or it's what we wish we could find when we finally arrive. We have this longing for something better than we currently experience, and we feel a desire for everything to be just right. C. S. Lewis wrote, 'If I find in myself a desire which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.'⁷ The world was another kind of place before sin, one that had no curse, where all was very good (cf. Gen. 3:17-19).

Can you imagine a world where men and women got along perfectly, never a hitch in their interactions? Can you imagine a world where women did not die in childbirth, where babies always came out of the womb alive and healthy, indeed, a world where childbirth was not painful? Every time there's a death in childbirth, we should respond: this is not the way it's supposed to be. That response is right because when God made the world, there was no sin or death, there was no conflict between men and women, and there was no pain in childbearing (cf. Gen. 3:16).

Can you imagine a world with no evil and no enemies? I'm not talking about moral relativism that denies that anything is evil. I'm talking about a world where everyone would always choose what is true and good, a world where everyone really would be reasonable, and we really could talk through differences. If you haven't noticed, that's not the world in which we live. We all think the world should be that way, don't we? We all wish that nations could have good-faith agreements and treaties that everyone could agree to as good and right so that all war could be avoided, all weapons unmade, and all peace enjoyed. When God made the world, there was no enmity between people groups; there was no curse on the serpent and his seed (cf. Gen. 3:15).

Prior to Genesis 3:14-19, where God cursed the serpent and his seed, caused the woman to desire to control her husband, added pain in childbearing, and cursed the land, making toil painful, the world was as it was meant to be: 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). The land was well watered and un-cursed. There

7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 136-7.

were no enemies full of enmity. And the man and his wife were naked and unashamed (2:25).

Sin had not yet entered the world through one man, and death through sin (Rom. 5:12). After sin, God spoke judgment, and Adam and Eve were driven from the garden God had planted in Eden in the east (Gen. 2:8; 3:22-24).

The closest we get to being back to the Garden of Eden in the rest of the Bible is in the poetry of the Song of Songs.

Do you want to read of the fruits and foliage of Eden? Read the Song of Songs. Do you want to know what it would have been like for Adam and Eve to gaze on one another in their native majesty, unarrayed by clothing, feeling neither shame nor fear? Read the Song of Songs. Do you want to see man and wife moving past hostility and alienation into harmony and oneness? Read the Song of Songs.

The Song is set in basically two places, and the two complement one another. On the one hand, there is a garden setting, and this garden looks cultivated. It looks like it has a new-Adam kind of figure who works and keeps it, which was what God put Adam in the garden to do. The Song of Songs shows us a fertile land yielding its fruit to the hand of a gardener wise and good.

On the other hand, the Song is set in Zion, Jerusalem, the city of David. There is a trajectory in the Old Testament from the Garden of Eden to the Tabernacle to the Temple, with Jerusalem, the capital of the land, being a kind of focal point of the new Eden that the land of promise represents. This means that these two settings are not that different from one another. Just as there is a direct line from Adam to David, there is a direct line from Eden to Zion. This trajectory, this thematic line from Eden to Zion, points forward to the new heaven and new earth, which is itself a new temple and a new Eden.⁸

As we read the Song of Solomon, then, the setting of this song that summarizes and interprets the Bible's big story should call to our minds the way that the story began in God's very good creation, the undefiled garden in Eden in the east. Man was driven from Eden because of sin, the land was cursed, the creation subjected to futility ... in hope

8. On this theme, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).



(Rom. 8:20), and those hopes are evoked in this Song, as the one who descends from Adam, the seed of the woman, has cultivated a garden-city that is not only habitable but lush and is causing the blessing of Abraham, the blessing of the land, to be enjoyed by all who benefit from the way he works and keeps the garden-city.

The Song of Songs is a song of hope. A hope not vague but specific: that one day the curse will be rolled back, the land will have no more famines, and all will again be very good under the hand of the one who works and keeps the garden. The Song of Songs does not portray the new heaven and earth directly, but its setting is reminiscent of the fertility of Eden, thereby pointing forward to a new and better Eden.

