

Song of Songs

Introduction

Songs is a book about sex filled with erotic overtones. This has caused difficulties of interpretation. The genre is the love poem. The book extols the love that a man and a woman have for each other. In canonical context, marriage is presupposed (cf. Gen. 2:24, 25; Judah/Tamar backdrop [Gen 38] is an interlude that puts Joseph's moral purity and view of marriage into heightened perspective).

In some environments, like Platonic Greek dualism and its negative view of the human body, "reading the Song as erotic poetry would have been an embarrassment in the face of its obvious delight in physical pleasures" (IOT 261); Cf. the early fathers, Origen and Jerome (261). Pope says of Origen that he "denatured it and transformed it into a spiritual drama free from all carnality" (115, Song, cited by IOT 261). Jerome gave a series of special preparatory readings so these "fleshly words" would not be misunderstood of fleshly things and cause harm.

1A. Author and style

A few but not all of the 30 odd poems are by Solomon. There is much in the poetic style that is counter-intuitively and counter-culturally beyond our grasp, until we enter into and get a sense of the forms of analogy and image making used in the poems. Though difficult, the euphemism of this style is refreshing in our day of raw sexual images. Here, like so much of the biblical worldview, pleasure rests on the foundation of meditation. It is thereby put in balance within the wholeness of life for a wholesome and balanced wisdom in our walk with God (Gen 2.25 candidly and literally puts the nakedness of husband and wife in the context of their walk with God in the Garden of Eden).

2A. Message

The book extols sexual love between a man and a woman; showing that sex within marriage is a God-given gift (264). There is a delight in God's good gift of sexuality and intimate love (263).

As part of the canon authorized by Christ, the book gives divine insight and instruction about sexual love. It "must be interpreted within the context of the law of God, which prohibits any kind of pre- or extramarital intercourse" (IOT 263).

1B. A positive view of the physical

Note the attention of the lovers to each other's body: 1:15-16; 2.2-3; of the wife, 4.1-7; and of the husband, 5.10-16.

2B. The joys of sexual love

For example, consider the refrain of 2:7; 3:5; 8:4. This text is saying that "love should not be awakened out of its dream" and that "it should not be disturbed from its being absorbed in itself" (KD, Song 47) until it is pleased or satisfied. The sexual union is spoken of as love that is personified; it is a person in a dreamy state moving toward a goal and is not to be disturbed till the goal is attained. Thus, both husband and wife are to be fully absorbed in their passion for one another until each is fully pleased (cf. 4.16, "Awake, O north wind, and come O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits"). The plea against disturbance can be simply applied. Husband and wife who have children in the home should find uninterrupted time for lovemaking; so do not forget to lock the door!

3B. Summary on message

1) The Song is a summons to sexual bliss. It is a summons to righteousness of life before God, before whom all things are naked and exposed. It is a summons to enjoy the pleasures of sex as a gift of God to man and woman his image bearers on the earth; after all, He made us male and female. It is a summons to the mutuality of nakedness in marriage and the sharing of nakedness, intimacy, and affection.

2) The joy of sexual love tokens the love of husband and wife in their total existence. (cf. sex spoken of as love that is personified).

Thus, in turn, as part of God's restorative word, the message of Songs tokens restoration to the original creative design for man on the earth. Here too, man and woman image God's righteousness and true holiness. In righteousness, sexual love (love expressed intimately) tokens man's true humanity and dignity.

Sex is truly a sacred pleasure!

Sex is a joy, wonderful, pleasurable, and fun! It is an experienced token of the passionate love of husband and wife for each other; to guard and protect one another; to comfort and uphold; to give security fulfillment and completeness to one another. "To have and to hold to death do us part!"

3A. Theme statement

The Song presents the joy of sexual pleasure as a sign of the pleasure of paradise for God's image bearers, male and female, the pleasure compromised by sin but restored to fullness by the coming king, the greater Solomon (the greater than Solomon).

4A. Two perversions

1C. Sex as idol

Sexual obsession dominates our society. Rejecting the intimate love of the Creator, many try to fill the void with various perverse sexual substitutes for God given and structured erotic love.

