
The Relevance of Song of Songs for Marriage Sustainability in the Christian Home

Mayowa Stephen Thompson

Abstract

Marriage is a legal, formal, and social union that exists between a man and a woman. From the biblical perspective, this universal phenomenon is rooted in the divine plan of creation. There the book of songs of songs is widely known for its erotic nature. However, the book is embedded with much relevance to address conflicts, chaos, and related issues in marriage. Therefore, this research examines the book of Song of Songs as a manual on relationship and marriage sustainability in the twenty-first century. In other words, Song of Songs is the biblical framework of this discourse. This work shows relevant lessons drawn from the conversation engaged between a man and woman (The lovers). An analytical methodology is employed to analyze the book with the aim of depicting several viable themes which fosters marriage sustainability in the contemporary time. Among themes like, identity, race, feminism; it is noteworthy that love is spoken about tirelessly throughout the book; meanwhile, the lack of it repeatedly drives women insane with loss. The concept of love forms the theoretical framework of this discourse. Love is often confused for possession and ownership. From courtship to marriage to the assurance of love, Song of Solomon poetically presents a broad range of events and feelings in the days leading up to and during marriage, offering encouragement toward an enduring love amid the petty jealousies and fears sure to threaten even the strongest of relationships.

Keywords: Relevance, Marriage, Sustainability, Century.

Introduction

It is not an overstatement that people have diverse perspectives about Song of Songs. Some individuals have questioned the reason for its canonicity in the Hebrew Scriptures (Kinlaw, 1994). But reading through the lines of this book, it has much to say about God's purpose for marriage. No book has done justice and explores more of the joy, beauty, and sacredness of marriage in the scripture than the Song of Songs (Adeyemo, 2000). Notably, this is one of the oldest books in the Bible and the Song vividly and clearly open how the bridegroom and the bride delight in each other (Tenny, 1963). In the Song of Songs, God has given us a divine manual or guide on romantic relationships and sustainability of marriage, taking us from the first attraction between a couple through courtships, deepening intimacy, and the decisiveness which is marriage (Moraeu, 2000). Having established this, it is obvious that God's desire and purpose for husbands and wives is to have a wonderful and happy home. Therefore, this study delves into the book of Song of Songs and its Relevance to Marriage Sustainability in 21st Century.

Background to the Book of Song of Songs

It is generally held that the title designated for this book is "Song of Songs" which comes from the first verse 1:1. However, it has been debated whether it was part of the original composition or if it is a later addition. The Hebrew title "*shiyrhashiyrim*" - the Song of Songs implies that the song in question is the most beautiful, transcending all others (Vriezen, 2005). The Latin word for song is *canticum* from which we get the word *Canticles*, which is an alternative title for this book. The original Hebrew version of the book took its title from the book's first two words, *shiyrhashiyrim*, usually translated as "the song of songs" (Archer, 1974).

This latter title remained in Greek and Latin Bible translations in later centuries. The repetition of the word song indicates that

the writer considers this “the greatest of all songs (Kinlaw, 1994). Some English translations that today have preserved the title “Song of Songs” (NIV, TNIV), but many have changed it to “Song of Solomon” based on 1:1 (NASB, NKJV). Garrett (2004) postulates that the name may be a kind of double entendre: it is the premium of Solomon’s songs (in the superlative sense of ‘song of songs’), and it is also a single musical work composed of many songs.

Solomon composed the collection of love poems, but Solomon’s name was probably added later by the song’s editors, perhaps because of references within the text to the wise and prolific king. This attribution to Solomon led to the book’s inclusion in the Hebrew Bible and later, Christian versions of the Old Testament. The *Song of Songs* is a unique book in the Bible. There is no plot and no mention of God, but the piece says a lot about early Hebrew traditions surrounding marriage and love, using elaborate descriptions and complex relationships.

The overall message of the *Song of Songs* has been hotly debated, and possibly this is because of the nature of its assembly and the culture from which it sprung. The Song was most likely a collage of wedding songs sung across the Jewish world, and because the ancient Jewish community was widely dispersed and interpreted their beliefs many ways, the *Song of Songs* is thus able to make both the argument for the beauty of love and its possibility for danger.

