

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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Chapter12

The Enigma of Solomon's Song

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The Enigma of Solomon's Song

Twice recently I had the chance to discuss The Song of Songs in informal scholarly meetings. Both times the discussion was dominated by one simple question, "What is *that* book doing in the Bible?" How did it get there, and what is its purpose in the divine plan for the Canon of Scripture?

The question is at least as old as the council of Jamnia in the first century where the Rabbis argued that the Song of Songs is an elaborate allegory of God's relationship with Israel. Throughout the medieval period Christian preachers loved this book above all others — as an allegory of Christ and the church (Norris, xvii-xxi). You would think this was the book of Daniel or the Apocalypse the way they interpret it. In fact, the most important Targum of the Song of Songs treats the poem precisely like the visions of Daniel or the book of Revelation. The various images in the Song are identified symbolically and historically with various individuals and events in the history of Israel and in Jewish history (Alexander). Some modern Christian interpretations do likewise.

In all fairness, the prophets provide us with the image of Israel and Judah as adulterous wives, fornicating with foreign powers and with idols. The adultery-idolatry metaphor and the adultery-foreign treaty metaphor are important images in the classical prophets. By implication there could be an ideal relationship between God and his people, a positive relationship which can be described as romantic — a counter-theme to adultery. It is a simple step to imagine such an ideal romance between God and Israel, and then find this relationship in a book of romantic poetry like the Song of Songs.

The allegorical reading of Song of Songs is understandable. It is based on uses of its themes in other books of the canon, so it is a canonical reading of this book. However the poem has no internal cues which point toward the allegory. Also, the allegory does not always fit the text, because marriage is not contemplated in the Song of Songs. A marriage contract is first required before there can be a threat of adultery.¹ Though the allegory of God and Israel could very well explain the presence of the Song of Songs within the canon of

¹ Of course, a canonical reading could read a marriage contract into the Song where none is implied, simply because that is the appropriate context for the physical involvement implied in the Song (Davidson, pp 556-569).

Scripture, other explanations are possible, and the allegory is read into the text, not out of it.

Why has the allegory been so popular for so long? The book is in the Bible, and the Bible is about God and his people. If you read the Song of Songs literally it has little or nothing to say about God. There is that one line near the end of the Song about a "flame of Yah" (*shalheveth Yah*, שלֵהֶבֶת יְהוָה; 8:6), but its interpretation is disputed. This line shares company with phrases about love being stronger than death, a line which indicates divinity to many readers. But even if this is a reference to God it is a lone reference, and a rather incidental one at that. It is difficult to believe a book of love poetry was included in the Bible merely because it contained this one verse.

And the allegory is very attractive. It describes the feelings of an almighty and transcendent God as subject to romantic passion (Linafelt). That is a tonic which has captured some of the greatest minds of both Judaism and Christianity, including Rabbi Akiba and Bernard of Clairvaux. Thomas Aquinas quit his work on the great *Summa Theologica* so he could spend the remainder of his life traveling and preaching this allegory in the Song of Songs. Pope Gregory I, reflecting the sex-negative attitudes of most church fathers, was amazed that God would use the image of our shameful loves to give us a taste of his holy love.

But, why was this book included in the Bible? It implies no allegory. It reads like a collection of sonnets, the kind of poetry a man might use to turn a woman's heart. It is lovely and romantic but not the sort of thing to be expected in Scripture, at least not without a strong statement of God's place in affairs of the heart.

The Song of Songs could have entered the Canon on the coattails of another book, such as Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, which are also attributed to Solomon. The Song could have been part of a scroll which contained some books from the Megillot (Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations), possibly with Jonah as well. The Megillot could have been a scribal collection of favorite short works which entered the canon as a group. Many things can happen in the history of a scroll, and the answer is, we do not know. If we accept the authority of the Canon, we must assume that, however it happened, The Song of Songs entered the Canon under God's guidance.

What the Song Can Tell Us

First, the Song of Songs is the one text in Scripture which takes seriously the woman's romantic feelings and capacity for sexual pleasure. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the woman's interest in sex has to do with procreation — producing children and thus being fulfilled. But only three times in the Song of Songs is reproduction mentioned. Twice is the provocative statement where the girl invites the boy into her mother's chamber where her mother conceived her (3:4; 8:2). Does she want to become pregnant with his child? She is her mother's daughter, so would she be satisfied with a female child? The outcome is not specified, for these texts mention reproduction in passing and provide scant information. Next is 8:5 where the girl awakens the boy under the tree where his mother was in labor to birth him. There might be a hint of reproductive interest in this verse, but it is slight. However, the close proximity of the girl's mother in verse 2 and the boy's mother in verse 5, both mentioned by the girl, may indicate the girl's interest in also being a mother. Elsewhere in Song of Songs reproduction is not mentioned as either a desirable or undesirable result of sexual activity. Outside Song of Songs the woman's pleasures in sex are almost unknown in the Bible. The only text with any similarity is Genesis 3:16 where God tells Eve, "your desire will be toward your man." The Song of Songs may be seen as a counterbalance, providing graphic romance to balance the procreation emphasis found through the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, reminding us that a woman may have sexual desires which are not necessarily reproductive.

The Song of Songs does take some family interest. The surprise is not that there is some family interest, but that it is so slight. There is almost no interest in the boy's family; his relatives do not seem to matter at all. There is a little interest in the girl's family. The first time her family is mentioned her brothers (lit., "the children of my mother") put her out to vineyard duty as a punishment (1:6). The chamber where her mother conceived her we have mentioned (3:4; 8:2). The girl wishes for incest — well not quite. In 8:1 she wishes her boyfriend was her brother, son of her mother, so she could kiss him openly. But that wouldn't work. If he was her brother, would she ever fall in love with him? Even though sister and brother may kiss in public, is that kiss the type a lover gives to the beloved? This verse borders on the comic and may have been intended as such. Finally the girl takes an interest in protecting her younger

sister from the sexual advances of others (8:8-10). She recognizes herself in her little sister, and apparently has misgivings about her sister experiencing these emotions at such a young age. Three times the girl warns her chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem against experiencing romance too early, "I adjure you, do not awaken love before its time." (2:7; 3:5; 8:4)

This chapter is not a commentary on the Song of Songs, and a study of the poem's literary qualities goes beyond the boundaries of this study. The imagery is lush, seductive and suggestive. Mixed metaphors abound. Genres have been identified. Commentaries are to be consulted. Some of those commentaries are extremely thick, especially for such a short book of poetry. Of the writing of these commentaries there is no end, and too much commentary reading is a weariness of the flesh (Eccl 12:12), and not as much fun as the Song itself. The Song is meant to be enjoyed and not merely studied.

In sum, the Song of Songs provides a look at sexuality different from what can be found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, or the New Testament, for that matter. This book wallows in the romance of human sexuality. Whether this viewpoint can influence modern theology and ethics depends on a few key questions. Do we respect the authority of the Canon, and are we satisfied with the place the Song of Songs holds in the Canon? Why do we think this book is in the Canon? Regardless of how we view the Canon, are we willing to accept a romantic view of sexuality? If we allegorize the Song of Songs are we absolved from noticing its lush, romantic view of human sexuality? If we require romantic sexuality in our worldview, do we need the Song of Songs to shape that romantic sexuality, or even to defend it within our religious communities?