The Song's Plot: Garments of Skin, Exposed and Unashamed

We have been considering how the situation in Genesis 1:31, where 'God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good,' came to an end when 'the creation was subjected to futility ... in hope' (Rom. 8:20). We turn our attention now to consider a beauty that deserves the reverence of the holy of holies. Solomon was no doubt aware of the correspondence between the phrases 'Song of Songs' and 'Holy of Holies.' The holiness of the holy place in both tabernacle and temple was reminiscent of Eden, and these most holy places were meant to create sacred space where God would be present. The presence of God is a significant consideration as we consider nakedness and clothing and intimacy.

The Book of Kings presents Solomon as a man who knew plants and built the temple (1 Kings 4:33; 6:37-38). He exercised dominion over the land and spoke of animals, and when the author of Kings describes him doing this he suggests that Solomon is a new Adam (4:24, 33). In the Song of Songs, the builder of gardens and temples (cf. Eccles. 2:4-5), King Solomon, writes of the glory of relations between man and woman in a way that seeks to regain what was lost when humans were driven from Eden.

To read of the intimacy described in the Song of Songs is like entering the holy place where God walks in the cool of the day. Moses, who wrote the narratives concerning both Eden and the tabernacle, shaped those narratives to show



that the tabernacle is a kind of new Eden.⁹ With the imagery of the Song so reminiscent of Eden, the connection with the presence of God in Eden and the holy places in tabernacle and temple takes on tremendous significance. Prior to sin, the man and his wife dwelt in the presence of God, and they were naked and not ashamed (Gen. 2:25). We should think of human nakedness with neither the crude lust nor the fearful shame that lamentably characterize our fallen impulses. We should think of the naked intimacy of man and wife with the sober dignity that would befit those who stood before God unfallen in the edenic holy of holies.

Our culture suffers from a plague of pornography. Perhaps nothing more threatens the purity of the church today than the smut the world slobbers over. Freedom from the filth comes in the desire for a more powerful pleasure. The degrading, dehumanizing, objectifying prostitution of pleasure on offer from the world is a twisted perversion of the true satisfaction to be found in the enjoyment of God's good gift within the boundaries of God's good commandments.

Can you imagine what would it be like to stand naked, flawless, perfect, worshiping, without sin in the presence of God? What with everything 'very good' and with sin not having 'entered the world' and with man and woman 'not ashamed,' there would have been no leering, no sneaking another look, no nervous giggles, no inhibition, no self-conscious fear that one's appearance was less than desirable, no impulse toward inappropriate behavior, no lurking bad memories of past transgression. Everything would have been innocent: undefiled and appropriate, respectful and trusting, safe and pure, and the man and woman would have been aware that God made the world, planted the garden, shaped them for each other, and was coming to walk with them 'in the cool of the day' (Gen. 3:8).

But Eve was tempted and Adam sinned (Rom. 5:12; 1 Tim. 2:14). Immediately they took steps to hide themselves, to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3:6-7). In the words, 'and

9. That John understood this reality can be seen from the way he depicts the new Jerusalem of the new heaven and earth as a new holy of holies, the city being a perfect cube (Rev. 21:16). See James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 381-9.

they knew that they were naked' in Genesis 3:7, we see that suddenly they became aware of themselves in a way they never had been before. After sinning, they knew that they were vulnerable. Having broken their troth with God, they immediately understood they could no longer maintain their troth with one another, that they must protect their most vulnerable and sacred parts from one another. They sensed a danger, whether from eyes or otherwise, they had not known prior to sin. In contrast with their former 'no shame' nakedness (2:25), after sin they knew shame, so 'they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths' (3:7).

That's the world we know. The world in which we live is the one with sin in it, the one over which God has spoken judgment. We have been driven from the Garden of Eden, and we are no longer naked in perfect innocence. We wear clothing that protects us from other people and from a world that has been subjected to futility, a world of scorching heat and biting cold, desert famine and whelming flood.

There is enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), and thus sometimes our clothing is for battle. There is animosity between man and woman (Gen. 3:16), and our clothing always protects from prying eyes. And there is a curse on the land that fills it with thorn and thistle (Gen. 3:17-19), so our clothing protects us from the harsh world outside Eden.

