

Song of Songs

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INTRODUCTION

The Song of Songs is located in the third section of the Hebrew Bible: the Writings.¹ This section deals with topics related to life in the covenant—that is, how to think and live as God’s people, in God’s world, and according to his Word. Many of the books in this section are poetic wisdom compositions (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and a number of the psalms), and the Song of Songs is one of them.

Its position in the Hebrew Scriptures is strategic. The Song of Songs appears after Proverbs and the book of Ruth. Proverbs ends, in chapter 31, with King Lemuel setting forth the character of a “virtuous woman” (lit. “woman/wife of strength”). The wisdom narrative that follows identifies Ruth as just such a woman (Ruth 3:11).² The Song of Songs appears in a way that the woman of the Song, the hero of the composition, is likely to be conceived of in the same manner, as a virtuous woman of strength. In other words, Proverbs 31 works to describe the importance of a good marriage partner, and the Song of Songs works to describe a good marriage relationship.

Given that wisdom literature is grounded in creation and the created order, it should come as no surprise that this genre gives considerable attention to the topic of marriage (examples include Prov. 2:16; 5:15–20; 6:26, 32; 7:5; 30:18–19; Eccles. 2:8; 7:26; 9:9). A corresponding significance appears in the creation of the woman

¹Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are my own translation.

²The designation “woman of strength” (אִשָּׁת הַקֹּחַל) appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible, twice in Proverbs (12:24; 31:3) and once in Ruth (3:11). Ruth is the only woman in Scripture to receive this explicit designation. Based upon its placement in the Hebrew canon, it appears that Ruth is intended to function as the illustration of the ideal woman presented in Proverbs 31. In our English Bibles, this connection is obscured by Ruth’s narrative-chronological [mis]placement after the book of Judges and by the inconsistency of Bible translations. For example, the ESV translates this designation as “excellent wife” in Proverbs but as “worthy woman” in Ruth. The NASB (1995) and the NIV (1984) are better with, respectively, “excellent wife” and “wife of noble character” in Proverbs and “woman of excellence” and “woman of noble character” in Ruth. The KJV is helpfully consistent with “virtuous woman” in all three instances. However, readers rarely notice this connection because of the [mis]placement of the book of Ruth after the book of Judges in our English Bibles.

recorded in Genesis 2. In Genesis 2:18, the Lord God made a shocking statement. He declared that something was “not good” on day six of creation. We know from Genesis 1:31 that day six was set apart from the previous five days; it was not just “good” (cf. Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) but “very good.” There was man in the garden of God’s presence with all of his resource needs met, but the status of his situation remained “not good.” According to the presentation in Scripture, the creation of the woman and of the marriage covenant (Gen. 2:21–25) was what finally transformed day six from “not good” to “very good.” It could be said that the “building” of the woman and the marriage covenant serves as the climax of creation on day six and the beginning of human history. Thus, it is important to observe that marriage and the family are prefall, creational institutions woven into the very fabric of culture and the means by which the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28) was to be fulfilled. By way of contrast, the institution of marriage was *not* a result of the fall or a means by which humanity better coped with a world that had fallen into sin. Marriage and the sexual, one-flesh relationship established by God on day six of creation became the covenantal, human paradigm by which he would relate to his people, both in this world and in the world to come.³

The fact that God created man and woman as (very good!) sexual beings, that this reality was to be expressed in the covenant of marriage, and that by analogy this covenantal relationship became the dominant way by which Yahweh would relate to his people, has caused difficulty for those who have labored to interpret the Song of Songs. In fact, no other book in the Old Testament has suffered at the hands of interpreters throughout history like the Song of Songs. Interpretations range from carnal, erotic love poetry to sublime, otherworldly descriptions of the divine-human relationship, and almost everything in between.

On the one hand, marriage and sexuality are legitimate aspects of creation and certainly deserve attention in biblical (and nonbiblical) wisdom literature. As such, many interpreters have argued that the Song of Songs deals with this very topic and that all the body parts and descriptions of sexual activity are just that, wise considerations of marriage and sex. On the other hand, some have considered such a “natural” approach indelicate, inappropriate, or just plain carnal. These interpreters have preferred a more “supernatural,” allegorical interpretation of the Song. With this interpretation, the Song constitutes an allegorical description of the covenantal relationship between God and his people, whether Yahweh and Israel or Jesus and the church. Proponents argue that this interpretation is more theologically suitable for Scripture as it describes and provokes love for our covenant Lord.

The swing of the pendulum from allegorical to natural interpretations in our modern context has resulted in the “functional decanonization” of the Song of Songs.⁴

³See Rev. 19:7, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, *for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready,*” and Rev. 21:2, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (ESV).

⁴D. M. Carr states, “This increasingly exclusive focus on the literal sense of the Song has corresponded with the functional decanonization of the Song in those sections of the church and synagogue which have been most deeply influenced by historical-critical method.” “The Song of Songs as a Microcosm of the Canonization and Decanonization Process,” in *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers Presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study*

The modern rise in popularity among scholars of the more natural interpretation of the book has resulted in a corresponding demise in the use of this book in public worship and Christian education. In other words, because of the book's sexually oriented language and our overly religious conceptions about the nature of the church, we simply ignore the Song, even though we recognize its presence in the Canon and render lip service to its inspiration and authority. This is a serious charge and a regrettable situation for the church. For this reason, modern attempts to revive the allegorical approach persist as a means to rescue this text from homiletical neglect.⁵

In this introduction, however, we will argue that the Songs of Songs is a canonical work of poetic wisdom literature that considers the important topic of human marriage. In our modern context, the consideration of marriage—including its definition, status, and legitimate participants—demands careful consideration from Scripture. Since wisdom literature reflects on the application of God's Word to God's world, who is better qualified to instruct us about the reality of marriage than the One who created this “very good” institution? However, it is important to note that this approach does not preclude application to the divine-human covenant relationship that is biblically and intentionally analogous to it (cf. Ezekiel 16; 23; Hosea 1–3; 1 Corinthians 7; 2 Corinthians 11; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; Rev. 19:7, 21:2). Covenant life finds its ultimate meaning in our covenant Lord, Jesus Christ. To interpret Scripture in any other way would contradict the clear and forceful teaching of Jesus and the apostolic witness (cf. John 5:39–40; Luke 24:25–27, 44–45; Acts 28:23–34; Rom. 1:1–3; 1 Pet. 1:10–11).