Authorship and Date

On this note, it is imperative to explore about the writer which is quite important to validate the authenticity of the book. There has been some assertion that argued for and against Solomon as the author of this book .Many references to Solomon throughout the book confirm the claim of 1:1 that Solomon wrote this book (1:4-5, 12; 3:7, 9, 6:12; 1 Kings 4:33) who reigned between 971 and 931 B.C. Garrett (2004) also asserts that he believed that the book was written either “by Solomon”

or “for Solomon”, by a court poet of Solomon’s day (Gledhill, 1994).

On the contrary, Hess (2005) believed the writer is unknown and could have been anyone, even a woman, and that the female heroine viewed and described her lover as a king as a Solomon. Some scholars also have argued that the book is a collection of songs written by multiple poets, but that view is unsupported by the text. How could Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3), be the same faithful lover this book presents? He could be if he became polygamous after the events in this book took place. That seems a more likely explanation than that, he was polygamous when these events occurred and just omitted reference to his other loves. Probably he wrote the book before he became polygamous. We do not know how old Solomon was when he married the second time. The history recorded in Kings and Chronicles is not in strict chronological order. The Shulammite was probably not Pharaoh’s daughter in view of references in the book (1 Kings 3:1; Song of Sol. 4:8). Sasson (1989) posits that she was Pharaoh’s daughter. Another view also opines that “Shulammite” is simply the feminine form of the name “Solomon”. So Solomon could have written this book in his youth. Perhaps he wrote most of Proverbs in his mid-life and Ecclesiastes in his old age. The contents of these three writings have suggested that order to many students of the book dating back to its earliest interpreters.

The Purpose

Robert asserts that probably God’s primary purpose in inspiring this book of the Bible was to give us revelation concerning the way love between a man and a woman should look (Laurin, 1962). The characters in the book usually behave towards one another the way men and women in love should conduct themselves in attitudes and activities. Solomon was a man of many lovers, and the Song of Songs is a record of one of the relationships that stood out above all others. Holmyard (1998)

posits that the Song of Songs harkens back to God's prototypical design in the Garden of Eden of one man and one woman, in marriage, a relationship God designed to be mutually special. This book presents a most relevant and urgent message for us today. The view of children is not necessary to justify sexual love in marriage.

Significantly, the Song of Solomon makes no reference to procreation or reproduction. It must be remembered that the book was written in a world where a high premium was placed on offspring and a woman's worth was often measured in terms of the number of her children (Diamant, 1985). Sex was often seen with reference to procreation, yet there is not a trace of that here in the book. The song is a song in praise of love for love's sake and for love's sake alone. This relationship needs no explanation beyond itself (Holmyard, 1998). The love relationship between a man and a woman is an illustration of the relationship within the Godhead, God and Israel and between Christ and the Church. The purpose of this book seems to be the revelation of those more basic love relationships for application by the reader. The use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship of God to his people is almost universal in Scripture (Lasor, 1982). Human love is thus a good pedagogical device to cast light on divine love. The book describes and extols human marital love. The love that exists portrays love at the higher and more perfect level, that between God and the objects of His grace (Dyer, 2001). In creating man, male and female in his own image and joining them together so that they become one flesh, God makes man copies both of himself in his Trinitarian unity and distinction as one God and three persons and of himself in relation to the people of his gracious election (Bromiley, 1980). Little wonder that this little book is in the canon.

The Literary Genre

The particular literary form of an author's work selects as the vehicle of his message can be the most important single clue to his true intention.

Love Song: It is being more and more recognized as archaeological discovery expand our library of ancient literature that the biblical Song was not a novel literary occurrence in the world in which it appeared. In its general framework and in numerous individual motifs and metaphors it is seen to be stylistically similar to what is found in ancient love lyrics. An Egyptian love poem, found on one of the Chester Beatty papyri dating about 1100 B.C., consists of seven cantos in dialog form with the lovers addressing each other as "brother" and "sister" (Pritchard, 1962). There are enough parallels to Canticles or song with words from a biblical text in structure, situation, and imagery in such love songs of the New Empire in Egypt. W. F. Albright was convincing that they "demonstrate the Egyptian origin of the framework of the Canticles (Albright, 1942). Other scholars are more impressed with parallels to the Song found elsewhere in the Near Eastern or in primitive love poetry. One variety of love song is the epithalamium or wedding song. From the time of Origen many have held that Canticles was composed for the occasion of Solomon's wedding to Pharaoh's daughter (I Kgs 3:1) and from the end of the sixteenth century expositors have tried to explain the character of the Song in terms of customs followed at ancient Jewish marriage festivals.

