

Bible Study: July & August

The Song of Songs

For the 8 weeks of the summer, we will read the Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon), an ancient collection of poems celebrating the beauty of creation and the ever-renewing and unending power of love, human and divine.

Introduction

The title has two meanings: It both celebrates this work as the greatest of all songs and it indicates that it is a collection of songs. Its imagery and structure follow the conventions of ancient Middle Eastern love poetry. There is wide speculation about its date of composition. Many of the passages seem to be ancient, while its many allusions to other passages in Hebrew Scripture suggest that the poet was familiar with Hebrew Scripture. Scholarly consensus is that it was composed or compiled in the 4th century BCE. Some passages may have been part of a marriage liturgy, and some are recited at weddings today. The opening line is a tribute to Solomon, partly because of his wisdom as a great king, partly because of his love for nature, and partly because according to tradition he loved many women. The Song of Songs is one of the books included in the Wisdom tradition because, even though it offers no explicit ethical advice or theological reflection, it celebrates the values of mutuality and faithfulness that are foundational for meaningful and ordered life.

We hear three counterpointing voices throughout the Song of Songs: a man, a woman, and a chorus described as the Women of Jerusalem. The predominance of the woman's voice makes this book distinctive. Its sexual imagery, while it follows the conventions in Ancient Middle Eastern love poetry, is also unexpected in Hebrew Scripture and can be understood in a number of ways: It expresses a comfort with the physical body that pre-dates more dualistic worldviews; it expresses an incarnational theology that anticipates a modern Christian worldviews; and it represents a reversal of the Genesis story: The fall of Adam and Eve brought with it sexual shame and estrangements, while each lover here celebrates the beauty of the other, and their longing is an expression of hope and joy, not of loss. Traditionally, the love between the man and woman has been interpreted by Jewish commentators as a figure for the love between God and Israel, by Christian theologians as a figure for the love between Christ and the Church, and by Christian mystics as a figure for the love between the individual soul and God. The Song of Songs is the scroll read on the Sabbath of the Passover festival because of its imagery of the fertility and beauty of spring and its celebration of the relationship between God and Israel.

The Song of Songs is neither a dramatic narrative nor a didactic treatise. I have marked the voices following general scholarly consensus, but what's most important is the contrast and complementarity of the images and emotions. Both the man and woman love and are beloved; both are active in their giving and their receiving; both are ennobled by the longing they experience and that they inspire. In the words of the mystic Bernard of Clairveaux, whose reflections on this poem as an expression of the soul's longing for God we will read in the coming weeks:

It is everywhere love that speaks. If anyone hopes to grasp the sense of what he reads, let him love. Whereas someone who does not love will hear or read this song of love in vain. . . .I love because I love; I love in order to love.

Song #1

¹The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

The woman:

² Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine,

³ your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is perfume poured out;
therefore the maidens love you.

⁴ Draw me after you, let us make haste.

The king has brought me into his chambers.

Women's Chorus:

We will exult and rejoice in you;

we will extol your love more than wine;
rightly do they love you.

The Woman:

⁵ I am black and beautiful,

O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
like the curtains of Solomon.

⁶ Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
because the sun has gazed on me.

My mother's sons were angry with me;
they made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not kept!

⁷ 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 is veiled
beside the flocks of your companions?

The man:

⁸ If you do not know,

O fairest among women,
follow the tracks of the flock,
and pasture your kids
beside the shepherds' tents.

⁹ I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.

¹⁰ Your cheeks are comely with ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels.

¹¹ We will make you ornaments of gold,
studded with silver.

Woman:

¹² While the king was on his couch,
my nard gave forth its fragrance.

¹³ My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh
that lies between my breasts.

¹⁴ My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
in the vineyards of En-gedi.

Man:

¹⁵ Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.

The woman:

¹⁶ Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
truly lovely.

Our couch is green;

¹⁷ the beams of our house are cedar,
our rafters are pine.

Meditation

Whether we read this poem as a dialogue between lovers, a covenant between God and God's people, or a prayer of the soul longing for and trusting in union with God, it's worth noting that there is no plea for forgiveness, no worry, and no shame. The love that is expressed is a longing born of experience, completely trusting, unmistakably vulnerable. Both speakers use images that don't at first seem to belong together, but they are designed to represent the way that love recreates the world and a loving relationship encompasses the world: Through love, we discover a new order and harmony that transcends differences of gender, class, and geography. Love is also an act of resistance that, by disrupting structures of authority, makes it possible to see the world, each other, and ourselves, in new ways.