BACKGROUND ISSUES

Authorship and Date of Composition

The questions of authorship and date are closely related. There are basically two options. Either Solomon wrote the book in the tenth century BC, or an anonymous author wrote sometime between the tenth and fifth centuries BC.

Traditionally, authorship of the Song was attributed to Solomon, the son of David, the third and final monarch of Israel's united kingdom. Solomon reigned over Israel from approximately 970–930 BC. The biblical account of his reign is recorded in 1 Kings 1–11 and 1 Chronicles 29–2 Chronicles 9. The following evidence supports the the *possibility* that Solomon is the author of the Song of Songs:

(1) The superscription in Song of Songs 1:1 may indicate that Solomon was the author—“The Song of Songs, *which is by Solomon* [הַשִּׁיר לְשִׁלֹּמֹה].” The Hebrew preposition that appears with the proper name Solomon may be used to indicate authorship. The use of this same preposition with a proper name is employed with some frequency in the book of Psalms. For example, it appears in the superscription at the beginning of Psalm 3: “A song *by David* [לְדָוִד] when he fled from Absalom”

of Religions (LISOR), Held at Leiden 9–10 January 1997, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, with an annotated bibliography compiled by J. A. M. Snoek, SHR 82 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 184–85.

⁵A recent attempt is represented by James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015).

(Ps. 3:1). Additionally, Psalms 72 and 127 both feature the same authorial superscription “by Solomon.” However, the indication of authorship is not required by this preposition. It may also indicate that the Song was written *about* Solomon, or that it was *dedicated to* Solomon.

(2) Solomon is the only person named in the Song. In addition to the superscription (1:1), Solomon’s name appears six more times (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12). The Hebrew text also includes several wordplays that are connected to the name Solomon. For example, in 1:7 the ESV translation “for why” (שָׁלֵמָה) is a unique Hebrew construction with the exact same consonants as the proper name Solomon (שְׁלֹמֹה). Additionally, the designation “Shulammitte” (שׁוּלַמִּית) in 7:1 (twice) appears to be a feminine form of Solomon’s name and may mean something like “Solomonite” or “one who belongs to Solomon.” The appearance of Solomon’s name in the Song certainly does not require Solomon to be the author. At the very least, however, we can affirm that the Song is *about* Solomon at some level.

(3) In addition to Solomon’s name, several other features in the Song are connected with his person and kingdom. On five occasions, a male figure in the Song is identified as the “king” (1:4, 12; 3:9, 11; 7:6). In 3:9 and 3:11 the king is specifically identified as Solomon. The Song also mentions the king’s bed (1:12), chambers (1:4), royal guard (3:7–8), carriage (3:9), crown (3:11), harem (6:8–9), and vineyard (8:11). Other connections with Solomon include the chariots of Pharaoh (1:9), the tower of David (3:4), and the location of Jerusalem (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 6:4; 8:4). Additionally, the frequent mention of spices, perfumes, wealth, and flora in the Song corresponds with Solomon’s kingdom and wisdom endeavors. By itself, the information presented in this paragraph does not require Solomon to be the author of the Song. However, whoever did write the Song would have had intimate knowledge of Solomon, the trappings of his court, and similar educational background and intellect.

(4) Solomon was a gifted and prolific author of poetic and wisdom literature. It is recorded that God granted Solomon wisdom to such a degree that he surpassed all who came before him and all who would come after him (1 Kings 3:28; cf. 1 Kings 4:29–34; 5:7, 12; 10:4–8, 23; 11:41). Solomon applied his wisdom to many different areas of life, but one of those areas was the production of literature:

[Solomon] was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs *and his songs numbered a thousand and five*. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:29–34 [Heb. 5:9–14] NIV).

First Kings 4:32 [Heb. 5:12] records that Solomon wrote over one thousand songs during his lifetime, not to mention three thousand proverbs (cf. Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1). The Hebrew word used for “song” (שִׁיר) in this text is the same word that appears in

Song of Songs 1:1, “The Song of Songs,” or the “Best Song.”⁶ Once again, this connection proves not that Solomon was the author of the Song of Songs but rather that he had the required background and ability. In fact, according to the biblical record, it can be reasonably argued that no other person in human history had better gifts or experience than Solomon to serve as the author of this superlative composition.

(5) The love poetry contained in the Song of Songs is related to love poetry found in Egypt dating from approximately 1305–1150 BC, just *before* the era of Solomon.⁷ As a wisdom collector, Solomon may have become familiar with this literature (cf. 1 Kings 4:30). Additionally, Solomon traded with Egypt (1 Kings 10:28–29; cf. Song 1:9), and he allied himself to Egypt by way of royal marriage: “And Solomon became the son-in-law of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he married the daughter of Pharaoh and he brought her to the city of David” (1 Kings 3:1). Solomon’s connection to Egypt by royal alliance, trade, and marriage may have put him in contact with a genre of love poetry that provides the background for some of the material that appears in the Song of Songs. A connection of this type does not require dependence or anything like our modern category of plagiarism. It does, however, establish the possibility of influence and adaptability in the hands of a skilled wisdom poet.

By way of conclusion, no single piece of evidence proves with absolute certainty that King Solomon is the author of the Song of Songs. However, the cumulative force of the body of evidence presented here identifies Solomon as the best possible candidate for authorship.

Genre

According to the superscription (1:1), the Song of Songs is just that, a song (שִׁיר). This same designation appears in the superscription for many of the psalms in the book of Psalms (e.g., Psalms 30, 45, 46, 48, 65, 61, 67, 75, 76, 83, 88, 92, 108, 120–134; see also 28:7; 33:3; 40:3 [4]; 96:1; 98:1; 137:3; 144:9; 149:1). The frequency with which this designation appears in the book of Psalms suggests that this particular genre would have been well-known in ancient Israel. Its association with Solomon in the same superscription (לְשִׁלֹּמֹה) also suggests a connection with wisdom literature.