The young are truly over saturated with sex through the entertainment media. A lighted match is continually placed in the midst of dry kindling wood. Immature sex is being enflamed in unprecedented ways. It is part of a rapid social decline with growing numbers of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, unwanted children, dysfunctional families and thus poor preparation of children for responsible adult behavior.

2C. Sex as taboo

A bias against the body is the other extreme. The Song is a corrective that reminds us that sex is wonderful and good within the parameters of marriage.

The lovemaking in the garden (cf. 1:16, verdant, green, refers to a leafy tree that is canopy for the marriage bed; bride is also a garden, 4:12, 16) should remind us of the Garden of Eden and God's original creative design for male and female. This, of course, includes the role of parenting (cf. the duty to fill the earth is basic in the cultural mandate).

5A. Canonical context - Genesis 2:24-25 (cf. Prov. 5:15-20)

The context is breathtaking summary of creation for a good place for man to live. But the status of man is not good until woman is created. "Naked and not ashamed" (Gen 2.25) assumes the need for companionship of Genesis 2:18 and "Not ashamed" puts a positive emphasis on the good, the joy, the appropriateness, the pleasure, and the uninhibited freedom of nakedness and sex in marriage. Thus, nakedness in marriage has no shame in itself; it is only through sin that distortion and shame enter the picture.

6A. The balancing point of Character

A godly and wholesome marriage is not built on sex per se. So, the emphasis on sex needs a larger context for balance. Central for balance is the point that love is based on character not sex. Mutual sexual pleasure is but one way that love is expressed in marriage. Before I was married (just a short time ago), I heard minister say that since love is based on character, then a married couple will fall more and more deeply in love over the years as they grow in grace, because in this way their capacity to love increases. The honeymoon is the low point, the beginning of a wonderfully rich and growing friendship. This is so true both biblically and

practically; it puts a promise out in front of those contemplating marriage, a promise of growing love rooted in the gospel.

7A. Message for us

1) The Song of Songs calls us to anticipate and to enjoy righteous and pure sexual pleasure with all its power and intensity. This is a general rule. A single and celibate status may be the calling of some, and when a single person marries, he or she does not drop a notch spiritually; they enter a truly sacred relationship.

2) The intensity of the sexual bond that typifies the loving bond of husband and wife is a picture of the love of God in Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Jesus passionately desired to eat the transitional Passover with the disciples (Lk. 22:15). Therefore, marital sex is a picture of Christ and the Church; it too embodies the gospel. Its joy is tied to the new wine at the wedding at Cana where Jesus inaugurated his ministry beginning to secure a bride for himself.

The celebration of the wedding; the companionship, pleasure and joy (tokened in and expressed in the pleasure of the sexual union of man and wife), ultimately pictures all that Jesus came to bring. It pictures restoration to man and woman His image bearers on earth, restoration to fellowship with each other and with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to companionship, closeness, intimacy instead of alienation and enmity.

It is a picture of gospel provisions new and old (7:13 with Matt. 13:52). In addition, the term of husband to wife, my love, suggests protection, caring for and tending to with an emphasis on the delight that goes with this responsibility (Carr, Song 82).

Jesus calls us his bride; thus in the words of Songs, he calls us "my love." He delights to make us the object of his love and protection. The sexual union of husband and wife pictures the ecstasy of His delight in securing our safety and well-being. In all the suffering, we were the joy set before him by which He endured the cross and despised the shame (Heb. 12:2).

It is not that Songs is merely a type of Christ and the Church. It is that the delight of love in the highest and purest passion of sexual love encouraged in the text is a picture of the delightful passionate love of Jesus for His church, for you and me.

The Song invites us to recognize the sacredness of marriage and sexual pleasure with gusto! There is clearly no sacred-secular compartmentalization regarding the physical body. Marriage in its wholeness is a covenant of husband and wife with each other and with the Lord. Therefore, as part of the whole canon of Scripture, the sacredness of marriage and sexual pleasure invites us to that which is symbolized in this sacred joy: it invites us to the new and old delicacies of the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.