Glickman (1976) demonstrated that the Song was composed of seven parts, one for each day of the wedding week, but with little success. Critics of the epithalamium view have questioned both the existence of such "king's week" among the Arabs in Palestine and the reliability of modern Syrian practices as a guide of Judean wedding customs of the first millennium B.C. They also argue that some of the poetry in Canticles is clearly occurring before marriage and that even the type of song was not confined to wedding festivals. There is an obvious reason

for calling the hero “king” (1:4, 7:5) if he is “king Solomon” (3:9, 11) and his beloved, it must be noted, is never designated “queen.” Certainly, she is not a princess from Pharaoh’s court but a maiden from the village of Shunem. Gordis (1954) seeks to meet some of these criticisms of the relevance of the “king’s week” but he too joins the majority of those who regard Canticles or song from biblical text as love poetry in concluding that it was not composed for a wedding but is an anthology of various types of love songs.

Drama: In the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries the view was developed and popularized that Canticles was dramatic in structure. The beginnings of this view were much earlier. Origen, for example, considered it “a wedding poem composed in dramatic form” and Milton called it a “divine pastoral drama.” Extremists treated the Song as a dramatic piece intended for the stage. In this they succeeded more in displaying a style for creating musical comedies than in manifesting a gift for exegeting ancient texts. But nineteenth century exegetes of the caliber of Franz Delitzsch, H. Ewald, and S. R. Driver also championed the dramatic view of the Song and this approach continues to enjoy some support in that century. The dramatists are divided over the question of whether the Shulammite’s true love is Solomon or a rustic lover to whom she remains faithful in a triumph of pure love over the seductions of Solomon’s royal court (Gledhill, 1994). The second plot obviously has greater dramatic tension and that perhaps is why it is more popular; but it has little else to commend it. Critics of the dramatic view correctly observe that fully fledged drama was unknown among the Hebrews or the Semites in general, some of them also protest, but incorrectly that the Song cannot be a drama because it is not also a literary unit. The real question in similarity with sober supports of the dramatic view is whether Canticles traces the love of Solomon and the Shulammite through a temporal sequence of scenes from courtship to their wedding and marriage life. The simple one teaches the wise man simplicity he wanders gladly over

mountain and field if he only has her (Keil and Delitzsch, 1950). Though not persuaded by Bentzen's argument that the many possibilities advanced to explain the book as a drama prove its impossibility the present writer is not convinced that the scene chronological structure has been satisfactorily demonstrated. The criticism that the dramatic view is almost as guilty of eisegesis as the allegorical view goes much too far, but it does seem to contain an element of truth. It is a virtue of the dramatic view that it recognizes the unity of the Song. That unity, however, is unfolded in recurring rather than sequential fashion. The divisions suggested by Delitzsch for his six acts mark the bounds of these cycles; observe, for example, the recurring opening and closing refrains of these divisions. Within each of these cycles the dominant love motif is that of longing and fulfillment. Each cycle closes with the satisfaction of consummation of love. Even though the Song is not structurally a drama, this repeat theme of seeking and finding does impart to it a certain dramatic quality (Keil and Delitzsch, 1950).

Poetic language: The indisputable difficulty in interpreting the Song of Songs is due not to the corruption of the Hebrew text but to the poetic character portrait of the book. Against a tendency, in the past, to consider the Song as a collection of popular songs, recent commentaries have increasingly underlined its refined language which, according to Muller sometimes borders on mannerism (Muller, 1992). The Hebrew text is an exquisite sonorous piece of work: for example, there are frequent uses of figures of speech such as paronomasia and alliteration, rhyme, and assonance, together with forms of onomatopoeia (Lasor, 1984). The meaning can also be deduced from the context or from similar vocabularies in the Oriental languages, but at other times the translation remains doubtful.

Marriage Sustainability in Christian Home

The message of the book of Song of Songs is relevant to our contemporary time which can be viewed as a divine manual or guide on romantic relationships and sustainability of marriage.

Therefore, this study will examine four fundamental principles from the book of Song of Songs that can aid sustainability in marriage in this 21st century.