Wisdom literature exhibits a variety of distinct and adaptive genres. Proverbs features proverbial sayings. Job is a poetic wisdom dialogue with a dramatic narrative frame, and the book of Psalms includes wisdom psalms (e.g., Psalms 36, 37, 49, 73, 78). Given its placement in the Hebrew canon, even the book of Ruth may be understood as a wisdom narrative. In light of the variety and adaptability of genre in biblical wisdom literature, classifying the Song of Songs as a *poetic wisdom song* seems entirely appropriate.⁸

⁶The construction “The Song of Songs” in Hebrew is used to indicate the superlative (i.e., the best of something). Similar constructions in the Hebrew Bible include “slave of slaves” or “lowest slave” (Gen. 9:25), “holy of holies” or “most holy” (Ex. 29:37), “the God of gods” or “the supreme God” (Deut. 10:17), “the Lord of lords” or “the greatest Lord” (Deut. 10:17), and “vanity of vanities” or “ultimate vanity” (Eccles. 1:2).

⁷COS, 1:125–30.

⁸The Song has also been described as a “canonical work of lyric poetry.” Duane A. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, in *Song of Songs / Lamentations*, by Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House, WBC 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 14; cf. 90–97. Others have similarly called it “an anthology of lyric love poetry.” Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand

The language is clearly poetic. Its imagery and style accord with the best examples of Hebrew poetry. Its designation as a song would indicate that the Song was originally composed for singing, but this does not mean that it must be sung in order to be understood (related examples would include Exodus 15 and Judges 5).

As noted earlier, the evidence for connecting this song with wisdom literature and with Solomon is significant. Its subject matter appears in both Proverbs (5:15–21; 30:18–19) and Ecclesiastes (2:1–11; 9:9). Additionally, the didactic section in Song of Songs 8:6–12 suggests an overall purpose or message for the book, much like Proverbs 1:2–6 and Ecclesiastes 12:9–13. In fact, the basic didactic strategy of the Song may mirror the collection and presentation of poetic texts in Proverbs 1–9. These features play a prominent role in the following identification of the purpose and message of the Song.

Proposed Setting

Many factors work together to determine the correct interpretation of the Song of Songs. Once these factors have been considered, both the translation and the exposition of the text are shaped by the adopted interpretation. Given the Song's complexity and poetic ambiguity, examining the Song's setting is vital for making sense of its language and imagery and for making a wise decision with regard to the interpretation of the Song. Careful consideration of the Song itself (internal evidence) suggests that the most likely setting is the royal harem of Solomon. Because we possess limited knowledge of ancient harem life, it is helpful to consider a text like Esther 2, which describes this institution in some detail.

According to Esther 2, young virgins were gathered into king Ahasuerus's harem (lit. "the house of women") and then supervised by male eunuchs (lit. "keepers of the women") and female attendants. These young women would undergo a series of preparatory treatments that included "six months with the oil of myrrh and six months with spices and cosmetics for women" (Est. 2:12). After a year of preparation, a young virgin would be selected from this part of the harem to spend a night with the king. Then in the morning, that woman, no longer a virgin, would return to another part of the harem, the place of the concubines. There she would live out her days in the royal harem, never returning to the king unless he summoned her by name (Est. 2:14).

Though the description of King Ahasuerus's harem in Esther 2 may not correspond exactly to the policies and procedures that governed King Solomon's harem, we can only imagine that the court of Solomon and his harem operated on a scale that surpassed that of Ahasuerus. The descriptions of cosmetics, spices, and oils in the Song correspond to the experience described in Esther. Additionally, the presence of guards and attendants appear both in the Song and in Esther 2.

The identification of Solomon's harem as the location of the woman in the Song

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 48–49; Michael A. Fishbane, *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), xxi; cf. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 25–26. There is also the wedding song (*epithalamium*) interpretation. Additionally, Origen (and John Milton) considered the Song to be a drama. Cf. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 34–35.

is substantiated in several instances. For example, Song of Songs 6:8 describes the female occupancy of the harem: “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines and virgins without number.” A similar description appears in the very next verse, “The daughters see her, and they bless her, the queens and the concubines [see her], and they praise her” (6:9b). The categorization of the harem women into three groups—queens, concubines, and virgins—corresponds to the description of Ahasuerus’s harem in Esther 2. It also complies with the well-known and shocking description of Solomon’s harem later in 1 Kings 11:3: “He [Solomon] had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines.”

The descriptions of the harem in Song of Songs 6:8 and 6:9 help to identify the enigmatic daughters of Jerusalem. They are not a background chorus, nor are they simply the young female inhabitants of the royal city. Note that the “virgins” (עַלְמוֹת) in 6:8 appear as the “daughters” (בָּנוֹת) in 6:9, identifying the so-called “daughters of Jerusalem” as those virgins taken into Solomon’s harem in order to be prepared as potential concubines.⁹ In other words, the daughters of Jerusalem represent the virgins taken with the female protagonist of the Song into the harem of Solomon for training and preparation. This interpretation suits the harem context of the Song, and it avoids the creation of participant categories (e.g., a background chorus) that are foreign to the ancient context or the genre of the song.

In the final verses of the Song, Solomon’s harem is described as a vineyard in Baal-hamon (בַּעַל הַמּוֹן): “Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon. He entrusted the vineyard to those who would guard it [i.e., eunuchs]. Each would bring in his fruit [i.e., a virgin] for a thousand pieces of silver” (8:11). However, the woman of the Song rejects both Solomon and harem life in the very next verse: “My vineyard, which belongs to me, is still before me. Keep your thousand [pieces of silver] and the two hundred for those who guard its fruit” (8:12). It is also worth noting that the location Baal-hamon appears only here in the Old Testament. However, it may not be a location at all but rather a satirical designation for Solomon’s harem, literally translated “husband of a multitude.” This is certainly a fitting description for the harem of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 11:3; Song 6:8). It also implicitly condemns this reality as a violation not only of the covenantal regulations that governed kingship in Israel (cf. Deut. 17:17) but also of the original created order, in which one man and one woman were united in the one-flesh covenant of marriage (cf. Gen. 2:18–25).