In the Song of Songs, Solomon sings a melody rich with reminiscent beauty, a beauty that resonates with us, a haunting beauty so sharp it sometimes cuts us open and lays us bare with a longing for what we do not now have. The beauty of the Song of Songs has an Eden-like loveliness. It has a harmony, a radiance, a shining innocence with a man and woman gazing on one another's glory, without an indication of any shame.

The Song is showing us something that the words of the poem do not overtly say. That is, the Song presents us with a married couple gazing on one another as Adam and Eve must have in Eden. There is safety, security, fidelity, and enjoyment, and there is no taking more than the other would give, no wanting more than is needed, and no coercion or manipulation. In the poetry of this book we see a man and

woman trusting one another, and we see that trust as the man and woman each describe the other with no indication of embarrassment or discomfort—and the descriptions can be read aloud in church without embarrassment and discomfort, too. This book shows us the glory of a good marriage.

There is an awesome glory here that transcends everything we have known or desired. In the poetry of the Song of Songs we have an impressionistic narrative that depicts a descendant of David who has overcome the alienation between himself and his wife, removed the hostility and mistrust by his loving words, worked and kept a cursed land such that it has become like the Garden of Eden. In the words of this book the man and the woman stand before one another naked and unashamed; theirs is a stunning renewal of Eden's lost glory.

The Song's Hero: David's Son, the new Adam

When God cursed the serpent He said that a seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).¹⁰ That Moses means to present Eve looking for the seed of the woman promised in Genesis 3:15 can be seen from his account of her responses when her sons were born (Gen. 4:1, 25). Moses then traces the line of descent from Adam to Abram in the ten-member genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, and Lamech's words in Genesis 5:29 present him looking for a rollback of the curse in Genesis 3:17-19.¹¹ The blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 then answers the curses of Genesis 3:14-19 point for point.¹² The line of descent continues right down to King David, to whom remarkable promises are made in 2 Samuel 7. The covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 invokes the blessing of Abraham from Genesis 12 at many points, showing that the author of Samuel intends the covenant with David to be understood as the means by which the blessing of Abraham would be accomplished. The biblical authors expected the blessing of Abraham, the promises of land, seed, and blessing, to be realized through the promised descendant of David.

10. James M. Hamilton Jr., 'The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,' *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 30-54.

11. See further Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 75-83.

12. For an exposition of this sentence, see James M. Hamilton Jr., 'The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007): 253-73.

Solomon is in that line of promise. The Old Testament texts trace his genealogy all the way back to Adam. Obviously he does not turn out to be the one who *ultimately* fulfills the promise, but he was in the line of expectation and became a type of the one to come (cf. Matt. 12:42). Given the Scripture that would have been available to Solomon, a case can be made that Solomon understood that he was—at least in part—causing the promises to come to pass, by building the temple, for instance. David was told his seed would build the temple (2 Sam. 7:13). Given the typological similarities between Solomon and other figures in the line of promise, Solomon probably understood that the patterns of his life were pointing forward to one in whom they would be ultimately realized. The key point here has to do with the way that the curses of Genesis 3 will be overcome by the blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12, which will be brought into reality by the promised King from the line of David in 2 Samuel 7.

The Bible begins with the loss of Eden because of sin, the consequence of which will be death. The restoration to life and God's presence is the salvation promised. This salvation implies a rollback of the curses: the renewal of creation, the healing of relational dysfunction, and the removal of the curse from the land. All this, the Old Testament promises, will be accomplished by great David's greater Son.

This broader narrative, this world-defining story, with this hope for its grand resolution, lies behind the lyrics of the Bible's poets. The biblical authors wrote their work to be understood within the context of a meta-narrative that begins with the problem of human sin, sin that results in death: alienation from God, from other people, and from the world. The back-story informing the biblical authors also provides the big answer to the world's big problem, and that answer comes in the promise of the seed of the woman, seed of Abraham, seed of Judah, seed of David, who will crush the serpent's head, reopen the way to Eden, renew harmony and justice between people, and usher His own people into the very presence of God. In a word, the promise of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 is the promise of *life* (cf. Gen. 3:20).

