

## The Song of Songs: an approach to this challenging book

For 3,000 years now readers of the Song of Songs have been puzzled as to its meaning. A plain and simple reading of the text indicates that it is a series of love songs or poems between a man and a woman with their respective voices interspersed with a female chorus. But so sexually explicit are these songs; so full of innuendo and euphemisms; so raunchy, with graphic descriptions of parts of the female anatomy; that writers from the Jewish world and the Christian world have been embarrassed by the Song of Songs. They have been convinced that it cannot possibly mean what it evidently seems to mean. They have tried as far as possible to 'cover up' the shameful nature of this book and try to make it say something other than what it seems to say. The strategy that has been adopted in the Jewish world and the Christian world has been what is called ALLEGORISATION: the method of attributing spiritual meaning to things that at face value have no spiritual meaning whatsoever. This process has been pursued still further because the Song of Songs is completely lacking in those spiritual themes usually found in books of religious edification. For example, the book makes no mention of God. No mention of the people of God. It is void of ethical or religious themes. There is nothing about worship or instructions about how to live. So that in order to justify its place in the canon of the Bible commentators have pursued allegorisation in order to supply the religious content it otherwise lacks.

There have been FOUR main allegories adopted with slight variations on each of these main approaches.

1. Early Jewish rabbis considered the S of S as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel. God's love for the children of Israel forms one voice, and Israel's love for God forms the other. By this method it was possible to deal with uncomfortable and embarrassing verses such as 4:5 and 7:3 "Your breasts are like two fawns; like twin fawns of a gazelle." The breasts, according to this approach, can either stand for Moses and Aaron, or the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. Each are beautiful in the eyes of God!!!
2. The Targum of the S of S is an Aramaic commentary on the book produced some time in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century AD for a Jewish audience. Nearly all OT books were provided with such commentaries or Targums. They make for very entertaining reading. So, the Targum of S of S considers the 8 chapters to be a historical survey of the History of Israel. Chapter 1 deals with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. By chapter 4 we are in the era of King Solomon. Chapter 5 is the sinfulness of Israel causing them to be taken captive by Babylon "I was asleep...." Chapter 6 is the deliverance of Israel from Babylon "My beloved went down into his garden..."
3. In the Christian era one of the main approaches to the book has been to see S of S as an allegory between Christ and His Church.

4. Or to see S of S as an allegory of the love between Christ and an individual believer. A 19<sup>th</sup> century book by Adelaide Newton takes this approach. “Dark I am yet lovely” (1:5) says the woman in the song. Adelaide Newton regards ‘Dark I am’ to be a reference to the sinfulness of human beings, and the confession of sinfulness by the woman in the song. Yet she can be considered ‘lovely’ because she has been covered by the blood of Christ, and has her sins forgiven and covered over. The two breasts (4:5 and 7:3) “Seem to imply the idea of unity in the church of Christ” according to Adelaide Newton.

It is perfectly possible to persist with one of these allegorising approaches to the S of S, but the more we do so the more we struggle to squeeze the evident meaning of the text into one or more of these theories. Which is why in more recent years there has been a renewed attempt to try and take the book at its face value, and consider it simply as a sexually explicit love song between a man and a woman. And to try and find meaning in the fact that such a love song is to be found within the Bible.

So that if we do take the book at its face value then it helps to provide us with a theology of sexuality. In contradiction to the ascetic monks of the early Christian era, we find that the presence of sexual passion and desire between a man and a woman is a good thing. It is something that is “very good” to quote the writer of Genesis chapter 1. This may not seem very surprising a conclusion to us, but considering that for most of its 2,000 year history the Christian Church has regarded sexual appetite as part of the Fall rather than the Creation, this discovery can in fact become quite liberating.

Moreover, it can also help us address some of the more urgent and critical pastoral and missiological problems faced by the church today. So many young people give up on the church when they become sexually aware, and certainly by the time they become sexually active. And this because they perceive there is a clash between sexual desire and the church’s teaching on holiness. Whether this clash is something they have been taught or something they have assumed, it remains a very real crisis. For many young people they are left feeling that they have a choice to make – either follow their heart or follow the church. If, therefore, we can incorporate the lessons from S of S into a proper theology of sexuality we can help young people (and not so young people) navigate the tortuous waters of what it means to be human. And we can help people to realise that sexual desire and sexual expression are perfectly commensurate with a holy and godly life.

Stephen Greasley

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