Identifying the harem as the background for the Song also helps make sense of many enigmatic texts in the Song. For example, the opening verses of the Song describe a man whose lovemaking prowess was so famous that it provoked the admiration and love of the virgins (עַלְמוֹת). In 1:2 we read the statement that “making love to you

⁹The connection between the “virgins” in 6:8 and the “daughters” in 6:9 is obscured by modern translations. For example, the feminine plural form בָּנוֹת (lit. “daughters”) in 6:9 is translated as “young women” by the ESV and NIV and as “maidens” by the RSV, NASB, and NET. The KJV is helpfully accurate, “The *daughters* saw her.” Thus, the categories for women residing in the harem in 6:8 include queens, concubines, and *virgins*. In 6:9 these same women are referred to as *daughters*, queens, and concubines. With the juxtaposition of virgins and daughters in 6:8 and 6:9, the author has provided readers with a helpful clue for identifying the so-called daughters [of Jerusalem] that appear throughout the Song (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4).

[masculine singular] is better than wine” (cf. 1:4). This is followed by the statements, “Therefore *the virgins* love you” (1:3) and “rightly *they* love you” (1:4). Given the proposed harem context, the man famous for his lovemaking is Solomon. He is the desire of the virgins. His name appears in 1:1 and 1:5, and his royal chambers are mentioned in 1:4 (הַבְּיָאֵן הַמֶּלֶךְ הַדָּרִי).

In Song of Songs 2 another man arrives, the woman’s beloved, “leaping over the mountains, jumping over the hills” (2:8). However, this man does not have access to the woman. He is cut off by a wall and can only peer through the windows and lattice (2:9). He must call to her at a distance (2:10ff). Now for a man who can leap over mountains and hills, the obstacle of a wall should present no difficulty. However, this was no ordinary wall. Rather, it was the fortress of the harem, a well-guarded enclosure that would have been fortified to prevent access by other men.

The appearance of the man in Song of Songs 2 stands in contrast to the appearance of Solomon in Song of Songs 3. In the third chapter, Solomon arrives “from the wilderness” (3:6) with his portable bedroom surrounded by sixty warrior-eunuchs (lit. “men who have been seized by the sword”) to be present for the “terror of the nights” (3:8). Upon Solomon’s arrival in the harem, the women are summoned, “Come out and look upon King Solomon, O daughters of Jerusalem” (3:11). Here the virgin women, the daughters of Jerusalem, are summoned to appear before the king upon his arrival so he can select his next concubine. It is important to observe that the man in chapter 2 does not have access to the harem but that the man in chapter 3, identified as King Solomon, has full access to the virgins who have been prepared to become concubines and permanent members of the harem.

The identification of Solomon’s harem, real or imagined, as the background for the Song will shape our interpretation of the Song. It places the Song in a context that explains the imagery, identifies the participants, and sheds light on the plight of the woman who is the hero of the Song.

STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE

There is a spectrum of opinion regarding the structure of the Song. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the Song consists of an indeterminate number of individual poems “of uncertain and often even of doubtful connection with one another.”¹⁰ At the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that the Song is a single “unified work with chiasmic structure and is composed . . . for presentation by a male and a female soloist with a chorus.”¹¹ The truth probably lies somewhere in between these two extremes. The Song’s language, style, and content suggest a single, unified composition. However, there is no discernible plot and no original headings to

¹⁰ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 43. Longman’s assessment considers the Song to be “an anthology of love poems, a kind of erotic psalter” without “a strict narrative unity” (43). Scholars debate the total number of individual poems. Longman argues for twenty-three poems, Keel for forty-two, Goulder for fourteen, and Murphy for nine. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 25–26. The paragraph markers in the Masoretic version of the Hebrew Bible divide the Song into twenty sections.

¹¹ Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 31–32. Other scholars who share a similar view regarding a chiasmic structure for the Song include Alden, Dorsey, Exum, Shea, and Webster. Cf. Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 30–35.

identify shifts in vocal performance.¹² Furthermore, the proposed chiasmic structures fail to correspond in any meaningful way and seem forced or imposed rather than clearly emerging from the language of the Song.

The Song's title in the superscription directs us to read this poetic composition as a single, unified song, "*The Song* [singular!] of Songs." If this is true, then we should expect to observe at least some structural markers to guide those who sing, hear, or read the text of the Song. One such device that appears to serve in this capacity is the so-called adjuration (NASB, ESV) or charge (KJV, NIV) of the woman: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (ESV). In addition to Song of Songs 2:7, this charge also appears at 3:5 and 8:4.¹³ Technically speaking, the woman is placing the daughters of Jerusalem under an oath, and so literally, "*I put you under oath, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, if you stir up or arouse love before it is willing, [may you be cursed].*"¹⁴ The statement in Hebrew is stronger than it comes across in most of our English translations, which makes it well suited to mark divisions in the text. Additionally, in all three occurrences, the oath is followed by the announcement of an individual's arrival (e.g., "behold, he is coming" in 2:8). It is proposed that the occurrence of this oath formula marks the ending of each major section and that the announcement of an individual's arrival marks the beginning of the next section. This scheme, therefore, divides the Song into four major sections:

- I. The Temptation of Solomon's Harem (1:2–2:7)
- II. The Arrival of True Love (2:8–3:5)
- III. The Arrival of Solomon (3:6–8:4)
- IV. The Arrival of the Woman (8:5–14)

This outline is expanded and explained in the following "Message and Theology" section. At this point, however, it is worth mentioning that three of the four major sections are relatively short, ranging only from ten to twenty-four verses. The third section is the longest section with sixty-eight verses divided into two subsections: 3:6–5:8 (thirty verses) and 5:9–8:4 (thirty-eight verses). The division of this subsection is marked and identified by the fourth oath, which is similar to but distinct from

¹²It is important to note that the headings and subheadings imposed by many modern translations do not appear in the Hebrew text. These headings are based on the editors' interpretation(s) of the Song. The oldest known headings of this type appear in Codex Sinaiticus (a fourth-century Greek manuscript).