In the Song of Songs we have Solomon, the son of David, King in Jerusalem, describing an Eden-like intimacy between

himself and his wife in an Eden-like setting.¹³ Solomon knows what he is doing, and he intends to depict a glorious renewal, the consummation of the hopes of the people of God. Relational dysfunction removed, the desert blooms like the Garden of Eden in the presence of God under the hand of the new Adam through whom God has brought His promises to pass.

The Song's Meaning: Poetry, Allegory, Typology, Oh My!

Before we consider how the Song is intended to instruct us, we should summarize the lines of argument being presented:

1) The setting of the Song of Songs indicates that Solomon means to depict himself as a descendant of David who is working and keeping a garden-city, such that what was lost when Adam was driven from Eden is being recaptured by what the son of David is doing in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion which the Lord loves.

2) The plot of the Song of Songs indicates that Solomon means to depict himself and his wife renewing the unashamed intimacy that Adam and Eve lost when they sinned. This renewed intimacy is pure and undefiled, sinful tendencies and hostilities overcome by the son of David.

3) The hero of the Song of Songs is Solomon the son of David, who works and keeps the garden-city and overcomes the alienation between himself and his beloved, achieving a renewal of an Eden-like scene and Eden-like relations.

What did the Song's author intend to teach his audience, which includes us, through the poetic depiction of this protagonist at work in this plot taking place in this setting?

This discussion will focus on the way the Song functions at three levels: 1) the Song of Songs depicts human love between a man and a woman; 2) the man in the song typifies the coming Messiah; and 3) the canonical context of the Song points to a deeper, symbolic understanding of marriage as a kind of allegory for the love between God and His people.¹⁴

13. This is the point I seek to establish in Hamilton, 'The Messianic Music of the Song of Songs.'

14. I say this in spite of the fact that, as Dillard and Longman note, 'the allegorical approach is in disfavor with a large majority of the academic community' (Temper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 295).

On what basis do I justify the claim that there are multiple layers of *author-intended* meaning in this Song? At least three reasons establish the warrant for these conclusions: First, we are dealing with poetry, and poetry is by nature deliberately evocative and suggestive. Second, biblical authors who wrote before and after Solomon produced material intended to function in ways that correspond to what I am arguing Solomon intended in the Song.¹⁵ Third, from what Paul says about marriage in Ephesians 5 we can be confident that we are on safe ground when comparing human marriage to the covenant between God and His people.¹⁶ What does the Song teach about the love between man and woman, the man who typifies the Messiah, and the allegorical understanding of marriage?

The Song is about the love between a man and a woman. It is about human marital love and its physical delights. This love is relished in the context of marriage, the Bible's only authorized context for expressions of physical intimacy between man and wife. That God would give such a gift and then encourage its enjoyment shows Him to be a God who seeks the satisfaction and delight of His creatures. God does not keep pleasure from His people, but creates gratuitous goodness and gives sound instruction on how to savor it.

We should also note, however, that the man in the Song isn't just anyone. The man in the Song is the son of David, the first king after David, the first son of David to reign after the promises about the seed of David in 2 Samuel 7. The hero of the Song is the son of David who typifies, anticipates *the* Son of David who will bring about the fulfillment of all the promises of God. What is typology? Typology involves historical correspondence and an increase in significance.

15. Against Estes: 'this song cycle was probably not intended to be construed as an allegory of divine love, although it has most often been read in that manner throughout its interpretative history,' in Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 300. There is warrant in the text, particularly when read in canonical context, for the way the Song has predominantly been understood in Jewish and Christian interpretation. There have obviously been excesses, but this should not keep us from dealing with the fact that throughout the Scriptures marriage is used as a symbol of the relationship between God and His people.

16. I am thus very much in sympathy with the 'Christological and analogical' hermeneutic espoused for the interpretation of the Song by Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 4, 14-66, *passim*.