Love should be Reciprocated: The dialogue that occurs in this book is between a man and a woman who has genuine affection with each other. Each plays its part to sustain the relationship so that it will not wreck. Their desire for each other is expressed and their love is reciprocal. Pope asserts that the lovers have an “alliance” and live in a “free and reciprocal face to face relation” where they “alternate taking initiative” (Pope, 1997). The man and woman describe each other and respond to these descriptions. They invite each other to enjoy and partake in their love; nothing can stand in the way of its fulfillment. And behind their words is a deep desire to build each other up.

The woman commences the dialogue by her keenness expression with the statement “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth- for your love is better than wine... (1:2) (Greenspahn, 1984). This woman has a level of desire and passion every bit as powerful as the man’s. He is the focus of all her desire and passionate longing. The man addresses her with a tender compliment, looking past her own perceived flaws to praise her beauty. Compliments foster love, but criticism impedes unity. This denotes, when there is a reciprocated enjoyment of shared interests it creates stability in a relationship. The wordplay of the couple’s admiration in 1:14-2:3 signals their growing intimacy between each other. She calls him “beloved”; he replies with “darling.” She describes herself as a “rose of Sharon” and a “lily of the valley.” In those days, both were common, everyday blossoms not especially noted for their beauty. She is modestly saying, “I’m not so pretty really kind of average.” After which the man lifts her up: to him she is like a lily among thorns; her beauty far outclasses that of all others. She then repays his compliment with one of her own: compared to all of the young men, he is like a refreshing apple tree that is far more desirable than all the trees of the forest. This scenario between the man and the woman unveils an

important part of a healthy marriage which is lacking in many marriages in our contemporary. It is on this note, that there should be constructive dialogue between a husband and a wife to aid peaceful cohabitation.

Love should be Exclusive: Sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is a beautiful experience that expresses their oneness and the love they have for one another. The Song of Songs communicates that love within marriage produces genuine sexual freedom not freedom from marriage, but liberation in marriage. The most explicitly erotic passage in the entire book, chapters 7:1-8:4, portrays the exciting sexual intimacy of the man and the woman as a married couple. Here they enjoy the fruit of their love: “I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved . . . let us go early to the vineyards . . . there I will give you my love” (7:10-12). Continuing the verbal and physical foreplay, the man uses the images of a locked garden and a sealed fountain to celebrate his beloved’s virginity. “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain” (4:12). Sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is a beautiful experience that expresses their oneness and the love they have for one another (Holts, 1984). The Song of Songs teaches that love within marriage produces genuine sexual liberation not liberation from marriage, but liberation in marriage. The most explicitly erotic passage in the entire book, chapters 7:1-8:4, depicts the vibrant sexual intimacy of the man and the woman as a married couple. Here they enjoy the fruit of their love: “I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved...let us go early to the vineyards...there I will give you my love” (7:10-12).

The garden suggests privacy, separation, sacredness, and security. A “sealed fountain” is protected; its water can only go to its rightful owner. Sex without marriage cannot compare with the joy of giving yourself completely to the beloved (Bullock, 1979). This language of exclusivity is expressed in something like a marriage vow: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” This phrase, often used by Jewish brides at weddings, is a statement

of possession. It represents an exclusive covenant between a man and a woman who are saying to each other. On this note, we are called to honor God, ourselves, and our future spouses by maintaining purity.

Love should be rooted in Companionship: Love is not theoretical; it calls for action. It is evident that the Song elucidate that the couple directly and explicitly call each other friends. The man calls the Shulamite “my friend” and uses the feminine singular Hebrew noun with the personal pronoun a total of nine times (Bosker, 1989). The woman also calls the man, “This is my beloved, this is my friend” (5:16). The two share erotic love, but they also share hopes, dreams, and aspirations as companions in life. The power of love requires more than the communication of feeling to protect it. Sexual expression is such as integral part of selfhood that needs the boundary of marriage to safeguard love. Marriage is the celebration of daily commitment between a husband and the wife (Moraueu, 2000). Friendship is a key ingredient in healthy relationship. It is the basis of biblical love and it is very vital for marriage sustainability. Marriage strives with companionship and together with the worship of God, is the foundation on which husbands and wives build intimacy.