¹³A similar oath formula also appears in Song 5:8 but is not counted with the three texts listed here for several reasons. First, it is not followed by the formulaic warning against stirring up or awakening love before it is ready; rather, the oath in 5:8 concerns finding and speaking to the woman's beloved. Second, the oath in 5:8 is not followed by the interrogative description of someone's arrival (cf. 2:8; 3:6; 8:5). Third, the oaths in 2:7 and 8:4 are preceded by the statement, "his left [hand] is under my head and his right [hand] embraces me" (2:6; 8:3), and the oaths in 2:7 and 3:5 include references to "the gazelles and the does of the field," perhaps functioning symbolically as witnesses to the oath. Finally, the oaths in 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4 constitute prohibitions (Do *not* stir up love!), while the oath in 5:8 functions positively as an admonition (Tell him that I am lovesick!). Thus, strong linguistic and contextual connections tie together the oaths in 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4 that do not occur for the oath in 5:8.

¹⁴For oath formulas of this type, see Blane Conklin, *Oath Formulas in Biblical Hebrew*, LSAWS 5 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), esp. 21–22, 29, 61. The appearance of the bracketed text above, [*may you be cursed*], indicates that the biblical text normally omits the actual curse statement (the apodosis) in an oath formula of this type for the sake of propriety or discretion (i.e., language taboo).

the one that terminates the first three sections, “I put you under oath, daughters of Jerusalem, *if you find my beloved, what will you tell him?*” (5:8).¹⁵

MESSAGE AND THEOLOGY

Interpretation

As stated earlier, the Song of Songs is a poetic wisdom song. Biblical wisdom literature is rooted in creation and works to describe how to live in God’s world according to God’s Word. It is first about understanding how this world works and then about how to make good decisions in light of that knowledge. As such, the Song is neither an allegorical description of the divine-human relationship nor an “erotic psalter” without any didactic purpose except to praise the goodness of human sexuality.¹⁶ The Song is not a drama, a play, or an opera. It is not a veiled account or interpretation of the history of Israel. There is no good evidence that it originally served in wedding ceremonies, funerals, or the cult. It does not read as myth.¹⁷

The Song of Songs is a poetic wisdom song that treats the topic of marriage and love from the perspective of a young woman. This woman has been taken into Solomon’s harem in order to be trained as a potential concubine (cf. Esther 2). She is a woman presented with the possibility of wealth, luxury, ease, and prestige if she will only give up the biblical, creational standard of marriage and love (Gen. 2:18–25; Ex. 20:14; Prov. 5:15–21). The Song, therefore, presents two men: Solomon, set in the context of his court and harem, and another male figure known by the woman, her true love, sometimes identified as the shepherd (e.g., Song 2:16; 6:3). For this reason, this particular explanation is often labelled “the shepherd interpretation.”¹⁸

In the opening verses, king Solomon is presented as a famous lover whose “love-making is better than wine” (1:2) and whom the young virgins love (1:3–4). But according to the woman, her beloved is unique, “like an apple tree among the trees of the forest” (2:3), and she is lovesick because of his absence (2:5). In Song 2:8–17, a male figure arrives who does not have access to the harem. A wall separates him from the woman, and he can only search for her by looking through the windows and lattice. When this man calls out to the woman, she is unable to come to him, and so he must go away and wait until the woman is able to leave the harem. By way of contrast, Solomon arrives in 3:6 with full access to the harem. He appears with

¹⁵ See note 11 on p. ***.

¹⁶ The designation “erotic psalter” comes from Longman, *Song of Songs*, 43. The traditional error with the interpretation of the Song excluded the natural reading of the text as it relates to human marriage and sexuality. The modern error operates at the other end of the spectrum, treating the Song as some sort of manual for sexual activity or as an aid to sexual arousal.

¹⁷ In this introduction, I do not describe the history of the Song’s interpretation, though I have alluded to it in the paragraph above. For those interested in this topic, some of the better treatments include Longman, *Song of Songs*, 20–49; Garrett, *Song of Songs*, 59–91; Provan, *Song of Songs*, 237–48; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 22–29; and the extensive treatment by Pope, *Song of Songs*, 89–229.

¹⁸ For this interpretation, see Chaim Rabin, “The Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry,” *SR* 3, no. 3 (1973): 205–19; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “True Marital Love in Proverbs 5:15–23 and the Interpretation of Song of Songs,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven Soderlund (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 106–16; Provan, *Song of Songs*, 245–48.

royal retinue and accoutrement where the virgins (i.e., daughters of Jerusalem) are assembled for viewing and selection (3:11). Of the two male figures that the Song presents, Solomon has access to the harem in 3:6 and following, but the man appearing in 2:7 does not have access to the harem. This reality also explains the woman's rejection of Solomon and harem life in 8:11–12 but the presence of the woman together with her beloved earlier in that same chapter (8:5).

Simply put, while Solomon appears repeatedly and explicitly in the Song, he does not exemplify fidelity in the context of the covenant of marriage or the love that a permanent, exclusive relationship promotes. In other words, the figure of Solomon in the Song represents not the way of wisdom but rather the way of folly, or that which is evil in the eyes of the Lord (cf. 1 Kings 11:1–6). A similar style of wisdom instruction occurs in Proverbs 1–9. There a young man is instructed by his parents to choose between two ways, the way of wisdom or the way of folly, each of which is exemplified by two women: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. It is helpful to compare the descriptions of the two women in Proverbs and to observe that these passages share much in common, even vocabulary, with the Song. For example, the instruction in Proverbs 5:15–20 shares language and imagery with the Song (see also Prov. 3:13–18; 4:6–9):

Drink water from your own cistern,
 running water from your own well.
Should your springs overflow in the streets,
 your streams of water in the public squares?
Let them be yours alone,
 never to be shared with strangers.
May your fountain be blessed,
 and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer—
 may her breasts satisfy you always,
 may you ever be intoxicated with her love.
Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife?
 Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? (NIV)

The call to fidelity in Proverbs 5:15–20 is contrasted with the description of Lady Folly in Proverbs 7:4–27 (cf. Prov. 2:16–19; 5:3–8; 6:23–29; 9:13–18). The following selection is lengthy, but clearly exhibits connections in language and instruction with the Song.

