

# Is the Song of Songs a Secular Love Poem and /or a Theological Allegory?

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## Abstract

This article offers an exegetical appraisal of the Song of Songs within the context of Wisdom literature using historical critical methodology. It is centred on various aspects of the Song's relevance to the world behind, of and in front of the text, together with an explanation of the passage and specific reference to whether the Song is a secular love poem and /or a theological allegory.

## Introduction: The Enigma of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, known also as the Song of Solomon and the Canticle of Canticles (the greatest song), is one of the most popular books of the Bible for both Jews and Christians alike, despite being amongst the smallest, most difficult and controversial of Bible writings.<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries hundreds of books and commentaries have been written and countless sermons preached on these 117 verses.<sup>2</sup> The Song has drawn the interest of the greatest intellects and spiritual minds of the believing community, and regardless of its deceptive simplicity presents a large number of major interpretative difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, it can be appreciated how the Song of Songs is considered an enigma. Its place in the canon has occasioned constant controversy, and there is no agreement among scholars as to its author or its interpretation. Hence, the individual must draw their own conclusions as to the latter, and acknowledge its inclusion in the canon as on sound grounds. Why? Because, for those who included it in the canon it had meaning, and meaning that is generally accepted as advocating the love of God for Israel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dianne Bergant et al., *The Song of Songs* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001).vii-xi.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*, NRSV Catholic Edition (Nashville, Ten., Catholic Bible Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon : An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1984).15.

<sup>4</sup> James A. Fisher, *Song of Songs* in Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Based on the New American Bible with Revised New Testament* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989).789-791.

## Challenges of Exegesis

The aforementioned highlights the challenges confronted in stipulating whether the Song is a secular love poem and/or a theological allegory? Appropriately, Alicia Ostriker commences her commentary on the Song by focusing on the confusion relative to the Song's ongoing scholarly debate by noting:

'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For thy love is better than wine' is the famous opening of the Song of Songs. With this pronoun-blurring sentence we are plunged into a breathlessly seductive and ultimately mysterious love scene. The remainder of the Song is essentially an erotic dialogue between two lovers who alternately yearn for, recall, invite and celebrate each other's crosses in language laden with metaphors that are at once explicit and cryptic, and have thus produced endless scholarly debates over their meaning."<sup>5</sup>

These debates relate primarily to the problems challenging readers of the Song for the first time. Are they dealing with a collection of short lyrics, a single work, an anthology such as the Book of Psalms, or poetry? Contemporary critics are divided on this question with many electing for an anthology. Nevertheless, they differ greatly in their estimate of the number of lyrics collected. Generally, the collection is perceived as being formed with a common theme of love or by word links between individual poems. Moreover, they view the collection as random and growing over a period of time.<sup>6</sup>

Other commentators argue the Song to be a single literary work. Roland E. Murphy, for example, 'has called attention to many literary signs pointing to a unified composition.'<sup>7</sup> Then, there are those who suggest it to be a meticulous array of correlated poems forming a unified celebration of the reality of love. Yet again, others see in the Song of Songs a scholarly allegory about the relationship of Israel with the Lord after the Exile, with another esoteric form of allegorizing appearing in the Jewish tradition. This form endeavours to interpret the Song according to a secret code of the Kabala.<sup>8</sup>

## Commentary Contradictions

As can be seen from the foregoing, addressing the question as to whether the Song is a secular love poem and/or a theological allegory offers no easy answer. In pursuing the question further it may be noted how James Reese's commentary acknowledges indications throughout the text as pointing to the biblical writer's conscious effort to adapt, position and organize pre-existing lyrics in order to yield a distinct literary composition acclaiming love as the greatest influence in God's creation. Reese views these indications as embracing, '...refrains, repetitions of words, themes and primary literary forms, learned allusions to

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<sup>5</sup> Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, *The Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).36.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Reese, *The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs* (Wilmington, Dela.: M. Glazier, 1983),205-207.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Reese, *The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs*, 206.

