



Song of Songs (Part 2)

Beauty and Poetic Imagery

Song of Songs features striking imagery. Song of Songs is arguably the most descriptive book in the Hebrew Bible. The book unfolds within a lush springtime landscape. Human bodies are rarely described in biblical narratives, yet physical beauty is a major theme in Song of Songs. The woman's physical beauty is discussed at length. Passionate desire and love are both expressed in terms of beauty throughout this poem.

The poem intentionally paints a picture for its audience using metaphor and sensory description. For example, *"How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead"* (4:1, NRSVUE). This may seem like an odd compliment, but the imaginative visual is quite stunning. The fact that the woman's beauty is described as free of "blemish" (or "flaw"), however, indicates ableist beauty standards. The man's beauty in this poem is *not* described as blemish-free.

Sex, Sexuality and Desire

The man in this poem is simply described as desirable. Again, this places the woman's desire at the center of the poem. Song of Songs is a female-centered sexual discourse. Most other biblical narratives use sex as a plot device and result in a pregnancy. This is because lineage and inheritance are central concerns in the case of male sexual desire. When female desire comes up in other biblical stories, it is typically narrated as a bad thing (e.g., Joseph and his master's wife). This does not seem to be the case in Song of Songs.

Some have read this book as a sort of "biblical guide" to sexuality. Those with more conservative understandings of sexuality and sexual norms are less likely to read the text in this way. This is in part because the characters don't seem to be married. Their sexual chemistry and desire unfolds outside of the traditional bounds of home and family. Many gravitate toward more allegorical, symbolic readings of Song of Songs for this reason. There is no single way to read and interpret this complex, unusual, and evocative text.