
Song of Songs

by Kurtis Peters

Ever thought you'd read erotica in the Bible? Well, apparently neither did many interpreters through the ages! But that's what we've got in the Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon). To be fair, though, that's not all that Song of Songs is. In fact, it's a love poem that includes many erotic elements. Eroticism is not the sum total of its intent. There are other erotic poems in the ancient Near East for which eroticism seems to be the goal, plain and simple (and far more explicit than what we find in Song of Songs). Nevertheless, the sexual elements in our biblical book have made many readers uncomfortable. Even very early readers have found in Song of Songs a type of allegory—a love song between God/Yahweh and Israel, with later Christian interpretations of it being about Christ and the Church. This is plausible because elsewhere, such as in Hosea and Isaiah, we find Yahweh and Israel's relationship described like a marriage covenant, and that Israel was Yahweh's "beloved." Sometimes the image is quite negative, suggesting that Israel has prostituted itself out among the nations and their gods. In Song of Songs, the image is passionate, coy, and playful. The allegorical reading, however, is somewhat insufficient. It necessarily downplays the deeply erotic imagery, and the strange back-and-forth of the lovers. There is still, of course, some beauty in applying the poem allegorically, but that should be separate from seeing the poem as an intentional allegory. In the end, it seems that the book is simply a love poem of supreme quality. It may have been used in marriage rituals, or in certain religious rituals, but it most likely depicts the love of two people,

who happen to be unmarried but maybe betrothed/engaged/trothplighted (one of my favourite words). For some this is scandalous, referring to sexual activity before or outside of marriage. Nevertheless, here it is. At the same time, it does not seem to refer to sexual activity as something casual, unlike some of the other ancient erotic poems. Here the relationship is the framework for the sexuality.

A few other comments may be helpful in reading the book:

- Repetition – As we saw already in Psalms and in other poetry, Hebrew poetry uses lots of repetition. This is not a sign of uninventive poets. Instead there is a deliberate eloquence to repetition, where the second element of a repetition often unfolds something that the first element could not. There is some delayed gratification about it.
- Imagery – In Song of Songs, the metaphors can sometimes seem a bit wild, especially those describing the woman's body in chapter 7 (who wants their nose likened to the Tower of Lebanon?). However, the poet is using a style that uses metaphors where only one part of the two things compared is relevant. Maybe the stateliness of the tower of Lebanon was the element. It is the playfulness of the poet that requires the readers to guess at what the common element might be.
- Solomon – As in some other books (e.g., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), Solomon has been named either in the text or in tradition as the

book's author. This is very likely not the case historically. Like the other books, it seems to have been attributed to Solomon at a later stage, lending the book greater credibility.

- Songiest Song – The book's title in Hebrew is Song of Songs, which is a superlative. It is similar to "holy of holies," which means "the most holy (place)." So the Hebrew title means something like "the songiest song" or, maybe just a little bit better, "the greatest song." ✨