persons, places and events linked to Israel's destiny, plus other stylistic devices of Israelite wisdom that will be noted in the commentary.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, The New Interpreter's Bible suggests that readers have a tendency to comprehend the book as an allegory because the vocabulary of love poetry is vague, the referents are uncertain and the images are compressed. Moreover, that for those who remain bent on reading the Song of Songs allegorically the following prove too incredible: the view that the lovers' energetic passion and titillating sexual fantasies do not characterize or direct to any greater theological reality, that the book's standing is bared in its literal import, and that the poet and editors shaping the closing poetry were indifferent when expanding on the character of God and facilitating comprehensive religious doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

### **Lyrical Poems Celebrating Honouring Human Love**

The Oxford Annotated Bible postulates the Song of Songs as a sequence of lyrical poems honouring human love:

The Song of Solomon, also known as 'Song of Songs' and 'Canticles,' is a sequence of lyric poems celebrating human love. The poetry is graceful, sensuous, and replete with erotic imagery and allusions. It is unclear whether the composition should be read as a single, unified poem or as a collection of several shorter pieces written in a common style and idiom. Nevertheless, the sequence is coherent and exhibits a lyrical structure that derives its unity from repetitions and juxtapositions rather than from narrative devices such as plot or character development.<sup>11</sup>

However, the Catholic study bible considers the poem not an allegory in which each comment in the dialogue of the lovers has a greater connotation, but as a parable where the true sense of mutual love originates from the poem in total. The Catholic study bible suggests that while the Song is thus generally understood by most Catholic scholars, likewise it is conceivable to perceive in it an inspired exposé of idyllic human love. As such it would offer from God a depiction of the sacredness and the depth of married union.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the views of the renowned Rabbi Akiba of the second-century CE may be noted, relative to the spiritual and secular interpretation of the Song. Rabbi Akiba states:

'No man in Israel ever disputed the status of the Song of Songs... The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>10</sup> Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*, 5. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).371.

<sup>11</sup> Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Augm. 3rd ed. (New York, N.Y. ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). 959-960.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Senior, *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). 791.

<sup>13</sup> Brenner and. Fontaine, *The Song of Songs*, 38.

## Sacred Yet Not Sanctioned

Hence, in the same era as the Song was avowed sacred, it was not sanctioned for a secular interpretation. Accordingly, rabbinic commentary would construe the Song as an allegory of the love between God and Israel, or as an implied account of covenantal history, or as a symbolic recall of the soul's desire for the next two thousand years to come. Furthermore, as Ostriker aptly points out:

So too, throughout the complicated history of Christian exegesis, the Song had been understood as allegorizing the love of Christ for the church, or for the individual Christian soul, or the mystical marriage of God and the Virgin Mary. Both Jewish and Christian mystical writings have been deeply indebted to its representations of longing and ecstasy, but commonly at the cost of denying the banqueting house of the flesh....Only in the last century has the Son of Song been widely read as a secular love poem.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, it can be appreciated that the Song shows how the beauty, intimacy and sexual consummation may be celebrated with God's grace, without being ends in themselves. Instead, they allude to another world and dimension rarely perceived by humankind. As such, the Song offers an awareness of how God has chosen the love of a man and a woman as an image of God's own love for God's people.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be understood from the foregoing the reasons for there being been so much debate over the meaning of the Song of Songs. Ultimately, some say it is an allegory of God's love for Israel and/or for the church whilst others say it is a literary story about married love. But in reality, it appears to be both – a historical story with two layers of meaning. On one level, we learn about love and sex and on the other level we learn about God's overwhelming love for God's people.

Taken as a whole, the Song of Songs surveys the entire array of emotions faced by lovers working out their mutual commitment and consummation in marriage. The Song's potent and unashamed affirmation of love, loyalty and earthly sexuality of yesteryear is still relevant in a society today where commercialized eroticism is the norm and the permanency of relationships rare. Perhaps, the fact that 'God is Love' and the Song of Songs is simply a song of 'love' should be the final note to end this love story on.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>15</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Canticle of Canticles* in Raymond Edward Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland Edmund Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 462-463.

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