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
 and to insight, "You are my relative."
They will keep you from the adulterous woman,
 from the wayward woman with her seductive words.

At the window of my house
 I looked down through the lattice.
I saw among the simple,

I noticed among the young men,
 a youth who had no sense.
 He was going down the street near her corner,
 walking along in the direction of her house
 at twilight, as the day was fading,
 as the dark of night set in.

Then out came a woman to meet him,
 dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
 (She is unruly and defiant,
 her feet never stay at home;
 now in the street, now in the squares,
 at every corner she lurks.)
 She took hold of him and kissed him
 and with a brazen face she said:

“Today I fulfilled my vows,
 and I have food from my fellowship offering at home.
 So I came out to meet you;
 I looked for you and have found you!
 I have covered my bed
 with colored linens from Egypt.
 I have perfumed my bed
 with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
 Come, let’s drink deeply of love till morning;
 let’s enjoy ourselves with love!
 husband is not at home;
 he has gone on a long journey.
 He took his purse filled with money
 and will not be home till full moon.”

With persuasive words she led him astray;
 she seduced him with her smooth talk.
 All at once he followed her
 like an ox going to the slaughter,
 like a deer stepping into a noose
 till an arrow pierces his liver,
 like a bird darting into a snare,
 little knowing it will cost him his life.

Now then, my sons, listen to me;
 pay attention to what I say.
 Do not let your heart turn to her ways
 or stray into her paths.
 Many are the victims she has brought down;
 her slain are a mighty throng.
 Her house is a highway to the grave,
 leading down to the chambers of death. (NIV)

The instruction in the Song of Songs is of the same type as that presented in Proverbs 7 but from the perspective of a woman who must choose between two men, both enticing in their own way but one leading to life and the other to death. As such, the instruction of the Song is intended to teach women how to make a wise choice in the selection of a husband and to resist the dangerous and deadly temptation of folly exemplified by Solomon with his offers of wealth, luxury, ease, and prestige characterized by harem life.

Message

The message of the Song is recorded in Song of Songs 8:6–10, in the context of the woman’s arrival with her beloved (8:5) and her corresponding rejection of Solomon and harem life (8:11–12). By way of summary, the Song teaches that the biblical covenant of marriage is intended to promote love that is both rock solid (8:6a) and white hot (8:6b), and that this type of love endures hardship (8:7a), resists temptation (8:7b), and brings wholeness (8:10).

The wisdom of biblical marriage produces rock-solid commitment that is capable of enduring hardship and resisting temptation. The text of 8:6a reads, “place me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm.” The imagery of the seal is one of ownership and access. Seals were placed on documents, doors, vessels, or containers to mark ownership, responsibility, content, and access. “Sealing was a means of closing something from interference,” the visible and public application of authority.¹⁹ The unsanctioned breaking of a seal was met with punishment, curse, and even death. Biblical examples include the sealing of the lion’s den in Daniel 6 so that only the king could open it, and the sealing of the scrolls with seven seals in Revelation 5 so that only Jesus could open them. Here in Song of Songs 8:6, the application of the seal to the heart and the arm perhaps represents the possession of one another in marriage, both emotionally (heart) and physically (arm). The apostle Paul affirms the same reality in 1 Corinthians 7:4: “The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.”

The woman also explains that rock-solid covenant love is “strong like death, obstinate like the grave with zeal” (Song 8:6a). Though it may seem odd at first, the language of death and the grave aptly characterizes the rock-solid commitment of covenant life described by this woman. These symbols are intended to communicate that the marriage covenant is designed to be a permanent relationship. Covenant life of this type is a miraculous, supernatural work. Recall, for example, what Jesus said about marriage. The rock-solid union of marriage is something that “God has joined together” (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9); that is, there is a force behind this type of covenant life that God himself implements. It is powerful, even life producing. The wisdom of the Song teaches us that covenant life in marriage must be rock solid.

¹⁹NIDOTTE, 2:324.

The wisdom of the Song teaches us not only that covenant life in marriage must be rock solid but also that it must be white hot! Consider, for example, the text of Song of Songs 8:6b, “Its flames are flames of fire, the very flame of Yahweh.”²⁰ The type of heat described here is the heat of physical intimacy created for the marriage relationship—that is, sexual intimacy. This is clear from the vast amount of physical or sexual descriptions in the Song. In fact, every single chapter in the book is loaded with sexual imagery or descriptions of sexual activity or both. The heat of marital intimacy was designed not only to provide satisfaction and wholeness but also to protect from the enemy. That is, both rock-solid commitment and white-hot intimacy work together. Again, Paul reinforces this teaching for us in the New Testament: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:4–5 ESV).

Rock-solid commitment makes white-hot intimacy possible. And white-hot intimacy fuels, protects, and supports rock-solid commitment. Traditionally, the church has done much to support the rock-solid commitment of biblical marriage and its permanent design. However, it has done little, if anything, to encourage, promote, or celebrate the heat of marital intimacy. On the other hand, the world loves, and unashamedly celebrates, the white-hot nature of sexual intimacy, but it despises the rock-solid commitment of marriage created as the context for this heat. Both positions, by themselves, are weak and endanger the covenant partners.

The wisdom of the Song teaches that both commitment and intimacy work together to secure, strengthen, and protect the marriage relationship. The Song makes this point in Song of Songs 8:7, where it states that “many waters [i.e., trials] cannot extinguish love, and rivers cannot flood it.” When marriage is *both* white hot *and* rock solid, it is protected from shipwreck during the storm. Moreover, not only will trials threaten covenant life in this world, but so will temptations such as money, power, security, or freedom—here characterized by the wealth of a man’s household: “if a man gave all the wealth of his house for love [i.e., Solomon], it would utterly scorn him” (8:7b). In other words, this type of love is not for sale. It cannot be bought, and only a fool would try to make such a purchase. The type of love promoted in the Song must be protected (8:8–9) because it promotes peace and wholeness (8:10). The message of the Song is summarized in table 20.

