

Song of Songs (Part 1)

What is “Song of Songs”?

Biblical interpreters have puzzled over Song of Songs for centuries. The question of genre is particularly sticky. *What exactly is this text?* Is it a single composition? A collection of short poems? A narrative? Its title means “the greatest of all songs” and comes from the book’s ascription. The ascription is typically translated “the Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.” Yet a slight shift in how we read the article *asher* (אשר) could change the meaning of this sentence instead to “the Song of Songs I sing to Solomon.” If the poem is addressed to Solomon, then who is the speaker?

The text opens with the voice of a woman’s longing. It sounds almost like a dream. When the young man speaks in the poem, it is as if the female speaker is imagining what she wishes her beloved would say. There is a persistent desire to historicize this text and pinpoint the speaker’s identity. For example, some have theorized that the speaker is actually the Queen of Sheba. This is unlikely. In fact, it is unlikely that this poem was written for Solomon at all.

Erotic Poem/Holy Text

The erotic poeticism of Song of Songs makes its inclusion in the scriptural canon curious. God is not explicitly mentioned in this book. The “daughters of Jerusalem” are addressed throughout the poem and told repeatedly to wait for love (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). This is an unusual message. Female desire is rarely represented in the biblical corpus. Song of Songs is similar to some other ancient Near Eastern love poems, which were often read at weddings. Yet this text’s inclusion in the scriptural canon means that it cannot simply be read as a love poem. Regardless of its original context or intent, Song of Songs has taken on new meanings over time.

So why did *this* particular text come to be viewed as sacred while other ancient love poems did not? Ancient readers were aware of the potential for some to take Song of Songs at face value, reading it as a steamy erotic poem rather than a holy text. In an attempt to prevent this confusion, there were rules about where this text could or couldn’t be read (e.g., in the temple vs. a tavern).

Many choose to read Song of Songs allegorically. The search for a wife in Proverbs is a model for how to seek wisdom. It could be that Song of Songs is doing something similar. The unquenchable, passionate intensity of seeking love might parallel how God and God’s people

Israel come together. Of course, this is just one way of understanding Song of Songs within its scriptural context. There are many different ways to read and interpret this poem.