Song of Songs 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Song of Songs, Chapter 1. The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. O daughters of Jerusalem, light the tents of Kedar, light the curtains of Solomon.

Do not gaze at me, because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me, they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept. Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon, for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?
If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherd's tents. I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.
Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver. While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.
My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En Gedi. Behold, you are beautiful, my love.
[1:38] Behold, you are beautiful. Your eyes are doves. Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved. Truly delightful. Our couch is green. The beams of our house are cedar.

Our rafters are pine. The Song of Songs is exceptional, as its very name suggests. Most notably, its primary subject matter, the erotic love of a man and a woman, has led some to question its inclusion in the canon.
On account of its subject matter, Robert Alter refers to it as the most consistently secular of all biblical texts. Whereas even the Book of Esther, which famously makes no explicit reference to the Lord, can readily be related to the covenant existence of the people of Israel, Song of Songs has much less obvious a grounding or a setting in Israel's covenant life.
It is a book that is pervaded with metaphor and symbolism, of a creativity, intensity, and a resting strangeness that stylistically sets it apart from others. Alter observes that, whereas most imagery in scripture is conventional imagery, the imagery of the song is startlingly innovative, something that is rarely seen elsewhere.
Perhaps only the Book of Revelation rivals the Song of Songs for the breadth of the differences between fundamental interpretive approaches that have been taken to it. Some interpreters, such as Tremper Longman, argue that the original song should be understood purely as love poetry.
[3:01] Indeed, some readers have handled its imagery as akin to a frosted glass of euphemism, to be torn down so that we can reflect more directly upon the sex acts that it obscures.

However, for many in church history it has been understood as the highest of all allegories, written for such a purpose. Rabbi Akiva famously referred to the Song of Songs as the Holy of Holies of the Writings, an assessment shared by many Christian interpreters of the song.
Even the language of the song is noteworthy, with a greater density of unique words, hapax legomena, and unusual terms than any other book of scripture. It seems exotic, strange, foreign, and often forbidding to many of its readers.
Many readers of the song may find themselves struck by its florid and startling imagery and metaphors. Within it we see hair compared to flocks of goats, teeth to sheep, and breasts to fawns. While the exact import of some of these metaphors may escape us, their rhetorical form is important. Michael Fox has argued that these arresting metaphors depend for their full meaning, not only on the extent of the common ground, but also on the metaphoric distance between image and referent, that is, the degree of unexpectedness or incongruity between the juxtaposed elements and the magnitude of the dissonance of surprise it produces.

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[4:20] According to Fox, a greater metaphoric distance then serves to excite desire and aesthetic pleasure. Within the rhetoric of the song, we witness the establishment of an expansive and playful distance.

The contemporary reader may be amused by the comparison of the Shulamites' waist with a heap of wheat encircled with lilies. In chapter 7 verse 2, the distance between the two metaphoric terms would seem to preclude their meaningful connection.
However, such metaphors do not depend upon a straightforward sensory connection between the two terms, nor do the metaphors function as euphemistic substitutions to be decoded.
Rather, the metaphors serve to create daring associations, associations that elicit the imagination's engagement, exposing the fecundity and plenitude of meaning.
The heap of wheat is associated with abundance, and with sustenance, with fertility and vitality. It also invites the hearer to explore the possibility of a relationship with the various other connections of wheat in the scriptures, such as the sexual associations of grain and wheat that we see in places like Ruth chapter 3.
[5:29] The temple is a site of wheat in the threshing floor, in 1 Chronicles chapter 21. The lily, which appears several times within the song, suggests beauty, but also evokes all of the garden imagery of the song, and obliquely gestures towards the broader biblical use of garden imagery in connection with the tristing places of Eden and the temple, where lilies also appeared.

The chosen medium of the song is the veil of language. Veils simultaneously allow us to draw near, but also maintain separation and difference. They deny immediate access, presenting us with desire as a reality that entails the radical play of presence and absence.
This should be contrasted with pornographic material, which seeks to rip away the veils. The circumlocutory character of erotic writing in the Song of Songs directs our mind around the sexual act in a way that excites wonder.
Its startling metaphors, such as those already mentioned, are characteristic of a rhetoric of desire, which relates seemingly distant terms in order to slow us down and allow us to savour the erotic dance of presence and absence, of the delight of memory and the longing of anticipation.
Deep difference in playful relation excites desire. The song is one filled with desire and longing, connected with both memory and anticipation. The song is fittingly a song, the song of songs.
[6:55] The medium of song, as St. Augustine recognised, is peculiarly suited to the expression of love. Replete as the song is with scents, sights, tastes, sounds and sensations.