²⁰The translation and interpretation of the expression “the very flame of Yahweh” in 8:6b is debated. Some take this to describe the origin or source of sexual intimacy, that this type of heat can only come from the Lord. Others take it to mean the degree of heat: it is super hot, the hottest possible heat (i.e., the superlative use of the divine name). Perhaps there is no need to distinguish. In both origin and degree, this type of love is a divine gift. But there may be more to it. When it comes to the fire of Yahweh in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, we learn that God himself is a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). Yet note that this fire does not consume his people but rather protects them. It is the fire of God’s presence and so also of his fellowship. But this same fire consumes God’s enemies. And so in marriage, the heat of sexual intimacy was designed to protect the marriage by consuming the threat of an enemy through the production of satisfaction (1 Cor. 7:4–5) and the creation of wholeness (Song 8:10).

The Message of the Song: Song 8:6–10

Verse	Translation	Instruction
8:6a	Place me like the seal on your heart, like the seal on your arm; for love is strong like death, obstinate like the grave with zeal.	The commitment of marriage should be rock solid.
8:6b	Its flames are flames of fire, the very flame of Yahweh [or “the hottest possible flame”].	The intimacy of marriage should be white hot.
8:7a	Many waters cannot extinguish love, and rivers cannot flood it.	This type of love endures hardship.
8:7b–9	If a man gave all the wealth of his house for love, it would utterly scorn him. We have a younger sister . . .	This type of love resists temptation.
8:10	I am a wall, and my breasts are like the towers, and so in this way I have become in his eyes like one who brings forth [finds] wholeness [peace, shalom].	This type of love pro- motes satisfaction and wholeness.

Table 20

The Song’s Content: A Summary

As indicated earlier (see “Structure and Outline” on p. ***), the message of the Song unfolds in four main sections, each of which is summarized in what follows. It is important to remember that each major section concludes with the woman placing the daughters of Jerusalem under oath (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and that the next major section begins with the arrival of a different individual—the shepherd in 2:8, Solomon in 3:6, and the woman in 8:5.

By way of context, recall that the woman in the Song has been taken into Solomon’s harem, where she must decide between a life as one of Solomon’s many concubines (6:8–9) or a life of true love in the context of an exclusive marriage relationship (8:1–12). There are, therefore, two men represented in the Song, Solomon and the so-called shepherd (the woman’s true love). Additionally, the woman of the Song finds herself among the daughters of Jerusalem, the other virgins in the harem complex training and preparing for the possibility of harem life. These are the voices of the Song.

*The Temptation of Solomon’s Harem (Song 1:2–2:7)*²¹

The harem in 1:2–4, either collectively or by way of a harem attendant, instructs the woman regarding the fame of Solomon and the intoxication of his lovemaking skills. It is here that the woman is first tempted by the so-called benefits of harem life. The woman immediately objects in 1:5–7 based upon her appearance that has

²¹The text of Song 1:1 constitutes the superscription. It is not a part of the Song.

resulted from prolonged exposure to the sun and manual labor. She concludes with a statement of longing for her true love, the shepherd. The harem responds in 1:8–17 with an affirmation of the woman’s beauty and the allurements of royal jewelry and perfume for beautification and decoration. Once again, the woman responds in 2:1–7 by affirming her preference for an exclusive relationship with the shepherd (e.g., a lily among thorns, an apple tree among the forest trees), and she concludes with another statement of longing. She is sick with love (i.e., lovesick) and so places the daughters of Jerusalem under oath not to force or provoke false love, or the love that she does not desire (2:7).

The Arrival of True Love (Song 2:8–3:5)

In this second main section of the Song, the woman’s true love, the so-called shepherd, arrives in search of the woman in order to return with her. He is described as coming with strength and vitality, “leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills” (2:8–9a). Upon arrival, the beloved shepherd searches for the woman, but he is prohibited from entering the harem. Such an act would have resulted in quick and certain death. Thus he can only stand behind the wall looking through the windows and lattice (2:9b). In 2:10–17 the shepherd calls out to the woman. It is now spring, the time for love, and he invites her to return to their vineyard, the place for love. The woman responds in 2:16–17, first with a vow expressing her rock-solid commitment to the shepherd, “my beloved belongs to me, and I belong to him, the shepherd among the flowers” (2:16),²² and then with a command to go and wait until she is able to come out to him (2:17). This section concludes in 3:1–4 with the first of two dream accounts in the Song (cf. 5:2–7). These accounts contain some of the most explicit sexual imagery in the Song and represent the woman’s strong desire to be reunited and joined in marriage to the shepherd. Both dreams highlight the degree to which the woman longs for her shepherd and express the lovesick condition of the woman kept from the shepherd in the harem of Solomon. The termination of this section is clearly marked by the repetition of the oath in 3:5.

The Arrival of Solomon (Song 3:6–8:4)

The third section of the Song is the longest. The shepherd has departed to the mountains where he waits for the arrival of the woman. This section is divided into two parts (3:6–5:8 and 5:9–8:4) by a secondary oath at 5:8, “I put you under oath, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, what will you say to him? [Tell him] that I am lovesick.”²³ It is a question and answer, not a prohibition as with the other three oaths.

Subsection One: The Temptation of Solomon (Song 3:6–5:8). In this first subsection, Solomon arrives in royal splendor. He appears in a billow of perfume and incense,

²²This vow may represent the covenantal expression of the marriage commitment, similar to the covenantal expression in Gen. 17:7–8; Jer. 31:33; 32:38, et al. See Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl, OTS (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

²³See note 12 on p. ***.

accompanied by his royal bed and surrounded by palace warriors, likely the harem eunuchs—that is, those who have been “seized by the sword” (3:6–10). The virgins are assembled for selection in 3:11, and then Solomon works to woo the woman by way of flattery (4:1–8) and then with promises of love and lovemaking (4:9–5:1). The temptation of Solomon is followed by the second dream account in the Song (5:2–7), once again expressing the woman’s profound longing for her shepherd. Like the previous dream account, this one is also filled with explicit sexual imagery designed to characterize the woman’s longing for covenantal union with the beloved shepherd in opposition to Solomon. This first subsection concludes with the oath that marks the division at 5:8.