In one study, couples were asked to rank a list of possible goals for their marriage. The single most important goal listed was to have a friend in one’s partner. This should not be surprising. God himself said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18). A spouse who is a real friend is a loyal companion who “loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17). This companionship is articulated by the man using different appellation for his lover such as “my sister, my bride” (4:9). It is explicit from this passage that she is not just a lover, she is also a friend. On this note, satisfaction in marriage can be achieved by efforts of both partners with the aid of friendship which makes marriage more meaningful.

Love should be Beautiful: Song of Songs as to do with the beauty of the marriage relationship. “My beloved spoke and said to me, ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me’” (2:10). The beauty of their relationship does not reflect only in physical outward beauty, but rather in the inward beauty of character and in the spiritual dimension of their relationship expressed in their commitment to God and his design for marriage. Each appreciates the other person as a beautiful gift from God. Like fine wine, beauty increases with age as God conform us more and more into the image of Christ and makes us beautiful. Ultimately, though the Song of Songs makes us yearn for Christ.

Conclusion

The *Song of Songs* is not weak for its contradictions and ambiguity. It is strong for being intriguing enough to be one of the most highly debated and contemplated books of the Bible. The *book* displays love, purity and intoxicating desire. The discussed themes don't come together to make a coherent whole, but in light of the widely dispersed culture it came out of, this is no surprise. To its audience, this can perhaps make the poem all the more illuminating. Each reader takes from the song a strengthening of the beliefs he or she already feels to be true. The book is a collection of love songs which evidently celebrate the joy of physical and intimate love. One of the distinctive messages is that ‘sex is God's gift’, and it should be enjoyed. It is a vital part of marital love, but it should be done in the context of marriage (2:7; 3:5) for outside marriage is fornication or adultery.

The Song boldly proclaims the value and beauty of love and devotion between a man and woman. The lovers' words portray a beautiful relationship expressed in the complete giving of themselves to each other in the marriage relationship. The book, therefore, is very helpful if it's rightly interpreted and properly used. It provides a guide for improvement and sustainability in marriage based concerning problems couples

face. Christians in the contemporary time should heed the Song's sublime words by continuing to value marriage as one of the bedrocks of society, appreciating the goodness and the beauty borne out of the union of two people in holy matrimony. With this book, God has given us a divine manual on romantic relationships, from the initial attraction between a couple through courtship, deepening intimacy, and marriage.

Sources

- Adeyemo, T. (2000). *Bible Commentary*. Kenya: Word Alive publications,
- Albright, W.F. (1942). *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Archer, G.L. (1974). *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Barry W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York: Summit Books, 1984.
- Bokser, B.Z. (1989). *The Talmud: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Bromiley, G.W. (1980). *God and Marriage*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Bullock, C.H. (1979). *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press,
- Bullock, H.C. (1979). *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Diamant, A. (1985). *The New Jewish Wedding*. New York: Summit Books,
- Dyer, C.H. and Merrill Eugene H. *The Old Testament Explorer*. Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001.
- Garrett, D.A. (2004). *Song of Songs: Word Biblical Commentary series*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers
- Gledhill, T. (1994). *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity.
- Gledhill, T. (1994). *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity,
- Glickman, S.G. (1976). *A Song for Lovers* New York: Downers Grove Press.
- Gordis, R. (1954). *The Song of Songs* Chicago: Moody Press.
- Greenspahn, F. E. (1984) *The Book of Song of Songs* Chicago: Moody Press.
- Hess, R.S. (2005). *Song of Songs: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms series*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2005.

- Holmyard, H.R. (1998). *Solomon's Perfect One: Bibliotheca Sacra* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Holtz, B.W. (1984). *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York: Summit Books.
- <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2012/05/love-lessons-from-the-song-of-songs> Accessed on 27/4/20.
- Keil and Delitzsch, (1950). *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, series Chicago: Moody Press.
- Laurin, R.B. (1962). *The Life of True Love: The Song of Songs and Its Modern Message*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Moraueu, S.A. (2000). *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Michigan: Bakers Books Division.
- Muller, H.P. (1976). *Song of Songs* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Pope, M.H. (1997). *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB. New York: Doubleday,
- Pritchard, J.B. (1950). *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Sasson, V. (1989). *King Solomon and the Dark Lady in the Song of Songs* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.
- Tenny, M.C. (1963). *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.