

What is the Song of Songs doing in the Bible?

Recent interest in Song of Songs in Anglican preaching, some focussing on its sexual interpretation, returns us to the question, “What is the Song of Songs doing in the Bible?”

If Song has a proper place in Scripture, we must insist that it speaks similarly to all people, to young adults of course, with beautiful, well-proportioned bodies such as the lovers in Song. But it must also speak to people who are ugly or deformed, by genetics, disease, or the scars of injury; to single people, married, divorced, aged; to those celibate by choice or same-sex attraction; to paraplegic or impotent people who cannot enjoy sex or those no longer interested; to all who take the Word of the living God seriously. The sex-manual approach robs so many such ‘unlovely’ people of this wonderfully evocative part of scripture.

But equally, Song cannot be allegory because allegory is deliberately contrived to conform to a preconceived ‘higher meaning’, often fantastical. The ‘story’ used to convey the allegorical message is not important in itself – only the ‘higher meaning’ is important. But here, in Song, the ‘story’ itself is of immense importance – it celebrates the wonder, peace, and security of perfect human love. The components of mutual attraction, even body parts or physical details of the natural world, cannot be reduced only to illustrations of spiritual truths. We shall not find Christ there in such allegory. The male lover is not Christ; he is at face value a human, not divine, lover. But we *are* going to find Christ in this poem.

We would do well to ask how Song conforms to the Reformation motto, “Christ in all the Scriptures”. The reformers didn’t mean that Christ is actually there in Song, or in any and every other part of the Old Testament, in some historical sense. Rather, all scripture has its place in a trajectory that has its fulfilment in Christ and the gospel. Nothing in scripture is merely incidental. So the male lover in Song is not Christ. He is an idealised man who has fallen in love with his maiden and v-v. Song celebrates this loving relationship culminating in marital union.

Song is certainly a hymn to love, but we suggest we should see it rather as a poem about a specific aspect, namely intimacy – the love that wants to be close in a relationship of perfect peace and security (the Hebrew ‘peace’ root, *shlm*, is more than incidentally present). A reader who has a predisposed need to find uninhibited sex in this poem will of course manage to do so; but if we lay that desire aside, and read the poem neutrally in this regard, then the ‘intimacy’ paradigm will be perfectly satisfactory throughout. Metaphors for this intimacy abound, e.g. 4:9, *You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride* (ESV), and the use of *sister* and *brother* in 5:1; 8:1. But in consequence of the reformers’ maxim, we suggest we should also see the very real event of two people wanting intimacy with one another in a mutual, permanent, bound relationship as an anticipation of the rightful intimacy with Christ that will characterise Christ’s people, and the eventual ‘marriage’ of the bride and groom. In reading Song, we must start with the quasi-historical event and see what it tells us of intimacy. But we should then apply it additionally through Christ in the light of the gospel. That is, we do not see the Song as *either* a love/intimacy poem, *or* only an ‘allegory’; rather, we see it as *both* a love/intimacy poem conveying the wonder of male-female attraction, desire and longing, *and* as typological (not allegorical), typology being the category that denotes a human reality (ideal human love) that conveys an analogy (not allegory) with Christ and his people. A typological

interpretation has been advocated since the early 20th century but appears to be recently out of favour.

Our suggestion of Christological typology in Song is reinforced by the Bible's analogy between marriage of man and woman and the marriage of Christ with his church. We see this epitomised in Ephesians 5:23-32, ²³*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour ...* ²⁵*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...* ³²*I am talking about Christ and the church* (NIV). Marriage terminology is also used in the Old Testament of God's relationship with his people – e.g. Isaiah 54:5, *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts ...*; Jeremiah 2:2, *... how as a bride you loved me ...*; and Ezekiel 16:8, *... I spread the corner of my garment over you ... and entered into a covenant with you ...*, (cf. Ruth 3:9, a figure conveying protection and security). It can be no accident that this use of the marriage metaphor finds its fulfilment in Christ and his bride, the church. The yearning love of God for his people, and the intimacy that God desires to have with them, is written everywhere into scripture. It is perfectly consistent with good Bible interpretation, we suggest, to find it implied, typologically, in Song. Song's celebration of ideal human love 'anticipates' the love of Christ for his bride, the church, and the intimacy he longs for with them. It is real, now, for every forgiven sinner; but the final consummation of our loving relationship with our saviour in 'marriage' is yet to come.

To pursue this ideal, and thus nurture our relationship with Christ and grow in our love for him, in response to his perfect love for us, is truly to find peace, safety and security in him, as is found on a human level in the climax of Song, 8:6, *Set me as a seal on your heart, ... for love is strong as death, ... the very flame of the LORD* (ESV). Yet we can also see that when time ends we will be united with Him in eternal rest and peace, as the ultimate marriage of Christ with His Church. Love has its ultimate source in Yahweh.

In the very centre of the Song in 4:16 and 5:1 the couple are in the garden of love. Garden here is the same Hebrew word as the garden of Eden. Song portrays an ideal, intimate relationship as foreseen in Eden in Gen 2:18, *... it is not good that the man should be alone ...*, but though our present relationship with our saviour God is flawed by our own sinfulness, yet we can see in Song of Songs our longing for that perfection, and His promise of eternal rest and a return to the Eden of perfection, God's 'garden of love'.

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An extended version of this essay can be found at VernonWilkins.org