There are ways that Solomon corresponds to David and to Adam, and as the patterns of events recur in history, they increase in importance. These historical correspondences and escalations in importance build up to Jesus, who matches and exceeds those who were before Him. Jesus fulfills the pattern, the type, that Solomon depicts in the Song of Songs. Jesus is the ultimate bridegroom (cf. Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:6-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).¹⁷

I don't know about you, but when I look at the Song of Songs I wish I could have ideas this good. I wish I could always see the world beautiful, as the Song depicts it. I wish I could describe the world and my beloved in such expressive, creative, fresh ways. The poetry causes us to long to experience the beauty detailed by the book. It's better than we could have imagined, better than the way life typically goes for us. By showing us this better life, the Song shows us that we need the son of David, Solomon, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit, to show us this world. Even more, we need the Son of David, Jesus, who brought God's purposes to pass to make the glory of the Song a reality for us.

Jesus is the one who overcame the curses. Jesus is the one who accomplished redemption. Jesus is the one whose resurrection set the new creation in motion. Jesus is the one who opened the way to the new and better Eden. Jesus is the one we must trust if we want to enter that new Eden in the future and experience anticipations of it in the present. Jesus is the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus laid down His life for His bride, the church (Eph. 5:25). Jesus will consummate the new marriage, the new covenant, and we will celebrate the marriage feast of the lamb when He returns (Rev. 19:9).

If we want our marriages to approach what is depicted in the Song of Songs, we need to trust Jesus, to be enabled by His Spirit, and to follow in His footsteps by laying down our lives for our beloved.

17. I disagree with G. Lloyd Carr, who writes, 'the text of the Song gives no indication that it is intended as typology. The Song is presented simply as an account of the relationship between the lover and the beloved. Nor is there any indication in the New Testament that the Song has a Christological interpretation or application' (*The Song of Solomon*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984], 31). For a list of 'possible NT allusions and verbal parallels to the Song,' see Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 29-34.

We have looked at the way the Song celebrates human love and the way Solomon typifies Jesus, but what about the allegorical meaning of marriage?¹⁸ Dictionary.com defines ‘allegory’ as ‘a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms.’¹⁹ Some allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs have gone too far.²⁰ But modern interpreters have overreacted to allegorical excess by rejecting this aspect of the Song’s meaning altogether. Paul, after all, does employ allegorical interpretation (Gal. 4:21-31).

We do not have to deny that the Song pertains to human love if we suggest that there is also a sense in which Solomon typifies Christ, nor do these two, the human-love interpretation *and* the Solomon-typifies-Christ reading, exclude the view that marriage is a picture of the covenant between God and His people. As early as Exodus 34:15, Israel is warned that those who worship the idols of the nations ‘whore after their gods.’ The view that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is a marriage informs the widespread indictment of spiritual adultery in the Old Testament.

In the book of Hosea, Hosea represents the LORD in his marriage to Gomer, and Gomer represents Israel. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both develop this spiritual adultery extensively, and Jeremiah presents the LORD referring to Israel as ‘my beloved’, using the same root that occurs at many points in the Song of Songs (see the use of יָדִיד *yadid* in Jer. 11:15; 12:7, and the use of דָּוִד *dod* in Song 1:2, 4, 13, 14, 16 etc.). With the covenant between Yahweh and Israel being viewed as a marriage, and with the new covenant being treated as a new marriage (see esp. Hosea 2:14-23), we have reason to think that Old Testament authors, including Solomon, knew that human marriage pointed beyond itself to the relationship between God and His people.

18. Cf. Mitchell, *Song of Songs*, 89, where he writes, ‘This commentary rejects pure allegory,’ then describes an interpretation similar to what is proposed here, 89-93.

19. Cf. the definition provided by Clement Wood, *Poets’ Handbook* (Cleveland: World, 1940), 415: ‘An allegory is a presentation of a meaning implied, but not expressly stated. It is in essence a prolonged metaphor, in which actions symbolize other actions, and often the characters are types or personifications.’

20. Many will think of Origen here, on whom see the balanced biographical introduction in Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen, The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3-66, and for Origen’s interpretation of the Song see pp. 45-9.

This possibility of a deeper meaning of marriage is augmented by the fact that there is another wedding song in the Bible, Psalm 45, where the king of Israel is identified with God. Psalm 45:1-5 extols the greatness of the Davidic King, and then verse 6 shows an extremely close connection between the throne of God and the throne of the Davidic King: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness' (Ps. 45:6, *ESV*).