It captures the rich sensory character of love. The song is filled with images drawn from fruitful gardens, majestic edifices, from armies, from agriculture, the flora and fauna of the wild countryside, or from banqueting tables.
For the lovers and the song, the world is charged and transfigured by their love and desire for each other. The beloved is encountered in the garb of the world and the world is known by the eyes of the lover.
What is the song about? Most immediately, the song is about erotic love, about the desire between a man and a woman. Readings that perceive more within the song need not deny this fact in order to do so.
In our ascent to higher readings of the song, however, we are also following invitations from the text itself. To those who might argue that the song is about mere sexual relations, part of our response must be that there is no such thing as mere sexual relations.
[8:00] In treating the subject of eros in his book The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis wrote, But in the act of love we are not merely ourselves. We are also representatives. It is here no impoverishment but an enrichment to be aware that forces older and less personal than we work through us.

In us all the masculinity and femininity of the world, all that is assailant and responsive, are momentarily focused. The man does play the sky father and the woman the earth mother.
He does play form and she matter. But we must give full value to the word play. Of course, neither plays a part in the sense of being a hypocrite, but each plays a part or role in, well, in something which is comparable to a mystery play or ritual at one extreme and to a mask or even a charade at the other.
If Lewis is right, sexual relations themselves cannot be mere sexual relations. They always relate us to greater realities. The literal sense of the Song of Songs as love poetry should be taken with the utmost seriousness and not effaced by any allegorical and other meanings.

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Any more developed readings must be related to this more immediate and initial one. A second consideration must be the fact that the song is part of the biblical canon. This fact alone should inform our reading of it, encouraging us to relate it to the other canonical material that surrounds it. [9:23] This consideration might be strengthened by a third, which is the way that the song is used elsewhere in scripture, most particularly in the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, where Christ is presented as the divine bridegroom, using imagery drawn from the Song of Songs.

This is clearly related to the way that marital union functions in both Old and New Testament as a metaphor for the relationship between the Lord and his people. Throughout the history of the church, a fourth consideration, Christians have followed John in reading the song in allegorical ways.
Christians have not been alone in this. There is a strong Jewish tradition of reading the song allegorically too. Arriving at an allegorical reading of the song need not involve an extreme and unwarranted leap, as there are convenient stepping stones by which we could reasonably do so. Solomon's role in the song connects the figure of the lover with the figure of the king, although many commentators dispute the identification of Solomon and the lover. This is not a novel association.
Throughout the books of Samuel, for instance, the king is presented as the lover of the people, and there is important metaphorical traffic between the king's relationship with women and his relationship with the people.
[10:35] In the books of Samuel, kings are romantic figures, whose deeds of daring do are the subject of maiden songs, who are remarkable for their dominant physical appearance or their beauty, and who elicit the profound love of their people.

Solomon's relationships with women clearly have political import, as he forms a marriage treaty with Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter, whereas the queen of Sheba comes from afar to witness the wisdom and wealth of Solomon for herself.
The king was also the covenantal son of the lord, representing the lord's own relationship with his people. From a reading of the song that sees, beyond the immediate literal sense of the erotic relationship between a man and a woman, a reference to the king's relationship with his people, it isn't hard to make some further steps.
First, to a connection with the figure of the Davidic Messiah, the greater son of David than Solomon, and his relationship with his people. And second, to a connection with the lord's relationship with Israel his bride, that second connection being reinforced for Christians by the first.
Christians have long read the Song of Songs as a song that is, in its highest referent, about Christ and his church. Different levels of meaning must always be held alongside each other.
[11:49] The Song of Songs teaches us about human love, but does so in part by helping us to recognise that the love of a man and a woman relates to something greater than it. It also teaches us about Christ's love for his church, but appoints human erotic love as a tutor in that lesson.

The Song of Songs is connected with Solomon. There are various ways to understand this association with Solomon. It might be attributed to Solomon as a work of his own composition, the common traditional understanding.
We have poetry from Solomon elsewhere in scripture, in Psalms 72 and 127, and are told that he composed 1005 songs in 1 Kings 4.32.
However, the association with Solomon might also be understood as concerning the fact that it is about Solomon, or alternatively, dedicated to him. The Song is predominantly dated to the post-exilic period, centuries after the time of Solomon, principally on account of its vocabulary and grammar, which advocates of this dating maintain, uses words drawn from Greek and Persian. This position, however, is far from universally held. Some date it from the time of Hezekiah, and many still hold the dominant traditional position of Solomonic authorship. Those arguing for this maintain that several features of the Song best fit the time of the reign of Solomon.
[13:09] References to places in the north and south of Israel make more sense in the time of the undivided kingdom. The Song has similarities to other ancient Near Eastern literature of that and much earlier periods.