Subsection Two: The Temptation of the Harem (Song 5:9–8:4). This second subsection begins with the daughters of Jerusalem inquiring of the woman. They want to know why her beloved shepherd is better than any other man, especially Solomon (5:9). The woman responds by describing the shepherd to the daughters of Jerusalem (5:10–16). The woman’s answer provokes a second question, “Where has your beloved gone, O beautiful one among the women, where has your beloved turned, that we may search for him with you?” (6:1). The woman answers and also affirms her commitment to the shepherd by repeating her statement of covenant loyalty, “I belong to my beloved, and my beloved belongs to me” (6:2–3). Following this vow of loyalty, Solomon sets out to woo the young woman a second time (6:4–10). The woman refuses and desires to leave the harem (6:11–12). The daughters of Jerusalem join with Solomon to call the woman back, “return, return!” She has now created conflict in the harem among the virgins, a conflict described as the “dance of two armies” (7:1). Next, Solomon delivers his third and final attempt at wooing the young woman to become a part of his harem as a concubine (7:2–10a), but it does not work. She responds to the king, “I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me” (7:10b). The rejection of Solomon is followed by the woman’s invitation or call to the shepherd to return in order that they might depart together and be united in marriage (7:11–8:3). This section is concluded by the third appearance of the oath-curse directed at the daughters of Jerusalem (8:4).

The Arrival of the Woman (Song 8:5–14)

This final section constitutes the climax of the Song. In this section, the woman of valor (cf. Prov. 12:24; 31:3; Ruth 3:11) arrives with the beloved shepherd and sets before us the wisdom instruction presented by her experience. Her message is summarized in the chart “The Message of the Song” (p. ***). The woman arrives with her beloved shepherd, coming up from the wilderness, the place of testing (Song 8:5; cf. 3:6). The woman teaches that true love, the love of marriage described in Genesis 2:18–25, must exhibit rock-solid commitment and white-hot sexual intimacy in order to endure hardship and resist temptation (Song 8:6–9). Only this exclusive marriage commitment is capable of producing satisfaction, wholeness, and peace (8:10). As such, the woman rejects Solomon and harem life along with the temptations of wealth, luxury, ease, and prestige (8:11–12). The Song concludes with an invitation to the beloved, and those friends who would embrace her wisdom, to

come away from the folly and temptation of harem life, or any other perversion of biblical marriage, in order to experience the true love of biblical wisdom (8:13–14).

Full Outline for the Song of Songs

Having explored the Song in detail, we are now ready to expand the outline:

- I. The Temptation of Solomon's Harem (1:2–2:7)
 - A. Temptation of the harem: A famous lover (1:2–4)
 - B. Response of the woman: Unqualified (1:5–7)
 - C. Temptation of the harem: Royal endowment (1:8–17)
 - D. Response of the woman: Exclusive love (2:1–6)
 - E. The oath-curse (2:7)
- II. The Arrival of True Love (2:8–3:5)
 - A. Arrival of the shepherd (2:8–9a)
 - B. The shepherd locked out of the harem (2:9b)
 - C. The shepherd calls the woman to return (2:10–15)
 - D. The woman vows commitment: Go and wait for me (2:16–17)
 - E. The woman's dream of longing and desire (3:1–4)
 - F. The oath-curse (3:5)
- III. The Arrival of Solomon (3:6–8:4)
 - A. Subsection one: Solomon's temptation (3:6–5:8)
 1. Solomon's arrival (3:6)
 2. Solomon's royal retinue (3:7–10)
 3. Virgins assemble (3:11)
 4. Solomon's first temptation (4:1–5:1)
 5. The woman's dream of longing and desire (5:2–7)
 6. The oath-request (5:8)
 - B. Subsection two: The harem's temptation (5:9–8:4)
 1. The harem's question: Why? (5:9)
 2. The woman's response: Desire (5:10–16)
 3. The harem's question: Where? (6:1)
 4. The woman's response: Commitment (6:2–3)
 5. Solomon's second temptation (6:4–10)
 6. The woman's response: Leave the harem (6:11–12)
 7. Solomon's third temptation (6:13 [7:1 Hebrew]–10a)
 8. The woman's response: Commitment and desire (7:10b)
 9. The woman calls the shepherd to return (7:11–8:3)
 10. The oath-curse (8:4)
- IV. The Arrival of the Woman (8:5–14)
 - A. Arrival of the woman with shepherd (8:5)
 - B. Wisdom instruction (8:6–10)
 - C. Rejection of Solomon and harem life (8:11–12)
 - D. Invitation to the wisdom of biblical marriage (8:13–14)

APPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The wisdom of love and marriage presented in the Song of Songs connects with the New Testament in several significant ways. First, both the Song and the New Testa-

ment affirm and promote marriage as an exclusive, covenantal relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 5:27–32; Mark 10:8; 1 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 7:1–15; Eph. 5:31). Additionally, the New Testament also affirms that the marriage relationship should be both rock solid and white hot (1 Cor. 7:1–15; Heb. 13:14) and that together these realities protect and sustain the marriage relationship.

It is important to understand that the New Testament does not deny or diminish the importance of our physical bodies. In fact, the bodily resurrection of Jesus affirms their importance. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and so we are taught, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:18–20 ESV). For this reason, the wisdom of the New Testament demands that a Christian must not marry a non-Christian: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14 ESV).

The importance of the marriage covenant is also highlighted by its use as a picture of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in the Old Testament (Isa. 50:1; 54:4–8; 62:5; Jer. 2:2, 32–33; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1–3) and between Christ and the church in the New (Eph. 5:22–32). This covenantal symbolism is intentional, typological, and rooted in the earliest parts of Scripture. It is no accident that the creation account in Genesis 2 climaxes on day six with the creation of the woman and the marriage covenant. This first marriage in the first creation points beyond itself to the ultimate marriage in the new creation, where both the New Jerusalem and the people of God are described as the bride of Christ: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:6b–7 NIV); “I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:2 NIV; cf. 21:19; 22:17). The goodness and joy of marriage and sexuality anticipate the satisfaction, fulfillment, and wholeness of life in the coming kingdom (Song 8:10b; Rev. 21:1–4). In this way, the wisdom of the Song is not limited to the realities of this fallen world, nor does its instruction apply only to those who are engaged or married. As wisdom literature, even the Song of Songs can make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15b ESV).

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