This Psalm (that closely identifies Yahweh and the king from the line of David who represents Him) is referred to as 'a love song' in its superscription, and the lyrics go on to address a princess who appears to be the king's new bride from a foreign land (Ps. 45:10-17). Solomon himself famously married foreign princesses (1 Kings 3:1), a point of connection between the love song Psalm 45 and the love song that is the subject of this study.

The idea that the covenant between God and His people was understood as a marriage is firmly established. We add to this that the agent of that covenant who is closely identified with God is the anointed king from David's line, the Messiah. This would appear to provide a strong basis for Paul's words in Ephesians 5:32. Having quoted Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31, Paul writes in 5:32: 'This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church' (*ESV*). Paul seems to be asserting that marriage exists to portray the relationship between Christ and the church.²¹ The poetry of the Song of Songs likewise has a meaning that plumbs deeper than merely human love, and I contend that Solomon *intended* his audience to see not only human love in the Song but also a typified Messiah and an allegorical correspondence with the relationship between God and His people.

The biblical authors indisputably knew an allegorical meaning of marriage. The application of the concrete reality of marriage to the spiritual relationship—the covenant—between God and His people can be found throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, this spiritual reality takes the

21. For my attempt at a biblical-theological exposition of Ephesians 5, see James M. Hamilton Jr., 'The Mystery of Marriage,' in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 253-71.

form of the love between Yahweh and Israel and the marriage covenant they entered into at Sinai. In the New Testament, the same spiritual reality is fulfilled in the love between Christ and the church, His bride. The Song of Songs was intended by Solomon to stir up the longings of God's people for *the Messiah*, the Christ, the Bridegroom, God's image and likeness who comes as our covenant Lord to slay the dragon and win His bride, whom he marries by initiating the new covenant.

Conclusion

The Song of Solomon has a hero, the male figure in the Song, Solomon the son of David, who typifies the one to come. In the Song this type of Christ is overcoming the alienation and hostility between himself and his beloved. He is restoring the intimacy lost between man and woman when Adam and Eve sinned. He has cultivated a garden and built a city. He is providing an example for all husbands to follow, and the wife in the Song is likewise exemplary. We should follow the example of Solomon and the Shulammitte as they point to the love between Christ and the church, and we should allow the love between Solomon and his bride depicted in this most sublime Song to point us beyond human marriage to its ultimate referent, the marital-covenant-love between Christ and the church.

There are practical realities that lend us specific applications here: God has inspired the Song of Songs to show us true love and to help us rightly order our relationships. Many people are drawn to perversions of God-honoring sexual expression because of the powerful pleasure and delight to be had, even from distortions of this gift of God. In the Song of Songs, God has shown us a blissful expression of marital love. God woos us away from sinful attempts at pleasure with a Song that sings the holy enjoyment of what He makes possible.

Have you ever wondered whether there could be anything better than perversion and smut? Has the disgusting, dehumanizing, degrading nature of the world's harlotry repulsed you? There is something better, and God reveals it to us through the inspiration of King Solomon, accomplishing it through King Jesus.

God calls us away from the powerful pleasure of sin with the depiction of the superior pleasures of holiness in this most sublime Song. God doesn't use a chisel to chip away at sexual perversion, He uses poetry set to music: The Song of Solomon.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the setting of the Song of Songs in Zion and a lush garden affect the way we think about what the poetry depicts between the King and his Bride?
2. Are there other texts in the Bible that are as reminiscent of the Garden of Eden as the Song of Songs seems to be?
3. The impressionistic plot of the Song of Songs moves from alienation and hostility to reconciliation and harmony. Is this pattern reflected elsewhere in the Bible? What do you think of the suggestion that this is the big story of the whole Bible?
4. The King in the Song is the son of David, Solomon. As we seek to imitate Christ, what can we learn from the negative and positive example set by Solomon?
5. This book takes the view that the most significant background for understanding the Bible's poetry is earlier Scripture. Does that differ from the way that you have thought about the Bible's poetry, or from the way you have heard others explain it?