The exotic items and the wealth described within the Song fit the period of Solomon's reign well, not least given what we know of the trade routes at the time, and of later times, when they did not go through the same regions.

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Those arguing for this position also dispute the etymology of some of the terms that are claimed to be loanwords, and argue that certain others might have entered Hebrew much earlier than assumed.
Much as many Solomonic proverbs were compiled in later periods and added to, there is also the possibility that the Song had a period of oral transmission before it was written down, and that we have a more ancient Song from the time of Solomon, the language of which was changed at points over the centuries prior to its final canonical form, much as many of the older hymns that Christians sing have been modernised in parts over the years.
In recent centuries, some commentators have read the Song as describing a love triangle, with the woman being pursued by both Solomon and a shepherd lover, whom she chooses over Solomon in the end.
[14:20] Yet this reading can be strained at many points, and the more traditional understanding of the characters remains the more persuasive. The chief parties within the Song are the bride, the bridegroom, or Solomon, and the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem.

Commentators differ on how to apportion the material to these various voices. They also differ on the degree to which this should be understood as a dramatic work. The Song begins with the voice of the woman or the bride.
There is presumably a narrative backdrop for her words, but we begin in medias res. She expresses the anticipation of love, in particular a desire for the intimacy of the beloved's kisses.
The intimacy of a kiss is seen in the sharing of breath, in a sort of mutual consumption. Lips are also the means of communication, and a kiss is a communication that's so close that it's mouth to mouth.
We need not assume, reading this, that they have already shared such kisses, or had physical relations of any kind. That would be to miss the imaginative role played by desire in such statements.
[15:20] The combination of imagery is also important to notice. The love and the kisses are connected with taste, the anointed oils with scent. The name like oil poured out might be related to the smoothness of touch.

Love here addresses all of the senses. While she does not seem to present them here as rivals to her love for Solomon, she expresses the way that the young women more generally delight in him. He is pleasing and attractive to them.
Later she will be joined by a chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem that she will speak with. Presumably we could associate these two groups. In verse 4 she expresses her desire to be closer to Solomon, that he would bring her nearer to himself, that she would have closer dealings with him.
The final statements of verse 4 could either refer to the woman along with the other virgins, or as Daniel Estes notes, they could be plurals of the woman's own ecstasy, expressing her personal desire to rejoice in Solomon and his love.
As she describes herself in verses 5 and 6, she seems to be someone of lower status. Sunburned from having been forced to work in the fields, while higher status women could be recognised by the fact that they did not have to go out in the heat of the sun to work.
[16:28] Nevertheless, even though she has not been protected from the elements, she knows that she is beautiful, even though she is conscious that others might look down upon her. Some commentators have seen in her being forced to work in the heat of the day, an allegorical representation of the experience of Israel and Egypt.

In verse 7 she once again expresses her desire to be nearer to Solomon, but this time to Solomon himself. A point of contact between them is formed by the fact that they both shepherd flocks, and in Solomon's response in verse 8 he reinforces that point of connection, and also reassures her of her surpassing beauty.
More explicit language of comparison comes in verse 9, as Solomon speaks of her as like a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. As the chariots of Pharaoh will generally be pulled by stallions, perhaps we should see in this image a reference to the confusion into which she throws men on account of her attractiveness.
In verse 10 he describes the way that her physical beauty is accentuated by adornment, with the chorus of the women in verse 11 committing themselves to make fitting ornaments for her. Verses 12 to 14 continue to describe the longing of the two parties for each other, particularly by means of scent.

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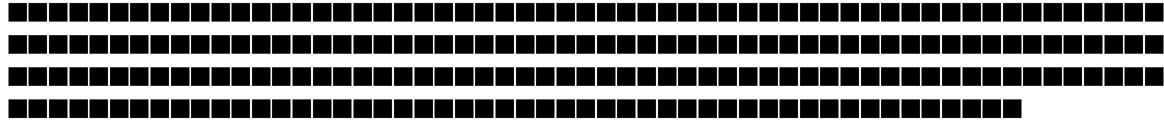
While the king is eating at his couch, it is as if the evocative and intoxicating scent of the woman is summoning him. Meanwhile for the woman, it is as if Solomon is a scent held intimately close to her, always calling forth anticipation, longing and desire.
[17:51] The following verses and into the next chapter are short exchanges between the couple. In verse 15 Solomon once again expresses her beauty. Her eyes are like doves, perhaps as messengers of love pass between them.

The woman echoes and develops Solomon's words. He too is beautiful and delightful. Whether or not Solomon takes up the words in verse 17, or their voices join together, perhaps they are expressing the fact that nature itself is the realm of their love.
The grass is their couch and the wooded groves the house around them. A question to consider. How might the book of Song of Songs serve as wisdom literature?



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